

## IMAGE AND DEGRADATION AS A PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY IN DANIEL 2

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### **Abstract**

Various interpretations were proffered for Nebuchadnezzar's dream of Daniel 2. The discussion has revolved around the possible historical kingdoms and their succession, but not enough attention has been paid to the statue itself and its unusual composition of metals. In this interdisciplinary article, I propose that the statue of Daniel 2 reflects a philosophy of history, revealing the moral degradation of humanity. Using some philosophical reflections of Emmanuel Levinas as a springboard, I focus on three aspects of the text. First, I explore the literary features and the key ideas of Daniel 2. Second, I underline the unusual choice of metals of the image as well as their obvious decline, indicative of the moral degradation of humanity in history. Finally, I analyze the motif of hubris and the anthropological vocabulary, pointing to the precise development of degradation in the remainder of the Book of Daniel.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of history, Book of Daniel, image, degradation, moral knowledge

Among the innumerable interpretations on Daniel 2 and its longer philosophical and theological traditions focused on the meaning of the dream and especially on its possible historical ap-

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plications,<sup>1</sup> one aspect almost completely neglected is the study of the image itself and its unusual metallic configuration. Composed by five materials (gold, silver, bronze, iron, and iron mixed with clay), which degrade in value from top to bottom (head to toe), history is illustrated as a great idol or icon establishing some intrinsic bond between the statue and human history. At this point, it is possible to ask the following: What kind of image is it? Is it possible to find the fundamental reason of this *iconological* representation of history? And, is there a deeper theological meaning in this image and its metallic degradation? These are some of the questions that emerge from the dream of the Babylonian king. A suggestive hint is given by Carol Newsom:

The author speaks about two intersecting symbolic schemata: the parts of the human body and a series of metals. While the image of the body suggests totality, the sequence that moves from head to foot is a symbolic movement from the most to the least noble parts of the body. Similarly, the metals are allocated in a sequence that moves from the most noble to the least, with the feet described as partly of a base, nonmetallic material: terracotta. In some sense a value judgment is made by means of the image itself, though in the interpretation the emphasis is not as much on the declining scale per se as on the contrasts between the first and fourth elements. In particular, the mixture of iron and pottery suggests an inherent incompatibility or instability.<sup>2</sup>

Newsom's argument is attentive and precise, thinking about the complete statue, its design, and its possible meanings *before* any historical and theological interpretation. The importance of these ideas is that the author opens the possibility to interpret the image

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols. (Washington: Review & Herald, 1946–54) and from a critical perspective, Rüdiger Schmitt, *Nebukadnezars Traum von den vier Weltreichen und die Auslegung des Danielbuches in der "Fürstepredigt" Thomas Müntzers* (Mühlhausen: Beltz, 2015), and Andrew Perrin and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, eds., *Four Kingdom Motifs before and beyond the Book of Daniel* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Carol Newsom, *Daniel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 75.

as a *value judgment*; in this case, something coming from the image itself and its curious metallic configuration.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, it is claimed that the image of the dream in Dan 2 can be interpreted as a philosophy of history which reveals the moral degradation of humanity. Taking into account some initial philosophical statements of Emmanuel Levinas, this research purposes to analyze three aspects: (a) the literary features of Dan 2 and some of its key ideas; (b) the unusual use of metals in the image and its evident degradation as an interpretation of the moral degradation of humanity in history; and (c) the motifs of hubris and the anthropological vocabulary as precise developments of degradation in the rest of the Book of Daniel. The purpose of this research is to understand the global meaning of the image of Dan 2 and its construction of a philosophy of history. The provisional thesis is that the iconic representation unveils a deep sense about the moral degradation of humanity by employing the image of an idol as the reflection of its own moral self. Finally, we return briefly to Levinas to formulate some conclusions in the light of my results.

#### EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

The philosophy of history in the West has been one of relativization of all its values. This has been the Model of the West. The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas affirms this thesis by two intriguing reasons. First, it is possible to detect a different understanding of history and of human values from a biblical perspective:

Admittedly, the true values are also changing; but they are not falling in value: the principle of their change is one of elevation.

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<sup>3</sup> An implicit comprehension in this direction is expressed by Joyce Baldwin, *Daniel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 54: "Far from evolving towards an Utopia, human kingdoms were declining in value (chapter 2) and becoming more beastly (chapter 7)." Thanks to Hector Urrutia for this important reference.

The principle of the permanence of the values in succession is their elevation. It is a rule of conduct symbolized by rituals.... A table of marble, a table of gold and a table of gold. It is a rule of teaching: never vulgarize what has been raised, always exalt it, always draw what can be sublimated from an ageing value.<sup>4</sup>

This interpretation raises the following implications for him:

The pedagogical recommendation supposes an axiology of true values and of a holy history. The elevation is the proper signification of a value's duration. A duration which never wears out, a duration which is an opening out. Higher and higher, irreversibly. Is this not an interpretation of profound temporality, or of the very diachrony of time? The striving of the holy towards the holier, the "more" already working at the heart of the "less." A structure of valuing which is very different from that which we give to valuing in our daily existence, and in our daily or non-daily philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

The originality of this interpretation is due to its author who formulates it analyzing a ritual text of the Torah (Exod 25:25–30) and discovering an alternative perspective from Judaism and not from the paradigmatic Greek philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the second reason is in a postulate that the origin of Western philosophy would be directly related to idolatry. After the concept of transcendence is defined,<sup>7</sup> Levinas vividly describes this movement in the following way:

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<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Model of West," in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Reading and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Levinas, "Model of West," 21.

