

The Court Stories of Joseph (Gen 41) and Daniel (Dan 2) in Canonical Context: A Theological Paradigm for God's Work among the Nations¹

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ABSTRACT

This article asserts that the canonical context of the accounts of Joseph in Gen 41 and Daniel in Dan 2 creates a paradigm for how Israel's God uses his people among the nations, where they spend the majority of their history. It begins by considering critical scholarship on the "court stories" of Joseph and Daniel. Then it evaluates each account in its own narrative context before comparing and contrasting the two narratives. Finally, it explores the canonical context of the two accounts and their theological significance in the narrative of the OT, as well as the implications of this theological significance in the NT.²

Key words: canonical context, Joseph, Daniel, court stories, narrative, theological significance

A INTRODUCTION

The accounts of Joseph before Pharaoh in Gen 41 and Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2 have many similarities in plot, motif, and even language. Both feature kings with disturbing dreams from God that revealed the future (Gen 41:25; Dan 2:28–29, 45). Both young exiles demonstrate the superiority of their God by outshining the royal experts. Both captives deny superior ability and credit God with their knowledge (Gen 41:16; Dan 2:30). In both accounts, the onlookers believe the men's ability resulted from the "spirit of the holy gods" in them (Gen 41:38;³ cf. Dan 2:11; 4:8, 18). Finally, both Joseph and Daniel achieve great political power because of their royal service (Gen 41:39–46; Dan 2:48).

Twentieth-century scholars classified these biblical stories, along with the book of Esther, the story of Bel and the Dragon, and 1 Esd 3–4, as "court narratives," noting that they share a basic plot and several motifs with other ANE stories.⁴ Such narratives recount the intrigues and adventures of royal

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³ רוח אללים in Gen 41:38.

⁴ Collins credits Gunkel and Baumgartner as the first to make this classification for the biblical stories, grouping them in a genre that includes sections of Herodotus, Kte-

courtiers. In a narrower corpus of stories within this genre are tales of foreign courtiers who supplant the wisdom of the king's regular staff, succeed where it failed, and then receive handsome rewards for their efforts. The stories of Joseph and Daniel fall in this smaller category, the tales of royal courtiers.⁵

The purpose of court stories was likely manifold. First, like any well-told story, they were meant to entertain. Those most entertained by the success of a foreign captive would have been those who shared the hero's nationality. Such a success story was likely to foster the ethnic pride of a conquered people group by allowing them to share "vicarious pride in the figure of an exile who rose to the highest position in the kingdom."⁶ For the biblical accounts particularly, the stories showcase the superiority of the Israelite God as he worked through the wit and wisdom of Israelite youth. A third purpose behind the court tales may have been to encourage people in adversity to follow the virtuous

sias, Xenophon, and the *Thousand and One Nights*. See John J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 39. Wills details the history of scholarship on court narratives. See Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of a Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (HDR 26; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 1–31. Lists of the shared motifs among court stories are widely available. See, e.g., John E. Goldingay, *Daniel* (WBC 30; Dallas: Word, 1989), 36–37; Collins, *Daniel*, 42–47. Niditch and Doran characterize the genre according to specific patterning of four motifs that together create a type or form: (1) a person of lower status is called before a person of higher status to answer difficult questions or solve a problem requiring special insight; (2) the person of higher status poses the problem, which no one is able to solve; (3) the person of lower status solves the problem; (4) the person of lower status is rewarded. See Susan Niditch and Robert Doran, "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach," *JBL* 96 (1977): 180.

⁵ Collins, *Daniel*, 43. Elsewhere Richard D. Patterson describes the genre by saying "such stories deal with the exploits of a godly exile in a foreign court whose piety and wisdom enable him to emerge triumphantly from various tests and rise to personal prominence." See Richard D. Patterson, "Holding On to Daniel's Court Tales," *JETS* 36 (1993), 447. He further describes the narratives as usually involving "a specific test involving faith, morality, or compromise of covenantal standards" (447), but Patterson's description goes beyond that of critical scholarship, which does not include the criterion that the exile be godly or pious. Further, one might contest whether his criterion even applies to all the so called court tales of the OT. For example, Joseph's appearance before Pharaoh does not seem to be a test of the Hebrew's faith, morality, or covenantal standards; nor does everyone agree that Esther qualified as a pious and godly exile in her captivity.

