

THE NARRATIVE FRAME OF DANIEL:  
A LITERARY ASSESSMENT

BY

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One of the most popular types of Jewish literature during the Second Temple period was the Jewish novel.\* The court-legends about Daniel and his three companions now collected in the narrative frame of the biblical book (Dan 1-6) are a formidable example of this highly popular genre.<sup>1</sup> Biblical scholars have long been intrigued by the tales. A principal concern in the scholarly discourse has been the tales' socio-historical origin because, it is assumed, the origin of the texts will undoubtedly yield considerable information about their purpose. The search for origins is inextricably linked to the search for meaning. Yet the quest proves difficult. For one thing, the biblical text provides next to no historically reliable information about its origin and thus offers the investigators little help. Moreover, scholars from a growing number of departments in the Humanities have come to problematize the relationship between the text and the extra-textual reality. While in the past it may have been accepted to assume that there is an "unmediated" connection between the world of a text and that of its historical origin, such an assumption cannot go unchallenged any more. The question of reference is much more complex than traditional biblical scholarship has proposed.

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<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive study on the Jewish novels is by Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), who claims that the novels were read by more Jews during Second Temple times than any other type of literature (p. 3).

The tales about Daniel and his three companions are a case in point. This essay seeks to challenge some of the commonly held assumptions about these stories, their origin and function. The argument I wish to present is based on the recognition that the world the reader finds in the tales is not simply identical with the socio-historical world of their authors. It is a fictitious construct that serves to draw the reader into the world of the narratives. The messages of the tales must therefore be inferred by comparing these court narratives with other texts of the same genre and by reading them within their larger context, the book of Daniel as a whole.

### 1. *The Composition of the Book of Daniel*

The book of Daniel falls into two parts, the tales about Daniel and his three companions in Dan 1-6, and the apocalyptic visions in Dan 7-12.<sup>2</sup> These two parts are distinct from each other on several counts. Formally speaking, the court tales refer to Daniel in the third person, while the narrative voice in the latter half of the book shifts to the first person of Daniel, who is now relating the visions he receives.<sup>3</sup> Second, whereas the visions are apocalyptic in nature, emphasizing the “transitoriness” of the great kingdoms as part of a larger divine plan, the court tales are entirely void of any apocalyptic elements. Their concern is entirely with this world, with no speculations about future expectations, let alone about the *eschaton*. Their narratological function is to extol Daniel’s virtues and unwavering faith and thus to introduce him as uniquely qualified to be the recipient of the secret divine lore communicated to him in the visions. Third and finally, in contrast to the benevolent treatment of the monarchs in Dan 1-6, the apocalyptic visions are suffused with language of war and violence. The imagery of crisis and feelings of hostility toward the Gentile ruler are so strong that it is easy to see why already in antiquity interpreters proposed that the visions were composed during times of persecution. As early as in the third century, the philosopher Porphyry correctly identified this period as the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BCE). Based

<sup>2</sup> On the genre of apocalyptic literature, see J.J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (*Semeia* 14; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979) 1-19; and idem, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998 [first ed., 1984]) 1-42, 85-115.

<sup>3</sup> The fact that the linguistic division of the book into a Hebrew (1:1-2:4a; chaps. 8-12) and an Aramaic part (2:4b-7:28) does not coincide with the formal division of the book remains a mystery; cf. A.S. van der Woude, “Die Doppelsprachigkeit des Buches Daniel,” in A.S. van der Woude, ed., *The Book of Daniel* (Leuven: Peeters, 1993) 3-12.

on his observation that in chapter 11 Daniel is able to provide an outline of the events leading up to Antiochus, but errs when predicting the circumstances of Antiochus' death, Porphyry proposed that the book was not written in the Babylonian exile, the ostensible setting of the tales, but during the time of the Antiochan persecution, a thesis now widely accepted in biblical scholarship.<sup>4</sup> It can thus be established with some confidence that the apocalyptic visions of Dan 7-12 were composed during or, better stated, in response to the horrid events surrounding Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

The socio-historical background of the court tales, by contrast, remains a problem. Unfortunately, the texts themselves yield next to no information about their origin.<sup>5</sup> The task is further complicated by the fact that the tales went through several phases of recontextualization before they were collected in what is now the narrative frame of the biblical book. The legends about Daniel and his three companions most likely originated as self-contained units already in pre-Maccabean times, i.e., well before the visions were composed. They circulated independently, probably initially in smaller collections.<sup>6</sup> It may have been as late as during the time of Antiochus IV that the collection of six tales reached its final form and was combined with the apocalyptic visions to create the book as we know it.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> P.M. Casey, "Porphyry and the Origin of the Book of Daniel," *JTS* 27 (1976) 15-33; Collins, *Imagination*, 87f.

<sup>5</sup> A notable exception is Dan 2:43 which includes a reference to an interdynastic marriage between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies. This may well be a gloss and, in any case, hardly provides enough evidence to establish a date for the original composition; cf. J.A. Montgomery, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1927) 177, 189-90.

<sup>6</sup> Already J.D. Michaelis, *Deutsche Übersetzung des Alten Testaments: 10 Theil* (Göttingen: Dietrich, 1781) 22, proposed that Dan 3:31-6:28 circulated as an independent collection at an early stage; more recently, see K. Koch, *Das Buch Daniel* (Erträge der Forschung 144; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), 75. Both the Old Greek version of Daniel and the library at Qumran include so-called "Additions" to Daniel, or "Pseudo-Daniel" material. These are compositions which are part of the Daniel literature at large, but which are not found in the Hebrew Bible. The question whether these texts, especially the Dead Sea fragments including the *Prayer of Nabonidus* (4QPrNab) and the 'Son of God' text (4Q246), are related to the book of Daniel or whether they are independent compositions is keenly debated. In any case, the evidence suggests that (a) the collection of tales in the MT is contingent rather than exhaustive, and that (b) the Daniel literature assumed different forms in different literary contexts during the Second Temple period; cf. M. Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4* (JSJ Suppl. 61; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 217-43.

