Niskanen, Paul

The Human and the Divine in History: Herodotus and the Book of Daniel

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Niskanen proposes that the historical material in Daniel was influenced by Greek historiographical tradition, in particular the Histories of Herodotus. The historian Arnaldo Momigliano already suggested this idea in 1977. The author takes up this suggestion and comparing these two texts he aims at showing “how the book of Daniel contains a theology of history that is neither as deterministic nor as exclusively eschatological as scholars have portrayed it” (3). According to Niskanen, the historical elements have been largely discounted in studies of Daniel. The influence of Greek sources has been minimized in favor of Mesopotamian or Iranian sources. With this publication he wants to fill this gap in scholarship. He indicates that the historiographical material in Daniel mirrors the Herodotean tradition in both its temporal and spatial scope. Daniel also views history on the human and divine levels simultaneously.

In traditional research biblical and classical historiography has been separated by a sharp distinction between the Greek and Hebrew worlds and also between apocalyptic and historiography. According to Niskanen, these barriers have now been removed and a new field of comparative studies between Herodotus and Biblical literature has been started. The relationship of Herodotus’s fifth-century B.C.E. works with the Chronicler, the Deuteronomistic History, and Jewish historical novellas such as Esther and Judith has recently been studied. The largest impediment in all these studies is the correct dating of the biblical works. It is not always clear which of Herodotus or the biblical material is the source for the other. In the case of Daniel, it is universally agreed that it was written during the second century B.C.E. There can be no doubt, therefore, that Daniel was the recipient of older ideas. Having outlined his approach to the material in his first chapter, Niskanen then turns to a comparison of the contents of Daniel and the Histories.
In the second chapter, titled “Daniel and Classical Studies,” the author demonstrates extensively that the *Histories* of Herodotus were known and used by the author of Daniel. The correspondence between the historical elements in these two works supports the case for a relationship and proves that the works of Herodotus were well known and widely read during the Hellenistic age to which Daniel belonged. A direct relationship can mainly be seen in the use of a similar scheme of four successive kingdoms in Dan 2 and 7. The detailed rendering of Seleucid and Ptolemaic history in Dan 11 shows beyond doubt that Daniel was rather based on the Herodotean tradition of universal history than on the Mesopotamian historical view in the Bhaman Yast, the Denkard, or the Babylonian Dynastic Prophecy. The author has no doubt that Herodotus played a central role in contemporary historiographical tradition. As an educated Palestinian Jew of the second century B.C.E., Daniel was thoroughly exposed to Herodotus’s thinking.

In chapters 3 and 4 Niskanen elaborates on his remark that the outstanding characteristic of Herodotean tradition is explaining the cause of events on both the human and divine levels. In the former chapter he studies the role human agents such as the king and the sage play in Daniel and Herodotus. He finds remarkable resemblances. In both works the severe limitations of kings form a prominent theme. In both the wise correctly interpret dreams and oracles that concern future events. In the fourth chapter the author observes that the divine holds the primary position in history in both Daniel as well as Herodotus. The divine reveals the course of history through dreams and oracles. The divine agency works in tandem with human agents, but there is nothing humans can do to counter the will of heaven.

In the final chapter Niskanen presents an outline of Daniel’s Herodotean-influenced theology of history. The “accurate, although allusive, historical narratives” (105) in the book of Daniel are based on Herodotus’s emphasis on relating political history and explaining the causes behind events. Daniel’s view on history presents theological and historical continuity with earlier biblical traditions. It also presents a distinctive development that reorients the history of the Jewish people in terms of the world’s empires and gives to it a totally new scope. The Jewish people have a role to play among the worldly kingdoms. Still within the history of this world, they are called to cooperate with God’s plan of establishing a definitive kingdom. This view was the result of direct influence of Greek historiographical tradition as represented in the works of Herodotus.

As a result of his study, the author challenges the widespread idea that Daniel advocates a “passive apocalyptic quietism that merely awaits God’s definitive action” (106). Daniel cannot properly be understood in relation to other apocalypses only. Daniel’s historical perspective is preeminently Greek. The Greek tradition does not negate the freedom and responsibilities inherent in human actions. “Apocalyptic determinism” is a false
dichotomy between human and divine causation in history. The interplay between human and divine causation learned from Herodotus’s historical view rather indicates a cooperation between God and his people in Daniel. The central theme in Daniel, that God is in control of the course of history (89), does not exclude human action but asks for religious action of “non-compromise, rejecting the religious initiatives of Antiochus that amount to idolatry” (123).

This thought-provoking publication definitively has laudable merits. It focuses on the role real history plays in the book of Daniel. In research this aspect has either been largely neglected or replaced by an unfounded deterministic view of history. The author repeatedly accuses Noth and von Rad of neglecting history in their studies. He ignores the fact that much progress has been made since these two scholars in studying the historical context of the book. His point of view that study of Daniel’s theoretical view on the phenomenon of history has been neglected, however, is a legitimate remark.

Two basic flaws can be found in this publication. First, the comparison between Daniel and *Histories* is mainly restricted to the study of words, ideas, and similar expressions. Certainly Daniel must have adopted many thoughts from Herodotus, even his view of history. However, when the author quotes Collins on page 87 that the influence of the Joseph narrative in Genesis is only one factor among many in the shaping of Daniel, the same is true of Herodotus. On the intertextual level Herodotus is not the only or main source of influence in the compilation of Daniel. What is more, the type of literature created in Daniel differs radically from that of Herodotus’s *Histories*. For example, Herodotus explicitly names the human agents, while Daniel in his type of apocalyptic literature only hints at the intended parties. Comparison should not be restricted to mutual words and ideas only but should also include a comparison of literary genre.

A second problem is the total omission of any study on the social background of the book. The author ascribes the book to an individual from the elite in Palestine during the second century B.C.E. Although he quotes Bocaccini’s work on social groups and different traditions of this era, he does not refer to the large amount of work that has already been done in apocalyptic studies on the social groups in Jerusalem and their interaction with each other. Intertextuality between the author/s/Tradenten of Daniel and the available written copy/ies of Herodotus’s *Histories* implies intertextuality also with other writings and the viewpoints of other groups. Herodotus’s ideas were not merely used in their original meaning but were reworked according to the author’s or authors’ sociohistorical circumstances and specific group identity.

Notwithstanding the above criticism, this work can be recommended as a stimulating contribution to Daniel studies. The author clearly states his viewpoints in fluent and
logical language. The book includes a useful bibliography and an index of references to biblical as well as various other ancient texts. Both students and scholars will benefit from reading this book.