⁶ Collins, *Daniel*, 44. Lucas notes that the basis of such encouragement in Daniel's court tales "is not belief in some kind of inherent ethnic superiority, but trust in the Most High God, who rules supreme even over human rulers and their affairs." See Ernest C. Lucas, *Daniel* (ApOTC 20; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 27.

model of characters such as Joseph and Daniel.⁷ Lee Humphreys proposed that the stories illustrated a "lifestyle for Diaspora," offering examples of Jews succeeding among the nations of the world.⁸ While not every Jew would have expected to succeed to the extent of Joseph, Daniel, or Esther, the lives of these three "spoke a message of hope, which declared that Jews could serve foreign kings and bring help or salvation to their own people, as well as helping foreigners."⁹ A fourth purpose for the biblical accounts in the Second Temple period could have been to affirm that foreign kings were still under God's rule: "The Jews would be led to confess that their God was still in charge of the world, even though tyrants held sway."¹⁰

The Joseph and Daniel accounts may well have been part of a "court narrative" genre, and they may also have served any or all of the purposes detailed above. However, their inclusion in the sacred text requires that we understand them in their biblical contexts, not simply as isolated accounts in a literary vacuum. What do they each contribute to their textual surroundings? Why are two such similar stories included in the HB – would one have been sufficient? Furthermore, why is the second account that of Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar, patterned so obviously after the first?¹¹ How do these two accounts contribute to Israel's portrayal of its God? To answer these questions, I will first consider the narratives of Gen 41 and Dan 2 in their respective contexts. Then I will evaluate their relationship to each other and the role they play in the larger context of the HB in order to demonstrate, first, that the account of Daniel intends to portray a greater God than the account of Joseph, and, second, that the accounts together create a paradigm for God's work among the nations, where his people spend the majority of their history.

⁷ Sharon Pace says the stories "provide a sense of pride to the powerless and encouragement for the beleaguered to follow commandments and customs." See Sharon Pace, *Daniel* (SHBC 17; Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 2.

⁸ W. Lee Humphreys, "Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *JBL* 92 (1973): 211–23. Cf. also Pace, *Daniel*, 2, who says the stories provide "a model for ways to cope in exile, when daily life is highly unpredictable."

⁹ Robert Gnuse, "From Prison to Prestige: The Hero Who Helps a King in Jewish and Greek Literature," *CBQ* 72 (2010): 31.

¹⁰ Gnuse, "From Prison to Prestige," 41.

¹¹ The similarities between the stories are so extensive that it stretches the imagination to think the author of Daniel did not know and knowingly imitate the story of Joseph before Pharaoh. For discussions of what the accounts have in common, see, e.g. G. G. Labonté, "Genèse 41 et Daniel 2: question d'origine," in *The Book of Daniel in the Light of New Findings* (ed. by Adam S. van der Woude; BETL 106; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993), 271–84; Robert Gnuse, "The Jewish Dream Interpreter in a Foreign Court: The Recurring Use of a Theme in Jewish Literature," *JSP* 17 (1990): 40–41; and Matthew S. Ringe, "Jewish Identity under Foreign Rule: Daniel 2 as a Reconfiguration of Genesis 41," *JBL* 129 (2010): 88–89.

B THE ACCOUNTS IN CONTEXT

1 Joseph before Pharaoh (Genesis 41)

1a The story

In Gen 41 Pharaoh has a pair of dreams, which the narrator initially recounts for the reader (41:2–7). In the first, the Egyptian king was standing along the Nile River when seven fine and fat cows (כָּפּוֹת מֶرֶאָה וּבְרִיאָת בָּשָׂר) came out of it and grazed among the reeds (41:2). Seven more cows came out of the river behind them, but they were ugly and scrawny (רָעָזָת מֶרֶאָה וְזָקָוֹת בָּשָׂר) and hungry enough to eat a horse. Or seven fat cows (41:4–5). In the second dream, seven heads of grain came up good and fat (בְּרִיאָות וְתְבוֹת) on one stalk (41:5). They were followed by seven heads of grain that were thin and “blasted by the east wind” (41:6; cf. KJV, JPS; קָרְקֹות וּשְׁדֹופֶת קָרְקֹות; 41:7) before Pharaoh awoke. In the morning when his “spirit was troubled” (רוּחָם רַעֲפָעָם), Pharaoh summoned his experts – the magicians and wise men of Egypt – but they proved unable to help him (41:8). It was then that the chief cupbearer remembered what he had managed to forget for two full years – namely, how a lowly Hebrew servant had helped him by interpreting his own troubling dream (Gen 40). Joseph was hurriedly (יָרַקְתָּה; 41:14) brought to the king, who told the clean-shaven prisoner he had heard about his ability to interpret dreams. Denying such ability, Joseph nonetheless assured Pharaoh that God would respond to the king’s anxiety (41:16).

Pharaoh then recounted his dream,¹² with slight variation from the narrator’s version.¹³ At the conclusion of the king’s dream report, Joseph confirmed that the cows and the corn were the same dream and told the king that God had made known to him what he was going to do (41:25). Then Joseph repeated the dream, interpreting each element in turn. At the conclusion of his interpretation, Joseph provided the king with some unsolicited advice about appointing a wise and discerning man to oversee management of the crops during the coming feast and famine, effectively writing his own job description. Pharaoh extolled Joseph’s wisdom and discernment, crediting his ability to the “spirit of God” in him. The Egyptian king promoted the prisoner to the palace, put him in charge of his house and the land of Egypt, turned over his signet ring, clothed him in fine clothes, slung a gold chain around his neck, and made him ride in the “second chariot” while Egyptians bowed before him. Then he changed his name to better befit an Egyptian overlord and gave him a priest’s daughter for a

¹² Pharaoh refers to the two dreams as if they were one (Gen 41:15, 17).