<sup>7</sup> Among the first to propose that Daniel is the result of continuous growth was

It is clear, then, that the textual history of the court tales differs significantly from that of the apocalyptic visions. Since the eschatological part of the book provides significantly more information about the identity of its authors than the historical part, it has been tempting to search this evidence for clues about the provenance of the tales as well. In a series of publications John Collins has proposed that the key may be found in an apocalyptic group which figures prominently in Daniel's final vision report (Dan 10:1-12:4). The group appears under the epithet "the wise" (*ham-māskīlīm*).<sup>8</sup> They are said to know (*yabīnū*) the "hidden and sealed" meaning of ancient revelation; what makes them wise is a certain exegetical knowledge which they attain through divine guidance (Dan 12:9-10).<sup>9</sup> The group is first mentioned in Dan 11:33-35 where it is said to instruct the "common people" (*hārabbīm*). Some of the group members will fall during the oppression, but this only serves to purify "the wise," for the time of the end has not yet come. "The wise" are then mentioned again in the book's epilogue in Dan 12:3 where they are singled out in the resurrection of the dead. They will shine like the firmament, and their function will be to make the "common people" righteous.

The associations of the *māskīlīm* in the latter half of the book of Daniel closely resemble the responsibilities of the figure so designated in certain Qumran texts, the 'Instructor,' or *māskīl*. In the *Rule of the Community*, for example, the introductory line of the classic "Treatise on the Two Spirits" succinctly captures the main responsibility of the *māskīl* and stipulates, "The *māskīl* shall instruct all the sons of light and shall teach them . . ." As a teacher of the sectarian lore which the community shares in common but which also separates it from the outside the *māskīl* plays a pivotal role in the formation of the community.<sup>10</sup> The explicitly hortatory quality of his teachings becomes evident

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J. Meinhold, *Die Composition des Buches Daniel* (Greifswald: Abel, 1884), and idem, *Beiträge zur Erklärung des Buches Daniel: Heft 1. Daniel 3-6* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1888), a proposal that has since received increasing support.

<sup>8</sup> J.J. Collins, *Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature* (FOTL 20; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 37f.

<sup>9</sup> This "pneumatic exegesis," attained through divine instruction into the meaning of ancient oracles and prophecies, functions for "the wise" as a mode of divine sustenance in the awesome times of the End; cf. M. Fishbane, "From Scribalism to Rabbinism: Perspectives on the Emergence of Classical Judaism," in idem, ed., *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) 69.

<sup>10</sup> 1QS 3:13-4:26; 9:12-10:05; cf. 1QSb.

from another, highly fragmentary composition, the *Songs of the Maskil*. These songs consist mostly of praise of God and offer a description of the Instructor's esoteric knowledge about the heavenly wonders; the primary purpose of these praises is, again, paraenetic, "And as for me, I am a *maskil* who makes known the splendor of his beauty, in order to frighten and ter[rify] all the spirits of the angels of destruction and bastard spirits, demons, Lilith, howlers, and s[atyr]s . . .]" (4Q510 1 4-5).<sup>11</sup>

According to Collins it was among the *maskilim* that the biblical book received its final form. "There can be little doubt that the book of Daniel was composed in the circles of these *maskilim*."<sup>12</sup> Collins then takes his argument one step further and claims that "the most natural place to look for the pre-history of the *maskilim* of Dan 11 is in the tales which make up the first half of the book."<sup>13</sup> He finds support for his proposal in Dan 1:4 which introduces Daniel and his friends as "proficient in all wisdom" (*maskilim bakol-hokmah*). The biblical author uses exactly the same term to characterize Daniel's rare qualities which in the final vision serves as a self-designation of the apocalyptic group presumably responsible for the book's final form. Daniel and his three companions become the precursors of the *maskilim*.

The proposed thesis that the tales stem from the predecessors of the eschatological conventicles who stand behind Dan 7-12 has much to commend it. It is immediately conceded that the verbal parallels between Dan 11:33-35, 12:3.10, and 1:4 can hardly be fortuitous. The identification of the *maskilim*, however, is of limited help for establishing the social background of the tales. If there was a group called "the wise" whose traces we can detect not only in Daniel's final apocalyptic vision but even behind the characterization of Daniel in 1:4, then all this would indicate is that "the wise" claimed Daniel and his companions as their literary ancestors. It yields no information about the origin of

<sup>11</sup> Translation taken from C.A. Newsom, "The Sage in the Literature of Qumran: The Function of the *Maskil*," J.G. Gammie and L.G. Perdue, ed., *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 373-382, 381; see also 4Q511 35 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> J.J. Collins, "Daniel and His Social World," *Interpretation* 39/1 (1985) 131-43, 132; also see M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974) 1:175-80, and O. Plöger, *Theocracy and Eschatology* (Richmond: John Knox, 1968) 22-25, who both argue that the *maskilim* in Daniel are identical with the Hasidim.

<sup>13</sup> "Daniel and His Social World," 134; a little later Collins further clarifies his claim and concedes that the legends should not be taken "as a direct account of the predecessors of the *maskilim*," but rather as a reflection of their ideology (p. 135).

the tales, let alone about the group(s) among which the tales originally circulated. And secondly, in the tales the key term “the wise” (*maskilim*) is attested only once, in Dan 1:4. According to a wide consensus the first chapter is a later addition, added perhaps as late as during the time of the book’s final composition. It almost certainly was never part of an independent collection of Danielic tales.<sup>14</sup> From a synchronic standpoint, the reference to “the wise” forms a literary frame to the entire book; “the wise” are present from the time of Daniel’s election in the book’s introductory narrative (Dan 1:4) to the book’s epilogue (Dan 12:9-13). Diachronically speaking, however, this connecting element between the tales and the visions was introduced at a late stage in the literary history of the book. It should be stressed that there is no connection between “the wise” and the main body of the tales (chapters 2-6).

