

DANIEL 3 AND 5 AS HISTORIOGRAPHY

The scholarly consensus on the book of Daniel is that it is the latest composition of the Hebrew Bible, dated to around 164 BCE. Its narrative, however, is set much earlier, during the reigns of the powerful Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid rulers in the sixth century BCE. Recent scholarship on these narratives in the book of Daniel has recognized that their composition involved something close to the writing of history¹. On the one hand, as Michael Segal has articulated, “it is abundantly clear that the authors of Daniel were not offering firsthand, eyewitness accounts of the events in question, but were rather describing how they perceived the past or, more precisely, how they wanted their readers to perceive this past”². But the description of a “perceived past”, for the benefit of the authors or their audience, certainly shows some kind of interest in history, however inaccurate the resulting details may be. Even a matter like the problematic dating of Nebuchadnezzar’s activities in Jerusalem to Jehoiakim’s third year (Dan 1,1), which, by modern scholarly standards, cannot be correct, can still be viewed as one reader’s way of making sense of received historical information³. Thus, even though “early readers and interpreters of the biblical text did not always read their sources with the same historical

¹ In this essay, we take a broad definition of historical writing, encapsulated by Johan Huizinga’s well-known formulation that history is “the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past” (quoted in C. WAERZEGGERS, “Manuscript and Archive: Who Wrote and Read the Babylonian Chronicles?”, *Conceptualizing Past, Present and Future*. Proceedings of the Ninth Symposium of the Melammu Project Held in Helsinki/Tartu May 18-24, 2015 [eds. S. FINK – R. ROLLINGER] [Münster 2018] 335-346, here 335). We adopt this definition because it resonates nicely with the available textual evidence, without constraining the texts to modern generic classifications. This is in keeping with R. Nelson’s sober and pragmatic justification for “recognizing (and defining) historiography” in ancient texts: “Historiography is thus a useful taxonomic category that can negotiate similarities among texts that reflect common characteristics but not something that can be defined once and for all. The term historiography highlights, instead, the similar usage and purposes of certain texts in the institutions and social behaviors of various cultures, even though they diverge in geography and time” (R.D. NELSON, “Historiography and History Writing in the Ancient World”, *The Oxford Handbook of the Historical Books of the Hebrew Bible* [eds. B.E. KELLE – B.A. STRAWN] [New York 2020] 7-19, here 7). For more on this subject, the essays in R.C. DENTAN (ed.), *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven, CT 1955) remain valuable, with the additional bibliography in NELSON, “Historiography and History Writing”, 18-19.

² M. SEGAL, *Dreams, Riddles and Visions*. Textual, Contextual and Intertextual Approaches (BZAW 455; Berlin 2016) 2.

³ SEGAL, *Dreams, Riddles and Visions*, 28-33.

consciousness (and knowledge) that we assume today”⁴, the creation of narratives anchored in the past, such as those in the book of Daniel, could be considered an act of historical writing.

This possibility that narratives in the book of Daniel emerge from historiographic activity finds support from Assyriological work that has scarcely attracted the attention of scholarship on Daniel⁵. In the main, the Akkadian historical records, most prominently the texts known as the Babylonian Chronicles (ABC 1–13), have served as a kind of historical “scientific control”, the basis for determining the “true history” against which Daniel’s narratives of the Persian period are weighed and found lacking. Assyriologists and biblical scholars alike have not given much critical attention to these Akkadian texts, often treating them, instead, as a trove of unbiased history. This is understandable, given the cuneiform texts’ laconic, “just the facts” style and the assumption that, even though some of these texts survive only in copies from the Hellenistic period, they originate much closer to the events they describe. However, recent scholarship has recognized problems with this approach⁶. With this revision comes the possibility that Hellenistic Babylon saw the rise of historiographic interest in the end of the Neo-Babylonian period and the early Persian Period⁷. In that context, narratives in Daniel 1–6 might be considered a kind of historiography, too⁸. As a cycle of stories, these chapters

⁴ SEGAL, *Dreams, Riddles and Visions*, 31.

