Short Stories of the Bible:
Viewpoints on International Relations

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An expanding awareness in recent years of the literary merits of the Bible has caused many readers to consider more carefully the traditional sectional labels of the Old Testament. It has long been customary to divide the collection into books of history, prophesy, wisdom, and literature or "writings." Obviously, a serious literary study of the Bible must not overlook the books labeled history, prophesy, and wisdom, but there can be no doubt that the early biblical editors were quite astute in their perception of special artistic merits in the books which they designated as "literature".

The four books considered in this study, like most of the Bible's literary pieces, were written after 587 B.C., the year in which the Hebrews of Judea were conquered and carried to slavery in Babylonia. The experience of captivity introduced the Hebrews to the rich cultural and artistic traditions of Mesopotamia while giving them cause for the deep introspection and soul-searching so essential to literary development.

Quite predictably, once these writings were branded "sacred" and included in the biblical canon, they were, for centuries, removed from objective consideration on their literary and philosophical merits. Standard practice among both Jews and Christians has been to view the characters in the books as real, historical figures and thus to seek instruction rather than enlightenment in reading the works. However, humanistic analysis of the books can also be extremely rewarding. Reading these ancient writings as literature is convincing evidence for the universality of the human spirit. One cannot but be pained by the ancient Hebrews' declarations of despair at the seemingly meaningless agonies of life, thrilled by their songs of joy and celebration, and awed by their unrelenting search for the divine amidst the mundane. In short, the stories of the Old Testament provide a true literary experience in reflecting not merely the historical facts of the characters' lives but the essential concerns and emotions of readers in every age.

The stories discussed below all deal in some way with international relations. In each case we meet characters whose personal lives are, in varying degrees, controlled and changed by the conflicts of their societies with neighboring cultures. These stories clearly demonstrate that, while the ancient Hebrews were basically insular, they were not and, indeed, could not be truly isolated from the world around them.

A. Ruth

The story of Ruth is one of the Bible's most misunderstood narratives. Many readers and all Hollywood screenplay writers would agree with Goethe's assessment of
the book as, "the daintiest of love idyls." In the popular imagination, Ruth is a raven-haired beauty whom Boaz or any other redblooded Hebrew could scarcely resist. Actually, the Bible story makes no mention whatever of her physical appearance. Her virtues are loyalty, love, and courage, but her most noteworthy quality is that she is a foreigner.

The true significance of this "love idyl" must be seen in the light of the times in which it was written. The story is set in the distant past, the time of the Judges who governed Israel about 1100 B.C. Indeed, the opening sentence, "Now it came about in the days when the Judges governed . . . ." conveys a fairy-tale-like, "once upon a time" mood. The author wants us to envision a scene in the good old days when women were loyal, men were just, and righteousness prevailed.

The best evidence suggests that the story was actually written about 350-450 B.C., after the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from their forced exile in Babylonia. During that post-exilic period, a strong sense of Jewish nationalism developed as a natural reaction to the years of servitude under the hated Babylonians. After the exile, Jewish leaders, headed by the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah, promulgated a series of religious laws designed to promote Jewish purity. One of the laws forbade foreigners to participate in Hebrew worship, while another demanded that Jewish men who had married foreign women divorce their wives and send them back to their homelands.

Historically, among the most despised of foreigners were the Moabites. For example, Numbers 25:1 clearly presents the seductive, evil ways of Moabite women by recording, "And Israel . . . . began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab." And in Deuteronomy 23:3, Moses thunders, "No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord."

Clearly, however, not all the Jews of the post-exilic period shared the xenophobia of their leaders. One of these outnumbered liberals, the author of the book of Ruth, dared to ask the question, "Isn’t it possible that foreigners, even Moabites, are worthy of acceptance by the community of Yahweh?" Or put another way, "Is our God a national possession or a universal Lord?" The book of Ruth provides the moving, unforgettable answer to those questions.

In many ways, the focus of the story is not Ruth but her old Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi. The changes in Naomi’s life during the course of the tale reflect the story’s movement from despair to fulfillment, emptiness to abundance, loneliness to love. As the story opens, one can hardly imagine a more pathetic figure than Naomi. Fleeing drought and famine in her native Bethlehem, Naomi enters Moab with her husband and two sons. However, disaster follows them, as first her husband and then both of her sons die. Before their demise, each son marries a Moabite woman, but Naomi, ever sensible and responsible, tells them that they must leave her alone and return to their villages in hopes of contracting other marriages. Orpha, recognizing the good sense of the proposal, reluctantly agrees and bids farewell, but the old woman’s luck begins to change when Ruth responds with one of the most stirring declarations of loyalty and
love in world literature: "Do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried" (Ruth 1:16–17). So the young woman and the old return to Jewish Bethlehem to face their future together. As they enter the town, the author provides a symbolic signal that this new stage in their lives may be happier than the previous one, for we are told, "They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest" (Ruth 1:22). At last, the famine is ending and the harvest is beginning!

Now we meet the third major character in the story: Boaz is a wealthy landowner and a kinsman of Naomi's dead husband. He is implied to be much older than Ruth (Ruth 3:10), a middle-aged pillar of the community. To fully understand his role in the tale, one must be familiar with two important Jewish laws of the time: Deuteronomy 25:5–6 indicates that when a man died leaving a childless widow, it was the duty of that man's closest male relative to marry the widow, impregnate her, and thus provide an heir for the dead man. Another religious law relevant to Ruth and Naomi's situation is recorded in Leviticus 25:25, "If a fellow-countryman of yours becomes so poor that he has to sell part of his property, then his nearest kinsman is to come and buy back what his relative has sold."