In short, while it is easy to see why the *maskilim*, the heroes of the Antiochan persecutions, had a vested interest in claiming the wisest of the Babylonian Jewry, survivors of the fiery furnace and of the lions’ den, as their literary ancestors by using their stories as the prelude to their own eschatological thinking, their own apocalyptic visions stem from a later date and hence yield no information about the social background of the narratives. The original setting of the tales remains an open question.

## 2. *The State of Scholarship*

A significant step forward in the debate over the nature of the court tales has been made with the celebrated article by W. Lee Humphreys on the genre of the tales in Esther and Daniel.<sup>15</sup> In his article, Humphreys

<sup>14</sup> While there appears to be a general consensus that chapter 1 was added at a later point, it remains unclear whether it was originally composed in Aramaic, added to the collection of Aramaic tales (Dan 2-6) and later translated into Hebrew or, what appears more plausible, whether it was written in Hebrew and intended to serve as an introductory chapter to the entire book; cf. K. Koch, *Daniel 1,1-21* (BKAT 22; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986) 16-18.

<sup>15</sup> W.L. Humphreys, “A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel,” *JBL* 92 (1973) 211-23. Previously, Montgomery, *Daniel*, 100-102, had simply referred to the tales as “stories,” while A. Meinhold, “Die Gattung der Josephsgeschichte und des Estherbuches: Diasporanovelle I, II” *ZAW* 87 (1975) 306-324; 88 (1976) 79-93, introduced the concept of the Diaspora (*Diasporanovelle*) to the form-critical discussion of these tales, a concept Humphreys developed further and applied to Daniel. A comprehensive history of the scholarly debate over this genre is offered by J.J. Collins, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 42-45.

is building on the double-insight that (a) the tales of Joseph, Esther, Daniel and *Ahikar* show certain similarities and in fact constitute a common literary genre which enjoyed widespread popularity throughout the ancient Near East, the "tale of the courtier," and that (b) these tales are replete with wisdom elements.<sup>16</sup> Humphreys seeks to arrive at a better understanding of this particular genre through a sociological study of the texts. He proposes that the court tales fall into two distinct groups, tales of court contest (Dan 4 and 5, and also Gen 40-41), and tales of court conflict (Dan 3 and 6, as well as Esther and *Ahikar*). In the tales of contest, a wise person of lower status unexpectedly makes a wise decision by interpreting a dream or omen which had proven too difficult for the other courtiers; consequently, the person is promoted. The story relates the ensuing conflict and ends with the hero receiving a reward. In the more dramatic tales of conflict, the wise courtier operates in a promoted position to begin with; the other courtiers persecute or conspire against him and he appears to be defeated, but in the end is vindicated before the monarch, with the antagonists receiving their due punishment. In addition to their entertainment value, according to Humphreys, the tales propagate a "lifestyle for Diaspora." "One could, as a Jew, overcome adversity and find a life both rewarding and creative within the pagan setting and as a part of this foreign world."<sup>17</sup>

The distinction between "contest" and "conflict" was met favorably and carried on by numerous scholars, including John Collins. In an article published two years after Humphreys', Collins seeks to explain how a collection of Diaspora tales became the basis for the book of Daniel.<sup>18</sup> He argues that the latter half of the book "was a product of the same group, or the descendants of the group, which produced Daniel 1-6."<sup>19</sup> Behind both the tales and the visions Collins detects the

<sup>16</sup> The wisdom connection had previously been underscored by G. von Rad, "The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom," in idem, *The Problem of the Pentateuch and Other Essays* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 292-300; and S. Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *VT* 13 (1963) 419-55.

<sup>17</sup> "Life-Style," 223; Humphreys finds further evidence for his argument in the peaceful attitude toward the foreign society in the first half of the book of Daniel which is diametrically opposed to the violent attitude reflected in the visions.

<sup>18</sup> J.J. Collins, "The Court-Tales in Daniel and the Development of Apocalyptic," *JBL* 94/2 (1975) 218-34. For an analysis of the court legends in the context of folklore studies, see S. Niditch and R. Doran, "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach," *JBL* 96 (1977) 179-93; see also L.M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (HDR 26; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> "Daniel and his Social World," 136.

Jewish “wise men” who, while in the Diaspora, composed their tales in which they emphasize their superior wisdom given to them by God. At some point during the early second century BCE they returned to Palestine and, under the impact of the persecutions of Antiochus, used their own court-tales as the basis for their apocalyptic visions.

In an article published a decade later Collins offers a remarkably precise definition of this group. Following Humphreys’ lead that the purpose of the tales is to outline a “life-style” for the Jews in the Diaspora, Collins takes the ostensible setting of the tales to be a reliable self-description of the group which composed them. The literary genre of the legends serves as a lens through which we can detect their origins. “We may infer tentatively that the authors and tradents of the tales were, like Daniel, upper-class, well-educated Jews, who found careers in government service in the eastern Diaspora. They were successful in the gentile world and stood to gain by maintaining the status quo.”<sup>20</sup>

### 3. *Tales of Harmony or Conflict?*

As mentioned previously, one of the more surprising elements in the portrayal of Daniel in the first half of the book is his ability to uphold an amicable relationship with the monarchs at whose courts he serves. Daniel never subjects Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar or Darius to severe criticism. To the contrary, the encounter between the Jewish sage and his heathen sovereigns occurs in an atmosphere which is best characterized as cordial and mutually supportive. This is most surprising in the case of Nebuchadnezzar, the destroyer of the Jerusalem Temple and architect of the Babylonian Exile (Dan 1:1-2), who is criticized fiercely by other voices in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>21</sup> In the book of Daniel, by contrast, the atmosphere of harmony is propelled to an extreme and borders on the absurd. Upon learning from the Jewish sage that he is about to be ousted from the throne and his kingdom to be erased,

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.; similarly R.R. Wilson, “From Prophecy to Apocalyptic: Reflections on the Shape of Israelite Religion,” *Semeia* 21 (1982) 79-95, 88. In his more recent work, however, Collins refrains from offering an equally specific description of the circles among which the tales originated and argues convincingly that the court tales do not represent the life-style of their authors. “To say that the tales present a life-style does not necessarily mean that they were models for direct imitation. The situations envisaged in the tales would not arise often in the life of a typical person.” *Daniel*, 51.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel’s amicable portrait of the Babylonian court may be compared, for example, with the prophetic oracles against Babylon (cf. Isa 13; 47).



