

# THE "WISE COURTIER" IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

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Certain plot lines seem to repeat themselves in the Bible, which scholars have identified as a literary technique called the type-scene. A type-scene is "a series of recurrent narrative episodes attached to the careers of biblical heroes . . . that are dependent on the manipulation of a fixed constellation of predetermined motifs."<sup>1</sup> Various examples of this have been identified in the Bible, for example, the story of a foreigner meeting his future wife at a well (Abraham's servant acting on behalf of Isaac, Jacob, and Moses). This does not imply that the story is fictitious; only that certain details were emphasized in order to make the story fit into a particular plot line. The reader is meant to notice this as being written in the style of a type-scene and to take note of the significant parallels and differences between the episodes.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes a type-scene includes so many plot elements that entire chapters in the Bible resemble one another. In this article we will present the type-scene found in the Joseph narrative (particularly Gen. 41) and repeatedly in the Book of Daniel, and note its use in rabbinic literature, especially in the rabbinic interpretations of the Book of Esther. This would indicate that the rabbis were well aware of this type-scene and used it as a guide for their own midrashic additions.

The parallels in the stories of Joseph and Daniel have long been noted in both traditional commentaries and academic scholarship. The basic plot line is called either a "court tale", "court contest" or "wise courtier" type. This story is found in literature throughout the world. The basic elements include a person of low stature as the hero, he is falsely imprisoned, then solves a puzzle posed by a person of high stature (e.g. a king) and is rewarded.<sup>3</sup> Certain theological elements are particular to the biblical narratives, such as the hero having the divine spirit rather than drawing on his own wits.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the Bible seems to use this plot line specifically in narratives describing success in the Diaspora. It has been suggested that it was considered particularly important to stress Jewish wisdom and statecraft during periods of foreign

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domination in order to strengthen the sense of worth and ethnic pride of the Jewish people.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the basic "wise courtier" elements, there are many points of similarity between the Joseph and Daniel narratives:

1. The hero is taken into captivity.
2. The hero is good-looking (Gen. 39:6; Dan. 1:4).
3. The hero successfully faces a test of faith in the foreign land (Joseph with Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39:7-12, Daniel with the king's food in Daniel 1:8-16).
4. A cryptic message is given to the king.
5. This message poses danger to the king or kingdom.
6. The king is agitated (Gen. 41:8, Dan. 2:1, 4:2, 5:6).
7. Inability of the king and his court to interpret the cryptic message (Gen. 41:8, Dan. 2:1-11, 4:4-7, 5:5-9).
8. The hero has someone at court who presents him to the king (the cup-bearer in Genesis 41:9-13, Arioch in Daniel 2:25, the queen in Daniel 5:10-12).
9. The hero has the divine spirit (Gen. 41:38; Dan. 4:6, 5:11).
10. The hero interprets the cryptic message.
11. The hero states that the interpretation of dreams rests with God (Gen. 40:8; Dan. 2:28).
12. God makes known what will come to pass (Gen. 41:25; Dan. 2:28, 4:21-22, 5:28).
13. The hero is decorated with a chain around his neck (Gen. 41:42; Dan. 5:29).
14. The hero is promoted/rewarded by the king (Gen. 41:39-45, Dan. 2:48, 5:29).

Particulars of each episode vary. Pharaoh has two dreams in one night, one of cows and one of ears of grain; Nebuchadnezzar has his dreams one at a time, a giant idol and later a tree; and with Belshazzar the cryptic message is not a dream at all, but mysterious writing on the wall. Furthermore, not every version of the type-scene contains all of the expected elements. In Daniel there is an additional element, where the king explicitly praises God at the end (Dan. 2:47, 4:34), which does not appear in the Joseph narrative. Still, the basic plot elements are there in each variant of this story, making it re-

cognizable as a Biblical "wise courtier" story. Because of this the reader has certain expectations as to what will appear in the story.