After arriving in Bethlehem, Ruth earns a basic living for herself and Naomi by gleaning, utilizing the primitive social welfare system of her new society which permitted the poor to pick up what grain was dropped or left behind in the fields by the harvesters. Boaz notices her, speaks kindly to her, and commends her for her care of Naomi. Later, he tells his workmen to leave extra grain for her, and he even shares his lunch with the amazing young foreigner. Here, as so often in the narrative, the storyteller uses a small detail to elucidate Ruth's flawless character by recording that she saves some of her lunch to take home to Naomi.

When Ruth reports all that has happened to her, Naomi shows that she is, indeed, a worldly-wise old mother-in-law. She first instructs Ruth to continue working only under Boaz' protection, "lest others [i.e., unprincipled field hands] fall upon you in another field" (Ruth 2:22). Next, the astute old woman tells Ruth to put on her best clothes and, after dark, go to the threshing floor and lie down beside the sleeping Boaz. A measure of Ruth's delicacy is that she does not awaken the landowner but waits for him to realize her presence. When the startled Boaz asks who she is, she responds, as nearly as decency will allow, with a proposal of marriage: "I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative" (Ruth 3:9). By thus reminding Boaz of his kinship, she is calling on him to fulfill his aforementioned religious duty of providing her and her dead husband an heir. Pious, honorable Boaz responds by gathering her under his blanket just as his workmen have been gathering the grain from his fields.

However, one complication remains. Boaz is not the nearest relative, so the next morning he must go into Bethlehem to ask that unnamed kinsman to waive his rights and responsibilities in the case. The man would like to buy Naomi's property but
doesn't want to complicate his own son's inheritance by producing another heir with Ruth. Thus, Boaz, with the blessings of the town elders, acquires new property and a new wife.

Ruth quickly conceives and bears a son whom Naomi helps to care for. The old woman, formerly so destitute, now has an abundant and happy life, thanks in large measure to her faithful foreign daughter-in-law. The women of the town, rejoicing with Naomi, pay Ruth their highest compliment and extend their full acceptance after the baby's birth by proclaiming, "Your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him" (Ruth 4:15). In that male-dominated, nationalistic society, what could be greater praise for a foreign woman that to be acclaimed "better than seven sons"?

The surprise ending to the story provides the startling answer to the above question: "So they named him [the new baby] Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David" (Ruth 4:17). Here Ruth, the Moabite, is presented as the great-grandmother of the mighty King David, the greatest of Israel's monarchs, the founder of the dynasty, the leader during the Hebrews' golden age, and the ancestor of the promised Messiah.

Thus, while the book of Ruth certainly is a "love idyl," a lesson in Hebrew family relationships, and a charming presentation of village and rural life in ancient Israel, it is much more. The simple, enchanting story of common folk in believable situations relies on moral force and artistic prowess to demand recognition of the universality of the Hebrew God and of the brotherhood (sisterhood?) of all mankind.

B. Jonah

One detail which almost everyone thinks he knows about the Bible is that the book of Jonah is the story of a man who gets swallowed by a whale. One suspects that if a person-on-the-street survey were taken to determine public knowledge about the book, ninety-nine out of one-hundred respondents would cite the whale as the focus of the book. Fortunately, those ninety-nine would all be comically wrong. First of all, the animal in the story is presented as a "fish" never a whale, but, more importantly, its presence in the tale is unrelated to the main idea. Thus all the laborious research which has been done in the last century to prove that no known sea creature could actually swallow a man whole and then vomit him out unharmed three days later has been a colossal waste of time. Clearly, the author did not intend his fantasy to be taken literally. The story is not a treatise on the eating habits of Mediterranean whales; rather, it is, like the book of Ruth, a fictional attempt to illustrate for the post-exilic Jewish community the folly of cultural and religious exclusivism and the limitless love of their universal God.

Like the book of Ruth, the Jonah story was written as historical fiction. While its composition may be dated to about 350 B.C., the time of the action is several centuries earlier, perhaps about 780 B.C. At that early date, there was in the northern kingdom of Israel a real prophet named Jonah. Thus, this short story, named for that man, is included among the writings of the minor prophets, even though the point of the nar-
rative is the folly, not the wisdom, of Jonah’s preaching.

The real Jonah of the eighth century B.C. was a spokesman for nationalism. In II Kings 14:25, he is mentioned as predicting the expansion of Israel’s territory: “He [Jeroboam II] restored the border of Israel... according to the word of the Lord... which He spoke through His servant Jonah.” Nineveh, the wicked city which the fictional Jonah is sent to evangelize, was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and, for the eighth century Hebrews, the most hated and feared of all foreign cities. Indeed, it was the Assyrians who in 721 captured the northern kingdom of Israel, destroyed its cities, enslaved its citizens and annexed its territory into their empire. Thus for Jonah, the prophet of Hebrew nationalism, to be sent to warn the Ninevites to repent or face God’s wrath is sharply ironic. As Jonah himself clearly states in Chapter Four, he doesn’t want the enemy to repent and be spared; he wants justice, not mercy, for these foreign idolaters.

Jonah’s response to God’s commission to go to Nineveh indicates that he believes in geographical as well as cultural limits to his God. He believes that he can run away from the God of Israel simply by leaving the country. Therefore, he books passage on a ship bound for Tarshish in modern-day Spain. The western Mediterranean was, in Jonah’s time, the other end of the world; surely God could not find him there! His progressive withdrawal from duty is emphasized by the fact that, once on board, he goes to the very bottom of the ship and then falls into a deep sleep.