Nebuchadnezzar spontaneously exclaims in jubilation, praises Daniel's exceptional divinatory qualities, worships both him and his God, and promotes Daniel and his comrades to advanced administrative positions in the Babylonian kingdom (Dan 2:46-49). In chapter 4 the amicable relation between Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel is underscored even further. This time, the emphasis is on Daniel who shows great affection for the well-being of the king. Distressed by the oracle of doom of which he is the messenger, Daniel begins his dream interpretation on an apologetic note, "My lord, may the dream be for your enemies and its interpretation for your adversaries" (Dan 4:16). As soon as the interpretation is pronounced, Daniel proceeds to offer advice on how Nebuchadnezzar can postpone, if not avert altogether, the swift implementation of the already decreed punishment, "Therefore, O king, may my counsel please you, to atone for your sins by almsgiving and for your iniquity by mercy to the poor. Perhaps your leisure will be prolonged" (Dan 4:24).

The surprisingly benevolent tenor of the encounter between the Jewish sage and the Babylonian tyrant did not go unnoticed among ancient interpreters. While both early Jewish and early Christian exegetes were in accord that the phenomenon as such required comment, their exegetical treatments differ dramatically. Hippolytus of Rome, composing his *Commentary on Daniel* at the onset of the third century, goes into considerable detail in his exposition of the relationship between the monarch and the sage. The reason for Daniel's hesitation, according to Hippolytus, was Daniel's sincere concern for Nebuchadnezzar's welfare. "The blessed Daniel has become his adviser," writes Hippolytus, "who, like a good physician, wishes to heal his wounds." Hippolytus then goes on to describe Daniel's distress about having to relate a message which he abhors. "For about an hour he was without reason, and his thoughts confused him [cf. Dan 4:16]. He did not want a single word to come out of his mouth. Thus he showed the love he had for the king, so that the king might humble himself and be saved by doing what the prophet was telling him."<sup>22</sup>

For the rabbis, by contrast, nothing seemed more troublesome than the thought that Daniel could have felt true compassion for the notorious tyrant. In an attempt to vindicate the prophet's problematic role at the Babylonian court the rabbis were anxious to demonstrate that

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<sup>22</sup> G. Bardy and M. Lefèvre, *Hippolyte: Commentaire sur Daniel* (SC 14; Paris: Cerf, 1947) III.7:4-5 (my translation).

Daniel's concern for the king was purely theatrical or, to be precise, calculated rather than heartfelt. Daniel speculated that while Nebuchadnezzar's exile was postponed, the king would show mercy on the Israelites and relieve them of their distress, knowing that ultimately the king's doom was sealed. "Do not believe for a moment that the righteous Daniel would have offered such advice to Nebuchadnezzar, who hated the Omnipotent One, if he had not known that Israel was wasting away from hunger as it wandered about in exile. Hence he gave this advice to him because of his concern for them, and because he knew that ultimately Nebuchadnezzar's soul would suffer."<sup>23</sup>

The friendly relationship Daniel entertains with the foreign monarchs stands in stark contrast with the consistent antagonism he faces from the kings' advisers. The motif of persistent hostility between the protagonist and the foreign courtiers is a common element in the court legends, as shown by Humphreys and others. The Jewish hero, or heroine, rises to some prominence and stands in close and friendly rapport with the foreign monarch. It is with the courtiers, however, the personal advisers to the king and hence the closest rivals of the ascending Jews, that tension arises. One immediately thinks of the anonymous group of Chaldeans in the book of Daniel and of Haman in Esther. The evolving conflict is, in the words of Wills, "the meeting of virtue of the protagonist and the mirror-image vice of the antagonist."<sup>24</sup> The malice of the courtiers underscores the moral quality of the protagonist; likewise, the amicable encounter between the monarch and the hero serves as a foil against which the conflict with the courtiers looms especially dark. The tolerant and positive attitude towards the gentile rulers and the perpetual conflict with the courtiers are thus two sides of the same coin, two aspects of the same literary device. Feeding on each other, both are integral parts of this common literary genre.

In light of this highly conventionalized style of writing, the question arises to what extent the ostensible setting of the tales and the social milieu in which the tales are set can be seen as a direct reflection of the author's own social reality. Should we assume, in other words, that these narrative fictions—and there can be little doubt that they are

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<sup>23</sup> *Tanhuma, Mishpatim* 4. The translation is that of S.A. Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1995) 479. The vehemence with which the plain reading of the text is refuted makes one wonder whether rabbinic opinion was as unanimous as the midrash wants to suggest.

<sup>24</sup> *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King*, 11.

fictitious—provide us with a clue about the social world of their authors? Is there a direct relationship between the social world constructed by the narratives and the social world from which they stem?