¹³ Meir Sternberg details the differences between the dream reports and suggests their significance. See his analysis of Gen 41 in Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 394–402.

wife (41:45). The narrator then reports the fulfillment of Pharaoh's dream, first describing the years of plenty – both in the land and in Joseph's house, where two sons were born – and then describing the years of famine.

1b The Context of Genesis 41

The account of Joseph before Pharaoh accomplishes at least two things in its immediate context. First and most obviously, it demonstrates to the reader the sovereignty of Joseph's God, who disrupts the world of a powerful ANE monarch and upends his kingdom with forces far beyond the control of Egypt's finest. Both the baffling dream and its spot-on fulfillment demonstrate God's sovereignty. The Egyptian experts do not understand the message of this God, much less have any power to thwart him. However, there is no indication that either Pharaoh or his experts acknowledged the sovereign superiority of Joseph's God. Rather, the praise goes to Joseph, in spite of his refusal to take credit for interpretative abilities (41:15–16).

A second purpose of the chapter is to establish Joseph as God's man in Pharaoh's court. Sternberg details how the narrative subtly communicates this through its series of dream reports. The reader first learns the dreams from the narrator, who presents the authoritative versions. Then the narrator says that Pharaoh reported the "dream" – singular – to his experts, who were unable to interpret "them" – plural (41:8). Sternberg suggests that behind this "grammatical clash . . . may lurk a perspectival clash," namely that Pharaoh thought the pair of dreams made one whole dream, while his advisors considered them separate dreams.¹⁴ Pharaoh then reports the dream in detail to Joseph, and the differences between his rendering and the narrator's confirm that he has blurred the two dreams into a single dream. When Joseph repeats the dream, he sorts out Pharaoh's misreporting and "restores in interpretation what the dreamer himself disturbed in narration."¹⁵ Sternberg summarizes:

From the functional standpoint, this chain of repetition develops a multiple and shifting play of perspectives: among the omniscient narrator's, the reader's, Pharaoh's, the magicians', Joseph's, and, most covert but also most dominant, God's. As far as the bare plot exigencies are concerned – the need to devise a causal sequence that will reverse Joseph's fortune from imprisonment to Grand Viziership – some of the members could be omitted or at least thoroughly reduced. (And such ellipsis would bring relief to bored underreaders.) But what a naturalistic plot might allow, if not require, would mar the ideological plot that underlies the visible march of events and shapes the tale's theme and rhetoric. It is the intention to establish Joseph's stature as God's elect rather than

¹⁴ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 398.

¹⁵ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 400.

Pharaoh's that accounts for the variety of the implied viewpoints, the nature of their discrepancies, and the order of their surfacing.¹⁶

1c The Context of the Joseph Story

Beyond the immediate context of Gen 41, Joseph's impressive appearance before Pharaoh serves an important role in the larger Joseph narrative. Most notably, it puts Joseph in position for the fulfillment of his own dreams. In the first scene of the Joseph story, the favored son of Jacob has a pair of off-putting dreams that he recounts to his brothers and his father: their sheaves bowed to his in the first, and in the second, the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed to him (Gen 37:5–10). From this point on in the narrative, Joseph knew little but trouble. First, after nearly killing him, his brothers settled for selling him into slavery. Then once in Egypt, Joseph had two false starts on his rise to fame. After a promising promotion that made him second in command in Potiphar's house, a falsely accused and implicated Joseph landed in prison. While there, he enjoyed the favor of the chief jailer, who made him second in command over the prisoners. Joseph's interpretation of dreams for the king's cupbearer and head chef gave him hope for release, but the cupbearer's bad memory left him forgotten in prison for an additional two years.

After this pair of ascents and descents for the Hebrew slave in Egypt, Gen 41 presents the third scene in what Wenham calls the "great triptych."¹⁷ Joseph finally rises out of the pit and prison for the last time with his interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, which sets in motion the fulfillment of his own dreams from years earlier. As second in command over Egypt, Joseph is in position for his bowing brothers. He is also set to steer Egypt through the ensuing years of plenty and scarcity. More importantly, God has put a man in place to preserve his own people, the people of Israel.¹⁸

1d The Context of Genesis and the Pentateuch

The Joseph narrative is both the culmination and conclusion of the book of Genesis, and it is also the transition to the book of Exodus and the rest of the Pentateuch. A masterfully told tale that fills nearly a third of the book, the Joseph narrative further develops all three elements of God's promise to Abraham: land, seed, and a relationship of blessing. Specifically, the account of

¹⁶ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 401.

¹⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Waco: Word Books, 1994), 389.

¹⁸ Joseph is not the only character in the larger narrative (Gen 37–50) that God uses to preserve his people. He sets up the long-term salvific preservation of Israel through the brother who shares the spotlight with Joseph – Judah, the one from whom Messiah would come. The dual redemptive roles of Joseph and Judah are important in their own right, but this article focuses on Joseph exclusively since the textual connections between Daniel and Genesis specifically concern the interactions of God's people with Gentile kings – a role Judah does not have.

