A Test-Case in Ascriptive Realism: The Quest of the Historical Daniel and its Complex Relationship to the Practices of Scriptural Interpretation

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Abstract

One productive avenue for locating the best practices for integrating historical and theological exegesis lies along the path of 'ascriptive realism', a shorthand label for a mode of reading informed above all by Hans Frei's work on scripture as realistic and history-like narrative. Rather than pursue a full theoretical account of ascriptive realism, I characterise it in broad terms, in relation to concerns over the character of the reader and of the nature of the reality to which the text attests, and then explore a case-study. The case study is occupied with what may be called 'the quest of the historical Daniel', and its complex relationship to the practices of scriptural interpretation. Postcolonial readings of Daniel are canvassed for examples of how historical detail may be turned to broader interpretative aims. The goal is to illustrate the kind of framework within which one might locate the best practices for integrating historical and theological exegesis: as a single practice that is irreducibly historical, irreducibly theological, and beholden to informed imaginative enquiry from a range of sub-disciplinary perspectives.

1. On Being Good Readers: Exegesis as an Embodied Practice

The best practices for integrating historical and theological exegesis involve taking each *more* seriously, not less, because to pursue either historical or theological exegesis with full seriousness will necessarily involve pursuing the other one also.[1] Part of the problem here is to have rent asunder that which was originally conjoined,

[1] The specific focus on best *practices* for integrating historical and theological exegesis was the focus of the *Closing the Gap* conference at Durham in June 2018, at which an earlier version of this paper was given. I am grateful to Ben White, Justin Allison, and respondents at the conference (especially Darren Sarisky) for questions and prompts towards greater clarity.

viz the historical and theological dimensions of a single unitary act of interpretation.[2] In one sense, then, asking the question of how to close the gap between historical and theological approaches might already be to start from the wrong place, if the project is to avoid the gap in the first place. Nevertheless while I do think there is merit in recognising this point, it is disingenuous to suggest that no interpreters have experienced any kind of separation between the historical and the theological in their interpretative work.[3]

I take it however that our task is to find a way forward rather than lament where we have been, and to ground such ways forward in practice rather than to retreat to aspirational analyses and statements of intent. It would certainly be all to the good if there were a lot less vague talk of a theological interpretation 'movement', whether intended positively or negatively, and more attention given to actual strengths and weaknesses of particular readings and their frames of reference. The present paper makes a small attempt to seek progress through detailed examples. It will concomitantly disappoint those wanting headline state-of-the-discipline provocations on the historical vs. the theological, as if wise reflection were simply a matter of aiming hermeneutical knock-out punches until one's preferred candidate was the last left standing.

One grounded way forward would lie in the direction of further reflection on the embodied nature of reading scripture as a practice performed by people. Questions of character have resurfaced in academic scriptural interpretation, coming by way of MacIntyre and perhaps also Hauerwas, and feeding in to biblical studies through the mediation of those such as Stephen Fowl in New Testament, William Brown in Old Testament, and others.[4] The potential benefits as well as the pitfalls of this turn to the interpreting subject in ethical (and virtue-ethical) perspective have

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[2] I intend the word 'theological' here, and throughout, to describe a constructive practice within the life of faith, acknowledging that it can also be used to denote an aspect of the history of religious ideas (as in 'the theology of Homer' – a usage that has pedigree in biblical studies in various projects that talk for example of being a 'dictionary of Old Testament theology'). If one restricts theology to being a subset of the descriptive task then there is not really any issue to address.

[3] At a recent SBL conference I gave a paper in the Book of Daniel group that was the only one of the five papers to mention any sort of theological matter, for example. So whether the distinction need exist in principle, it does seem to in (much) practice.

[4] The primary mediation of ethical and specifically virtue-ethical work remains Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion. Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991). See further Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture. A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); William P. Brown (ed.), *Character & Scripture. Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Richard S. Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), and others.

been well explored, with productive questions asked about interpretative virtues as well as the ways in which scripture itself might inform our grasp of such virtues.

'If you want to become a better exegete, become a deeper person', as Brevard Childs is reported to have said 'in his Introduction to Old Testament class at Yale Divinity School'.[5] This is of course not a two-way inference: there are deep people who are not good exegetes. But are there good exegetes who are not in some sense deep people? Here a lot would depend on what it means to call an exegete 'good' or a person 'deep', and clearly one could attempt to delimit exegesis in certain ways, such as calling it the analytical operation of particular technical interpretative moves, so that any well-trained technician could perform them regardless of moral character. In practice, however, very few define exegesis this way beyond the most introductory of handbook-style textbooks.[6]

It is surely much more widely recognised that the practice of exegesis is both an art and a science. It is a science not least in that it incorporates technical requirements pertaining to capacity with language, indeed languages, which bring with them various skills at handling cultural, historical, anthropological and social factors, though all of these are also both art and science. They all include elements that anyone can learn, given time and technical capacity. However exegesis is also an art in that it incorporates elements that require not just technical but *moral and imaginative* capacity, which bring with them questions of character. Indeed we live at a time when the once easy stand-off between the arts and the sciences is gradually realigning into sub-categories of all disciplines that either do or do not recognise the hermeneutical constitution of their endeavours.[7] The sub-title of Steven Shapin's collection of essays on the history of science makes the point well: *Historical Studies of Science as if It Was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority*.[8] Historical studies of exegesis

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[5] As cited by Claire Mathews McGinnis in 'Swimming with the Divine Tide: An Ignatian Reading of 1 Samuel', in Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (eds.), *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1999), 240-70, here 244.