<sup>6</sup> For the relationship between the Jewish thought and the Greek philosophy in Levinas's work, see Ephraim Meir, *Levinas's Jewish Thought between Jerusalem and Athens* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence, Idolatry, and Secularization," in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 163: "Transcendence signifies a movement of traversing (*trans*) and a movement of ascending (*scando*). In this sense, it signifies a double effort of stepping across an interval by elevation or a change of level. Before any metaphor, the word is therefore to be thought in its sense of a change of site."

Raising itself toward the sky, the gaze thus encounters the un-touchable: the sacred (the untouchable is the name of an impossibility before being that of a taboo.) The distance thus traversed by the gaze is transcendence. The gaze is not a climbing but a deference. In this way, it is wonder and worship. There is an astonishment before the extraordinary rupture that is height or elevation within a space closed to movement. Height thus takes on the dignity of the superior and becomes divine. From this spatial transcendence, crossed by vision, idolatry is born.<sup>8</sup>

Thinking in the Greek origins of Western philosophy with the name of Aristotle as one of its central precursors,<sup>9</sup> Levinas asks, "Is not the knowledge of the West, consequently, the secularization of idolatry? In the extraordinary rupture of transcendence that is idolatry, the repose of the earth under the vault of the sky prefigures the reign of the Same."<sup>10</sup> In the end, Levinas concludes that in

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<sup>8</sup> Levinas, "Transcendence, Idolatry, and Secularization," 163–64. Here, the different use of the concept of "elevation" is observed. According to Levinas's first statement, the nature of moral values drives it in history (by the Torah) and in the second statement, the elevation is of anthropocentric character.

<sup>9</sup> In an extensive quote, Levinas points out, "Aristotle interpreted 'the wonder that things might be what they are' as the recognition of ignorance by itself, and thus as the origin of philosophy, thereby making knowledge [*savoir*] proceed from the love of knowledge [*savoir*]. In so doing, he denies to knowledge any origin in the practical difficulties of life, in the difficulties of commerce between men who do not manage to communicate with one another. The origin of knowledge is not in need but in knowledge itself. Yet, in the wonder or astonishment it provokes, in the idolatry of its wonderment, is the reign of astronomical repose not an ignorance that would know itself as an anticipation of knowledge and as some beginning of rationalism? Is not this religion prior to any sermon older than every history and like the secret of the intelligibility of the Same?" (Levinas, "Transcendence, Idolatry, and Secularization," 164).

<sup>10</sup> Levinas, "Transcendence, Idolatry, and Secularization," 164. This critical posture goes through all Levinas's work. Basically, *the reign of the Same* is a phrase referring to the mental process to bring into concepts (conceptualization) the reality and reduction (violently) of the Other (any human being) into ideas or preconceived concepts. The final result of this movement is the ontology of the *Same*. It would be useful to read the first part of his book. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991). In addition, see the book of James R. Mensch, *Levinas's Existential Analytic: A Commentary on*

Western philosophy, this comprehension of knowledge as idolatry is secularized as ontology. Despite the density of the philosophical argumentation, the two reasons are finely crafted.

In the first statement, the Jewish philosopher extracts some ideas coming from the ancient Hebrew tabernacle and its phenomenon of grades of holiness (material and technological),<sup>11</sup> which with acute perception he collects for thinking the philosophy of history (Model of the West) through the concepts of permanence, and elevation or decline of moral values in history.<sup>12</sup> And on the other hand, in a more complex statement, Levinas interprets the origins of philosophy as idolatry and the secularization of it in the West. Here, he echoes the prophetic tradition with its vehement criticism against idolatry. In both statements, Levinas uses the HB as an estimated source of the most serious philosophical reflection.

## LITERARY FEATURES OF DANIEL 2

In Dan 2, the concern of the complete narrative moves around future time or **בְּאַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים**, “in the end of the days” (cf. vv. 28, 29, 45). To Nebuchadnezzar was revealed a dream of a colossal anthropomorphic statue which, according to Daniel’s interpretation, represented the history of universal kingdoms. For the purpose of the

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*Totality and Infinity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into the Character of Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985) and Philip P. Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World*, JSOTSup (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> About the complex philosophical reasoning of Levinas from the biblical and talmudic texts, he affirmed, “The chief goal of our exegesis is to extricate the universal intentions from the apparent particularism within which facts tied the national history of Israel, improperly so-called, enclose us.... Our approach assumes that the different periods of history can communicate around thinkable meanings, whatever the variations in the signifying material which suggest them.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 4.

present article, some of the literary remarks on Dan 2 can be summarized as follows:

1. Being the second longest chapter of the book of Daniel, it is written in Aramaic and has only three verses in Hebrew (historical introduction). From a literary point of view, the language switch suggests the change of audience and possibly a focus on themes related to the Babylonian empire (chs. 1–5).<sup>13</sup>
2. There are some *leitwort* throughout the entire chapter. The first one and more evident is חלום, “dream”—a motif with which the narrative begins. Often, it is connected to other two elements: פִּשְׁר, “interpretation,” and זְמַנְ/עֲרֵנִיא, “time.”<sup>14</sup> An interesting detail in Dan 2 is the word for dream that is used both in Hebrew and Aramaic, probably with the intention to connect it with its prominent use in the rest of the book. The concern for interpreting one dream is a motif that reappears permanently in the book with different nuances. On the one hand, Daniel is unique, being able to make this work and, on

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<sup>13</sup> “The curious overlap of the Aramaic (chaps. 2–7) with the literary division of the book into third-person narratives about Daniel’s visions and his companions (chaps. 1–6) and first-person accounts of Daniel’s vision (chaps. 7–12) suggest that the language switch is rhetorical and literary rather than motivated by different sources.” John Cook, *Aramaic Ezra and Daniel: A Handbook on the Aramaic Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 113. Cf. Bill T. Arnold, “The Use of Aramaic in the Hebrew Bible: Another Look at Bilingualism in Ezra and Daniel,” *JNSL* 22 (1996): 1–16.