However, God’s call is not to be so easily avoided. A great storm arises and the pagan sailors, fearing that all may soon be lost, wake Jonah to ask him to pray to his God for salvation. They then cast lots to determine who is responsible for their troubles, and Jonah is exposed as the culprit. The fugitive prophet shows his commitment to justice, if not to mercy, by telling the sailors to throw him overboard. Ironically, however, it is these foreign crew members who demonstrate true compassion in refusing Jonah’s directive and rowing desperately to reach the shore so that his life might be saved. Thus, even in the first chapter, it becomes clear that goodness and concern for human life are not uniquely Hebrew characteristics. Finally, however, recognizing their hopeless position, the sailors prayerfully toss Jonah to the waves, whereupon the storm abates and the great fish appears for his famous lunch.

Three lonely days in the dark interior of the fish provide ample opportunity for reflection. In Chapter Two, Jonah recites a prayer from the stomach of the fish which indicates that he at last accepts his subservience to God’s will and that he will try, if given another opportunity, to complete his mission to Nineveh. There is no indication, however, that Jonah has truly learned a lesson about God’s infinite mercy; rather, it appears that the prophet agrees to go to the wicked foreign capital simply to avoid further punishment from his inscrutable God.

The reluctant preacher’s efforts in Nineveh are spectacularly, disappointingly successful. In response to Jonah’s fire and brimstone threat that God will destroy the entire city in just forty days, all the citizens, from the King on down, immediately, totally repent and cry out to the Hebrew God for mercy. No matter that such a mass
conversion of the Assyrians to Judaism is blatantly unhistorical, the important message for the story's post-exilic Jewish readers was that their God heard the prayers of those hated foreigners and spared their lives and city.

Jonah, quite predictably, learns nothing from the experience. He is despondent that God has shown mercy where the prophet demands justice. Jonah clearly wanted to fail in Nineveh, wanted to be ignored, wanted God in a fit of righteous anger to level the city and exterminate all life. This prophet would have been happier serving the God whom the Hebrews envisioned during their conquest of Canaan who commanded them to show no mercy and to reduce their enemies’ cities to rubble while slaughtering all the inhabitants.

By the time the book of Jonah was composed, however, at least some Hebrews had become more sophisticated and their concept of God more universal. Ezra and Nehemiah would continue their calls for tribalism, but the author of Jonah displays true universalism in his ironic presentation of the prophet's narrow-mindedness. Jonah’s defense sounds stupid, indeed, when we read in Chapter Four, verse two: “In order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.” Jonah bitterly lists these divine virtues as though they were vices, but the point of the satire is not lost on even the dullest reader.

To reinforce Jonah’s ridiculous position, however, we are given a final incident at the end of the tale. As God’s despondent messenger sits sulking in the sun on a hillside near Nineveh, the Lord causes a plant to quickly grow up to provide him shade. The next day, however, God sends a worm to attack and kill the plant, whereupon Jonah becomes sick with the heat and melodramatically begs to die. God’s answer to Jonah not only silences the unworthy prophet but explicitly underscores the moral of the tale: “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons...?” (Jonah 4:10–11).

The book of Jonah is the story of a man reluctant to accept God’s mission. Many other Old Testament figures such as Moses and Gideon also tried to avoid the duty God imposed upon them. However, Jonah’s case is different. While the others sought to escape because they felt unworthy of God’s mission, Jonah feels that God’s mission is unworthy of him. He is a man whose nationalistic prejudices contradict his belief in a universal God. In this, one of the finest examples of biblical satire, the reader learns a lesson by observing Jonah’s stubborn refusal to learn anything. This tale, popularly perceived as a fish story is, in reality, a monument to its unnamed author’s perception that Yahweh in the post-exilic period had grown beyond narrow tribal limits to become the Light and Hope of all mankind.

C. Esther

The story of Esther is unique among books of the Bible in that, throughout the entire
narrative, there is no mention of God or of prayer. Early editors tried to splice in pious-sounding passages to make the tale more religiously acceptable, but these have never been recognized as genuine and, in the Protestant Bible, are relegated to a separate book in the Apocrypha called "Additions to the Book of Esther."

As it stands, Esther's story is a completely secular tale of blood, intrigue, and heroism. By the standards of most of the rest of the Bible, the message of the book is morally objectionable, and both Jewish and Christian theologians have long considered the story an embarrassment. Martin Luther, for example, declared flatly that he wished the book did not exist.²

Nonetheless, Esther's story does exist, and Hebrew literature is richer for it. The book is clearly a work of historical fiction, probably composed in the second century B.C. with the clear purpose of explaining the origin of the Jewish festival called Purim. The holiday, still celebrated by modern Jews, may actually have been an ancient Babylonian rite of spring borrowed by the Jews during their exile in Babylonia, much as many contemporary Jews in Christian countries participate in a secular observance of Christmas. Purim is a major Jewish festival without mention in the Pentateuch, and postexilic Jews clearly felt the need of a scriptural basis for the occasion. The resulting story displays none of Ruth's loving charm or Jonah's satirical call for brotherhood and universalism. To the contrary, the book of Esther is unflinchingly nationalistic, a skillfully wrought example of political propaganda. Its only moral statement is negative: those who practice intolerance and try to persecute the Jews will themselves eventually fall victim to their evil schemes. Perhaps it is this spirit of revenge, so often manifested in human affairs, which gave the story so much popular appeal that all efforts by the religious hierarchy to omit, change, or append it were totally fruitless.