[6] Note though Douglas Stuart, 'Exegesis', in *ABD* 2:682–88, here 682: defining exegesis as 'The process of careful, analytical study of biblical passages undertaken in order to produce useful interpretations of those passages.' Stuart is also the co-author of a well-known handbook-style basic textbook: Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its worth* (3rd ed; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

[7] The most engaging overview of this issue at present is John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (London: Pelican, 2018).

[8] Steven Shapin, *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as if It Was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

likewise show us the inevitable interplay between the exegete as person (character, context and all) and the nature of the exegesis they produce.[9]

Historical and theological elements of exegetical practice *each* straddle the art and science sides of the spectrum. Both therefore flourish best with a combination of technical competence and good character (among other things). There are ways round this as an absolute requirement: Bible readers with no Hebrew can rely on someone else having translated it for them, just as readers with no faith in Christ might learn to analyse the language of faith in Christ in ways that make good sense of the texts about faith in Christ. Sometimes the academy seems to disapprove more of the former short-cut, and the church disapprove more of the latter. One form of good practice, at least, might be to avoid both.

It has been a fault of ardent supporters of each of historical criticism and theological interpretation that they find it easy to construct a straw figure that represents the other as a pale shadow of their own best interests, and whose insights would be entirely covered – without interesting remainder – simply by pursuing the preferred path in all its glory. (Thus historically-minded critics invested in this discussion sometimes say 'Theological interpretation emerges out of the detail of good historical work anyway' and theologically-minded interpreters likewise invested sometimes say 'Historical investigation is nothing but the incidental detail of proper theologically-disciplined interpretation'.)

I think this is a half-truth. Historically-minded interpreters on the one hand, and theologically-minded interpreters on the other, are prone to seizing on the important point about interpretation being a single unitary act of an embodied interpreter, but only meeting it half way. It is met from within one's preferred sub-discipline, and thus of course it looks as if what is being shown is that other approaches will all be accessed appropriately if one simply pursues the approach of preference thoroughly enough. But the key point, and the one missed by partisan advocates, is that this claim might be made from all sides. So we may be better advised to say that we – actual interpreters – are engaged in a pursuit that is irreducibly historical in focus, and irreducibly theological in focus, and that it is unwise to think that always choosing the same focus is the best way to get at all the interesting things one can say about a text: whether those things are theologically

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[9] For examples from an Old Testament perspective, see the studies gathered in Rudolf Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli: Old Testament Scholarship in Three Centuries* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). A particularly illuminating case study pertaining to 20th century Old Testament criticism is Burke O. Long, *Planting and Reaping Albright: Politics, Ideology, and Interpreting the Bible* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

interesting, historically interesting, or indeed interesting in a whole range of other ways too.

In principle, any informed and imaginatively engaged approach to a text seems likely to be worth exploring for potential interpretative insight. But I would like to propose one candidate for a practice that might be particularly well suited to integrating historical and theological exegesis, and – in the sure and certain hope of simplification – I am going to call it 'ascriptive realism'.

2. A Particular Practice Worth Pursuing: Ascriptive Realism

Scripture is rarely simply interested in relating what happened. It is much more invested, as most serious and all literary texts are, in portraying the world in a certain way, advocating for a construal of reality, as we might say. In the case of scripture this is of course a theological construal at least as much as any other kind. Without wishing to over-burden common terms with theoretical meaning, it may be helpful to think of *history* as what happened, and *historical narrative*, or *history-like narrative*, as the construal of what happened, for which the grand theological claim of scripture is that such a portrait is a portrait of *reality* – defining 'reality' therefore as something more than history, but as history-with-appropriate-evaluation-built-in.[10] So one could say: scripture narrates the real world. It makes truth-claims about the ways in which we should understand history and in so doing – to anticipate – it makes claims that may stand in all sorts of interesting relationships to what actually happened.

It would be helpful to have a useful term for describing how the truth-telling and realistic narrative of scripture is doing its work of referring to the world. We have a good word for how language does this in normal everyday language use: we call it *descriptive*. If the car is red, and we say 'the car is red', then this is descriptively accurate. Descriptive language works by accurately matching up to the historical world that it is talking about. Here I draw upon one particular feature of Hans Frei's account of these matters, and pick out a word that he only gradually came to use in his work on biblical narrative and Christian interpretation: *ascriptive*. To ascribe is to project language on to something, to attach a form of words to it, or to create a way of looking at it. Believers 'ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock, his work is perfect'. (Deut 32:3-4). The God in question is not here being *described* as great, but

[10] The vast questions this raises about who gets to define 'appropriate' lie beyond the scope of this paper, but clearly indicate one reason why there can be endless dispute about scriptural claims.

greatness is being *ascribed* to him.[11] The language is not simply a recognition of what was there waiting to be described by anyone who cared to look, but is in part an evaluative move from the speaker (or writer) to portray the reality in a certain way, and not in another way. It is part of the labelling project of talking about reality, we might say.

