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Henze, Matthias

The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4

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This is an interesting book on the story of Nebuchadnezzar's madness in Daniel 4 and I am glad to have read it. Henze develops a nice model for interpreting texts by looking at three dimensions: the past, present, and future of the text. This implies that he takes into account the Ancient Near Eastern background of (motifs in the) story, has a keen eye for the textual basis of the story and sketches the early history of the interpretation of the biblical scene both by Jewish and Christian interpreters.

Henze approaches the textual problems in MT and LXX Dan 4 from the perspective of a tradition in flux. He adopts the view of Peter Schäfer on the *Hekhalot*-literature: the various textual forms of the Enochic-material can only be brought together in a synopsis and literary dependency between various forms cannot be detected. As for Dan. 4 this implies that the quite divergent text-forms in the MT and the Old Greek should be considered as independent developments of an original tradition. Both versions have their own specifics. The MT unmistakably portrays Nebuchadnezzar as a stubborn and complacent tyrant who is forcefully banned into exile, while the Old Greek placed the emphasis on the nature of the repentance of the Babylonian king. The Daniel material uncovered at Qumran only underscores this view, since these texts clearly show that the continuous writing process was still going on. I can only say that I appreciate this kind of approach to textual problems. In my view, the puzzling diversity of the text of Jeremiah in MT, Old Greek, and Qumran can only be understood when seen from a comparable approach.

Qumran also plays an important role for the prehistory of Dan 4. Henze refers to the well-known Prayer of Nabonidus. He, however, opposes the view of, e.g., Cross and Flint that 4QPrNab occupies an intermediate place in the tradition between the Babylonian accounts of an historical incident and the Book of Daniel. Although Henze acknowledges the thematic closeness of 4QPrNab and Dan 4, he stresses some differences between the two. (1) The texts are about different kings; (2) In Dan 4 the Jewish seer is explicitly identified as Daniel, while in 4QPrNab the seer remains

anonymous; (3) In Dan 4 the seer is instrumental for the story line, while in 4QPrNab the Jewish seer does not enter the scene until the seven years of Nabonidus' affliction are over. All these and some other observations make him conclude that Dan 4 and 4QPrNab are two independent versions that both originated as oral recollections of the historical incident of the retreat of a Babylonian monarch to the oasis of Tayma on the Arabian peninsula.

Quite interesting are Henze's religio-historical remarks on several motifs in the story. Especially remarkable are his ideas on the 'tree' as a symbol of royal power and his comparative remark on the reversal theme. Following a remark already made by Coxon, Henze points at a passage in the Epic of Gilgamesh I iii, where Enkidu is depicted as a wild man living the beasts before his metamorphosis into a 'man of culture'. In Dan. 4 this theme recurs, albeit in reversed order: Nebuchadnezzar as king of Babylon, the man of culture at the apex of civilization is transformed into a 'man of culture'. Although I do not think, that the author of Dan 4 is 'quoting' the Epic of Gilgamesh, the parallel is impressive. Referring to the 'world turned topsy-turvy motif' that is present in Mesopotamian literary predictive texts, such as the Shulgi-prophecy, could have reinforced Henze's remarks.

Then he turns to the future, i.e. the history of exegesis of Dan. 4. Here he displays in full detail the differing ways in which Jewish and Christian interpreters have treated this texts. To the early Rabbis, Nebuchadnezzar's metamorphosis was an act of divine punishment, or better perhaps retribution. At first sight, these Jewish interpreters seem to have overlooked the fact that the story culminates in the conversion of the Babylonian king to the God of Israel (Dan. 4,31-34). When assessing this omission, one should, however, keep in mind that the Rabbis read the story during the reign of so many wicked and hostile Roman emperors. The Jewish interpretation of Dan. 4 is based on an identification of the Babylonian king with the Roman ruler.

Christian interpretation has taken other avenues. Since it is basically dependent of the Old Greek version of Dan. 4 it does not come as a great surprise that Christian exegetes encounter this text as the description of an act of penitence. In the West this interpretation give rise to the sacrament of penance, especially under the influence of Tertullianus. In the East, Ephrem Syrus animated an interpretation that lead to various forms of self-mortification. In re-enacting the metamorphosis of the king, anchorites and other persons living on the fringe of 'culture' were seeking reconciliation for the effect of the original sin by harsh forms of repentance.

The book ends with three appendices. (1) Daniel at Qumran which supplies a magnificent overview of all Daniel and Daniel-related material; (2) A synopsis of Dan. 4 in the MT and the Old Greek, and (3) A translation into English of a homily of Jacob of Serug, a Syrian father from around 500 CE on Daniel 4.

The book is well-written, well-argued and will find—I hope—a multitude of readers.