The book opens with a scene of oriental splendor in the court of Persia. King Ahasuerus, better known in Western history as Xerxes I who ruled from 486–464 B.C., is shown presiding over a royal banquet which, in the exaggerated language of the tale, lasts for six months. As a climax to the feast, the King orders his eunuchs to bring his wife, Queen Vashti, before him, "in her royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes" (Esther 1:11). For unexplained reasons, the Queen refuses to appear—some have speculated that the King ordered her to wear only the royal crown! At any rate, Ahasuerus is furious, and his trusted ministers advise him to issue an irrevocable decree (According to the unhistorical convention of this story, the Persian King's commands were always irrevocable, even by himself.) deposing the Queen as a lesson to all women who might be tempted to disobey their husbands.

The fall of Vashti gives the court cause for another round of amusement. A new Queen must be found, and the King's attendants stage an elaborate "beauty contest" to select the new Miss Persia. The most ravishing maidens from throughout the empire are brought to the capital at Susa, and after a year-long beautification program they are presented, one each night, to His Royal Highness for judgment.

Among the contestants for the King's favor is the fetching young Jewess, Esther, who is entered in the competition by Mordecai, her cousin and guardian. Mordecai
is here said to have been exiled from Judah with King Jeconiah by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian conqueror. Since that event occurred in 597, both Mordecai and Esther must be well over one-hundred years old at the time of Xerxes. Obviously, the author, writing four centuries later, has little concern for chronology. At any rate, since this is her story, Esther is ultimately chosen as the fairest of the fair and installed as the new Queen. She keeps her ethnic origins a secret, however. Mordecai gets a job as gatekeeper at the palace to remain near her. In that position, he overhears a threat on the King’s life and, through Esther, reports the danger to Ahasuerus. The conspirators are hanged and Mordecai’s service is recorded in the official chronicles of the kingdom.

At this point, the villain slinks into the story. He is Haman, the Agagite, recently appointed as the King’s Prime Minister. The mention of “Agagite” suggests that he is descended from Agag the ancient king of the Amelekites, Israel’s first and most bitter enemies (See I Samuel, Chapter Fifteen). Another interesting possibility suggested by the names of the characters in this story is their plausible link to Babylonian mythology. The names Mordecai and Esther seem remarkably similar to Marduk and Ishtar, the principal male and female Babylonian deities, who were also cousins. Haman and Vashti, the ultimate losers in the Esther story, might be derived from Humman and Masti, an Elamite god and goddess who were ultimately replaced by Marduk and Ishtar in the Mesopotamian religion.

Whatever his legendary origins, the mortal Haman is an unwholesome creature indeed. Impressed with his own importance, he is enraged when the lowly gatekeeper, Mordecai, refuses to bow before him, presumably because of religious scruples. The Prime Minister wants revenge not only on Mordecai but on all his people. He, therefore, casts lots, Purim, to determine an auspicious day for action and approaches the King with a plan worthy of the most rabid modern Nazi. Haman tells Ahasuerus that there are, scattered throughout the empire, a “certain people” with their own laws who do not obey the King. Haman declares, “Let it be decreed that they be destroyed” (Esther 3:9) and promises to sweeten Ahasuerus’ distaste for the task by paying an enormous bribe to the royal treasury. Without asking for details or even realizing who the “certain people” are, the fun-loving monarch hands Haman his signet ring and with it the authority to issue the orders of preparation for history’s first holocaust. Subsequently, a decree is published throughout the empire, “from Ethiopia to India” that on a given day, eleven months hence, all Jews are to be exterminated.

While it seems most unlikely that the Jews would be given almost a year’s notice of their impending fate, this literary contrivance does give Mordecai and Esther time to implement a plan for saving their people. Mordecai must first convince his royal cousin that only she can dispel the cloud of doom which hangs over the Jewish nation. He asks her to plead with him before the King that the edict might be changed. She, however, fears for herself, citing a palace regulation that no one, even the Queen, can approach the King without being summoned. Unless the King holds out his golden scepter to the uninvited guest, the penalty for such an intrusion is death. This danger
to Esther seems a literary exaggeration of palace security procedures which were undoubtedly strict indeed. Such a high risk to Esther accentuates her bravery in agreeing to help Mordecai, but still he must threaten her by warning, “Do not imagine that you in the King’s palace can escape any more than all the Jews (Esther 4:13). Actually, since her religion was a secret, the Queen probably could have escaped the pogrom, but she rises to meet her destiny as implied in Mordecai’s argument, “Who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). Resolving to do or die, the lovely young hope of the Hebrews nobly proclaims, “I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16).

Esther prepares for her unscheduled appointment with great care. She tells Mordecai that all the Jews in Susa must fast for her for three days while she and her maidens likewise go without food or drink. Then, donning her royal robes, she enters the august presence of Ahasuerus. Quickly the immediate danger passes as the monarch extends his septer in welcome, asks her petition, and promises her anything, even the legendary half of his kingdom. Initially, however, she requests only that he and Haman attend a banquet she will give the following day. Moreover, at that dinner she asks nothing but that her guests return again the next day for a second banquet. Clearly, the Queen wants an appropriate setting for her plea, and the author wants more time to orchestrate his plot.

Skillful in the art of developing and maintaining suspense, the storyteller shifts the focus at this high point in the action. The reader again encounters Haman, whose massive ego has been inflated even further by the Queen’s invitations to dine privately with the royal couple. He feels that everything in his life is perfect—except that Mordecai still will not bow to him as he leaves the palace. To end such indignity, his shrewish wife, Zeresh, suggests that he build a spectacular gallows fifty cubits (twenty-five meters) high and request the King’s permission to hang Mordecai on it the next day. Haman, pleased with the idea, orders the platform to be constructed and goes to sleep a contented man.