I suggest that the resulting approach to biblical narrative might usefully be called *ascriptive realism*.[12] It is realistic because it is involved in claiming that the world is rightly understood in certain ways, with particular evaluative naming and labelling built into the project of telling it in a certain way. It is ascriptive because it is not simply deducing from that reality the one way of telling it (i.e. descriptively), but in the process it is creating that way of looking at it. Frei's work on these issues emerged slowly out of his reflections on the history of biblical interpretation, and the word 'ascriptive' played only an occasional role, sometimes allied to his troubled attempts to capture an understanding of the 'literal reading' of scripture that stands in some sort of continuity with the church's traditional literal sense.[13] Sufficient unto the day are the complexities of unpicking helpful and unhelpful aspects of the word 'literal', but in pointing to literary attentiveness and a willingness to see what scripture is trying to portray, these terms can all play their part. In Frei's case he probably did not intend to demarcate different ways of reading by his use of 'ascriptive' and 'descriptive', so much as prioritize different aspects of scripture's

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[11] This is not the place for a full analysis of the Hebrew and Greek language or conceptuality underlying this English-language distinction, which, unsurprisingly, involves a range of terms. The translation 'ascribe' in Deut 32:3 was established by the KJV, rendering *yāhab* (+ relevant noun, 'greatness'). The other four instances of 'ascribe' language in the KJV are all *nātan* + relevant noun (1 Sam 18:8 x2; Job 36:3; Ps 68:35). Modern translations have tended towards multiplying uses of 'ascribe' for *yāhab* + noun, while (mostly) retaining the few KJV instances for *nātan*. In any case, I am not proposing a technical distinction in Hebrew (or even, in fact, in the English language), but merely the recognition that the direction of fit from word to world is different, whatever specific language is used.

[12] I draw here briefly on the approach explored and modelled in my *Theological Hermeneutics and the Book of Numbers as Christian Scripture* (Reading the Scriptures; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018). The label 'ascriptive realism' came late in the day in attempting to capture the form of reading in which I and various interlocutors (Erich Auerbach, Karl Barth, Miroslav Volf, and many others) were engaged.

[13] The key framework for Frei's argument is found in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 1-16; but the terminology of 'ascriptive' over against 'descriptive' narrative is elsewhere, notably on pp. 122-23 of his essay 'The "Literal Reading" of the Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?', in his *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (eds. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher; New Haven and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 117-52, and perhaps most clearly contrasted in his *Types of Christian Theology* (eds. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 125 (cf also 84).

engagement with the non-textual world. It would be easy to polarize here, but wisdom lies with letting the ascriptive have its (theological) day sometimes ahead of and sometimes in, with and under the descriptive – though also vice versa if one were trying to defend the importance of the descriptive against (for example) ahistorical and undisciplined theological heavy-handedness.

I use the short-hand of 'ascriptive realism' to point to the kind of interpretative practice that holds in tension all these factors, including the historical and the theological, alongside the literary and other angles of approach, including attention to the perspectives brought by writers, editors and readers all the way along the line from the ancient near East to the postmodern West.

In lieu of endless theoretical fine tuning, I propose an example that may illuminate what sorts of issues are at stake: the complex relationship between the historical and the theological in offering a responsible interpretation of the book of Daniel.

3. The Quest of the Historical Daniel

3.1 Daniel as Accurate or Inaccurate Description

The long stand-off between conservative and critical interpretation of the book of Daniel is well-known. It took a particularly engaging form in the late 19th century as E.B. Pusey and Frederic Farrar aimed choice denunciations at their opposing viewpoints.[14] Pusey's study of Daniel began with the celebrated words that 'The book of Daniel is especially fitted to be a battle-field between faith and unbelief. It admits of no half-measures. It is either Divine or an imposture',[15] in response to which Farrar asserted 'Much truer faith may be shown by accepting arguments founded on unbiassed evidence than by rejecting them. And what can be more foolish than to base the great truths of the Christian religion on special pleadings which have now come to wear the aspect of ingenious sophistries, such as would not be allowed to have the smallest validity in any ordinary question of literary or historic evidence?'[16] There is plenty more in this vein from both sides, much of it – in

[14] I have reviewed this in more detail in an article titled after Frei's image: 'The Eclipse of Daniel's Narrative: The limits of historical knowledge in the theological reading of Daniel', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70 (2017), 264-77. About two paragraphs of the text that follows through the rest of this paper are drawn from this article.

[15] E.B. Pusey, *Daniel the Prophet: Nine Lectures, delivered in the Divinity School of the University of Oxford* (Oxford: James Parker & Co, 1864), iii (cited here from the 1868 second edition).

[16] Frederic W. Farrar, *The Book of Daniel* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1895), 41 n.1.

my view – uncannily like a good deal of the debate today between historical and theological advocates in biblical interpretation.

The presenting issue, of course, and the relevant one for our purposes, is that the narratives and incidental details of the book of Daniel stand in a vexed historical relationship with what happened in the ancient world. In particular, to make a claim that turns out to be rather more uncontroversial than some would have us believe: The historical information one might straightforwardly deduce from a surface-level reading of the book of Daniel does not match our knowledge of the ancient world drawn from other sources. As far as I am aware, all commentaries and studies across the critical and conservative spectrum acknowledge this, even if sometimes rather inadvertently. But there the agreement ends.