<sup>14</sup> There is a wordplay using the words for time in Dan 2: in the intentional delay by the religious specialist (2:9); in the time required by Daniel to find the interpretation (2:16); in the proclamation of God’s sovereignty to change times and seasons (2:21); and finally, in the teleological orientation of history (2:28, 29, 45). For a complete analysis, see Gerhard Pfandl, “The Latter Days and the Time of the End in the Book of Daniel” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1990). Segal, who regards the different temporal numerals in Daniel, affirms, “The temporal references to these events are spread out throughout the four apocalypses found in the second half of the book (7:25; 8:13–14; 9:27; 12:7, 11–12), and their presence in all of these passages emphasizes the importance of the chronological aspect within the apocalyptic worldview of the authors of Daniel.” Michael Segal, “Calculating the End: Inner-Danielic Chronological Developments,” *VT* 68 (2018): 272–73.

the other hand, are the Babylonian specialists<sup>15</sup> who are unable to interpret the king's dreams (chs. 2, 4, 5 [wall inscription]). As pointed out by Michael Segal,

This contrast is intended to demonstrate the superiority of divinely inspired knowledge over and above the extensive educational training of Mesopotamian scribes and scholars in Antiquity.... These two court tales therefore make a fundamental epistemological claim regarding the ultimate source of knowledge, championing the divine bestowal of wisdom upon those who are faithful, and simultaneously undermining the validity and stature of the Mesopotamian mantic training and techniques, and their practitioners.<sup>16</sup>

Here also, the concept of *mystery* (47 ,27 ,19 ,2:18; הַסֵּתֶר) reinforces more the power of Israel's God over the Babylonian gods for revealing the accounts of the future.<sup>17</sup>

3. The idea of time is one of the central topics in the chapter. As mentioned in the previous point, it is presented at least by two perspectives: general statement on future time and by the technical expression, "in the end of the days." The emphasis place on the idea of the end of history is supported by the terminology describing the succession of empires (וְאַחֲרָיִךְ, "and after you"), as well as on the interpretation of the image and its metals and culminating with the establishment of the kingdom of God. In addition, the use of ordinal numbers together with verbs expressing a sequence by the use of the stem Peal Imper-

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<sup>15</sup> Mesopotamian scholars or also called "cult operators" (*operati cultuali* in Italian) for being distinguished from priests (Christian). Paolo Xella, "Per una ricerca sugli operatori cultuali: Introduzione metodologica e tematica," in *Gli operatori cultuali: Atti del II Incontro di studio organizzato dal "Gruppo di contatto per lo studio delle religioni mediterranee" – Roma 10–11 maggio 2005*, ed. M. Rocchi, P. Xella, and J.Á. Zamora (Verona: Essedue, 2006), 3–8.

<sup>16</sup> M. Segal, "Rereading the Writing on the Wall (Daniel 5)," *ZAW* 125.1 (2013): 174.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Benjamin L. Gladd, *Revealing the Mysterion: The Use of Mystery in Daniel and Second Temple Judaism with Its Bearing on First Corinthians*, BZNB 160 (New York: de Gruyter, 2008).



fect 3fs (קום, “will arise”; שלט, “shall rule”; and הוה, “will be”) reinforces the idea of succession.

4. The central poem in Dan 2:20–23. Daniel’s proclamation of the power and wisdom of God in his prayer contains the rich statements that define the principal theological lines of the book. Daniel’s prayer describes the God of Israel, the unique one who gave the capacity necessary to interpret correctly the signs of the future. In ch. 1 is the first reference to this idea (1:17) which shares a linguistic affinity with the great poem:

וְהַיְלָדִים הָאֵלֶּה אַרְבַּעַתָּם נָתַן לָהֶם הָאֱלֹהִים מַדְעַ וְהַשְׂכָּל  
בְּכָל־סֵפֶר וְחֻקָּמָה וְדַנְיָאֵל הַבֵּן בְּכָל־חֻזוֹן וְחַלְמוֹת

As for these four young men, God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams (1:17).

וְהוּא מַהֲשֵׁנָא עֲדַנְיָא וְזַמְנֵיָא מַהֲעֲדָה מַלְכִין וּמַהֲקִים מַלְכִין יְהֵב  
חֻקְמָתָא לְחַכְמֵיָן וּמַנְדְּעָא לְיַדְעֵי בִינָה

And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to those who have understanding (2:21).

Wisdom is fundamental in these passages and in all the Book of Daniel as the divine hermeneutical competence given to the faithful people of God to interpret correctly the vicissitudes of history and, in particular, to grow in righteousness (moral self) and to resist political oppression. Each one of these literary features is presented in the Book of Daniel and can be summarized as follows:<sup>18</sup>

Daniel 2	חלום “dream”	פֶּשֶׁר “interpretation”	בְּאַחֲרֵית יוֹמֵיָא “in the end of the days”
Daniel 4	חלום “dream”	פֶּשֶׁר “interpretation”	שִׁבְעָה עֲדָנִין “seven times”

<sup>18</sup> For such reason, Dan 2 functions as a basic pattern for the entire book. The same happens with the phenomenon of degradation of metals as a moral degradation presented also in chs. 7, 8, and 11–12 (see the summary on pages 15–16).

