

## INTRODUCTION

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When I began preparing the Book of Daniel for the Bible Week two things struck me. The obvious one was my lack of familiarity with working in such detail with Biblical Aramaic. Quite simply, I did not have the same sense of intuitive control of the language that has come with decades of working with Biblical Hebrew. But, more immediately, in contrast with the nuanced subtlety of other Biblical narratives, the text of these chapters of Daniel felt ponderous and unnecessarily repetitive.

For example in verse 2 of chapter three, Nebuchadnezzar summons together ‘the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs and all the rulers of the provinces’ to dedicate the enormous golden image that the king had set up. But in verse three the exact same lengthy list is repeated when recounting that all the invitees arrived. A slightly reduced version of the same list reappears in verse 27.

Even greater repetitiveness recurs in the list of musical instruments that are to be played as the signal to fall down and worship the image. They appear in verse 5: ‘the horn, pipe, harp, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music’. Again the identical list reappears in verse 7 when we are told that all the people, on hearing them, duly fell down and worshipped. Then again in verse 10 the identical list recurs when some people accuse Daniel’s companions of not falling down and worshipping when the music plays. In verse 15 the list is repeated a fourth time when Nebuchadnezzar himself gives the companions one last chance to fall down and worship and thus save themselves from the fiery furnace. These sets of repetitions offer nothing obviously new in terms of information or variation, whereas such repetitions in earlier Biblical narratives may well yield something significant. Unless some purpose lies behind this style, it suggests that the author was in serious need of a good editor.

This different narrative style reminded me of an observation in Erich Auerbach’s celebrated book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. In the first chapter, ‘Odysseus’s Scar’, he compares the writing of Homer and that of Biblical narrative.

The Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present.

In contrast, in the story of the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22)

Only so much of the foreground as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative is left in, all else is left in obscurity ... all else remains mysterious and ‘fraught with background’.

Auerbach uses the same evocative phrase, ‘fraught with background’ about the Biblical accounts of the complex relationship between King Saul and David, or the tragic experience of King David because of the rebellion and subsequent death of his son Absalom. All the external features of time and place are minimally noted, and yet the intensity of the events are powerfully present. So

why this stylistic change in Daniel? If it is composed in the Hellenistic period, as scholarly opinion suggests, is some other literary tradition or purpose at play here?

I had a very different kind of association while studying the beginning of Chapter 2. This is the point at which the Aramaic part of the Book is introduced that will continue till chapter 7. We are told that in the second year of his reign Nebuchadnezzar had disturbing dreams and his spirit was troubled. Therefore, as was the conventional behaviour in such circumstances, he summoned 'the magicians, and the enchanters, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans' to reveal to him the meaning of the dreams. There is a comic, though potentially tragic, dimension to the king's demand because he refuses to tell this multitude of specialists and experts the content of the dreams. He becomes furious at their insistence that without that essential information there was nothing they, or anyone else, could do. But verse four performs an unexpected kind of double duty. It begins with the advisers asking the king about the content of his dream.

*Va'y'dabru ha-kasdim la-melekh aramit: Malka l'almin cheyi emar chelma l'avdakh ufishra n'chavei.*

Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic: 'O king, may you live forever! Tell your dream to your servants and we will declare the interpretation.'

At that exact point not only the immediate speech, but the entire Aramaic section of the book begins in mid-sentence. Whatever the reason for the two different linguistic parts of the Book, Aramaic and Hebrew, this is how the phenomenon is introduced. It is an almost invisible transition, but not quite, because the word 'Aramaic' floats there unanchored in the sentence. It might be regarded as a kind of footnote marking the transition, so is omitted in translation. But many translations, and in the Masoretic text, the sentence is understood to offer the redundant information that the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic. Since this is surely obvious, the effect is that its ambiguity jars and grabs our attention. For me it triggered a surprising association from a very different medium.

The first part of the great Hollywood movie, 'The Wizard of Oz', is filmed in 'black and white', actually, a monochrome sepia colour. It establishes the image of young Dorothy's home in Kansas and the familiar figures in her life who will join her in different guises in her later adventures. The great moment of transition is brilliantly filmed. A tornado carries her house away and deposits it in another land. Dorothy starts to leave the building. We view her from behind, in that same monochrome sepia colour, as she opens the front door and steps outside into - the vivid technicolour of the Land of Oz. The effect is mesmerising.<sup>1</sup> It tells us at once that we have left behind Dorothy's known world and entered another one of fantasy and imagination, both familiar and radically different. Whether or not that was the intention of the presumed author of the Book of Daniel, the attention-grabbing introduction to the switch from Hebrew to Aramaic tells us that we, too, have entered another world with its own norms, conventions and rules, and that the change of language, and literary style, carries with it some significant meaning, if only we are able to understand it.

This year we are focussing on the narrative part of the Book of Daniel. To some extent we are in familiar territory with echoes of the Joseph story and the Book of Esther. All three narratives address the situation of outsiders living in the court of a foreign king. Their worth is recognized and valued by the monarch, but they may have to cope with rivalry from other powerful people in the court hierarchy. However, the world of Daniel is more intensively threatening than that of the other stories: the visions and actions of the kings Daniel encounters in his long years of service are more grandiose; the pressure on him and his companions to conform with idolatrous worship, and the penalties for not conforming, fiery furnaces and dens of lions, are sensationally exaggerated and horrifying.

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<sup>1</sup> The trick was done by having a sepia-toned substitute for Dorothy open a sepia-painted door.

In preparing some literature on Daniel I was struck by the title of a book by Anthea Portier-Young *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism*<sup>2</sup>. She argues that it is no accident that the first examples of apocalypse emerge in the Hellenistic period, a time of continuous warfare and the reconquest of Judea. It was an era of empire with all the attendant horrors of occupation and the attempt by those in power to control every aspect of life. The earliest apocalypses were part of resistance to these forces. Thus the narratives about Daniel and his companions modelled forms of behaviour and offered challenges to the values imposed from above.

I find the idea of 'resistance to empire' a possible key to accompany us during our reading of Daniel. The narrative dramatizes the day-to-day reality of life lived under the power and control of the imperial regime, but at the same time allows its protagonists, and also their readers, to explore strategies of resistance that might be available to them.

The book opens by describing the education of Daniel and his companions to assimilate them to the norms of their new society, to equip them to be able to 'stand before the king'. They are to become functionaries in the royal court and the administration, and possibly one day be sent as emissaries for the empire back in their homeland. The first thing this elite group had to be taught was the 'literature and the Chaldean language' of their new society (*Daniel 1:4*). This was a skill set of which, we are told, Daniel excelled beyond his companions and other students (*1:17*). Is it possible that the decision to tell the narrative part of the Book of Daniel in Aramaic is itself part of an act of resistance? That is to say, to use their skill with the language as a weapon. Perhaps the form of the narrative, its exaggerated language, repetitions, the arbitrary behaviour of the all-powerful kings, the underlying and sometimes overt violence, while apparently being merely a documentary may also function as a subtle critique or even parody, for those who know how to read between the lines!

A final thought. The Hebrew word 'oz' means power. So, if my association with the techniques of Hollywood is defensible, then, like Dorothy, we begin to read the Book of Daniel with caution and trembling, because we are actually entering the Land of Oz.

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<sup>2</sup> William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK 2014.