

Writing on the Wall for the Whole of Sudan?

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by Graham Kings, [Bishop of Sherborne](#)

Is “[the writing on the wall](#)” for the whole of Sudan? The referendum, by the people of Southern Sudan, which is due to take place on Sunday 9 January 2011, [is a matter of great moment](#). On this day, the [Comprehensive Peace Agreement](#) runs out on its sixth anniversary, and culminates in a vote. Analysts expect most southerners to choose independence in the poll.

[There are still many questions](#): will civil war erupt again? will [the north accept the vote of the south, whatever it is](#)? At one point earlier this year, it looked as if the north was attempting to stall and delay the referendum, but that would have precipitated chaos. It now seems likely that the vote will go ahead.

On 8 December, Xan Rice wrote a perceptive article in *The Guardian*, “[Southern Sudanese independence vote stays on track as registration closes](#).” He stated: “More than 3 million southerners have signed up for the 9 January poll” and quoted John Ashworth, an analyst who works with Sudan’s churches: “The momentum is there, and 99% of the international community now say it should happen on time.”

[It is reported](#) that the Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir, told supporters at a rally in Gedaref, on 19 December 2010, that the north would adopt an Islamic constitution if the south split away. The Episcopal Church of Sudan covers the north and south of the country, and will continue to serve both areas, or both new countries, according the result. Whatever happens, the Christians in the north and the south, and all who may be caught up in the events following the referendum, will need considerable support.

The Archbishop of Sudan, Dr Daniel Deng, is a wise man of immense courage. He and his Roman Catholic colleague in Juba, Archbishop Paulino Lukudu Loro, registered to vote together and, with other Christian leaders, have issued key [statements](#) together.

Whatever the result of the referendum, the backing of the world-wide church and of the international community for the implementation of the result will be vital. That support can best be given through respected and wise leaders like the archbishops.

For 38 years the Diocese of Salisbury, in which I minister, has been linked with the Episcopal Church of Sudan, and seeks to assist its archbishop in the pursuit of justice and peace. I was with Dr Deng in January this year when he and the

Archbishop of Canterbury met the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, and when he was on the panel at [Chatham House](#), London, for the launch of "[Decisions and Deadlines: a Critical Year for Sudan](#)". This report, written by Edward Thomas, provides a penetratingly discerning background resource for the referendum. In October this year, in New York with other Sudanese ecumenical leaders, Dr Deng [met](#) the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, and all the members of the UN Security Council.

Perhaps a momentous event from another historical period and culture may provide some perspective on this current crisis? The phrase "the writing on the wall", with which I began, emanates from the book of Daniel (chapter 5) in the Hebrew Scriptures, and concerns Belshazzar's Feast. A [haunting picture](#), by Rembrandt, of this highly charged moment (painted about the year 1635, but with mistranscribed Hebrew, rather than Aramaic, words) hangs in the National Gallery, London. This is not far from the Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, where Southern Sudanese came last month from all over Europe to register for the poll, and will come again to vote on 9 January.

In the biblical narrative, Belshazzar, the son of Nebuchadnezzar who sacked Jerusalem and carted its leaders off to Babylon, impiously used the vessels of gold from the Temple in Jerusalem for his feast. Mysteriously, the fingers of a human hand (v 5), wrote on the wall. The King was terrified and his face turned pale. He called his wise men to read and interpret the words on the wall. They could not. The Queen, his mother, remembered a Hebrew prisoner of war, Daniel.

Daniel said that from God's presence the hand was sent and the writing was inscribed. Scholars have commented that the words of Aramaic are ambiguous, and denote measures of weight. The biblical text runs: "This is the interpretation of the matter: *MENE*, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; *TEKEL*, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; *PERES*, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." (Daniel 5:24-28).

Sudan, with all its leaders, is [at a crossroads](#). As the 9 January [approaches](#), wisdom, justice and peace are wanted and need weighing.

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