Daniel 5	כתב "writing"	פֶּשֶׁר "interpretation"	בליליא "in that night"
Daniel 7	חלום "dream"	פֶּשֶׁר "interpretation" (by an angel)	עֵדֶן וְעֵדְנִין וּפְלֶג עֵדֶן "a time and times and half a time"
Daniel 8	חזון "vision"	פֶּשֶׁר "interpretation" (by an angel)	עֶרֶב בִּקְרָא אֲלֵפִים וּשְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת "Unto two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings" לְעֵת־קֵץ הַחֲזוֹן "time of the end"
Daniel 9	וְהִבֵּן בְּמֵרָאָה "and understand the vision" (ch. 8)	לְהִשְׁכִּיל׀ בִּינָה "skill to understand"	שִׁבְעִים שָׁבָעִים "seventy weeks"
Daniel 10–12	חזון "vision" (ch. 8)	בִּינָה "understanding"	בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים "in the latter days" עֵדֶן וְעֵדְנִין וּפְלֶג עֵדֶן "a time and times and half a time" יָמִים אֶלֶף מֵאוֹת וְתִשְׁעִים "a thousand two hundred and ninety days" לְיָמִים אֶלֶף שְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת שְׁלֹשִׁים וְחֲמִשָּׁה "thousand three hundred and five and thirty days"

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## IMAGE AND MORAL DEGRADATION IN DANIEL 2

When the focus is placed on the statue itself and its design and materials, some aspects seem to be clear while others are not. However, a close reading permits at least two important clues: the political power and the morality of the kingdoms. In the first case, Daniel's interpretation expresses explicitly that the image and its different metals represent kings and kingdoms (2:38–45). A superficial reading could conclude thus that the metals involve a meaning

associated symbolically with *perdurability* and *strength*. This last idea is already present in the reference to the four kingdoms (תְּקִיפָה כַּפְּרִזְלָא, “strong as iron”), underlining its power of destruction (וְכַפְּרִזְלָא דִּי-מִרְעַע כָּל-אֲלִין תִּדְק וְתִרְעַע, “and like iron that crushes, that kingdom will break in pieces and crush all the others”). The idea is repeated in vv. 41 and 42, now indicating the weakness of a kingdom (מִלְכּוּתָא תְּהוּהּ תְּקִיפָה וּמְנַה תְּהוּהּ תְּבִירָה, “the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly fragile”). The final destruction of the image by the rock confirms categorically that it will be God’s kingdom which לֹא תִתְחַבֵּל לְעַלְמִין דִּי, “shall never be destroyed” and וְהָיָא תְּקִימָא לְעַלְמִינָא, “it shall stand for ever.” Thus, in the first case, the symbolism of metals seems to imply the political power (strength or weakness), but more precisely applied to the exercise of power (government). In the second case, it views a moral dimension that requires more analysis as it is not visible on the surface of the text but only when considering the total picture of the statue itself and in dialogue with the entire Book of Daniel.

The head of gold is interpreted as representing Nebuchadnezzar, a unique idea in comparison with the other metals that represent kingdoms. Perhaps, as it will be seen later in the study of Dan 4 and 5, that the king and kingdom are inseparable from the perspective of the book. In other words, here there is a direct association between one metal and one singular human being. Thus, the symbolic representation of kings-kingdoms in Dan 2 seems to hide a sophisticated anthropological plot. The degradation of metals could be interpreted as a progressive moral degradation of humanity in history until the end,<sup>19</sup> a statement that will be developed widely in chs. 4 and 5.

Furthermore, to observe the poetic figures used for the final destruction of the statue at the end of the chapter, it shares an exten-

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<sup>19</sup> Andre LaCocque sees a similar pattern of degradation in Gen 4 and Zech 1–2. Andre LaCocque, *The Book of Daniel*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 68.

sive anthropological tradition in the HB with metaphors for the destiny of wicked humans being כְּעֵפֶר, “like the chaff” (of the summer threshing floors; cf. Pss 1:3–4; 35:5; Job 21:18; Isa 40:24; 41:15; Jer 13:24).<sup>20</sup> The metaphor specifically used here is the agricultural image of *winnowing*, emphasizing a complete eradication (לֹא־הָיָה־שָׂמָכָה לָהֶֿן, “no place was found for them”).<sup>21</sup> As an ironic contrast, this imagery seems to express who has the real power to judge and destroy mankind, not Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2:5).

### A GREAT IMAGE WHOSE SPLENDOR WAS EXCELLENT

When the analysis of the statue and its metals is made, the textual evidences from Dan 2 and the Ancient Near East suggest that the statue could be an idol.<sup>22</sup> There are some relevant aspects to sustain this interpretation. These are presented below.

#### *Use of Metals for Cult Statues in the Ancient Near East*

In addition to the information provided in Dan 2, it is pertinent to observe how different materials for the creation of cult statues in Mesopotamia and in the HB were used. The reading of the Book of Daniel, before any hypothetical reconstruction of its composition,<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “Chaff is something that is ephemeral, dead and worthless in contrast to something that is stable, flourishing and alive.” Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 495–96.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Nili Samet, “On Agricultural Imagery in Biblical Descriptions of Catastrophes,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 3.1 (2012): 2–14.