⁵ This is true even for scholarship that recognizes the general value of Assyriology for the interpretation of the book of Daniel. See, for example, K. VAN DER TOORN, “Scholars at the Oriental Court: The Figure of Daniel Against its Mesopotamian Background”, *The Book of Daniel. Composition and Reception* (eds. J.J. COLLINS – P.W. FLINT) (VT.S 83.1/ FIOTL 2.1; Leiden 2001) 27-54, here 38.

⁶ C. WAERZEGGERS, “The Babylonian Chronicles: Classification and Provenance”, *JNES* 71 (2012) 285-298; EADEM, “Facts, Propaganda, or History? Shaping Political Memory in the Nabonidus Chronicle”, *Political Memory In and After the Persian Empire* (eds. J.M. SILVERMAN – C. WAERZEGGERS) (SBLANEM 13; Atlanta, GA 2015) 95-124; EADEM, “Manuscript and Archive”; and EADEM, “Writing History Under Empire: The Babylonian Chronicle Reconsidered”, *JANEH* 8 (2021) 279-317.

⁷ In this article, we use the term Persian to refer to the Achaemenid Persian Empire, founded by Cyrus. On the background of the names, see P. BRIANT, *From Cyrus to Alexander. A History of the Persian Empire* (trans. P.T. DANIELS) (Winona Lake, IN 2002) 17, 110-111.

⁸ On the separate character of Daniel 1–6, see, for example, K. KOCH, *Das Buch Daniel* (Darmstadt 1980) 8-12, 55-77; J.J. COLLINS, *Daniel. A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN 1994) 324; C. NEWSOM, *Daniel. A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY 2014) 9-12. For a recent overview regarding the composition of Daniel, see A.M.D. BLEDSOE, “The Relationship of the Different Editions of Daniel: A History of Scholarship”, *CurBR* 13 (2015) 175-190. For a current opinion on the literary development of different units within Daniel’s prose stories and analysis of the book’s overall literary structure, see SEGAL, *Dreams, Riddles and Visions*, especially the summary on pp. 210-213.

probably began in oral form, reaching written form during the fourth to second centuries BCE. In these chapters, we find narratives whose interests in the period align with those that characterize Hellenistic Babylonian historiography. In this article, we focus on Daniel 3 and 5, where we find readily identifiable parallels to the Babylonian material ⁹.

I. BABYLONIAN HELLENISTIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Our study proceeds from an observation by C. Waerzeggers, as part of her re-evaluation of the Akkadian text commonly known to scholarship as the Nabonidus Chronicle (BM 35382) ¹⁰. This text, attested on a single copy from the Hellenistic or Parthian period, was long held to have originated during the early Persian period. Waerzeggers argues convincingly against this earliest possible date of composition and suggests that the text is an example of historical literature written after Alexander's conquest of Babylon. This literature survives on tablets from the Esagil in Seleucid Babylon, which constitute a not-insignificant plurality of the finds from there ¹¹. Apart from the Nabonidus Chronicle, these texts include the Dynastic Prophecy (BM 40623) and the Royal Chronicle (BM 34176+), preserved in cuneiform, and Berossus's *Babyloniaca*, known from quotations in Greek sources. Based on this, Waerzeggers describes a circle of writers active in a Hellenistic-Babylonian milieu and familiar with both Babylonian and Greek historiography. According to Waerzeggers, it is to the activities of this circle of writers that we owe the Nabonidus Chronicle.

For Waerzeggers, the historical writing from the Hellenistic Esagil exemplifies a wider historiographical interest at this later time. She writes:

What emerges clearly from this textual environment is that there was a lively interest in Nabonidus and Cyrus among scholars of Esagil [...] These texts all deal with the same historical period, but they focus on

⁹ In line with this purpose, we refrain from undertaking a comprehensive literary analysis of these specific stories, and certainly do not wish to make claims about all the book's narratives. For these matters, see published serial commentaries and studies.

¹⁰ ABC 7.