Joseph before Pharaoh relates directly to one element of the Abrahamic promise and has clear repercussions for the other two. First, God had promised Abraham that he would be a blessing and in him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:2-3). God's revelation to Joseph of the meaning of Pharaoh's dream and Joseph's subsequent advice made him a blessing. Abraham's great grandson, the wise and discerning man appointed to manage Egypt's survival during the famine, blessed the people of Egypt and beyond. Second, with respect to the Abrahamic promise of descendants and land, Joseph's ascent to power in Gen 41 set the stage for him to save the descendants of Abraham – but to do so, they had to leave the land God had promised. Through Joseph, God prepared a haven for the Israelites to weather the famine, but Gen 47:27 reports that they did more than simply survive. While Egypt and the surrounding lands languished (Gen 47:11-26), the sons of Israel acquired land and were "fruitful and became very numerous" (Gen 47:27). The seed of Abraham, in jeopardy through most of the patriarchal narrative, appears to be in good stead for the first time by the end of Genesis, but Abraham's descendants are living outside the land of promise.

1e Summary of Genesis 41 in Context

The account of Joseph before Pharaoh establishes him as God's man for that time in Israel's history. The narrative subtly demonstrates the superiority of Joseph's God over the powers of Egypt, and it also exhibits the superior wisdom of Joseph over his Egyptian "competition." No reason is given in the immediate context of Gen 41 for God's revelation to the king, except for Joseph's general pronouncement that God had made known to Pharaoh what he was going to do (Gen 41:25). It is only the broader context of the Joseph story, Genesis, and Exodus that shows Pharaoh's dreams to be part of a complex series of events that both preserved God's people and set them up for bondage in a foreign land.

2 Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2)

2a The Story

In Dan 2 Nebuchadnezzar was troubled by dreams (רִוחַם רִוחַת), so he summoned his experts (2:1-2). He demanded that they tell him his dreams as well as the interpretation (2:2-5) and threatened to dismember them if they failed (2:6). When he accused his wise men of conspiracy, they protested that only the gods could tell the king a dream and gods do not dwell among people. The king dismissed their protest and ordered the execution of all Babylon's wise men. This edict included Daniel and his Judean companions, who were absent from the original line-up of experts.¹⁹ Daniel requested time from the king, and when

¹⁹ The absence of Daniel and his friends has raised much speculation. Since the text doesn't tell us why the men were absent, it is not important for the purposes of the

he and his friends sought God's mercy, God revealed the dream and its interpretation to Daniel (2:16–19). Daniel praised God for his sovereign wisdom and might (2:20–23), and then was taken in haste (בָּהַרְחָבָה) to Nebuchadnezzar. The king asked Daniel if he could tell him the dream and its interpretation, and Daniel confirmed what the wise men had said earlier: No person could, but God reveals secrets (2:27). Then he informed the king – twice – that God had made known to the king what would happen in the future (2:28–29). Daniel emphasized again that he only knew the dream and its meaning because God had told him – not because he had special wisdom (2:30). Then Daniel finally reported the dream of the magnificent statue. When he finished the interpretation, the king worshipped him and declared Daniel's God great for revealing the secret to Daniel: "Surely your God – he is the God of gods and the one who rules kings and the one who reveals mysteries" (2:46–47). Nebuchadnezzar lavished gifts on Daniel and promoted him "over all the provinces of Babylon" and made him chief over all the wise men of Babylon (2:48).

Two chapters later Nebuchadnezzar had a second troubling dream – his dream of the flourishing tree in Dan 4.²⁰ The two accounts are similar in their broad strokes: in each, the king has a disturbing dream that mystifies his experts but is known to Daniel, who explains the demise each dream foretells. However, I have excluded the account of Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 4 from comparison with Gen 41 because its direct connections are few and can be better explained in terms of its relationship to Dan 2, which *is* directly related to Gen 41.

narrative. Lucas notes, "In 'historical' terms . . . there may be all kinds of good reasons why Daniel and his friends do not appear with the other sages in vv.1–12. In literary terms their absence is crucial. It serves to set up the whole conflict that is at the centre of the story." See Lucas, *Daniel*, 71–72.

²⁰ The king's dream report occurs in a declaration he makes to his empire about what the Most High God had done for him (4:1–3, 37 [MT 3:31–33, 4:34]). When he was at the peak of his career, he dreamed a frightening dream and summoned his wise men, who, predictably, could not interpret it. Nebuchadnezzar notes that Daniel then came before him, and he explains why Daniel would be able to interpret the dream: "the spirit of the holy gods is in him" (4:8–9, 18 [4:5–6, 15]). The king told his chief magician the dream of a flourishing tree abruptly cut to the ground, its stump morphing into a beast in the field (4:14–16 [4:11–13]). When Daniel heard the dream, he immediately knew it portended the king's demise and wished it upon the king's enemies instead (4:19 [4:16]). He interpreted it for Nebuchadnezzar and then offered some unsolicited advice to renounce his sins and change his ways so that the dream might not come to pass (4:20–27 [4:17–24]). But twelve months later a proud outburst of the king set the dream's fulfillment in motion (4:28–32 [4:25–29]). Driven from civilization, the mighty Babylonian monarch ate grass with the animals until he acknowledged God's sovereignty (4:33–35 [4:30–32]).