<sup>22</sup> See Pierre Keith, “Image culturelle et présence divine dans le livre de Daniel,” in *Représenter dieux et hommes dans le Proche-Orient ancien et dans la Bible: Actes du colloque organisé par le Collège de France, Paris, les 5 et 6 mai 2015*, ed. Thomas Römer, Hervé Gonzalez, and Lionel Marti (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 255–70.

<sup>23</sup> For this discussion, see the valuable study of Joshua A. Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism* (New York:

is a work that emerged in the context of a Neobabylonian environment where the divine world and particularly the plastic representation of its divinities was a prominent characteristic of its ancient culture.<sup>24</sup>

Gods in the ancient world were essential protagonists in the daily life. Every dimension of the culture was infused with the divine presence.<sup>25</sup> Particularly, divine images occupied a prominent place in the religious comprehension of the early cultures. The worship of deities in the form of cult statues was “one of the dominant aspects of Mesopotamian civilization.”<sup>26</sup> The cult statue was believed to mean the real presence of god on earth and, for them, the determinant element inside of a temple. A temple without an image of god really was not a temple.<sup>27</sup> Rituals and different ceremonies were part of, and performed around, an image of god, produced by religious specialists—ceremonies which, as such, were based also in myths and traditions. The creation of a cultic statue and, in particular, the selection of materials for that work

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Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Although skeptical, Karel van der Toorn recognizes that “the tales about Daniel preserve the atmosphere of the oriental court as it can be reconstructed from the letters of Assyrian and Babylonian scholars.” 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: Brill, 2001), 41.

<sup>25</sup> Angelika Berlejung, “Divine Presence for Everybody: Presence Theology in Everyday Life,” in *Divine Presence and Absence in Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaism*, ed. Nathan MacDonald and Isaak J. de Hulster (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 67–68; Karel van der Toorn, “Speaking of Gods: Dimensions of the Divine in the Ancient Near East,” in *Open-Mindedness in the Bible and Beyond: A Volume of Studies in Honour of Bob Becking*, ed. Marjo Korpel and Lester L. Grabbe (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 273–86.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Beaulieu, *The Pantheon of Uruk during the Neo-Babylonian Period*, CM 23 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Jack Sasson, “On the Use of Images in Israel and the Ancient Near East,” in *Sacred Time, Sacred Place: Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, ed. Barry M. Gittlen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 63–70.

was an elaborated process with different steps. Victor Hurowitz expresses it eloquently,

Manufacturing cult statues and ritual figurines was a complex endeavor involving such activities as deciding to make a statue, determining its form, selecting artisans, acquiring materials, forging the statue, ritually purifying and enlivening it, installing it as an object of worship in the temple or elsewhere, or using it in a ritual.<sup>28</sup>

Then, the importance of the materials for making a cult statue was not an irrelevant issue for ancient Mesopotamians. Diverse cuneiform texts depict in different instances the manufacturing of valuable metals and precious stones as part of this process.

The Mesopotamian texts, according to Hurowitz, “praise the high quality and divine origin, ownership, and nature of the materials used in cult statues.”<sup>29</sup> An excellent example is the letter of Mār-Issar to Esarhaddon on the implementation of certain metals for cult statues, waiting for certain metals (SAA 10, 349, lines 5–26):<sup>30</sup>

As to what the king, my lord, wrote to me: “Itti-Marduk-balātu of Uruk has written to me: ‘Gold has accumulated in the temples, and there is repair work to be done’”—formerly, before the king, my lord, went to [S]urmarrāte, the k[ing, my lord, as]ked me in Calah: “What work [on the gods] is [i]ncomplete?” I (then) informed the king, my lord, as follows:

“[The decoration of N]anaya is incomplete. Furthermore, (while) the face and the hand[s of U]šur]-amatsa have been overlaid with gold, the figure and [the feet] have not. She is [dr]essed with a

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<sup>28</sup> Victor A. Hurowitz, “What Goes in Is What Comes Out: Materials for Creating Cult Statues,” in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2006), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Victor A. Hurowitz, “What Can Go Wrong with an Idol?” in *Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond*, ed. Natalie Naomi May (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2012), 289.

<sup>30</sup> Hurowitz, “What Can Go Wrong,” 284.

la[maḥuššû]-robe and equipped with a golden tiara. The two golden [drago]ns are ready and they stand right and left [upon] her [pedestal].

I have sent her from Assyria to Uruk. Furthermore, the work [on Arka]yitu, Anunitu, and Palil [of the temple of] Mummu: the carpenter's and metalworker's work is [fin]ished, (but) they have not been overlaid with gold. We have given them silver, (but) they are still to get gold from me. After we have finished the work on Ušur-amatsa and on the temple of Mummu, and the temple is complete, then we shall make the decoration of Nanaya."

The artisans seem to work based on a certain conventional model of that time, and are aware of the materials that are indispensable (especially gold), without which the statue would be invalid. The prolific textual testimony from Mesopotamia presents a predilection for the wood of the *mesu*-tree for cult statues. This tree is, sometimes, called in Akkadian *sir ili*, "the flesh of the gods" although the *binu*-tree is designated as *esenti ili*, "bone of divinity."<sup>31</sup> The old Babylonian forerunner of the lexical series *hubullu* mentions *lamas* and *alans* of copper, silver, and gold.<sup>32</sup> The same materials are employed for the goddess Nanaya: copper; plated with silver; and overlaid with gold for the eyes, mouth, and arms.<sup>33</sup> It is important to point out today that there is almost a total absence of cult statues in archaeological remains from Mesopotamia, which "can hardly be a coincidence."<sup>34</sup> Obviously, the same situation results for any monumental statue as portrayed in Dan 2 or 3.