¹¹ The historiographical texts are part of the broader corpus recently characterized as "Late Babylonian Priestly Literature", which included other genres of writing, including ritual texts and astronomical diaries. See M. JURSA – C. DEBOURSE, "Late Babylonian Priestly Literature from Babylon", *Stones, Tablets, and Scrolls. Periods of Formation of the Bible* (eds. P. DUBOVSKÝ – F. GIUNTOLI) (Tübingen 2020) 253-281, and, with great detail on the ideological concerns manifest across the corpus, C. DEBOURSE, *Of Priests and Kings. The Babylonian New Year Festival in the Last Age of Cuneiform Culture* (CHANE 127; Leiden 2022) 348-414.

different aspects of that history, and they express different opinions about it, in different genres. This was a past that mattered in the present — and not only to the learned community of Esagil. The *Prayer of Nabonidus* from Qumran, the *Shulgi Chronicle* from Uruk, and the book of Daniel all speak of a similar, and widely shared, interest in this crucial turning point in history, when mighty Babylon was integrated in an even more powerful empire¹².

Beyond the circle of the Esagil, Hellenistic writings in Akkadian, Hebrew, and Aramaic all treated the reigns of Nabonidus and Cyrus. As a historical moment of transition from native Babylonian to Persian rule, “this was a past that mattered in the [Hellenistic] present”. After all, this later period also brought political transformation, with the end of Persian domination and the rise of a new empire¹³.

The motivation for turning to early Persian history is likely to have been shared among the various cultures that underwent the political transformations that accompanied Alexander’s conquests. In fact, recent scholarship has detected similar trends of reaction to empire in the book of Daniel and “Danielic discourse” in Second Temple Jewish literature¹⁴. However, for the most part, biblical scholarship has yet to move beyond this Hebrew and Aramaic literature to evaluate it in light of the parallel developments in Akkadian cuneiform¹⁵. This limited perspective has caused a failure to appreciate how Daniel might also fit in with contemporaneous historiographic literature from the Babylonian sphere.

II. NEBUCHADNEZZAR’S STATUE (DANIEL 3) AND THE ROYAL CHRONICLE

Ever since its recovery and publication, the text known as the Verse Account of Nabonidus (BM 38299) has been a crucial part of any discussion

¹² WAERZEGGERS, “Facts, Propaganda, or History”, 110-111. Compare similar observations in JURSA – DEBOURSE, “Late Babylonian Priestly Literature”, 255-256, 278.

¹³ WAERZEGGERS, “Facts, Propaganda, or History”, 118-119.

¹⁴ See, for example, A. FRISCH, *The Danielic Discourse on Empire in Second Temple Literature* (JSJSup 176; Leiden 2016) 20-22.

¹⁵ An important exception is by Waerzeggers herself, who has devoted one study to the “Prayer of Nabonidus” from Qumran, with its well-known connections to the book of Daniel and to Jewish Nabonidus Literature; see C. WAERZEGGERS, “The Prayer of Nabonidus in the Light of Hellenistic Babylonian Literature”, *Jewish Cultural Encounters in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern World* (eds. M. POPOVIĆ – M. SCHOONOVER – M. VANDENBERGHE) (Leiden 2017) 65-75. For a brief survey of potential biblical and extra-biblical parallels to Late Babylonian Priestly Literature, see DEBOURSE, *Of Priests and Kings*, 414-420.

of Daniel 3¹⁶. The cuneiform text is a polemic that views Nabonidus's promotion of the cult of Sîn, the moon god, as an offense against Babylon's patron deity, Marduk. Cyrus's rule, in this account, restores order to Babylon and corrects Nabonidus's religious lapses. For the present purposes, the text is important because it includes the construction of a statue of Sîn among Nabonidus's offenses. According to modern interpreters, this statue "may have provided the starting point for the legend" of the giant statue that Nebuchadnezzar constructs in Daniel 3¹⁷.