These parallels set the stage for commentators throughout history to make connections and comparisons between the Joseph and Daniel narratives. For example, *Midrash Tanhuma* (*Miketz* 2) compares the agitation felt by Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar after their respective dreams. Since the word used to describe the agitation of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2:1 *va-titpa'em ruho*) is almost the same as that used for Pharaoh (Gen. 41:8 *va-tippa'em ruho*) except for one additional letter, we learn that Nebuchadnezzar was more agitated than Pharaoh, since he could not even remember his dream. This was elaborated by Tosafot and Rosh in their interpretations of the Joseph and Daniel narratives.<sup>6</sup> Once the narratives were understood to be similar, even fanciful connections were made, such as finding the numerical value of Daniel hidden in the Joseph story.<sup>7</sup>

The rabbis of the Talmud went a step beyond simply comparing the two similar tales of Joseph and Daniel. Plot similarities between the narratives of Esther and Joseph (a Jew rises to a high position in a foreign court and then helps his family/people) and Esther and Daniel (a Jewish courtier rises to a high position in a foreign court despite religious/ethnic obstacles), as well as many linguistic parallels, have long been noted.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond these similarities, elements of the "wise courtier" type-scene can be found in the book of Esther, with the heroic role divided between Esther and Mordecai.<sup>9</sup> Here, too, we have heroes who were taken into captivity (Mordecai in Est. 2:6, Esther herself in Est. 2:8) and good-looking (Est. 2:9). By the end of the story both heroes are promoted by the king (Esther in 2:17, Mordecai in 8:1, 10:3). The reader now expects that the happy end of the story and ultimate promotion of the heroes will come about through an interpretation of the king's dream, as in the Joseph and Daniel narratives. In Esther we have a twist, the king's sleep is disturbed, as we expected (Est. 6:1), but instead of having a dream he asks to have the book of records read to him. Can this lead to the expected promotion? Of course it does, and our hero gets the expected promotion, but with the additional irony of Haman being "hoist with his own petard." Still, one major element of the story is missing, the hero interpreting a cryptic message that poses a danger to the king.

Having recognized on some level the "wise courtier" type-scene as a kind of script for the tale of a heroic Jew in a foreign court rising to power, the rabbis added the elements of this type-scene to the places where they noticed that they were missing. The Talmud (TB *Megillah* 13b) states that only Mordecai understood Bigthan and Teresh, who conversed in their native Tarsian when plotting against the king. As a member of the Sanhedrin, Mordecai was fluent in seventy languages, which enabled him to foil the plot by denouncing the two conspirators to the authorities. The rabbis added a few "missing" elements to the narrative in Esther: the cryptic message telling of future disaster for the king (engineered by the Tarsian plotters), the inability of others to interpret this message (because they could not understand Tarsian), and the hero's ability to do so. When does this episode come into play in the narrative? It is inserted exactly where it belongs, when the king's sleep is disturbed, just where we find these elements in the Joseph and Daniel narratives.

The irony of this part of the Esther story is enhanced when we note that generally after the king is agitated, there is someone who presents the hero to the king to resolve the crisis, followed by the king rewarding the hero once the crisis is averted. After the rabbis inserted the 'hero solving the problem' elements after the king's night-time agitation there is a clear emphasis on the fact that in Esther it is Haman, the villain, who unknowingly provides the reward for the hero, Mordecai, by suggesting it to the king. This becomes even more ironic when we note that these narratives usually include a court personality sympathetic to the hero, one who facilitates the hero's introduction to the king and his subsequent promotion (the cup-bearer in Gen. 41:9-13, Arioch in Dan. 2:25, the queen in Dan. 5:10-12).<sup>10</sup> In the case of Mordecai, however, it is Haman who serves as this facilitator! Note also that Esther is befriended by Hegai, the king's chamberlain, who helps her to find favor with the king and thus receive her own promotion to queen (Est. 2:15-17).<sup>11</sup>

In Esther we also find the element of a hero undergoing a test of his faith when Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman (Est. 3:2-4). This is emphasized as a true test of faith by the rabbis, who explained that Haman wore an idol so that anyone who bowed to him was actually bowing down to an idol (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 50) or that Haman viewed himself as a god (*Sanhedrin* 61b). Where did Esther herself face such a test? This element was added

by the rabbis, who explained that Esther, like Daniel, rejected food served in the king's palace and ate only seeds (*Megillah* 13a).<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to note that the rabbis of the Talmud were so familiar with this type-scene that they cast their own narratives as "wise courtier" tales, as in the story of Rabbi Bana'ah (*Bava Batra* 58a). This hero had determined who was the rightful heir (and only legitimate son) of a Jew who had passed away.<sup>13</sup> The disgruntled illegitimate sons contrived to have Rabbi Bana'ah arrested:

They then went and slandered him before the king, saying: 'There is a man among the Jews who extorts money from people without witnesses or anything else.' So they took him and threw him in prison. His wife came [to the court] and said: 'I had a slave, and some men cut off his head, skinned him, ate the flesh, filled the skin with water and gave students to drink from it. They have paid me neither its price nor its hire.' The court did not know what to make of her tale, so they said: 'Let us fetch the wise man of the Jews and he will tell us.' So they called R. Bana'ah, and he said to them: 'She means a goat-skin bottle (it means she had a goat: they stole it from her, killed it, consumed the meat, and from the skin they made a leather bag for water to drink from).' They said: 'Since he is so wise, let him sit in the gate and act as judge.'<sup>14</sup>

The familiar plot elements include the hero taken into captivity, interpreting a cryptic message and getting promoted. It would seem that this story is in fact a meta-"wise courtier tale" as R. Bana'ah's wife purposely formulates a cryptic message in order to rescue her husband. It is as if she herself was familiar with the Joseph and Daniel plot lines and knew that this would be a surefire way to free her husband from prison and possibly have him promoted as well!

We have seen that the "wise courtier" plot, identified by researchers in modern times, was in fact recognized on some level by the rabbis of the Talmud. One of the functions of rabbinic *midrash* is to fill in perceived gaps in the biblical narrative.<sup>15</sup> Here the rabbis used aggadic exegesis to add in the expected elements that they noticed were missing in the Esther narrative to make it fit more closely into the biblical "wise courtier" type-scene.

## NOTES

1. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) p. 51.
2. For a full treatment of the well/betrothal type-scene, see Alter pp.51-61.
3. See Shemuel Ha-Kohen and Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra - Daniel* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994) pp. 19-20, 56. Louis Hartman and Alexander DiLella, *The Anchor Bible – The Book of Daniel* (New York: Doubleday, 1977) pp. 55-56. L. M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). Wills is summarized in the introduction to *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, pp. xxiv-xxv. See also Matthias Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4 (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism)* (Brill Academic Publishers, 1999) pp. 11-13; Richard D. Patterson, "Holding on to Daniel's Court Tales", *JETS* 36/4 (December 1993) pp. 445-454. In these sources one can find many examples of court tales from non-Biblical literature, the most well-known being the Aramaic story of Ahikar. Susan Niditch and Robert Duran trace this type-scene to the "Clever Acts and Words" folklore type, categorized in folklore studies as type 922: see their article "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 96, 2 (June 1977) pp. 179-193.
4. Niditch and Duran, p. 187.
5. Wills, p.68.
6. *Hadar Zekenim* (Jerusalem: Makhon le-Hafatzat Perushei Ba'alei ha-Tosafot al ha-Torah) pp. 100-103. See also *Pa'aneah Raza* (Israel: Makhon Torat ha-Rishonim, 1998) p. 180, Gen. 41:8.
7. Rabbenu Yoel, *Sefer ha-Remazim* (New York: Julius Klugmann and Sons, 2001) p. 139, Gen. 41:39.
8. Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001) pp.xxxvii, xl.
9. *The Anchor Bible – The Book of Daniel*, pp. 57, 58.
10. See Patterson p. 449.
11. See Patterson p. 450, note 24.
12. R. Mordekhai Jaffe (1530-1612), in his halakhic work *Levush* (695:1), makes the further connection that it was in fact Daniel who supplied Esther with the seeds, since the Talmud (*Megillah* 15a) identifies Hathach, who was in charge of the harem, with Daniel. In *Otzar Minhagei Yeshurun* by Rabbi A.L. Hirshovitz (Pittsburgh: Moinester Printing, 1918) p. 126, we recall Esther eating only seeds in the palace by having poppy seeds as the customary filling for *hamen-tashen*.
13. That part of the story is itself a parallel to Solomon's judgment I Kgs 3:16-27.
14. Based on the Soncino translation by Maurice Simon.
15. Thus we find midrashim dealing with the daily life of Noah on the ark, the childhood of Abraham, etc.