Finally, copper/bronze, iron, gold, and silver are the common

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<sup>31</sup> F. A. M. Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits: The Ritual Texts*, CM 1 (Groningen: Styx, 1992), 81.

<sup>32</sup> Hurowitz, "What Goes In," 7.

<sup>33</sup> Hurowitz, "What Goes In," 7.

<sup>34</sup> "It indicates, rather, that cult statues were not preserved" (Hurowitz, "What Goes In," 3). This, according to the author, is due to "their being made of costly materials taken as booty, or of perishable ingredients vulnerable to ravages of time and climate" (Hurowitz, "What Goes In," 3–4).

metals in ANE used to manufacture jewelry, ornaments, and other accessories; however, gold was “the most valuable metal in the biblical period.”<sup>35</sup> Gold as the most precious and valuable metal universally is recognized from immemorial times; thanks to the mythological traditions this metal had an important role in the divine community and was considered as *condition sine qua non* of sovereignty over the other gods and the entire cosmos.<sup>36</sup>

### *Use of Metals for Cult Statues in the Hebrew Bible*

In the HB, there is a long tradition on criticism of idolatry. The interesting issue is that it is frequently made by a diatribe against the metals of the statue to emphasize its inertia and incapacity.<sup>37</sup> Psalm 115:4–8 is one of the most representative texts of this tradition:

עֲצֵבֵיהֶם כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אָדָם:  
פִּה־לָהֶם וְלֹא יִדְבְּרוּ עֵינַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִרְאוּ:  
אָזְנַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אֶף לָהֶם וְלֹא יִרְיחוּן:  
יְדֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַמְיִשוּן רַגְלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יִהְלְכוּ לֹא־יִהְיוּ בְּגִרוֹנָם:  
כְּמוֹתָם יִהְיוּ עֲשִׂיהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר־בִּטְחַן בָּהֶם:

Their idols are silver and gold,  
The work of men’s hands.  
They have mouths, but they do not speak;  
Eyes they have, but they do not see;  
They have ears, but they do not hear;  
Noses they have, but they do not smell;

<sup>35</sup> Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 169.

<sup>36</sup> Gabriella S. Matthiae and Paolo Xella, “Il possesso dell’oro nelle tradizioni mitologiche del Vicino Oriente Antico,” in *Aurum: Funzioni e simbologie dell’oro nelle culture del Mediterraneo antico*, ed. Marisa Tortorelli Ghidini (Roma: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider, 2014), 53–61.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Elizabeth C. LaRocca-Pitts, “Of Wood and Stone”: *The Significance of Israelite Cultic Items in the Bible and Its Early Interpreters*, HSM 61 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001).



They have hands, but they do not handle;  
Feet they have, but they do not walk;  
Nor do they mutter through their throat.  
Those who make them are like them;  
So is everyone who trusts in them.

The psalm provides a strong theological criticism against those that make idols declaring implicitly their inertia: *like them* (כְּמוֹתָם (יְהִיוּ עֲשִׂיהֶם). They lose their vitality as human beings or more precisely, cease to be true humans.<sup>38</sup> The criticism is crucial because it is one of the few biblical statements giving a reason regarding the nature of idolatry and most importantly the degradation (moral and religious) that it causes in human beings.<sup>39</sup> Many biblical personages and accounts can be considered from the history of Israel that exemplify this degradation or moral decay due to idolatry.<sup>40</sup> This is a process of deterioration that is in consonance with the interpretation of the prophets<sup>41</sup> and with the Book of Daniel.

Additionally, another important point is that the destruction of the statue by a rock in Dan 2 alludes to the early Israelite practice

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Isa 6:9–10, where the same phraseology of inertia and incapacity of idols is applied to the Israelites. For a complete comparison of both texts and its implications, see G. K. Beale, *We Become Like What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 36–70.

<sup>39</sup> The moral and theological foundation for this idea is Gen 1:28–30 and Exod 20.

<sup>40</sup> Accounts like the worship of the golden calf (Exod 32) or the installation of calves in Bethel and Dan (1 Kgs 12) are foundational. And among the long list of biblical personages involved with idolatry, the cases of Solomon (1 Kgs 11) and Ahab are proverbial (1 Kgs 16:29–34). For the place of idolatry and some moral implications for the history of the ancient Israel, see Alison L. Joseph, *Portrait of the Kings: The Davidic Prototype in Deuteronomistic Poetics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Michael Dick, “Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Michael B. Dick (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 1–53; Pieter van der Lugt, “The Dynamics of the Incomparable God Highlighted by the Immobility of an Idol: The Rhetorical Integrity of Isa. 40:12–26, 41:1–7 and 46:1–13,” in *The Present State of Old Testament Studies in the Low Countries: A Collection of Old Testament Studies Published on the Occasion of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap*, ed. Klaas Sprong (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 159–79.

of the destruction of idols (Exod 23:24; 34:13; Lev 26:30; Num 33:52; Deut 7:5, 25; 12:2, 3, etc.), a practice also present in historical and prophetic literature (cf. 2 Kgs 23; Isa 27:9; Mic 1:7).<sup>42</sup>

### HUBRIS, DEGRADATION, AND MORALITY IN THE BOOK OF DANIEL

One of the relevant theological motifs in the Book of Daniel is *hubris*,<sup>43</sup> here applied to the human usurpation of the divine sphere. In the Book of Daniel, this concept reveals some anthropological and moral dimensions which portray the phenomenon of degradation in the narrative texts as shown below.