There is, however, a difference between the statue in the Verse Account and the one in Daniel 3. In the Verse Account, the statue is clearly a deity that the king "named Nanna [...] its appearance like Sîn"¹⁸. In Daniel 3, in contrast, although it is an object of worship, the statue is never identified as a specific deity. Here, P.-A. Beaulieu detects "purposeful ambiguity" between the possibility that the statue is a divine image and the possibility that the statue is the image of Nebuchadnezzar himself¹⁹. According to Beaulieu, this ambiguity was introduced during the Hellenistic period, when an original story, recalling the Verse Account, was merged into its current place following the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, in which the king is represented as the gold head of a mixed-media statue (Dan 2,31-45)²⁰. With that, the memory of Nabonidus's statue — originally of the god Sîn, signifying a cultic offense — turned into the memory of something at once less specific but, at the same time, much more sinister: "a statue embodying imperial hubris"²¹.

Babylonian Hellenistic historiography preserves another connection between Nabonidus and a statue that also illuminates the narrative in Daniel 3, especially the ambiguity about the statue's nature. A text known

¹⁶ P.-A. BEAULIEU, "The Babylonian Background of the Fiery Furnace in Daniel 3", *JBL* 128 (2009) 273-290, here 275-276. For the text, see H. SCHAUDIG, *Die Inschriften Nabonids von Babylon und Kyros' des Großen* (AOAT 256; Münster 2001) 562-578 (P1).

¹⁷ COLLINS, *Daniel*, 181. See also NEWSOM, *Daniel*, 101.

¹⁸ BM 38299, I.24', 26' (SCHAUDIG, *Inschriften*, 566).

¹⁹ L.M. WILLS, "Daniel", *The Jewish Study Bible* (eds. M. BRETTLER – A. BERLIN) (New York 2014) 1640-1665, here 1641, describes this as having a "comic effect".

²⁰ BEAULIEU, "Babylonian Background", 276-277.

²¹ BEAULIEU, "Babylonian Background", 277. On this aspect of the story, see NEWSOM, *Daniel*, 103-104. Compare the view of L. Hartmann and A.A. Di Lella that "the compiler of the book decided to incorporate the story of the worship of the golden image in his work because it offered a good object lesson to his coreligionists who were being persecuted by Antiochus IV Epiphanes" (L. HARTMANN – A.A. DI LELLA, *The Book of Daniel. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 23; New York 1978] 159) and the similar view expressed in J. STÖKL, "Nebuchadnezzar. History, Memory, and Myth-Making in the Persian Period", *Remembering Biblical Figures in the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods. Social Memory and Imagination* (eds. D.V. EDELMAN – E. BEN ZVI) (Oxford 2013) 257-269, here 261.

as the “Royal Chronicle” (BM 31476+) ²², describes Nabonidus’s restoration activities in the Ebabbar ²³. The king locates the temple’s ancient foundation inscriptions, as well as a now-broken statue of Sargon of Akkad:

He examined the statue of Sargon, father of Naram-Sîn, in this sacred enclosure: half its head was missing, it had aged so its face could not be found. Because of fear of the gods and respect for kingship, he summoned expert artisans, restored the head of this statue, and put back (its) face. He did not change its place but installed it in the Ebabbar and initiated an oblation for it ²⁴.

Nabonidus restores the broken statue of the ancient king and makes it an object of worship. Unlike in the Verse Account, where the statue depicts a deity, in the Royal Chronicle, the statue is a royal image for which Nabonidus institutes religious rites. As such, the Royal Chronicle’s statue straddles both sides of the ambiguity in Daniel 3. On the one hand it is worshiped like a deity, while, on the other hand, it is the image of a king ²⁵.

As with the parallel between Daniel 3 and the Verse Account, the possible parallel to the Royal Chronicle has its limitations. Both Akkadian texts locate their respective statues in temples, while, according to Dan 3,1, Nebuchadnezzar erects the statue in the plain of Dura ²⁶. If, however, we are looking for the “starting point of a legend” (in the words of J.J. Collins, quoted above), then either Akkadian text fits the bill, and the Royal Chronicle has certain advantages. Apart from the specific point about combining a royal image with cultic worship, there is also the more general point of dating. The Royal Chronicle dates to the Hellenistic period, which is the time at which the Daniel narrative took shape and the ambiguity about the statue was born. Within the circle of Babylonian historiographers, the memory of Nabonidus included an episode about a

²² For an edition of the text, including publication history and joins, see SCHAUDIG, *Inschriften*, 590-595.