The social world of the narratives is, of course, the royal court. Several of the stories are quite explicit in their description of Daniel's involvement in the affairs of the foreign monarch. As early as in chapter 1, Daniel and his compatriots are solemnly introduced into the circle of Nebuchadnezzar's courtiers (Dan 1:19-20). The final remark of the chapter that Daniel's tenure at the court lasted "until the first year of King Cyrus" (Dan 1:21) anticipates the similar remark at the end of the last tale, "Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian" (Dan 6:29) and spans the book's entire narrative frame. Daniel's presence at the court is thereby implied throughout, whether made explicit in each of the tales or not. In chapter 2 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are appointed "over the affairs of the province of Babylon," a remark repeated in Dan 3:30, while Daniel remains "at the king's court" (Dan 2:49). In chapter 5, finally, the king promotes Daniel by clothing him in purple and putting a chain of gold around his neck (Dan 5:29; cf. Gen 41:42). Should the fictive world of the tales, then, specifically the persistent theme of the promotion of the Jewish heroes into advanced political offices, be understood as a mirror-image of the social milieu of the authors?

"[T]here is an inbuilt tendency in the discipline of biblical studies," explains Philip Davies, "to take biblical statements about social reality as if they are reliable descriptions of a objective state of affairs."<sup>25</sup> The book of Daniel, it would appear, is a case in point. For one thing, the ostensible setting of the tales at the foreign court hardly indicates that the tales themselves function only, or even primarily, within the court circles. The literary genre of the narratives provides little information about the social location of their authors.<sup>26</sup> The story of Ahikar, for example, demonstrates that court narratives were not enjoyed by educated courtiers exclusively. As Wills observes, the presence of *Ahikar* at the Jewish military colony of Elephantine casts into doubt whether

<sup>25</sup> P.R. Davies, "Reading Daniel Sociologically," in A.S. van der Woude, ed., *The Book of Daniel in the Light of New Findings* (Leuven: Peeters, 1993) 345-61, 347; see also his "The Social World of Apocalyptic Writings," in R.E. Clements, ed., *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 251-71.

<sup>26</sup> As convincingly argued by Davies, "Reading Daniel Sociologically," 350.

wisdom court legends necessarily circulated in the court and, indeed, whether they were composed there. Wills also discusses another example, the case of Onkhsheshonq who is not a courtier but a farmer. The account of Onkhsheshonq, in Wills' words, is "less rigorously developed as a document for the education of an elite class of administrators, but instead it reflects a considerable lower social landscape, not incommensurate with a more rural mercantile and farmer class."<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, a closer look at the description of the foreign courts quickly reveals that accurate information about life at the court was not the dominant concern of the biblical author. Instead, we find numerous gross exaggerations in the often fanciful description of the court: for his banquet the king invites "a thousand nobles" (Dan 5:1) who are served the wine previously enjoyed by the alumni of the court's own academy (Dan 1:5). Of royal proportions are also the gifts offered to the minions (Dan 2:6.48; 5:7.16.29). The king's orders are grotesquely arbitrary (Dan 2:2ff.; also Dan 3:19), and both his appetite for parties (Dan 5:1) and his hysterical distrust (Dan 2:8ff.) have the gravest consequences. The king's rage, finally, is both excessive and cruel (Dan 1:10; 2:5.12f.). According to Hans-Peter Müller, a text with such exaggerations is not likely to stem from circles who had an intimate knowledge of the Babylonian court. To the contrary, the extravagant descriptions are wishful projections of the disenfranchised, reflecting the social misery of those who seek comfort in such fantasies. Hardly the product of the well-to-do Jews in exile, the legends originally circulated "among the poorest of the Babylonian Jewry."<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, the portrait of the *dramatis personae* strongly suggests that they are types, not masked references to real people. As mentioned above, the development of their character is guided primarily by the constraints of the literary genre in which they appear: the plot development of the court tale simply *demand*s that the Jew be exceedingly pious, eloquent, and wise, the monarch not exactly an intellectual giant, but nevertheless good-natured, and the courtiers cunning and malevolent. Moreover, the extravagances in the descriptions of the Babylonian court make it impossible to think of them as representative Jews. The enormous exaggerations as well as the gross historical inaccuracies in

<sup>27</sup> *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King*, 195-96.

<sup>28</sup> H.-P. Müller, "Märchen, Legende und Enderwartung: Zum Verständnis des Buches Daniel," *VT* 26/3 (1976) 338-50, 341; see also his "Die weisheitliche Lehrerzählung im Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt," *Die Welt des Orients* 9 (1977-78) 77-98.

the tales<sup>29</sup> demonstrate that historical precision or accurate reporting in the modern, Western sense were not the authors' primary motives.<sup>30</sup> Not many Jews would have been in a situation to face the fiery furnace. Even if we were to assume that the tales were meant to be understood rather literally, it would seem doubtful that they would have been extraordinarily successful as a handbook for the young Jewish elite to a career in the Babylonian society. After all, Daniel finds his most vehement opponents precisely in the ranks of the Babylonian intellectuals into which the aspiring Jewish elite allegedly sought to advance. It appears unlikely indeed that such a "life-style" would have been met with overwhelming enthusiasm, to say the least, for what awaited the ambitious Jews, at least according to our tales, was first and foremost *not* a stellar career at the foreign court, but the lions' den.

Daniel and his three companions undergo a significant transformation as the story unfolds, from young exiles with no official training "in the literature and language of the Chaldeans" (Dan 1:4), to "administrators of the province of Babylon" (Dan 2:49) and, in the case of Daniel, "chief officer over all sages of Babylon" (Dan 2:48; cf. 4:6). These transformations recall the prophetic visions of restoration after the Babylonian exile (e.g., Isa 54) and suggest, as Jon Levenson has argued with respect to Mordecai and Esther who experience similar transformations, that the protagonists, "for all their particular character, are also allegorizations of Israel's national destiny." In other words, these figures "personify the transformation of the Jews that the narrative in its larger outline reflects—or, perhaps more accurately, *fantasizes*, since we have no evidence that the transformation depicted occurred outside the fictive world of the book (. . .)." <sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> The historical inaccuracies in Daniel have long troubled commentators, both ancient and modern. The statement in Dan 1:1, for example, that Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem in the third year of Jehoiakim's reign, remains a puzzle. Jehoiakim was put on the throne by Necho II in 609 BCE (2 Kgs 23:34); during Jehoiakim's "third year," i.e. in 606 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar had not yet ascended the throne and was campaigning in northern Syria, far from Jerusalem. The next chronological reference, in Dan 2:1, "In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream . . ." presents yet another problem: since according to the previous chapter Daniel and his companions received three years of schooling following their deportation before they were first brought before the king (Dan 1:5.18), Daniel cannot have interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream during the second year of the king's reign. Cf. Collins, *Daniel*, 130-33 and 154-55.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. J.D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 26, for a similar remark about the tales in Esther.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Levenson, *Esther*, 16 (*italics* in the original).

