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An Error in the Menetekel Inscription in Rembrandt's "Belshazzar's" Feast in the National Gallery in London

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## An Error in the Menetekel Inscription in Rembrandt's *Belshazzar's Feast* in the National Gallery in London.

In *Belshazzar's Feast* Rembrandt depicts the handwriting on the wall from the Book of Daniel (Fig. 1). The inscription, like certain parts of the Book of Daniel, is written in Aramaic. Rembrandt painted several works on biblical themes, possibly for Jewish patrons. He knew Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel and etched his portrait.<sup>1</sup> Menasseh ben Israel published the Aramaic inscription, and an explanation of its interpretation. Presumably, from this printed inscription, or possibly on Menasseh ben Israel's advice, he painted the inscription in the painting. It is most likely that Rembrandt borrowed the formula from Menasseh ben Israel because this was a rabbinic rather than Christian interpretation of the solution to the handwriting on the wall. On the basis of this Hausherr suggests that the painting was ordered by one of the circle of learned Amsterdam Jews.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, there is an error in the Aramaic of Rembrandt's painting, an error that has gone unnoticed in the literature. Rembrandt is generally reliable in his Hebrew/Aramaic orthography.<sup>3</sup> For example, in his *Moses breaking the Tablets*, the Hebrew inscription is correct, except that Rembrandt left out a preposition in the ninth commandment. The tenth commandment is abbreviated in a manner consistent with the sense, which suggests that Rembrandt was advised by someone who knew Hebrew.

In the *menetekel* inscription the final letter is wrong. Rembrandt in error has written the letter *ṣayin* 𐤌 instead of a final *nun* 𐤊. This is the sort of mistake that someone who is familiar with Hebrew/Aramaic letters, but does not actually know the meanings of the words, might make. He knows enough to confuse two Aramaic letters. If we look at the published version of Menasseh ben Israel, we see that his text is printed correctly.

A composite x-ray photograph (Fig. 2) shows that in the underpainting the final *nun* had its vertical line drawn correctly on the extreme right of the letter.<sup>4</sup> When the final layer of paint was applied the vertical line on the left had been removed and the one on the right incorrectly moved to the center of the horizontal line to change the letter from a final *nun* to a *ṣayin*.<sup>5</sup> In the underpainting (Fig. 2) the finger of God is not on the *nun*. In the final version the hand of God is on the redrawn letter, which was incorrectly made into a *ṣayin*. A guess would be that Rembrandt correctly copied the final *nun* from Menasseh ben Israel, but when he made the final overpainting, he erred in moving the vertical line from the right hand side of the cross bar to the middle, and created a



1  
Rembrandt, *Belshazzar's Feast*, detail.

*ṣayin* instead of a *nun*. Why then did Rembrandt make this change to the underpainting? In the underpainting (Fig. 2) the words are completed rather than in the act of being written and God's finger is not on the letters. The purpose of this change in location of God's finger was to create more drama and the impact of frozen action as Belshazzar and the viewer see the letters still in the process of formation on the wall. In his overpainting (Fig. 1) while Rembrandt improved the drama of the scene, he made an error in the Aramaic orthography.

Does this error in the Aramaic negate Hausherr's theory that the painting was destined to one of a circle of learned Amsterdam Jews? Probably not. If one examines the picture, the incorrect *nun* is still being formed by God's hand. The fact that this letter is still in the process of completion distracts the viewer from the error.<sup>6</sup> Those who know Aramaic will read the correct letter without thinking. Those who do not know Aramaic will not notice the error. Even if this picture was delivered to a learned Jew of Amsterdam, the mistake would not have necessarily been caught, as it has not been detected by many subsequent viewers of the painting over the past three centuries.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>2</sup>  
Rembrandt, *Belshazzar's Feast*,  
detail. Composite X-ray photo-  
graph

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cecil Roth, *A Life of Menasseh ben Israel, Rabbi, Printer and Diplomat* (Philadelphia 1934). Franz Landsberger, *Rembrandt, the Jews and the Bible* (Philadelphia 1934).

<sup>2</sup> R. Hausherr, 'Zur Menetekel-Inschrift auf Rembrandts Belsazarbild,' *Oud Holland* 78 (1963) 142-149.

<sup>3</sup> Both Hebrew and Aramaic are written in the same script, that which we call Hebrew script, but is, in fact, a square Aramaic script that was adopted by Hebrew before the time of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> See Neil MacLaren and Christopher Brown, *The Dutch School 1600-1900* (London 1991) vol. 1, fig. 88.

<sup>5</sup> The overpainting was done by Rembrandt himself, as was his common practice. This is the opinion of Christopher Brown of the National Gallery in London.

<sup>6</sup> I have viewed this painting for 25 years, have taught about it, and also have taught Aramaic and Hebrew and did not notice the error until 1991 when I was explaining the inscription to my son Adam at the National Gallery.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Christopher Brown, Chief Curator of the National Gallery, London, for supplying the photographs.