²³ On this undertaking, see P.-A. BEAULIEU, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon 556-539 B.C.* (YNER 10; New Haven, CT 1989) 132-137.

²⁴ BM 34176+, III.29’-IV.5 (SCHAUDIG, *Inschriften*, 592).

²⁵ For the history and religious significance of royal statues in Mesopotamian temples, see I.J. WINTER, “‘Idols of the King’: Royal Images as Recipients of Ritual Action in Ancient Mesopotamia”, *On Art in the Ancient Near East*. Vol. 2: From the Third Millennium BCE (CHANE 34.2; Leiden 2010) 167-195. Important general theoretical insights into the religious nature of statuary can be found in B. PONGRATZ-LEISTEN – K. SONIK, “Between Cognition and Culture: Theorizing the Materiality of Divine Agency in Cross-Cultural Perspective”, *The Materiality of Divine Agency* (eds. B. PONGRATZ-LEISTEN – K. SONIK) (SANER 8; Berlin 2015) 3-69.

²⁶ BEAULIEU, “Babylonian Background”, 276.

statue that was both royal and godly at the same time. It is not hard to imagine this memory contributing to the legend we have before us in Daniel 3²⁷.

One implication of this parallel pertains to the possibility that Daniel 3, and, more generally, the Daniel narratives, could stem from historiographic activity. In Hellenistic Babylonia, a circle of native Babylonian writers looked back with sustained interest to the reign of Nabonidus, some two hundred years earlier. Babylonian Jews, too, looked back to this same period and engaged it for their own purposes. Both found some significance in the last Babylonian king's statue-building activities.

III. DANIEL 5 AND THE NABONIDUS CHRONICLE

The parallel between Daniel 3 and the Royal Chronicle establishes a possible link between a specific biblical episode and Hellenistic Babylonian historiographic writing. A different kind of parallel between these historiographic cultures emerges from the comparison between Daniel 5 and the Nabonidus Chronicle. In this instance, we find that both texts employ several similar literary techniques to shape their narration of history.

As a first example, we point to the element of suspense as an historiographical feature. Waerzeggers demonstrates that the Nabonidus Chronicle builds suspense around Babylon's downfall, which turns that event into a dramatic climax in the account²⁸. In Daniel 5, the mystery of the meaning of the writing on the wall builds suspense almost from the very beginning. And, as in the Nabonidus Chronicle, the fall of Babylon stands at the climactic resolution of the suspense²⁹.

The Nabonidus Chronicle and Daniel 5 also engage their readers by taking them into settings that would normally be out of their view. In the Chronicle, this occurs in close conjunction with Cyrus's conquest, when

²⁷ It is possible that this interest in Nabonidus reaches back to the Persian period itself, as argued by C. NEWSOM, "Now You See Him, Now You Don't. Nabonidus in Jewish Memory", *Remembering Biblical Figures in the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods. Social Memory and Imagination* (eds. D.V. EDELMAN – E. BEN ZVI) (Oxford 2013) 270-282, here 273-275. However, as argued here, the evidence of Akkadian Hellenistic historical sources militates against restricting the possibility of interest in or relevance of Nabonidus to the Persian period alone. See WAERZEGGERS, "Prayer of Nabonidus".

²⁸ WAERZEGGERS, "Facts, Propaganda, or History", 108.

²⁹ See SEGAL, *Dreams, Riddles and Visions*, 80. Compare, however, his identification of Isaiah 21, rather than parallels from the ancient Near East, as "the key towards understanding the origins" of motifs in the tale (SEGAL, *Dreams, Riddles and Visions*, 82).

the narrative gives extensive details about how Cambyses participated in the New Year festival. As Waerzeggers observes, the ritual's "movements take place in sacred areas that are unknown and inaccessible to all but the most high-placed priests and royalty. The reader of the Chronicle, allowed to view this hidden space, is treated to a spectacle of the senses as the authors dwell not only on the gestures but also on the implements (the scepter), the garments (Elamite attire) and the weaponry (lances and quivers) used at the scene"³⁰. Readers of Daniel 5 gain access not to sacred space, but to the king's inner court, where they witness events that occur in the presence of the king, his advisors, and the royal women.