It is in this, rather abstract sense that the tales offer comfort to the Jews in the Diaspora. Like Esther and Mordecai, Daniel and his companions come to personify the national hopes of the exiled Jews; they are representatives of the Jewish people collectively, not historical portraits of individual Jews.

#### 4. *A Conflict of Authority*

The Diaspora afforded the authors of the court tales a formidable opportunity to compose a string of fictitious narratives through which to express their own beliefs. In conclusion, I offer four theses about the nature of these narratives which are meant to suggest fruitful avenues toward a new assessment of the function of the tales.

First: the discussion about the original setting and purpose of the tales has been plagued by the disabling premise that the stories are a one-to-one representation of the authors' historical reality. The assumption that there is an "unmediated" relation between the world of the texts and that of the texts' authors is highly questionable. The tales are shaped primarily by literary conventions; they bristle with gross exaggerations and are suffused with historical inaccuracies. All of this makes it impossible to think of the main characters as representative Jews. The specific elements in the tales, rather, are greatly idealized and hardly reflect the life circumstances of their authors.

In a brilliant essay entitled "The Writers' Audience Is Always a Fiction," Walter Ong analyzes the various techniques employed by an author in order to capture the readers. Both the assumed historicity of the subject matter of a text (in our case, the court setting) and the implied reader (in our case, the courtiers) are fictitious, Ong suggests, skillfully created by the author and expressed in the text through a number of signals. Both the text's ostensible setting and the implied audience are literary constructs, one feeding on the other, which impose certain demands on the readers, i.e., "to conform themselves to the projections of the writers they read. . . . [The readers] have to know how to play the game of being a member of an audience that "really" does not exist."<sup>32</sup> The author of the tales in Daniel is a master storyteller who employs these techniques with such skill that it is easy to

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<sup>32</sup> W.J. Ong, S.J., "The Writers' Audience Is Always a Fiction," in idem, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Cultures* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) 61.

see why modern interpreters were led to believe that the tales ought to have been composed by courtiers for courtiers.

Second: one of the most prominent features of the tales is their narrative economy. Far from providing the reader with a full-fledged portrait of the Jewish elite in the Diaspora, the biblical author is deliberately sparse in his description of the key characters. He furnishes but a few details about their "life-styles," apparently in an effort to place the emphasis squarely on the glory of his God rather than on that of his characters. In the tales we face a certain paradox in that the towering character of Daniel is stressed precisely to *efface* him so that his message can emerge more clearly.<sup>33</sup> This is entirely in line with a general strain of ambivalence, in the Hebrew Bible in general and in Daniel in particular, toward human leaders and the limits of human authority. The ultimate emphasis is on the message, not on the messenger—as Daniel himself is at pains to point out, "But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (Dan 2:28; cf. Gen 41:16). It therefore does not surprise to find that a considerable amount of form-critical scholarship on Daniel has yielded little illumination of the social setting of the composition as well as of the *Sitz im Leben* of the tales.<sup>34</sup> The elusiveness of the main literary characters, and hence of the tales, is deliberate.

The tendency to efface the protagonist in an effort to emphasize the message is furthermore underscored by the conspicuous absence of Daniel from much of the story line. He does not appear in chapter 3 at all. In chapter 4 he disappears from the scene well before the story is over. The last we hear of him is that he offers advice to Nebuchadnezzar on how to postpone punishment (Dan 4:24); from there on the story is entirely Nebuchadnezzar's, and Daniel has no further ado in the ensuing conversion narrative. This is in contrast to the *Prayer of Nabonidus* (4QPrNab), a text discovered at Qumran and often thought to be related to the fourth chapter of Daniel, in which the anonymous Jewish seer does not enter the scene until the seven years of Nabonidus' affliction are over.<sup>35</sup> His sole function is to inform the monarch that

<sup>33</sup> Cf. P.B. Machinist, "The Meaning of Moses," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 27 (2/3) 1998, 15, for a similar remark about Moses who, in contrast to the message he communicates, is a "remote, inimitable outsider."

<sup>34</sup> As rightfully lamented by Davies, "Reading Daniel Sociologically," 348-49.

<sup>35</sup> J.T. Milik, "Prière de Nabonide' et autres écrits d'un cycle de Daniel," *RB* 63 (1956) 407-15; J.J. Collins, "Prayer of Nabonidus," in G. Brooke et al., ed., *Qumran Cave 4-XVII. Parabiblical Texts, Part 3* (DJD 22; Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 83-93.

his cure which at this point has already happened was brought about by the God of Israel. The absence of Daniel from much of the story in chapter 4 did not go unnoticed among early interpreters. They “rectified” this flaw by re-inserting Daniel back into the narrative. In one example, the *Lives of the Prophets*, the Jewish sage becomes a saint, a “holy man” who prayed constantly on behalf of the Babylonian king, accompanied him throughout his ordeal and even shortened for him the time of his exile from seven years to seven months.<sup>36</sup> In short, “The goal of the tales is ultimately not the advancement of the wise men but the glorification of their God.”<sup>37</sup>

Third: the tales revolve around two forms of authority which *in principle* are incompatible with each other and which clash consistently in the stories: the self-appointed authority of the foreign monarch who is “at ease” in his complacency (Dan 4:1), and the authority of Daniel which stems from his divine appointment (see Dan 1:17; 2:20-23, 28; 4:6). In the court tales in Esther this conflict between the Jewish heroine and the heathen monarch is played out exclusively on the political plane, with little if any attention devoted to theological issues.<sup>38</sup> The conflict of authority in Daniel, by contrast, is predominantly theological in nature and does not concern itself with sociological or political divisions. Such religious confrontations may very well result in political tensions, as in fact it does in most other court narratives, but the tales in Daniel are surprisingly silent at this point.