Among the ideas employed for this concept, two are its principal uses: desecration and self-magnification. On the one hand, it is observed from the introduction of the book (1:1–2), with Nebuchadnezzar's usurpation of the sacred vessels of the temple of Jerusalem placing these into his temple in Babylon.<sup>44</sup> This was an account unprecedented in the history of Israel and which have enormous repercussions in the Book of Daniel. Desecration happens again in the occasion of the fall of the Babylonian empire in ch. 5 and the desecration of the vessels; here, as an intensification of the rebel act, is the theological reason for the divine judgment.

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Allan Bornapé, "El problema del  $\text{זָבַח}$  en el Pentateuco y su dimension ritual," *DavarLogos* 4.1 (2005): 1–16; Lauren Shedletsky, *Josiah's Reform and the Dynamics of Defilement: Israelite Rites of the Violence and the Making of a Biblical Text* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Arie Versluis, *The Command to Exterminate the Canaanites: Deuteronomy 7*, *OtSt* 71 (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Following here, Donald E. Gowan, *When Man Becomes God: Humanism and Hybris in the Old Testament* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1975). Cf. John T. Strong, "Sitting on the Seat of God: A Study of Pride and Hubris in the Prophetic Corpus of the Hebrew Bible," *BR* 56 (2011): 55–81 and Ari Mermelstein, "Constructing Fear and Pride in the Book of Daniel: The Profile of a Second Temple Emotional Community," *JSJ* 46.4 (2015): 449–83.

<sup>44</sup> See my complete study on this issue, Allan Bornapé, "Profanación en historia y profecía: el motivo de los utensilios del templo de Jerusalén en Babilonia en el libro de Daniel," *DavarLogos* 16.1 (2017): 5–27.

The desecration of the sanctuary is the climax of the use of this concept in the book (8:9–14; cf. לִלְבָב in 11:31).

On the other hand, the action of self-magnification is more prominent in the book and the concept of desecration seems to be subsidiary to it. Following the proposal of Martin Pröbstle in Dan 8:9–14,<sup>45</sup> I observe a *hubris-fall* pattern not only in Dan 8 but also in chs. 4 and 5, and in certain sense, in chs. 2 and 3. This pattern emerges by the use of a keyword defined by Pröbstle as “words that contribute significantly to the understanding of the text’s structure and meaning.”<sup>46</sup>

In Dan 4, the concept of hubris finds its more elaborated development.<sup>47</sup> Similar in different points to Dan 2,<sup>48</sup> it also has the dream of Nebuchadnezzar and its interpretation by Daniel as its general themes. The narrative describes the fall of the king because of his pride (גָּבַר, “self-magnification,” 4:37),<sup>49</sup> transforming him into a beast and after seven years, he experienced a genuine repen-

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<sup>45</sup> Martin Pröbstle, “Truth and Terror: A Text-Oriented Analysis of Daniel 8:9–14” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2006), 510–16.

<sup>46</sup> Pröbstle, “Truth and Terror,” 510. For the author, it is not the same as leitwort but can be complementary concepts.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Klaus Koch, “Gottes Herrschaft über das Reich des Menschen: Daniel 4 im Licht neuer Funde,” in *The Book of Daniel in the Light of New Findings*, ed. A. S. van der Woude (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993), 77–120 and Newsom who named this section, “Hubris and Humiliation, Arrogance and Understanding” (Newsom, *Daniel*, 124–58).

<sup>48</sup> Other two significant similitudes are the divine judgment from heaven (stone in Dan 2, an angel in Dan 4) and the doxologies expressed by Nebuchadnezzar at the end of both chapters.

<sup>49</sup> Here, it is important to point out the mention of the expressions for height (גָּבַר, 4:7, 8, 17; MT), together with words for שָׁמַיִם, “heaven,” describing both the glory of the king and, also, as a reverse, of his arrogance and judgment. Through the poetic technique of wordplay, the author contrasts, intentionally, the human and divine spheres, and recurring also the language of creation. In other words, the author makes a “contrast between gods of earthly material and the spiritual God Creator.” James Montgomery, *Daniel: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), 261.

tance and restoration.<sup>50</sup> It is suggested that among the symbolism of the dream and the incredible experience of the king as an animal, Nebuchadnezzar's repentance evokes a precise anthropological vocabulary for expressing his moral transformation:<sup>51</sup>

לִבְבֵהּ מִן־אָנוּשָׁא וְשִׁנוֹן וְלִבָּב חַיָּוָה יִתְּיָהֵב לָהּ

Let his heart be changed from that of a man, let him be given the heart of a beast (4:16; MT 4:13).

וְחָטְיָךְ בְּצַדִּיקָה פָּרַק וְעוֹנֵיֶיךָ בְּמַחֲן עֲנִין

Break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor (4:27; MT 4:24).

וְלִקְצֵת יוֹמֵיהָ אָנָּה נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר עֵינַי לְשָׁמַיָּא נִטְלָת וּמִנְדָּעֵי עָלַי  
יִתּוֹב

And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me (4:34; MT 4:31).