One additional possible shared feature is the attention both texts give to royal women. According to Waerzeggers, this seems to be a particularly Hellenistic feature of the Nabonidus Chronicle, because women do not regularly feature in earlier Mesopotamian Chronicles³¹. The Chronicle reports the deaths of Nabonidus's mother and of Cyrus's wife, which, in the overall narrative arc and argument of the text, suggest an association between these events and the text's main event: the fall of Babylon and the conquest by Cyrus. In Dan 5,10, it is the queen mother (*malk^etā*) who reminds the king of Daniel, the wise Judean exile in Nebuchadnezzar's court, who might be able to read the writing on the wall. Thus, she plays a pivotal role in the narrative, against the background of Belshazzar's status³². It is also worth noting that, like the women in the Nabonidus Chronicle, she appears in close proximity to Babylon's downfall.

The most basic point of comparison, beyond these particulars, is that both texts narrate events that take place during the same period in history, at the end of the Neo-Babylonian period. The events of Daniel 5 take place in the royal court during the last days of Belshazzar's regency, which lasted from 552-543 BCE. The Nabonidus Chronicle describes the reign of Nabonidus (556-539 BCE), which included the regency of his son, Belshazzar. Both texts focus on the events that preceded the fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire to the Persians. Both texts present the Persian conqueror, Cyrus the Great, positively, and view his rule as a fulfillment of divine will.

³⁰ WAERZEGGERS, "Facts, Propaganda, or History", 108 (also see 109).

³¹ WAERZEGGERS, "Facts, Propaganda, or History", 116-117.

³² For the description of Belshazzar as a "problem son", see B.C. DIPALMA, *Masculinities in the Court Tales of Daniel*. Advancing Gender Studies in the Hebrew Bible (London 2018) 44-45. On the queen in Daniel 5, see J.A. MONTGOMERY, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (ICC; Edinburgh 1927) 257-258, and COLLINS, *Daniel*, 248.

With this theological position, both texts seek to explain the fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire and the rise of the Persians. The narrative in Daniel 5 lays the theological underpinnings of the fall of the Neo-Babylonian empire by depicting Belshazzar's profane use of the vessels from the temple in Jerusalem (Dan 5,2). Belshazzar's act of desecration expresses scorn towards the supreme authority of the God of Heaven (5,23). Consequently, his kingdom must fall to the Persians (5,27), and, indeed, Belshazzar's death follows immediately (5,30). Similarly, the Nabonidus Chronicle provides a negative depiction of Nabonidus as a way of justifying his fall to Cyrus.

Beneath the surface, however, neither text treats the rise of Persia as an unambiguously positive historical development. In Daniel, God's rejection of the Babylonians in favor of Cyrus comes about because of Belshazzar's offensive behavior. This suggests, without quite stating as much, that the rise of the Persians is equally contingent upon respectful behavior. In the Nabonidus Chronicle, as in Daniel, Cyrus comes to power after Nabonidus's violations of religious practice. Yet even Cyrus's restoration of the New Year festival is not without its problems: one protagonist appears in "Elamite dress", which seems to have been an offense³³.

These shared features, from the narratives' overall efforts to explain the shifts in imperial power to the specific ways in which they construct their stories about the past, are consistent with the motives of historical writing during this period. Based on our current knowledge, neither the Nabonidus Chronicle nor Daniel 5 seeks to provide an account of events exactly as they occurred. Rather, both interpret the past by means of the narratives that they construct³⁴. If, indeed, both texts originate in the Hellenistic period, then both turn to a distant past to explain transitions in the present. For the circle of priestly historians in the Esagil, this may have been a way to locate precedent for their special connections to the ruling elite and thus establish continuity and stability, even as the imperial powers change³⁵. For their Judean counterparts, whose leadership was similarly subject to those same imperial authorities, history pointed towards God as the ultimate power behind all thrones³⁶.