Unfortunately for the Prime Minister, however, the King is at that same moment suffering from insomnia. To occupy the restless hours of his sleepless night, Ahasuerus orders that the royal chronicles be read to him, and, as he listens to the records, Mordecai’s laudable deed of warning him about the plot against his life is recalled to his mind. Eager to show gratitude, His Majesty demands to know what reward has been given to the gatekeeper. When Ahasuerus is informed that Mordecai has received nothing, he resolves to remedy the oversight at once. Haman, just arriving for his busy morning at the court, is called to the King’s side and asked what should be done for one whom the King wishes to honor. The haughty potentate, supposing himself to be the recipient of such royal favor, suggests that the honored man be given clothes from the King’s wardrobe and a horse from his stable on which to be led through the city and acclaimed before all. Imagine Haman’s mortification when he is ordered to arrange for his archenemy, the gatekeeping Jew, to be afforded the honors which he envisioned for himself! He hurries home, only to be taunted by his wife and friends, until the royal
eunuchs arrive to escort him to Esther’s second banquet.

This magnificent meal is Haman’s last. As the persuasive Queen at last explains the Prime Minister’s treachery and its effects for her people, the King becomes enraged. Haman, realizing that his luck has turned from bad to worse, falls at Esther’s feet and grovels for mercy. Ahasuerus, however, interprets Haman’s sudden lunge as an assault on his Queen and commands that the hapless Agagite be hanged on the gallows which he had so confidently prepared for Mordecai.

Nonetheless, according to the literary conceit of this story, the Jews’ troubles do not die with their perpetrator because the King’s original edict cannot be revoked. The situation is far from hopeless, however, as Mordecai, now elevated to Haman’s former post, is given the royal seal and empowered to issue a new, countervailing decree. The second decree authorizes the Jews to organize and defend themselves and, indeed, to take the offensive against their enemies. Strangely, the monarch seems unworried about the forthcoming civil war within his kingdom, but many people convert to Judaism in order to escape the vengeful carnage of God’s chosen.

The appointed day finally arrives, and the rampaging Jews kill five hundred enemies, including Haman’s ten sons, in Susa alone, while apparently suffering no casualties of their own. The tale reaches its moral depths as Esther, excited by the slaughter, entreats the King to allow a second day of vengeance. Ahasuerus, perhaps enjoying the spectacle, readily agrees and, somewhat redundantly, calls for Haman’s already dead sons to be hanged. By the end of the second day, the Jews have dispatched seventy-five thousand “of those who hated them.” But the storyteller righteously adds, “They did not lay their hands on the plunder” (Esther 9:16).

Such a victory, of course, requires a celebration which, according to the book, was the institution of the two-day festival of Purim, “because on those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, ... they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor” (Esther 9:22).

The remaining characters in the story apparently live happily ever after. The beautiful Queen Esther continues to reign with her gentle husband, and her co-hero, Mordecai, remains Prime Minister throughout the era, “one who sought the good of his people and one who spoke for the welfare of his whole nation” (Esther 10:3). Haman’s dastardly plans have failed utterly. His honors and office have become Mordecai’s and the evil which he plotted for the Jews has consumed himself and devastated his confederates. The lesson is abundantly clear for the forces of darkness and intolerance. Unfortunately, however, this superbly crafted short story leaves the reader with the unsatisfying, if all too realistic, suggestion that often life’s “good guys” may be little better than their black-hatted foes.

D. Daniel

The first six chapters of the book of Daniel, the only portion of literary interest, contain a cycle of six very short stories, one per chapter. The stories are each intended to teach a lesson, somewhat in the manner of Jesus’ famous parables. The tales were
written about 166 B.C., but, like the other stories previously discussed, they are set in a much earlier time. They are presented as stories of the Hebrews during their Babylonian exile four-hundred years earlier. However, to fully appreciate the impact of the Daniel legends on their audience of the second century B.C., one must understand the circumstances which gave rise to the book's composition.

The roots of these tales may be found in Alexander the Great's conquest of Palestine. That amazing Macedonian drove out the Persian overlords in 331 B.C. However, Alexander's life was as brief as it was brilliant, and when he died in 323 at the age of 33, his mighty empire, stretching from Africa to India, was divided among his four top generals. These four then established their own dynasties which ruled much of the world until the rise of Rome.

Palestine was originally included in the southern or Egyptian portion of the empire, and at the time of the division, the Jewish homeland fell under the rule of the Ptolemies whose capital was at Alexandria. For more than a century, the Hebrews lived in religious freedom and enjoyed some measure of local autonomy under Ptolemaic rule. However, in 198 war erupted between Ptolemy Egypt and the Seleucid Empire which descended from Seleucus, the member of the military quartet who had been given Syria and the eastern territories at the time of the Conqueror death. In the conflict Antiochus III, the reigning Seleucid, defeated Egypt and annexed Palestine as the spoils of war.

The change from Ptolemaic to Seleucid rule was disastrous for the Jews. The new Greco-Syrian masters were determined to impose Greek language, customs, and religion on all the peoples of their realm. In 175 Antiochus IV became King and stepped up the policy of Jewish persecution which his father had initiated. The final stroke came in 168 when the King ordered an altar to Zeus to be constructed in the Jerusalem temple. Jews were commanded to worship at that altar on pain of death and to participate in the sacrifice of pigs to the Greek god within their holy temple. Many Jews, much to their later disgrace, complied with the edicts, but others held life less important than their devotion to Yahweh. At the forefront of these dissenters was Mattathias, a priest, who led an armed revolt against the Syrians.