Some approaches, typically from the conservative side, seek to explain this phenomenon of disagreement by adjusting one part of the mismatched pair: contesting either how to read the historical claims of the book of Daniel or our knowledge of the ancient world. One could at length cite examples of this standard apologetic manoeuvre, but for the sake of a convenient passing illustration let us note the persistence of claims that Darius the Mede (6:1 Aram/5:31ET) was 'actually' Ugbaru the conqueror of Babylon, or possibly Gubaru a satrap of Babylon. [17] What is instantiated here is the adjustment of the surface-level reading of Daniel to fit the Nabonidus Chronicle. The purpose of such creative adjustment, of course, is to bring into alignment what are taken to be the actual claims of the text and the actual state of our knowledge of the ancient world. The rationale for such adjustment is that historical accuracy is taken as a sine qua non for authoritative scripture, a view that is presumably based on the argument that historical accuracy guarantees theological accuracy, which turns out to be no argument at all, but only an assertion. Suffice it here to note the presenting oddity of the approach, which even on the terms put forward by its advocates is arguing as follows: the text says X, but we can postulate that X was in fact Y, and thus the text is accurate, since we know that historically it was Y. Passed over with undue haste in this move is what must surely be a hermeneutical sleight of hand: the text did not say Y, but X, and therefore is surely not after all accurate. It seems almost churlish to point this out, and my concern is not with whether we have accurately deduced the historical facts of the matter or not, but merely with noting that what has been demonstrated is nothing other than the very mismatch between straightforward reading and knowledge of history that was to be explained in the first place.

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[17] John J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 30-31, reviews the data.

A second well-known tradition of approaches reads the text as meaning what it says, which we may take to be a good thing, and concludes that the text is therefore wrong. The mismatched pair of the claims of the text and our knowledge of the ancient world is indeed mismatched. This approach is a mainstay, arguably *the* mainstay, of the mainstream of critical commentary through the modern era. Here Darius the Mede is identified, in what is probably the most plausible such identification available to us, with the satrapy-organizing Darius I of Persia, placed some years too early by being described as receiving the kingdom on the very night that Belshazzar was killed (5:30, which would be 539BCE, while Darius I (Darius the Great) rose to power in c.522BCE). The purpose of this kind of reading – as compared to the previous kind – is to recognize that while we cannot align the claims of the text as they stand with what we know of the ancient world, we can conjecture plausible misidentifications that allow us to make sense of how the claims of the text are related to, but not congruent with, our knowledge of the ancient world. The rationale for such a reading, I take it, is that historical accuracy would indeed have been a desideratum of the text, but given that the text failed to attain to it, we can explain what went wrong – which interpretative move might be undertaken with some degree of sympathy or alternatively without, perhaps even delighting in pointing out the falsity and failed status of the book of Daniel measured against the canons of critical enquiry. From Frederic Farrar's aforementioned 1895 commentary on Daniel on downwards, the degrees of sympathy have varied quite widely. Suffice it to note here the presenting oddity of this approach, which is that even on the terms put forward by its advocates, it is arguing as follows: the text says X, which we can see is a mangled version of saying Y, which the text does not say, and what has gone wrong here is a form of misattribution, misidentification, or otherwise some scrambling of the historical record. Passed over with undue haste in this interpretative move is another hermeneutical sleight of hand: the claim that the text was trying to get its history right in the first place.

I am not the first to suggest that this depressing scenario is a fight between two options that both slip too quickly past the question of whether biblical texts are helpfully measured as true or not in anything like these terms. To appropriate the peculiarly apt image of Hans Frei's overall analysis: Daniel's narrative has been eclipsed. The eclipse in question is the shift to the modern framework within which texts are descriptively referential in historical, literal-factual terms. This is more or less what it means to the modern mind to say that a biblical narrative is true: it gets its facts right, and to read it literally is to read it in terms of correspondence between

the text and history. Much 20th century writing on Daniel was in effect 'The Quest of the Historical Daniel', even if such a label has not had wide currency.[18] It differed only in whether it returned a positive verdict (after Pusey) or a negative one (after Farrar).

An ascriptively realistic reading, however, looks elsewhere. Following Frei's lead, I take it that such a reading seeks to let the literary texturing of the text carry the reader to wherever the text was going; to 'reality' understood in theological, rather than simply historical, terms. On another occasion and for other purposes it would be appropriate to explore the ways in which Frei's account is more nuanced than this – for example, he actually claimed that the ascriptive and descriptive were not traditionally distinguished, which is why it is no counter-argument to Frei's thesis that one can find descriptive issues being pondered by pre-modern readers.[19] But this is because, as noted above, they are different ways of assessing interpretive priorities, rather than separable methods from which one is to choose the correct one and necessarily discard the other. Nevertheless, for our present purposes, ascriptive realism in contrast to descriptive accuracy gives us the focus we need.

With regard to the book of Daniel in particular, this distinction makes short work of much of the old critical-conservative stand-off. It offers a third option, at one time a minority report but one that has moved slowly to prominence over recent years: to wit, that the book of Daniel is deliberately invested in modes of narration that bring with them misinformation, at least with respect to matters such as dates and designations. Here, the historical information one might straightforwardly deduce from a surface-level reading of the book of Daniel does not match our knowledge of the ancient world drawn from other sources because that mismatch is exactly the result the book of Daniel was aiming for. This move from juggling descriptive success or failure to assessing how Daniel constructs its inter-action with historical states of affairs will serve admirably as our test case of the possibilities and nature of ascriptive realism.