The specifically theological nature of the dispute and its resolution is played out in various ways and pronounced by both the heathen kings and Daniel. Note, for example, Nebuchadnezzar’s reaction to Daniel’s first dream interpretation. “Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell

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<sup>36</sup> D. Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets* (SVTP 11; Leiden: Brill, 1995) 124: “Daniel prayed greatly on behalf of Nebuchadnezzar, after Beltasar, his son, summoned him, when he became a wild animal and a beast, in order that he might not perish. [. . .] Many were going out of the city and observed him. Daniel alone did not desire to see him, for he was in prayer on his behalf during the entire period of his transformation. He said that Nebuchadnezzar would again become a man, but they did not believe him. Daniel caused the seven years, which he called ‘seven seasons,’ to become seven months. The mystery of the ‘seven seasons’ was fulfilled in his regard, since he was restored in seven months.” See also *Chronicle of Jerahmeel* 46; and Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4.334, 6.423.

<sup>37</sup> Collins, “Social World,” 137; *contra* Davies, “Reading Daniel Sociologically,” 355.

<sup>38</sup> On the possibility of divine presence in the book of Esther, see M.V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) 235-47.



prostrate and worshipped Daniel and ordered that sacrifice and incense be offered to him" (Dan 2:46). The king's reaction is rather dramatic. The specifically religious character of the veneration is pushed to an extreme through the absurdity of the royal command that sacrifice and incense be offered to *Daniel*.<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, Daniel's implied acceptance of these honors was felt to be a source of considerable embarrassment by both Jewish and Christian commentators, precisely because of the obvious religious symbolism. Whereas Jewish interpreters argued that Daniel did not accept Nebuchadnezzar's honors, Christian interpreters generally followed the lead of Jerome, who claimed that Nebuchadnezzar did not worship Daniel, but God.<sup>40</sup>

The distinctive religious quality of the tales is underscored further by the composition of the narrative frame as a whole. Nebuchadnezzar's two great doxologies clearly stand out in this respect, strategically placed by the redactor in Dan 3:31-33 and 6:27-28. The royal proclamations solemnly summarize the theological message of the tales and form an inner frame to the cycle of tales. In either doxology the God of Israel is praised by the heathen monarch for his sovereignty. Whereas all human dominion is bound to perish, God's kingdom has no end, "His kingdom is an eternal kingdom, and his dominium is from generation to generation" (Dan 3:33; cf. 6:27).<sup>41</sup>

Fourth and finally: the stories in Daniel differ from other court tales in that in the end it is not the protagonist who is praised by the monarch, but *his God*. Following a certain stereotypical structure, the tales in Daniel consistently end with a celebratory declaration of the king acknowledging the supremacy of the God of Israel.<sup>42</sup> At the end of chapter 2 the only words uttered by Nebuchadnezzar are words of

<sup>39</sup> Collins, *Daniel*, 171-72.

<sup>40</sup> Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:328, 6:415; Jerome, *Commentarium in Daniele* (ed. F. Glorie; CChr series Latina 75A; Turnholt: Brepols, 1964) *ad loc.*; cf. Collins, *Daniel*, 171f.

<sup>41</sup> Critics have long assumed that the doxologies in 3:31-33 and 6:27-28 frame a textual unit which possibly circulated at an early stage as an independent collection of tales; cf. Michaelis, *Deutsche Übersetzung des Alten Testaments*, 22; Montgomery, *Daniel*, 37; and more recently E. Haag, *Die Errettung Daniels aus der Löwengrube. Untersuchungen zum Ursprung der biblischen Danieltradition* (SBS 110; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1983) 49-62; Wills, *The Jew in the Court*, 87-89.

<sup>42</sup> By concatenating originally independent stories which all begin with the persecution of the Jews by a king who in the end reverses himself to embrace the Jewish cause, an ironic narrative is created in which the king converts in one verse, only to persecute the Jews in the next. Nebuchadnezzar converts no less than three times in the book (Dan 2:46-47; 3:28; and 4:31-34), for the rabbis a clear indication that his conversion was calculated rather than honest (cf. *Midrash Tanhuma*, Va'era 17).

confession, “Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery” (Dan 2:47). Similarly at the end of chapter 3, Nebuchadnezzar blesses at length the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan 3:28-29), followed by a sporadic note about the promotion of the three seers. Chapter 4, too, ends in a long blessing (Dan 4:31-32) and a praise of “the King of heaven” (Dan 4:34). The most elaborate example comes from King Darius at the end of chapter 6, the second half of the great doxologies, who solemnly declares “I have issued an edict that throughout the domain of my kingdom people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is a living God, and one who endures forever. His kingdom is indestructible, and his dominion until the end. He saves and rescues and does signs and wonders in the heavens and on earth. He has saved Daniel from the power of the lions” (Dan 6:27-28). Compared to this eloquent confession, the brief concluding remark by the narrator that “this Daniel (*wəḏānîy’ēl danāh*) prospered during the reign of Darius” (Dan 6:29) seems formulaic.