In Dan 4:20–22 [MT 4:17–19] the narrator specifically links the second dream to the first by echoing its language and themes. In the first interpretation, Daniel had told the king he was the head of gold – the king of kings to whom God gave dominion, power, might, and glory to be ruler over all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of heaven (2:37–38). In the second interpretation, Daniel describes the tree of the king's dream, saying it gave shelter to the beasts of the field and provided nesting places in its branches for the birds of heaven.²¹ Then he announced to the king that he was the tree; he had become great and strong and had dominion that reached to the end of the earth. The point seems to be that by Dan 4, the young king of Dan 2 (v.1) had become the head of gold. He had built Babylon the Great (4:30 [4:27]) and was “at ease in [his] house and flourishing in [his] palace” (4:4 [4:1]). But Nebuchadnezzar had failed to acknowledge the relationship of his kingdom and power to the God of heaven. The judgment of ch. 4 is a remedial lesson for a king who didn't learn the first time that his kingdom was temporary and his power was relative and bestowed by a greater king.

2b The Context of Daniel 2

The account of Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2 accomplishes several things in its immediate context. First, it establishes the superiority of Daniel (and his God) over his Babylonian colleagues. When they could not meet the king's demand, he could. They protested that no one could do what the king asked (a claim that Daniel affirms; 2:27); only the gods could but they didn't dwell among men. This latter part of their protest is perplexing, since the Babylonians believed that the gods *did* live among people in temples built for just that purpose. Certainly Nebuchadnezzar's wise men knew this. Perhaps they meant that the gods were not at hand to help with the king's request, or perhaps in their panic, they were not thinking or speaking clearly.²² But their protest prepares the way for Daniel to upstage the Babylonian experts by demonstrating access to a God who could reveal the dream and its interpretation.

Another purpose of Dan 2 is to establish God as the true source of wisdom and the sovereign over all human history. The first thirty verses focus on the source of wisdom. First the ineptitude of the Babylonian wise men takes center stage; they cannot access the knowledge the king demands (2:1–12). Then the narrator details Daniel's predicament and God's response, namely, sharing wisdom with Daniel (2:13–23). Then when Daniel finally arrived before the king to interpret the dream, he left no room for misunderstanding the source of the dream and its interpretation (2:24–30). Such mysteries belong solely to the God in heaven (2:28). The statue dream and its interpretation dis-

²¹ In their more immediate context, Daniel's words recall Nebuchadnezzar's dream report (4:10–12 [4:7–9]), which, obviously, also picks up the language of Dan 2.

²² Collins, *Daniel*, 157, considers the wise men's failure “to turn to the gods for help, either by prayer or by ritual” to be “contrived to sharpen the contrast with Daniel.”

close that God is sovereign over human empires and the only eternal king whose dominion will endure forever.

2c The Context of Daniel

Daniel's success in ch. 2 confirms what the narrator reported in Dan 1:19–20, namely, that he was “ten times better” than the rest of the king’s experts in every matter of wisdom and understanding. Although the most obvious demonstration of this would appear to be Daniel’s revelation and interpretation of the dream, Daniel himself refutes this (2:26–28, 30). The wisdom and understanding were not his but had been given to him by God in response to his prayer (2:17–23, 30). Rather, Daniel’s superiority is in view in v. 14, where the narrator reports that Daniel spoke to the executioner with “prudence and discretion” (ESV, NRSV; סָבִיבָה אֲמָתָה) about the king’s decree, such that Arioch stopped, talked with him, and then allowed Daniel – under a death sentence – to go petition the king for time, the very thing the other wise men were denied (2:7–9). And Daniel received it (2:15–16). Behind this series of events is a careful negotiator, a man with superior skill. Daniel and his friends were spared, and, ultimately, the king got what he wanted because of Daniel’s prudence and discretion.

Daniel 2 is also part of a larger context, the six-chapter block of Aramaic text in the book of Daniel (Dan 2–7). Without doing a full exposition of these chapters and their significance to the entire book, I assume with the majority of scholars that the arrangement of these six chapters is meaningful. The relationship of corresponding chapters is widely acknowledged:

- chapter 2 – statue dream/four empires
 - chapter 3 – Jews face religious conflict/fiery furnace
 - chapter 4 – tree dream/royal hubris
 - chapter 5 – handwriting on wall/royal hubris
 - chapter 6 – Jew faces religious conflict/lions’ den
- chapter 7 – beasts vision/four empires

For the purposes here, Nebuchadnezzar’s statue dream in ch. 2 is related to Daniel’s vision of the four beasts in ch. 7. Furthermore, the entire Aramaic chiasm is integral to the book’s structure and even meaning.²³ Were it not for the chiasm, one could easily and convincingly divide the book between the narrative of chs. 1–6 and the apocalyptic/prophecy of chs. 7–12. However, ch. 7 confounds such a tidy division. It is bound in language and structure to what precedes, yet it is tied in theme, content, and genre to what follows.