3.2 Contesting Accounts: Postcolonial Reading as one tool in the toolbox

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[18] Before my own use of it in the article mentioned in n.14 above, I am aware only of Richard D. Patterson, 'Holding on to Daniel's Court Tales', *JETS* 36 (1993), 445-54, closing on 454 with the hope that he has contributed to 'success in the quest for the historical Daniel'; and the opposite inclination of Jack Levison, *Inspired. The Holy Spirit and the Mind of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 3 n.3 on his use of ancient texts: 'I do not interpret them as windows to history … There will be no quest of the historical Daniel …'. I am grateful to David Reimer for pointing me to these references.

[19] See for example, in the 430's, Theodoret's wondering about the historical identity of Darius the Mede in his commentary, discussing 5:31 (see Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on Daniel* [tr. Robert C. Hill; Writings from the Greco-Roman World 7; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006], 153-57).

We turn then to readings that assume that it makes sense to read the book of Daniel, in one way or another, as disinterested in giving what we would call accurate historical information. Various questions may arise at this point. Two such questions are: how does one locate such readings, and how (or against what) does one evaluate them? I shall argue that one key to locating such readings is the ability of the interpreter to read with an imaginative engagement disciplined and sensitized by both historical and theological factors, among others. The question of evaluation will require further untangling.

Thus, recognising the book's location as speaking for the oppressed, in or around 164BCE (and by extension subsequently), one may think to ask how the book seeks out a way of speaking that rejects the dominant voices of the oppressor. The resulting broad framing interpretative interest here may be best characterized under the umbrella of postcolonial reading: reading Daniel from the margins of Empire. Postcolonial reading ranges from Homi Bhaba's work on ambivalence, hybridity, and in particular mimicry – the exaggerated imitation of empire – through to James Scott's work on hidden transcripts that has had such an impact on biblical scholarship's reading of texts like Daniel, by positing the conflict between the hidden and the dominant (or 'public') transcript at the heart of the 'art of resistance'. [20] Such postcolonial reading will anticipate that the book of Daniel is most likely subversively engaged in contesting the empire's account of reality, and that therefore the stage is set for Orwellian adventures in re-narrating the public transcript of Kings Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius et al. On a broad literary level, such a reading turns out to be persuasive, as may be seen in the commentary of Daniel Smith-Christopher, for example. [21]

Now it is not part of my purpose to suggest that postcolonialism should therefore be welcomed with open arms by biblical scholars, tout court.[22] The postcolonial imagination has frequently been triggered by a rightly suspicious hermeneutic that has sought to accuse imperial powers of various kinds of co-opting and thereby suppressing the voice of the over-written culture. In postcolonialism, to recall the wonderful galactic phrase of one its earliest critical analyses, 'the empire

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[20] See Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), conveniently described for biblical studies in Leo G. Perdue and Warren Carter, *Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 15-19. See also James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[21] Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, 'Daniel', in NIB 7 (1996), 17-194.

[22] What follows here is my brief response to the well-judged questions of Darren Sarisky in his helpful response to this paper below. [to editors: how do you want to reference Sarisky's response here?]

writes back'.[23] More modestly I suggest only that postcolonial tools can contribute to a properly imaginative critical engagement, without prejudging the question of whether the use of such tools requires a reader to subscribe to postcolonial–*ism* as an ideological system. More generally, it is doubtless the case that a hermeneutic of suspicion has its place within the kind of positive ('ascriptive') hermeneutic that I have sketched above, but as I will seek to show here there is a difference between discerning suspicion within the text and deploying suspicion in blanket terms when approaching the text. The two may overlap, but the failure to see the difference between them has perhaps been one of the more disappointing features of various ideological and advocacy approaches to hermeneutical questions.[24]

We should notice that postcolonial readings effectively work across both historical and theological categories. By framing the insights they offer within an ascriptive realist hermeneutic, I suggest that what we have here is the vindication of deploying a full and multi-disciplined imaginative seriousness to read texts that seek to advocate for a certain construal of reality. If we cannot evaluate such readings with regard to accuracy – because that would be to miss the point – then we can still evaluate them with regard to coherence and plausibility, both historical and theological. Whether the plausibility has to be understood as relating to the originating context is not self-evident. Again some examples may help us to see what is at stake here.

3.3 Constructing Daniel and Daniel's Constructions

The reading of Daniel 1–6 offered by David Valeta in his probing and thought-provoking study *Lions and Ovens and Visions* explores a 'satirical reading' informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's reconstruction of a form of interpretation indebted to the 3rd century BCE Greek cynic Menippus of Gadara, and known as Menippean satire.[25]

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[23] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 1989). A second edition updated the account to 2002.

[24] For my own discussion of how to construe suspicion in biblical studies see 'Juniper Trees and Pistachio Nuts: Trust and Suspicion as Modes of Scriptural Imagination', *Theology* 112 (2009), 353-63. The proper tempering of suspicion within the wider hermeneutical matrix was arguably central to the life-long work of Paul Ricoeur, especially as he progressed to concerns for justice and the ethical in his later writings. In my view his work would have been of more relevance to biblical scholars had its intermittent theological underpinnings been allowed to shape the hermeneutical nuances more clearly. For an interesting perspective see W. David Hall, *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative: The Creative Tension between Love and Justice* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).