³³ WAERZEGGERS, "Facts, Propaganda, or History", 105-106, where she presents other examples of how "the Chronicle contains a subtle, rather than a one-dimensional, judgment of Persian rule".

³⁴ See NEWSOM, *Daniel*, 164: "Dan 5 participates in the creation of cultural memories about the end of the Babylonian Empire and attempts to give that event religious significance".

³⁵ WAERZEGGERS, "Facts, Propaganda, or History", 118-119.

³⁶ See the discussion of the ideology of the court tales in NEWSOM, *Daniel*, 15-18. Although Newsom dates the tales to the Persian period, the diasporic concerns she identifies are likely to have animated later literary activity, too.

CONCLUSION

For all the miracles and wondrous tales they contain, the stories of Nebuchadnezzar's statue (Daniel 3) and the Belshazzar's feast (Daniel 5) purport to tell stories from a known past. In contemporary research, these narratives are generally perceived as part of the book of Daniel's historical unreliability, even though they show an interest in some recognizable historical reality. By contextualizing this interest in a genre of historical writing, we have proposed situating Daniel 3 and 5 within Babylonian Hellenistic historiography as a step towards a broader exploration of similar possibilities regarding additional biblical narratives³⁷. Placing the Daniel narratives in this context reveals that they share with their Babylonian counterparts an interest in the transition from the Neo-Babylonian to the Persian empires, about which they seem to have knowledge from a common factual pool. They make use of the past in a parallel manner, as a means of communal self-understanding. Moreover, within this context, reading Daniel's narratives as examples of late Babylonian historiography calls attention to narrative features characteristic of this genre's emphases.

Making the case that Daniel 3 and 5 constitute historiographic writing raises the issue of the relationship between the Hellenistic author (or authors) and the Persian past. This challenge comes to the fore in the contradictions between the narrated past in these chapters and what today would be considered historical truth, such as, most prominently, referring to a king named Nebuchadnezzar whose name was actually Nabonidus. Factual errors like this one make these narratives unreliable for the reconstruction of Neo-Babylonian and Persian history. Still, these stories do emerge from an effort to draw on a known past; they do not imply that the stories' authors never engaged in historiographic activity.

Since modern historians commonly prefer the witness of authors closest to the periods in which they write, they have correctly neglected Daniel for its historical evidence, but have incorrectly privileged the cuneiform sources as the only ones engaged in the writing of history. Daniel, widely acknowledged as a Hellenistic work, was deemed irrelevant for the writing of history of earlier periods. This, however, does not preclude considering the Daniel narratives themselves as historical writing. Cuneiform sources and, as argued above, the book of Daniel, too, show that the writing of

³⁷ The interest in the past extends to the apocalyptic vision stories in Daniel, too. See M. SEGAL, "The Four Kingdoms and Other Chronological Conceptions in the Book of Daniel", *Four Kingdom Motifs Before and Beyond the Book of Daniel* (eds. A.B. PERRIN – L.T. STUCKENBRUCK) (TBN 28; Leiden 2021) 13-38, here 16-17. However, it is in the narratives that we see closer resemblances to historical writing.

history mattered in the Hellenistic period. Approaching the texts as we have suggested here can enrich our knowledge of Judean cultural history, as it relates to the writer(s) responsible for the book of Daniel and other, similar texts.

Bar-Ilan University
Ramat Gan, Israel

Tova GANZEL

Yeshiva University
New York, NY (USA)

Shalom E. HOLTZ

SUMMARY

Recent re-assessment of Akkadian historiographic sources prompts re-evaluation of the nature of historiography in Hellenistic Babylonia. Features in Daniel 3 and Daniel 5 find parallels in the historiographic writings from the recently identified circle of Hellenistic Babylonian historians. These shared features, including the narratives' overall efforts to explain the shifts in imperial power and the ways in which they construct their stories about the past, are consistent with the motives of historical writing during the Hellenistic period.