²³ Admittedly, not everyone thinks the Aramaic chiasm is meaningful with respect to understanding the entire book. This reflects my opinion, though not one I have the space to develop in this article.

The extremities of the chiasm – chs. 2 and 7 – offer a wide-angle view of world history and God's control over it, a theme the book returns to repeatedly in its narrative accounts of vulnerable human kings and its visions of apocalyptic mayhem. God is revealed to be the source of true wisdom and power, and his kingdom will conquer all human kingdoms, fill the whole earth instead of just part of it, and alone endure forever. In ch. 2 God reveals himself to a Gentile king as sovereign over all world powers, and in ch. 7 he does the same to devout Daniel. Interestingly, neither recipient of this revelation understands it without divine assistance: Nebuchadnezzar, through the intermediary of Daniel, who received the dream and interpretation from God; and Daniel, through the intermediary of an angelic being.

2d Summary of Daniel 2 in Context

In Daniel's appearance before Nebuchadnezzar, God establishes his servant Daniel as superior over the Babylonian entourage of experts and revealed himself to be the true source of wisdom and the only one sovereign over human history. God alone has wisdom and power, and both are his to give and take. Daniel's magnificent doxology in Dan 2:20–23 captures the message that encompasses the entire book:

Daniel answered and said, “Blessed be the name of God, from forever to forever, to whom are the wisdom and the might. He changes the years and the times. He deposes kings and raises up kings. He gives wisdom to wise men and knowledge to the ones knowing understanding. He reveals the deep things and the hidden things. He knows what is in the darkness and the light with him abides. You, God of my fathers, I praise and laud because you gave me the wisdom and the might. Now you have made known to me what we asked of you – because the matter of the king you made known to us.”

This message began in Dan 1:2, when God delivered Jehoiakim into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, allowing his holy city to be destroyed, his temple to be torched, and his people carried into captivity. Throughout the book, God raises up kings and takes them down. He confounds the “wise” and gives wisdom and discernment to his faithful servants. He shares his wisdom, power, dominion, and even glory with humans, but he alone rules a kingdom that will destroy all human kingdoms, fill the earth, and endure forever.

C CANONICAL CONTEXT

As detailed above, the accounts of Joseph before Pharaoh in Gen 41 and Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2 have significance in their immediate context, as well as in their larger contexts (i.e. the Joseph narrative and the book of Genesis; the Aramaic chiasm and the book of Daniel). But the similarities between the accounts and the clear patterning of one after the other require we

also ask about the relationship they have to each other and the role they play in the OT canon as it reflects the history of God's people.²⁴ Building on the work of Matthew Rindge, who proposes that the account of Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar intends to portray Daniel as a greater Joseph, I suggest that it also means to portray a greater God. Further, the two accounts together create a paradigm for understanding God's work among the nations.

1 A Greater Joseph

Matthew Rindge lists eighteen specific similarities between the plot structures of Gen 41 and Dan 2,²⁵ noting that "the numerous specific similarities (lexical and thematic) between these two narratives suggest that Dan 2 is a conscious reworking of Gen 41."²⁶ Rindge restricts his analysis to Dan 2 and Gen 41,²⁷ but arguably, the author of Daniel evokes the Joseph account already in Dan 1, perhaps to foreshadow what's ahead in Dan 2. Thematically, both characters are Hebrew exiles serving in a foreign court, both are handsome (Gen 39:6; Dan 1:4); both demonstrate impressive wisdom (Gen 41:39; Dan 1:4, 20); both are blessed in their tasks (Gen 39:2–6; Dan 1:17–20).²⁸ If these broader themes don't trigger the reader's recognition of a possible connection, then one might think the description of Daniel and his friends after their dietary test would (Dan 1:15): after ten days of vegetables and water, the four Hebrews are said to be בָּרִיאִ בָּשָׂר, "fat of flesh," an expression used elsewhere only in Gen 41 to describe the fat cows of Pharaoh's dream.²⁹

²⁴ Collins, *Daniel*, 39, says the "the verbal correspondences make it highly likely that the author of Daniel knew and was influenced by the story of Joseph." However, he does not say what significance this influence might have, and he strongly refutes the popular idea that the stories of Daniel are a midrash on the Joseph narrative: "In no case is Daniel either an interpretation or a retelling of the Joseph story." See Collins, *Daniel*, 40. Labonté, "Genèse 41 et Daniel 2," 271–84, represents a minority position, arguing against any dependence of one text on the other and proposing that the similarities between the two stories are due to the fact that they both came out of the post-exilic period – before apocalyptic literature was firmly established, when prophecy was rare, and when literature with dreams would be an ideal medium to communicate God's will to Gentiles as well as Jews.

²⁵ Rindge, "Jewish Identity," 88–89.

²⁶ Rindge, "Jewish Identity," 90.