[25] David M. Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions. A Satirical Reading of Daniel 1-6* (HBM 12; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), especially 55-66. Further page references are in the text.

On Bakhtin's view, Menippean satire is 'fully liberated from historical constraints and "external verisimilitude to life",' with an 'extraordinary freedom' of plot and deployment of historical or legendary figures. (60) Valeta is able to put this characterization to work with an account of how historical and temporal markers dissolve into a 'serio-comic chronotope that is concerned more with the present testing of truth than a mere accounting of facts.' (146; cf 140-46) He rehearses most of the standard examples of problematic historical identification, and shows how each of them can be read through the genre lens of pre-novelistic Menippean satire.

So for example Valeta writes: 'A Bakhtinian reading with an emphasis on the freedom of plot recognizes that conceptions of time are often fluid and help shape the Menippean-like satirical structure that serve to undo both imperial forces and the traditions that prop them up.' (145) Hence Belshazzar is blurred into being the son of Nebuchadnezzar, while he is in turn replaced by a figure called 'Darius' who may be either a cipher ('a symbolic character that represents kingship') or a 'composite figure based on general knowledge'. (145)

There is no doubt that this kind of reading makes good and coherent sense of the book. To demonstrate it fully, one would need to work through the various episodes of the book and show how they pursue their satirical and/or postcolonial aims. When Valeta does this with chapters 1–6, the results are illuminating. He is able to say, in his conclusion, that where Bakhtin proposes 14 primary characteristics of the Menippean genre, 'Daniel 1–6 manifests all these features'. (193) That certainly gives pause for thought. Have we unlocked the genre mystery at the heart of the construction of the book of Daniel? Maybe so. Valeta's engaging short-hand for his project – I paraphrase only slightly – is that the book of Daniel is a bit like the Wizard of Oz, the fantastic adventures of a hero up against supposed world-powers susceptible to satirical deflation: Lions and Ovens and Visions indeed, or 'oh my!' It is true that Valeta underwrites this imaginative analogical leap with the scaffolding of historical plausibility, by way of exploring the 3rd century BCE matrix of the particular satirical genre at stake; but is it not equally true that the merits of Valeta's reading as a reading of the finished text would remain even if the author or editor of the book of Daniel were to rise at the end of days and say 'By no means, I did not intend the book that way!'

Genre identification is actually a very good example of an aspect of interpretation that admits of historical plausibility but only rarely provability. Would the case be stronger if one could demonstrate not just that Daniel 1–6 trades in all 14 primary characteristics of the Menippean genre, but that these 14 are at the same time the defining characteristics of Daniel 1–6? It certainly would, but the

likelihood of being able to demonstrate that seems remote. The inherently unstable and self-deconstructing travails of genre identification may well leave us more cautious.

To explore this point further let us move to a second example of a reading of Daniel informed by awareness of typically postcolonial concerns, though one that ends up in a similar area with regard to questions of historical accuracy: that of Alexandria Frisch in her study of *The Danielic Discourse on Empire in Second Temple Literature*.[26] Frisch is helpfully alert to questions of how to bring postcolonial concerns into dialogue with elements of the apocalypse genre (13),[27] and sets up her reading of Daniel – or what she more precisely terms Danielic discourse – by way of a consideration of the hegemonic view of the Persian Empire. This ambiguous phrase admits of two construals: views of the Persian Empire found within the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (especially Ezra-Nehemiah), and 'Persian Imperial discourse itself'. (42) In this discourse – inscriptional, artistic and literary – empires are conflated across time, and 'nothing exists outside of Persian control'. (46)

Read against this background, the book of Daniel again makes compelling sense. For an example here, consider the long-noticed oddity that the vision of the statue in Daniel 2 sees all four (or so) empires toppled at once, and yet is explained in terms of one empire succeeding another, as is echoed further in Daniel 7. Frisch notes that in the dream of chapter 2 the statue 'does not come from anywhere', but that 'like the Persian concept of empire, there is one, continuous empire that has been ever-present on the world scene'. (84) For another example: and these are Frisch's words: 'Daniel himself experiences what historians would consider to be three separate empires—the Babylonians, Medes, and Persians—but these empires have been ahistorically collapsed into the span of his one lifetime'. (97) One might add that such an approach as this makes sense of the often-reported experience of readers of the book that Daniel presents as a figure of indeterminate age all the way through, and that attempts to reconstruct his age on the supposed presenting chronology of the book, such that it is an old man in the lion's den for example, seem oddly irrelevant.

Frisch further sees a shift from the first to the second half of Daniel in its probing of all empire as under God's control: the focus switches from earthly empire in 1–6 to heavenly empire in 7–12. The 'hidden transcript' that is characteristic of the pre-Maccabean provenance of the stories – such as Daniel's occasional asides to the

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[26] (JSJ Sup 176; Leiden: Brill, 2016). Further page references are in the text.