Mattathias died two years later in 166, but one of his sons, Judas Maccabeus, proved to be an admirable successor who completed the task of driving the Syrians out of Jerusalem and purifying the temple through a ceremony which is still celebrated by Jews in modern times as the festival of Chanukah. Judas Maccabeas then established his own dynasty, virtually independent of Syria, which provided one-hundred years of home rule for Palestine until the Roman Legions of Pompey seized control in 63 B.C.

The purpose of the book of Daniel, written in the midst of the revolution, probably in 166, was to encourage resistance against the Syrians. The prophet Ezekiel speaks of a legendary Daniel at the time of Noah and Job who was famous for his wisdom (Ezekiel 14:14, 28:3), and perhaps a namesake of that ancient worthy did rise to prominence during the exile. The Daniel of the exile is presented in a series of face to face encounters with tyrannical kings, each of whom represents one or more of the evil
inclinations of Antiochus IV. The kings are filled with pride and commit acts of sacrilege by presenting themselves or other false gods as objects of worship. Of course, Daniel and his friends, ever true to the God of Israel, are able to emerge victorious from their encounters with the pagan rulers. Thus, the author of the stories found a way of attacking the Seleucids and encouraging the rebellion of 166 without facing charges of sedition.

Chapter One is intended to promote adherence to Mosaic food laws despite the Seleucids’ campaign against kosher habits. The story’s lack of concern with historical accuracy is shown in the presentation of Jehoiakim rather than his son Jehoiachin as the Judean king at the time of Babylonia’s first conquest of Jerusalem. Clearly the story is intended as a message to the Maccabean revolutionaries, not as a factual history of their ancestors’ difficulties.

According to the Chapter One story, Daniel and three other aristocratic young Jews named Hananiah, Misha-el, and Azariah are selected for special treatment during the exile. They are to be trained at the royal palace, along with other youths from throughout the empire, to eventually assume posts in the Babylonian civil service. Symbolic of their new position, they are given Babylonian names: Daniel becomes Belteshazzar, Hananiah is called Shadrach, Misha-el becomes Meshach, and Azariah’s name is changed to Abednego. Presumably, these changes make their names easier for their Babylonian masters to pronounce, but also significant is the fact that their Hebrew names all contain el (God) or iah (Yahweh), while their new names relate to Babylonian deities. Strangely, throughout the rest of the book and in popular lore, Daniel is best remembered by his Hebrew name while his three friends are usually referred to by their Babylonian designations.

King Nebuchadnezzar wants all the youths to be fed the finest, richest fare from his own table. The four Hebrews, however, reject his non-kosher generosity and ask for fresh vegetables and water. Their attendant is very reluctant to serve them such simple food, but he is persuaded to let them eat as they wish for a ten-day trial period. At the end of that time, the Hebrew youths are stronger, healthier, and wiser than any of the other trainees: “And as for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm” (Daniel 1:20). The King adds the young men to his regular staff of advisors, and from that time on Daniel remains near the center of power until the beginning of the reign of Cyrus the Persian, sixty years later.

Chapter Two marks the real beginning of Daniel’s importance in the Babylonian Court. King Nebuchadnezzar’s sleep is troubled by a dream. Like nearly everyone else in the ancient world, he regards dreams as serious messages from the spiritual realm. Quickly he calls in his wise men and diviners for consultation, but either because he is truly unable to remember the troublesome vision or because he wants to be assured of their magical skills, the King insists that the conjurers tell him not only the interpretation but also the contents of the dream. Not surprisingly, they are unable to comply, and in a fit of oriental rage, the monarch orders the deaths of all the wise men in Babylon.
However, when the gestapo come knocking on Daniel's door, he requests an audience with the King before the unreasonable death sentence is carried out. Employing his God-given powers to the full, Daniel is able to describe Nebuchadnezzar's dream in which His Highness saw a great statue of a man with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of brass, legs of iron, and feet of iron mixed with clay. Then, in the royal dream, a stone smashed the clay feet and the whole statue came crumbling down while the stone rose up and became a great mountain covering the whole earth.

Daniel tells the King that he, Nebrchadnezzar, is represented by the golden head, while the other parts of the statue symbolize later, inferior kingdoms. The author of the story intended the silver to represent the Median Empire (actually contemporary with Babylonia), the brass portion to stand for the Persian Empire, the legs of iron for Alexander, and the feet of clay for the corrupt, crumbling Seleucid oppressors. The stone which becomes a mountain clearly foretells the success of the Maccabean revolt and perhaps the coming of the Messiah.

Daniel's success in interpreting the dream demonstrates the superiority of God's wisdom to man's, but it also reminds the reader of another Hebrew whom God helped to interpret a king's dreams. Surely the similarities between Daniel and Joseph are more than coincidental. Daniel, like his ancient counterpart, is a high-born youth taken in captivity to a powerful foreign land. Both young men remain true to their God and, in consequence, rise quickly to positions of great power within the foreign governments. Like the ancient pharaoh in Joseph's story, the grateful Nebuchadnezzar rewards Daniel with costly gifts and makes him chairman of his council of advisors and governor of the province of Babylon. Additionally, Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, like the family of Joseph, are given sinecures which insure comfortable lives for them in Babylonia.