²⁷ This is a methodological choice by Rindge, who discusses the studies of Gnuse ("Jewish Dream Interpreter") and Labonté ("Jewish Identity") in which each makes comparisons beyond Daniel 2. Rindge contends this "flattens the disparate ways in which Joseph and Daniel are characterized" (in the case of Gnuse) and mutes the "distinct perspective of each narrative" (in the case of Labonté) ("Jewish Identity," 87).

²⁸ Gnuse, "Jewish Dream Interpreter," 40.

²⁹ It's tempting to think there might be metaphorical significance in this choice of words to describe Daniel and his friends. The fat cows in Pharaoh's dreams repre-

There are also differences between the portrayal of the characters in the accounts, and Rindge argues that this is where the greater significance lies. He argues that the differences "are consistent in nature, reflecting the existence of three distinct patterns," namely, dream interpretation, piety, and the nature of Joseph and Daniel's relationship to their respective foreign kings. In each area, Rindge shows that Daniel is presented as superior to Joseph,³⁰ suggesting that the account of Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2 reconfigures the account of Joseph before Pharaoh in Gen 41 in order to show Daniel to be a "new and improved" Joseph.³¹ Rindge contends that this greater Joseph provides an ideal model for how Jews should relate to and function within a foreign empire – i.e. what Rindge calls "moderate resistance."³²

2 A Greater God

The accounts of the two captives before foreign kings do more than present a message about one or both of the young Hebrews. As part of the portrayal of Israel's God, they also instruct the reader in the person, character, and activity of this God. The accounts are similar in their broad theological theme – namely, the sovereignty of God. However, a comparison of what God revealed to the pair of Gentile kings and why he revealed it suggests that the account of Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar not only shows a greater Joseph, it shows a greater God.³³

What God revealed to Pharaoh in Gen 41 was, essentially, a fourteen-year regional weather forecast and his control over it. For seven years, the rains would be plentiful along the Nile and the fields would overflow with crops. Then for seven years, the Nile river of life would not deliver. Famine would seize and all but strangle the land. By contrast, what God revealed to Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2 was, essentially, the whole of human history and his sovereignty over it. The splendid and not-so-splendid human kingdoms would

sented years of plenty for Egypt. Perhaps the author of Daniel hints at coming "years of plenty" for the Babylonian royal court through the quartet of Hebrew captives.

³⁰ Rindge, "Jewish Identity," 90–98.

³¹ Rindge, "Jewish Identity," 98. See also Goldingay, *Daniel*, 43, who compares the characters and events of Gen 41 and Dan 2 by saying, "[Dan 2] is like Gen 41, only more so" and then suggests "that Joseph could be seen as a type of Daniel."

³² "I say 'resistance' because he chooses to maintain his own dietary traditions. I say 'moderate' because, despite his rejection of the royal diet, Daniel nonetheless remains involved in the Babylonian court. He still submits himself to the training of the 'Chaldeans' in language, literature, and education. Thus, Daniel offers a *via media* between the extremes witnessed in 1 Maccabees and Gen 41. He embraces neither the assimilation modeled by Joseph nor the rejection practiced by the Maccabees." See Rindge, "Jewish Identity," 103.

³³ This is not to say that Joseph's God was somehow lesser than Daniel's God. Rather, by calling to mind the Joseph narrative, the Daniel narrative intends to portray God in a grander way with respect to his sovereignty and redemptive purposes.

crumble before the one eternal kingdom that filled the whole earth – not just territories of it. In the former dream, God made known his sovereignty over regional weather patterns and the corresponding fertility of the land. In the latter, he revealed his sovereignty over all kingdoms and powers forever.

Why God revealed the dreams to the Gentile kings is less clear in the texts. In Gen 41, Joseph simply tells Pharaoh that God has declared to Pharaoh what he is doing (41:25), and in Dan 2, Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar that God has made known to the king what will happen (2:29). These answers tell us the general content of the dreams (i.e. future events), but neither tells us why God sent the dreams. We have to rely on the larger context for this. In the case of Pharaoh, the baffling dream brings Joseph to the mind of the cupbearer, who reports his ability to the king. Joseph's interpretation of the dream leads to his appointment over Egypt, which ultimately resulted in the sons of Israel moving there to survive the famine. In terms of Israel's history, we could say God sent the dream to Pharaoh so that the Israelites would survive. In the process, he also blessed Egypt too, preserving it through the wisdom of Joseph. In the case of Nebuchadnezzar, the purpose of the dream for the king specifically doesn't come into focus until Dan 4, when he has his second dream, which I've argued above is a remedial lesson for a king who didn't learn the first time that his kingdom was temporary and his power was relative and bestowed by a greater king. But the purpose of the dream goes beyond the circumstances of the Babylonian king. It reveals the coming kingdom of God, which breaks into history, destroys all human kingdoms, and fills the earth forever. In Pharaoh's dream, God made a way for the salvation of the starving Israelites and for the nations surrounding Egypt. In the latter, he reveals his coming, eternal kingdom, an event the NT says is inaugurated by Jesus, presented as the savior of the world.