[27] Actually here in respect of the work of Anathea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire. Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

God who 'gives wisdom to the wise' (2:21-22, cf 106) – shifts to the freely expressed conflict of the apocalyptic chapters. (122-24) Taking this long view of the overall book in conflict with imperial ideology, once again, one has to say that it is a reading that makes good and coherent sense. There is once again historical plausibility. In terms of imaginative analogical leaps, the nearest intertext appealed to on this occasion is the early chapters of Genesis. By way of reference to Shinar, Daniel and the table of nations are drawn into dialogue; and Frisch offers a particularly insightful reading that explores the tree of Daniel 4 alongside the tower of Babel. (112-16) What such analogy lacks in the creative reach of landing on the Wizard of Oz, it perhaps makes up for in terms of intra-canonical mutual illumination. And once again that gives pause for thought. Have we *now* unlocked the genre mystery at the heart of the construction of the book of Daniel? Or is there any need or ability to go further than saying that Frisch's reading as a reading is illuminating?

I think that framing our concerns here in terms of ascriptive and realistic reading allows a certain natural hospitality to a useful interpretative pluralism. It turns out that there is more than one way of making positive and theologically-orientated sense of the book of Daniel's historical infelicities while taking them at face value, i.e. ascriptively.

Nevertheless, alongside their congruities as readings that explore subversion and critique, there are certain real differences between Valeta's and Frish's accounts. One such is tone: arguably the difference between the tone of Daniel 1–6 and 7–12 filters down to a difference in tone concerning the two readings: one almost *en route* to the carnivalesque, the other ending up reflecting on theologies of accommodation. The interpretative plurality, in other words, is not just a matter of distinct literary modes of enquiry, but consists in there being genuinely different realistic construals of the book that make good sense.

In theory, then, does ascriptive realism permit one to find illumination of Daniel's historical infelicities from any potentially relevant disciplinary perspective? I think the answer is yes, because once one has stopped assuming that historical descriptive accuracy was at stake, then what one is pursuing is the coherence and plausibility of a reading, and then the point is this: any reading that can make sense of the overall purpose of the book of Daniel will, along the way, suggest possibilities for productive reading of Daniel's strange dates and designations, which were of course part of the data that generated the putative reading in the first place.

So for example, if Daniel is read in the light of the pressure exerted by other canonical books, in particular the prophecies of Isaiah, this creates yet another (call it 'theological' or 'canonical') constructed reading, whereby a character such as Darius

the Mede is constructed to fit with the perceived import of prior prophecy. Thus in the reading offered by Jennie Grillo: 'Echoes of Isaiah have thus exerted an imaginative pressure on the redactors as they fitted their tales within a scripturally constructed historical scaffolding'. [28] One can easily see how this sort of approach is a different option again, in which the driving categories are canonically intertextual.

Further down this line might come readings driven by concerns that come less from the historical world that produced the text of Daniel, and more from the conceptual worlds that pertain to Daniel's reception as Jewish and in particular Christian scripture. The book of Daniel's construction of time and sovereignty seems to hold much promise for explicit Christian theological reflection on time and the lordship of Christ, but this seems to me to move on slightly from 'theological exegesis' to theology in dialogue with the biblical text. Perhaps that is a distinction without a profound difference. But when Ephraim Radner writes 'We do not look to history to find Christ; but at Christ to find history, in its divinely constructed form',[29] he is making a case for figural reading of scripture to some extent over and against historical-critical reading. I might rather suggest that we look to *reality* to find history, properly understood, that the reality is textually-mediated through scripture, and that the witness of the Old Testament is that we can do this truthfully without explicit reference to Christ.

Can we do it well from the Old Testament *with* reference to Christ? The most interesting recent reading of Daniel to explore these issues is George Sumner's *Brazos* commentary, which does say early on that questions of chronology 'should be asked within the context of the question of "Christ and time," the impact of the ascended Christ on our understanding of the shape of history' – indeed Sumner thinks that 'the ascension Christology of Dan. 7 [is] the hermeneutical key for the book'.[30] How this works out with regard to detail in his commentary is uneven. For example he helpfully sees Daniel 4 as creatively recontextualising the 'pagan' symbolism of the

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[28] Jennie Grillo, '"From a Far Country": Daniel in Isaiah's Babylon', *JBL* 136/2 (2017), 363-80, here 377.
[29] Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 41.
[30] George Sumner, 'Daniel', in Samuel Wells and George Sumner, *Esther and Daniel* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2013), 93-225, here 113 and 112. The former quote makes reference to Cullman; the latter quote is more fully 'The ascension Christology of Dan. 7 as the hermeneutical key for the book is reinforced by the structure of the chapters'. Sumner derives this focus from Richard Bauckham's work on Revelation in regard to Daniel. (108)

Nabonidus story,[31] but often passes over historical data completely.[32] He is also willing to offer gentle critique of theological over-riding of the text, such as Reformation readings that are 'predictable' – with reference to Melanchthon finding justifying faith as the heart of Nebuchadnezzar's restoration in Daniel 4, for example.[33] In his preface Sumner reports that his friend John Goldingay 'did not consider what I have written exegesis', even though he agreed with many of the points made.[34] I do however wonder whether the large part of Sumner's reading could be presented in a more directly exegetical mode without substantive departure from his major interpretative moves. What we see here is in effect the tendency, noted earlier, to imagine that one's own disciplinary orientation can carry all before it without needing to avail itself of other perspectives.

