

Daniel 5 5-12

What was the Meaning of the Handwriting on the Wall?

The fingers of a “man’s hand” appear and write on the wall while the drunken party is continuing. This writing appears on A wall “near the lampstands” so the king can clearly see the hand writing the words. This writing is an inscription and is a parody of Assyrian or Babylonian official writing. Just as the King of Babylon inscribes words on statues or walls, so too the Lord is inscribing his own imperial edict for the king to read.



Belshazzar’s reaction is absolute fear, he turns pale, and his legs give way. Literally this is the “bands / knots of his legs were loosed”, he comes very near to fainting. This idiom can be translated a number of different ways, the NRSV, for example, has “his knees knocked together.” Seow suggests that the idiom could be translated “his bowels were loosed” (*Daniel*, 79).

Belshazzar “calls out” for his advisors. The verb here is a participle, used with a to-be verb to imply a continuous action: he “was screaming” for his advisors. Once again in the book the wise men are consulted but they cannot make anything of the writing. Even though they are educated men, these are scribes and scholars cannot read (or understand) the message.

Was the message intended to be understood? Often inscriptions were about more than recording an event. They were a guarantee the event happened or would happen. Thus the judgement on Babylon certain is “written in stone” quite literally.

The Queen (possible Belshazzar’s mother) tells him “Don’t look so pale,” basically “show some backbone!” Belshazzar can look no worse, his mother publicly rebuking his cowardice! (Did she stop to comb his hair and tell him to tuck his shirt in as well?) She recalls what Daniel had done and recommends that he be called in to interpret this writing. She understands that Nebuchadnezzar believed him to be very powerful, and he is summoned. There is a subtle word-play in the queen-mother’s speech. Daniel, she recalls, was able to “loosen knots” (verse 12, “solve problems”), which is ironic since the king had his “knots loosened” (verse 6, perhaps that he has soiled himself!)

Daniel is summoned and questioned by the King. The king asks him if he is Daniel, indicating his ignorance of the man. Belshazzar also promises him the same reward as offered to the wise-men, a promotion to the third highest in the kingdom, essentially riches and power. Daniel is less respectful with Belshazzar than he had been with Nebuchadnezzar. He tells Belshazzar to keep his gifts and then describes Nebuchadnezzar's glory, implying Belshazzar was nothing like Nebuchadnezzar.