Both accounts reveal a sovereign God, but comparing the what and why of God's revelation to the Gentile kings suggests that the Daniel account intends to show a greater God – that is, it magnifies the scope of both his sovereignty and salvation.³⁴

3 A Paradigm for God's Work Among the Nations

The accounts of Joseph before Pharaoh and Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar bookend the OT story of Israel's life in the land of promise. Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream is the trigger event for moving the Israelites to Egypt, where they will enjoy royal favor and eventually suffer under royal oppression. Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream occurs early in the exilic

³⁴ I am not suggesting that Nebuchadnezzar's dream itself includes a message of salvation – either implicit or explicit. It is only when considered through the lens of the NT and the work of Christ recorded there that one might say, first, how the rock of Dan 2 comes to fill the earth and rule forever, and, second, how the Son of Man achieved salvation for the human race.

period, when the people of God have lost the land of promise to the foreign invader. On either side of Israel's sustained presence in the land, the canon offers accounts with similar themes in which God sends a message to Gentile kings and his servants encounter those kings specifically because of these revelations. In its canonical context, this pair of accounts provides a paradigm for God's interaction with "the nations," where most of the Bible's readers since the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. have lived.

In the previous section, we considered the significance of the specific messages God sent to Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar. Here, we consider the significance of the fact that God spoke to them at all at these points in history when Israel did not have possession of the promised land. I suggest three points of significance.

First, by speaking to the Gentile kings whose influence most affected the Israelites (i.e. Pharaoh during the patriarchal period and Nebuchadnezzar during the Neo-Babylonian period), God sent a clear message to all involved that he was the God of the nations, not just Israel. Neither Pharaoh nor Nebuchadnezzar had met a God like this one. His messages eluded them and their experts, and the dreams' fulfillment exceeded any power they or their gods might have claimed. The God of Israel was also the God over Egypt and Babylon, whether or not they acknowledged his sovereignty.

Second, although the messages themselves were inscrutable to the Gentile kings, God spoke in a language they understood – namely, dreams. Most revelatory dreams that kings received gave clear information about future events. A biblical example of such a "message dream" is in 1 Sam 3, where God calls three times to the sleeping Samuel so that he could tell the boy that he was about to judge Eli's family. Symbolic dreams were more likely to need an interpreter, although the meanings of symbolic dreams could also be obvious (e.g. Joseph's dreams of bowing sheaves and stars in Gen 37). In his Daniel commentary, Longman suggests that God spoke to Nebuchadnezzar in dreams because it was in dreams "that the Babylonian religion and Daniel's faith [came] closest," rather than speaking to him through something like the birth of a multiheaded ox.³⁵ The same could be said for God's revelation to Pharaoh.

³⁵ Tremper Longman III, *Daniel* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 77. Such an affinity between the Gentile religions and Israel's religion likely also made the accounts more palatable to a Jewish audience, well versed in God's view of the divination arts. Karel van der Toorn considers it unusual for a royal courtier to be proficient in dream interpretation, and here the accounts of Daniel "seem to depart from the customs at the Assyrian and Babylonian courts. Although a Neo-Assyrian prayer to the sun-god speaks of the oneiromancer (*ša'ili*) explaining a dream to the king, there is no mention of oneiromancers among the court sages, nor does any of their letters deal with the interpretation of royal dreams. It is not beyond the realm of pos-

A third point of significance about God's revelation to Gentile kings is that he didn't send the enigmatic messages until he had also put one of his servants in place to interpret the message. And even then, both texts are clear that the ability to explain the dreams came from God. Joseph and Daniel were only able to interpret the dreams because, in the language of the Gentile kings, "the spirit of the holy gods" was in them (Gen 41:38; cf. Dan 2:11; 4:8, 18). Their access to God's wisdom came from God himself, and God's wisdom was made available to the Gentile kings through them.

The accounts of Joseph before Pharaoh in Gen 41 and Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2 reveal a God who bothers to communicate to Gentile kings. In their respective contexts, they each show the sovereignty of God and his establishment of his man in the foreign court. Through his lowly servants, God put the mighty Gentile kings on alert that they were dependent on him for their lives and for their kingdoms. While God did not appear to have an earthly kingdom at the time, he demonstrated his superiority over the kings (who found the dreams inscrutable), all other gods (whose diviners were stymied), and the future. This Yahweh may not have *looked* like much during the hey-day of Egypt or Babylon, but in fact, he was Lord of all the earth.

Considered together in the context of Israel's historical and geographical situation, the pair of accounts creates a paradigm for God's work among the nations. God reached out to foreign kings through the murky means of revelatory dreams in order to make himself known. Knowing that the collective knowledge of the empires' finest interpreters would prove inadequate, he had already positioned his faithful servants – with access to the "spirit of the holy gods" – to interpret and explain the dreams.

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sibility that the interpretation of dreams belonged to the expertise of the *bārū* or the – at least originally Egyptian – *hartibu*, but even if this were the case, difficult dreams play a minor to non-existent role in their correspondence." See Karel van der Toorn, "Scholars at the Oriental Court: The Figure of Daniel against its Mesopotamian Background," in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception* (ed. John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2001), 41–42.

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