While the motif of the repentant king who reverses himself is widely attested and, indeed, instrumental for the plot line of the court narratives, the king’s climactic confession of faith in the uniqueness and universal sovereignty of the God of Israel is not. In the Joseph story, for example, Pharaoh readily acknowledges the abilities of Joseph’s God, yet he is far from converting to the God of the Jews (Gen 41:38-39). The God of the Hebrews becomes one God among many, powerful to be sure, but certainly not supreme. In the Hebrew version of Esther, to give another example, God is not even mentioned throughout the book, let alone a conversion of Ahasuerus. The legendary account of the unsuccessful persecutions of Egyptian Jews under Ptolemy IV in *3 Maccabees* similarly ends with the conversion of the king. Following several failed attempts to execute the Jews, Ptolemy finally issues a letter in which the Jews are vindicated of all accusations and allowed to return home. The king solemnly proclaims in the closing line of the epistle that it is in vain to persecute the Jews since they are under the protection of their God. “For you should know that if we devise any evil against them or cause them any grief at all, we always shall have not a mortal but the Ruler over every power, the Most High God, in everything and inescapably as an antagonist to avenge such acts” (3 Macc 7:9). Ptolemy’s proclamation sounds more like the words of a disillusioned tyrant who comes to terms with his own limitations rather than the exuberant religious confession of Nebuchadnezzar in his own

epistle (Dan 3:31-33).<sup>43</sup> Finally, a similar picture emerges from the account of the affliction and death of Antiochus IV in 2 Macc 9. The notorious villain, living in constant pain because of a mysterious intestinal disease, reverses himself as well and promises, in spite of his earlier threats to the contrary, to leave Jerusalem intact, to set the Jews free, even to become a Jew himself (2 Macc 9:17). The account of Antiochus IV making peace with the Jews at the end of his life is quite a variance with the earlier account of his death in 2 Macc 2:11-17 and bears many parallels with the story of Nebuchadnezzar's madness in Dan 4.<sup>44</sup> In any case, while Antiochus in his epistle "to his worthy Jewish citizens" (2 Macc 9:19) informs them of his legitimate successor, the letter does not mention the God of the Jews and includes no reference to the king's confession.

The principal difference between these stories and the court narratives in Daniel is found in their endings. The tales in Daniel 2, 3, 4 and 6 all end in a royal declaration, narrated in the first person of the heathen king, either spoken directly to Daniel and his three companions or written down in form of an epistle and sent to all people, in which the newly converted monarch confesses at length the universal supremacy of the God of Israel.<sup>45</sup> This royal proclamation is then followed in chapters 2 and 3 by a remark in the third person of the

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<sup>43</sup> On 3 *Maccabees*, see G.W.E. Nickelsburg, "Stories of Biblical and Early Post-Biblical Times," M.E. Stone, ed., *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (CRINT 2/2; Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 80-84.

<sup>44</sup> Like Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus is struck with his affliction "as soon as he stopped speaking" (2 Macc 9:5; cf. Dan 4:28); the king who is blinded by arrogant self-satisfaction with his comfortable lot, "who a little while beforehand had thought that he could touch the stars of heaven" now lies in worm-eaten agony (2 Macc 9:10; cf. Dan 4:1.27); the mysterious nature of Antiochus' "many and strange inflictions" is reminiscent of the equally obscure nature of Nebuchadnezzar's affliction (2 Macc 9:6; cf. Dan 4:29-30); Antiochus had originally planned "to throw out [the Jews] with their children for the wild animals and for the birds to eat," i.e., to send them into exile among the beasts of the field, precisely the place which Nebuchadnezzar roams during the seven years of his exile (2 Macc 9:15; cf. Dan 4:29-30); most importantly, the theological motto of Antiochus' death scene is summarized succinctly at the end of the account, "So the murderer and blasphemer, having endured the most intense suffering, *such as he had inflicted on others*, came to the end of his life by a most pitiable fate" (2 Macc 9:28; *italics* mine), although not articulated in Daniel 4, succinctly captures the preferred reading of the tale in early rabbinic literature: Nebuchadnezzar's exile is a particularly fitting requital for the sufferings he had previously inflicted on the Jews (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Shirta* 6 [ed. Lauterbach, II.46-47]; *Tosefta Sota* 3:19 [ed. Liebermann, p. 166]).

<sup>45</sup> Dan 2:47; 3:28-29. 31-33; 4:31-32. 34; 6:26-28.

narrator about the promotion of the Jewish sages.<sup>46</sup> The emphasis clearly is on the confessions which bring the story to a climactic end. Indeed, their prominent place within the composition suggests that the authors' own position lies behind them. The repentant king reverses himself and embraces the Jewish cause, but he never relieves the Jews of their present condition and makes no political promises.

Furthermore, in striking difference to other court narratives it is not the protagonist who is praised, but his God.<sup>47</sup> The court-tales or, rather, the conversion narratives in Daniel each ends on a theological note, articulating a theology with immediate political implications: at the center of the confessions stands the recognition that while all human dominion is bound to fade away, the kingdom of the God of Israel alone shall remain forever (e.g., Dan 6:27). The setting of the tales at the court of the foreign superpowers appears the logical place to make this point: the acknowledgment that in the end all of Israel's enemies are bound to perish is infinitely stronger when articulated by the foreign monarchs themselves rather than by Daniel or his companions. Such villains are anything but threatening, or even worthy of condemnation, in "the comic triumph"<sup>48</sup> of the tales. Moreover, it is precisely the theme of the "transitoriness" of the heathen kingdoms that is carried to its most extreme, apocalyptic level in the second half of the book. The predictions of the foreign kings come true in the apocalyptic scenario at the end of time. The doxologies not only summarize the theological message of the tales, they set the stage for the latter half of the book and give coherence to the book as a whole.

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<sup>46</sup> Dan 2:48-49; 3:30; cf. 1:19-21; 5:29.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. G.W.E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (HTS 26; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) 55, "Although the stories end with some notice about the heroes' promotion and/or success, it is the heroes' God who is acclaimed and not the heroes themselves, as is the case in Joseph, Ahikar, and Esther."

<sup>48</sup> Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World*, 48.