In my judgment, interpreters (and theological interpreters in particular) have everything to gain and not much to lose from hosting as wide a range as possible of plausible readings, across literary, historical, theological and other categories. One can construct Daniel's constructions in a range of compelling ways.

4 Evaluative Reflections: Is Historical Plausibility more significant than Theological Plausibility?

Are all constructions of readings equal or are some – to return to Orwell – more equal than others? One line of enquiry is clearly to explore the question that asks after theological criteria for evaluating readings. If readings cannot usefully be evaluated in terms of historical accuracy, as I have been arguing, then what of 'theological accuracy' – or in other words how do a theologically ascriptive text and its theological readings admit of critical weighing? A book like Daniel that majors on larger-than-life self-obsessed tyrants causing social and political mayhem while playing fast and loose with God-talk might pose this question rather pointedly to theologically-minded observers of the practices of Bible reading around the world in our present historical moment. To give Sumner's commentary its due, I suspect it was considerations like this that were at the forefront of his mind as he applied himself to interpreting this particular scriptural text in the early 21st century.

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[31] Sumner, 'Daniel', 146.

[32] Or very swiftly: the treatment of Darius' identity is reduced to one suggestion 'as good as any' (Sumner, 'Daniel', 151), though this is deliberate given his introductory comments on the relative importance of 'historical cul-de-sacs' (97-100).

[33] Sumner, 'Daniel', 149.

[34] Sumner, 'Daniel', 96.

I wish to conclude by offering a reflection on just one aspect of the many evaluative questions this raises, an aspect particularly pertinent to the over-arching project of integrating historical and theological exegesis. The question may be framed this way: In weighing interpretations, should one say that historically-reconstructed plausibility holds some kind of evaluative priority over subsequent theologically-constructed plausibility?

The writing and/or compiling of the book of Daniel was clearly a political act, with deliberate intentions. As Anathea Portier-Young observes, 'even as Antiochus's soldiers gathered and burned scrolls of Israel's scriptures, there were Judeans who kept reading and writing. … the writers of Daniel were among them. Reading and writing alike were part of their program of resistance to the empire.' [35] This much seems assured. But as to how far one can attribute specific motivations to – for example – the use of historical disinformation, I am less sure.

It would not have been difficult to imagine, upon looking at specific readings of Daniel, that the conclusion would be something like: We may read the misinformation of Daniel as deliberate disinformation, but this is more of an illuminating reading strategy – sensitized as it is by postcolonial awareness – than a recovery of authorial or editorial strategy. But instead the conclusion seems to need greater nuance. Rather: the pursuit of coherent readings of Daniel pushes the reader to readings that construct the book's purpose in ways that then result in constructive readings of its historical misinformation. We have sampled several of them. In this sense the misinformation must have been deliberate. But it was not deliberate as an end in itself, or perhaps: it was not deliberate as a conscious strategy. For it to be a conscious strategy we would need to postulate writers and editors who at some level were conscious of the possibilities of recording history accurately but chose not to do so. Instead we have discovered that the most plausible readings of Daniel arrive when we move beyond that framework. Daniel's postcolonial subtext, in other words, is a little like Molière's Monsieur Jourdain who was amazed and delighted to discover that he had been speaking prose for forty years without knowing it. [36] In what sense had he been deliberately speaking prose? That depends on whether one wishes to describe what he thought he was doing, or how it looks to later observers.

More generally, there is no *a priori* way of knowing what is the best available classificatory terminology for understanding a text. Is it couched in terms related to

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[35] Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 265.

[36] Cf Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*; alluded to in passing for its aptness with regard to hermeneutical theorizing by Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons. New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans & Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1980), 9.

the text's conditions of original production? Or does it perhaps become available through subsequent refinement of our understanding of the conceptualities at work? The former has been the preference of historically-critically minded readers for centuries now, while the latter was the established preference for centuries before that. That there was and is merit in both approaches is part of the burden of this paper. The imaginative impetus to see the world through the lens provided by the book of Daniel may be provided by postcolonial insights or Christological insights (to give just two examples), and in each case may truly get at the heart of something that is really present in the text. The fact that our focal example has been an Old Testament text helpfully clarifies some key aspects of the interpretative interplay of categories. It is surely worth noting that the surface-level witness of the two testament canon of Christian scripture provides evidence that the originating categories that generated what is now an Old Testament text are both indispensable for good understanding, and at least sometimes inviting further conceptual articulation for the purposes of Christian theology.

Is it worth noting, finally, that head-on engagement with questions of history, while it has served to lay bare the data with which the interpreter has to work, is systematically unequipped to offer explanations as to *why* Daniel does what it does with historical information? Here one requires analogical imaginative explorations of paradigms that offer a different perspective. In the end the success of the book in effecting a written act of resistance that challenges the empire's account of history requires us to work at drawing out its alternative report by way of imaginative recontextualization.

Such recontextualization takes the form of reading that is theologically alert and theologically informed and informing, but it is not theological as an alternative to the deployment of the full range of critical interpretative approaches that lie close at hand. I offer the wager that the results of this test-case would be borne out by further adventures in ascriptive realism: a reading of scripture that is a single practice – irreducibly historical, irreducibly theological, and beholden to informed imaginative enquiry from a range of sub-disciplinary perspectives.