Chapter Three presents one of the most famous tales from the Daniel cycle, and undoubtedly one of the most meaningful to the second-century B.C. Jews who were struggling against the tyranny of Antiochus IV. The Chapter Three story seems completely disconnected from the events of Chapter Two, perhaps indicating separate authorship. In Chapter Two, after Daniel has successfully interpreted the disturbing dream, the King declares, "Surely your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries" (Daniel 2:47). Despite such piety, however, in Chapter Three Nebuchadnezzar sets up a golden statue ninety cubits (almost sixty meters) high as the supreme object of worship in Babylon. The exaggerated height of the sculpture and the fact that the writer of Daniel sometimes uses the more ancient name for Babylonia, Shinar (Sumer), suggests that he wants his readers to remember that other great Sumerian monument to human pride, the Tower (see Genesis 11:1–9), and to recall the fate of those haughty builders.

Of more immediate concern to the Maccabean-era reader, of course, was the implied comparison between Nebuchadnezzar's idol and the one set up in the Jerusalem temple by Antiochus IV. The story is a call for resistance and an example of the divine protection extended to those who remain loyal to Yahweh.
Nebuchadnezzar commands that a magnificent ceremony be held to dedicate his spectacular new image. Invited and expected to appear at the event are "the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces . . ." (Daniel 3:2). Among the assembled worthies are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, now administrators in the province of Babylon. Daniel is unaccountably absent from the festivities, but his three friends here show that they, too, deserve to be counted among God's chosen.

The three Hebrews listen passively as the King's menacing edict is read to the crowd: "... at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire" (Daniel 3:5–6).

The furnace, perhaps a smelting pit, was a fitting metaphor for the persecutions Antiochus IV was perpetrating on those brave Jews who refused to worship Zeus four centuries later. As exemplar Hebrews, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego put faith before fears and refuse to bend their knees to the massive falsehood, even when the angry King gives them a second chance.

Furious at being twice defied, Nebuchadnezzar not only calls for their deaths but prescribes that the furnace be heated to seven times its normal temperature. The three friends are sure that their God can save them, though not certain that he will. Nonetheless, they defiantly tell the threatening monarch, "even if He does not, . . . O King, we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Daniel 3:18). For their crime of lese-majesty the trio are, as threatened, cast into flames so hot that even the guards who carry them to the furnace die from exposure. In contrast, the three heroes walk about in the inferno unscathed, and with them is a fourth figure whose appearance is "like a son of the gods" (Daniel 3:25). This divine agent preserves Yahweh's brave servants until a humbled, repentant Nebuchadnezzar calls them forth from the flames, declares that their God shall be honored in Babylonia, and restores them to their positions of power. Thus, victorious in their struggle with royal pride and idolatry, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego emerge as folk heroes of the Maccabean resistance. Like them, the Hebrew nation was not consumed by the ordeal of exile in Babylonia, or the earlier exile in Egypt, and, the narrative implies, God’s people will also triumph over the threats and perils of Antiochus IV if they remain faithful to their religion.

Dreams return to haunt the royal bedchamber in Chapter Four. This time the sleeping Nebuchadnezzar sees in his vision a large, strong tree (another Tower symbol, perhaps) with beautiful foliage and abundant fruit which provides food and shade to all creatures. However, in the dream, an angel descends and orders the tree to be chopped down, its branches cut off, and its fruit scattered. Only the stump of the tree remains, and the angel proclaims, "Let him [the stump?] share with the beasts in the grass of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man, and let a beast's mind
be given to him, and let seven periods of time [years?] pass over him” (Daniel 4:15–16).

Again, as in the dream of the statue with clay feet, the court diviners are unable, or perhaps unwilling, to provide an interpretation for the ominous vision. Therefore, Daniel, wisest of the wise, is summoned to the palace for another consultation. The fearless Hebrew tells Nebuchadnezzar directly that he, the King, is that tree: “You [will] be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place [will] be with the beasts of the field . . . until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind” (Daniel 4:25).

Daniel advises the proud King that his only hope is to reform his sinful ways and to rule with justice and mercy. Nebuchadnezzar, with characteristic arrogance, spurns Daniel’s warning and continues to defy God with pretensions of his own divinity. The real king in the story is, of course, Antiochus IV, and the Maccabees must have been thrilled to hear of the divine sentence being carried out on Nebuchadnezzar, the substitute tyrant. The prophecy is fulfilled; the King becomes mad. He begins “eating grass like cattle.” He is “drenched with the dew of heaven,” and his hair grows “like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws” (Daniel 4:33). These strange symptoms of madness presumably are derived from the Assyrian royal symbol of a winged bull which would have been known throughout Mesopotamia.

After the “seven periods of time” pass, the King repents and praises the Hebrew God. Nebuchadnezzar’s reason and his sovereignty are restored to him once he acknowledges the supremacy of Yahweh, and he closes the tale on a note of reverent recognition: “Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and his ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride” (Daniel 4:37).

Historically, there is no record of such an insane Babylonian king, certainly not Nebuchadnezzar, but fiction need not be bound by history. The point of the story is that the “divine right of kings” does not exist. Kings, like all humanity, are bound by obligations to their fellow men and to God. Surely even the hated Syrian oppressor, Antiochus IV, could not forever escape the humiliating wrath of God.

The next story in the Daniel collection features a new king. Belshazzar, not to be confused with Daniel’s Babylonian name of Belteshazzar, is unhistorically presented in the Chapter Five legend as the son of Nebuchadnezzar. The real Belshazzar was never king at all, but the crown prince and regent for his father, King Nabonidus, the last Babylonian monarch. Apparently Nabonidus preferred to spend much of his time in seclusion and meditation and left the running of the kingdom to Belshazzar, his son.3

The story opens with a display of the splendor and immorality of the Babylonian Court. Belshazzar is staging a great feast for a thousand of his nobles. The evening is complete with the finest of wines and the loveliest of women. The greatest evil, however, is not the bawdy spectacle itself, but the fact that the King and his guests use as their drinking cups the sacred vessels which have been plundered from the Jerusalem temple. In such fashion, they drink toasts to their own gods. Again, the second century B.C. reader would need no help to recognize that the King in the story was
Antiochus IV who had similarly stolen the most sacred objects from their holy temple.

At this point, the jovial mood of the party is abruptly spoiled by the appearance of a spectral, detached hand writing incomprehensible words on the banquet-room wall. The wicked King, openly displaying his cowardice, is frightened beyond reason: “... his face grew pale ... his hip joints went slack, and his knees began knocking together” (Daniel 5:6). Following the pattern made familiar by previous tales in the cycle, Belshazzar sends for his wise men who are, of course, unwise and unable to understand the handwriting on the wall.

This time it is the Queen, or more probably the Queen-mother, who remembers Daniel and urges that he be sent for. When the now-elderly Hebrew seer arrives, he minces no words in condemning Belshazzar’s arrogance and sacrilege. He then proceeds to explain frankly that the Aramaic words on the wall MENE (numbered), TEKEL (weighed) and PERES (divided) mean that the King’s actions have been measured by God and found wanting. As a result, the realm will now be “divided” and given over to the Medes and the Persians. The last of the three words on the wall is perhaps even intended as a pun on the name Persia.

Strangely, Belshazzar rewards Daniel handsomely for being the bearer of such disastrous news. The Hebrew is given lavish gifts and promoted to a new position as one of the three chief ministers in the kingdom. However, if Belshazzar’s aim is to turn aside God’s retribution by treating His servant kindly, his efforts are in vain: “That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. So Darius the Mede received the kingdom” (Daniel 3:30–31).

The historical Darius was not a Mede but a Persian. He was the successor of Cyrus, the actual conqueror of Babylonia. However, the author of Daniel continues in his mistaken belief, expounded in the story of the clay-footed statue, that the Babylonians and Medians were successive rather than contemporaneous kingdoms. It is therefore necessary for him to change Darius’ nationality and to place him chronologically before his predecessor. Nonetheless, while historical details are obscured in the narrative, the message is unmistakable. As clear as God’s handwriting on the wall is the promise that profanation of the holy temple by the Babylonians or by the Seleucids will be met by divinely directed punishment. Undoubtedly, the Maccabees believed that God was as much at work in their rebellion as in the Persian-Median invasion of Babylonia.

The last of the six short stories in the book of Daniel is unquestionably the most well-known. Who has not heard of Daniel’s perilous adventure in the lions’ den? Essentially, this story in Chapter Six is a retelling of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s trial by fire in Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace. This time, however, the king is different, for the indomitable Daniel has now become a central figure at the court of “Darius the Mede,” the third monarch to whom he has proven himself indispensable. In fact, Daniel’s success is nearly his undoing. As one of three commissioners over the satraps (provincial governors) of the empire, this most illustrious of the exiled Hebrews has become an object of envy and hatred among the jealous native-born officials. When the news spreads that Darius plans to appoint Daniel as his Prime Minister, the power
struggle erupts into public view. Daniel’s enemies convince the gullible King to proclaim himself the only object of legal worship in all the empire. The punishment for ignoring the proclamation is to be death in the jaws of fierce, hungry lions. Moreover, the author borrows from the Esther story the fate-fixing detail that the King’s injunction may not be changed or revoked, even by himself.

The conspirators have no difficulty in catching Daniel at his regular prayers to Yahweh, and they immediately take their evidence to the King. Darius is deeply disturbed, but he is trapped by his own power, distorted in the hands of the unscrupulous confederates. He has no choice but to send Daniel to his gruesome dinner engagement, but there is no food, entertainment, or sleep at the palace that night as Darius agonizes over the fate of his foreign friend and devoutly hopes that Yahweh will not allow their mutual servant to die so needlessly.

The morning light reveals, to the King’s great relief, that Daniel’s God has indeed delivered him from injustice. The Hebrew is pulled unharmed from the pit and quickly replaced by those who plotted to kill him. The angry King orders not only Daniel’s accusers but their apparently innocent wives and children cast into the pit. Clearly, the reason for the lions’ abstention has not been lack of hunger, for their new victims “had not reached the bottom of the den before the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones” (Daniel 6:24).

After the danger to his friend is past, Darius issues a new decree, this time commanding everyone in the realm to recognize the power and majesty of Daniel’s God. Such a vindication of Jewish allegiance to Yahweh must have been immensely satisfying to the Maccabees who refused to worship Antiochus’ image. While they could not expect such a reversal in their own King’s commands, they could prayerfully and expectantly await the time when their struggle would succeed and the cleansed temple would be rededicated to their God.

In a sense, all of the Daniel stories are propaganda pieces. They feature obvious villains and heroes, with ultimate rewards for the just and humiliations for the oppressors. The characters, good and bad, are uncomplicated, stereotyped figures who represent their causes but can hardly be considered individuals. Nonetheless, these narratives, like the more literary stories of Ruth, Esther, and Jonah are exciting and graphic portrayals of the basic Hebrew premise that God’s will is constantly being asserted, albeit sometimes indirectly, in the lives of His people.

NOTES

Biblical quotations are cited in parentheses throughout the text. The translation used is the New American Standard Bible.

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