The personal transformation of Nebuchadnezzar however has direct implications for all the Babylonian empire. This collective dimension is supported by phrases like *שְׁלִיט עָלֵיא בְּמַלְכוּת אָנוּשָׁא*, “the Most High rules in the kingdom of men” (4:17, 25, 32), and the comparison with the first beast of ch. 7 which also represents Babylon. The king and kingdom are in view in the Book of Daniel as one entity, not separate.

In Dan 5, King Belshazzar organized a great banquet and desecrated the holy vessels of the Jerusalem temple by drinking from them. In that story, there are two instructive aspects: in Dan 5:2–4, it mentions the act of desecration connected to idolatry, and Daniel summarizes all the accounts of desecration implied in the king's actions which were out of *hubris*, making it the theological reason

<sup>50</sup> “Nebuchadnezzar's suffering is not merely educative but also transformative.” Newsom, *Daniel*, 148.

<sup>51</sup> Previous to his transformation, the king's government was described by the language of creation (as Adam) similar to Dan 2. It can be said that the description suggests surreptitiously at least the idea of the image of God (here as a contrast with the idol of history).

of his falling by referring to the example of Nebuchadnezzar in the previous chapter—ch. 4. See the verses below:

וְאַנְתָּה בְּרַחֵם בְּלִשְׁאֲצַר לֹא הִשְׁפַּלְתָּ לְבָבְךָ כְּלִקְבֵּל דֵּי כָל־דְּנָה  
 יִדְעַת  
 וְעַל מְרֵא־שְׁמֵיָא הַתְּרוֹמְמַת וְלִמְאֲנֵיָא דִּי־בֵיתָהּ הִיתִיו קְדָמֶיךָ  
 וְאַנְתָּה וּרְבָרְבָנְךָ שְׁגַלְתְּךָ וְלִחְנַתְךָ חֲמֵרָא שְׁתִּין בְּהוּן וְלֹא־לְהִי  
 כְּסָפָא־וְדִהָבָא נְחֹשֶׁא פְּרוֹזָא אַעֲא וְאַבְנָא דִּי לֹא־חֲזוּן  
 וְלֹא־שְׁמַעִין וְלֹא יִדְעִין שְׂבַחְתָּ וְלֹא־לְהָא דִּי־נִשְׁמַתְךָ בִּידֵהּ  
 וְכָל־אַרְחֻתְךָ לָהּ לֹא הִדְרַתְךָ

But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this. And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified (Dan 5:22–23).

Literarily, both verses are connected, and the most important point is that they describe the Babylonian idols, mentioning the same metals and order that are present in the statue of Dan 2. With the unique difference that the last material is wood and stone instead of clay. William Shea notices a subtle but important detail from the two enumerations of the metals in 5:4 and 5:23: in the second one, the order changes (silver now occupying the first place instead of gold), being an indicator of the fall of Babylon (gold) and the coming of the new kingdom, Media-Persia (silver).<sup>52</sup> Hardly is this literary arrangement incidental. It implies a relationship of the statue of Dan 2 with idolatry and, at the same time, with some anthropological and moral dimensions (לֹא הִשְׁפַּלְתָּ לְבָבְךָ, “have not

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<sup>52</sup> William Shea, “Further Literary Structures in Daniel 2–7: An Analysis of Daniel 5, and the Broader Relationships within Chapters 2–7,” *AUSS* 23 (1985): 281–84. Moreover, Shea notices that in both lists only for the gold and silver is employed the waw conjunctive, presenting it as a pair of words together. This phenomenon makes the change of order more unusual.

humbled your heart”). The anthropological vocabulary used here (כֹּחַ), which is strategically implemented in the Book of Daniel (cf. Dan 1:8; 4:16; 5:23; 7:4; 11:12, 27–28, 36–37),<sup>53</sup> emphasizes the moral dimension of the king’s decision. In addition, the language of creation is the background of the verse<sup>54</sup> and, more specifically, is an allusion to the deconstruction of idolatry in Ps 115 (cf. Deut 4:28; Ps 135:5).<sup>55</sup> Then, one can see the motifs of hubris, degradation, and morality in the Book of Daniel, as follows:<sup>56</sup>

Chapter	Hubris	Degradation	Morality
Daniel 2	Statue/Idol	Metals: strength and value	Moral decay and the establishment of God’s kingdom
Daniel 4	Self-magnification	King as a beast	Repentance and transformation
Daniel 5	Self-magnification	Desecration of sacred vessels	Condemnation and divine judgment

<sup>53</sup> The use of כֹּחַ in the Book of Daniel appears in the contexts of moral decision (Dan 1:8), as well as moral transformation (Dan 4) and intellectual understanding (10:12). For heart and its varied uses in the HB, see Hans W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 40–58; Thomas Krüger, “Das ‘Herz’ in der alttestamentlichen Anthropologie,” in *Anthropologische Aufbrüche: Alttestamentliche und interdisziplinäre Zugänge zur historischen Anthropologie*, ed. Andreas Wagner (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 91–106; and Bernd Janowski, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments: Grundfragen–Kontexte–Themenfelder* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 148–57.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Jacques Doukhan, “Allusions a la creation dans le Livre de Daniel,” in Woude, *The Book of Daniel*, 285–92.

<sup>55</sup> For Yael Avrahami, these verses are fundamental sources for any discussion of the senses in the HB, all connected with the topic of idolatry. Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 67–69.

<sup>56</sup> A similar pattern of moral degradation can be observed in chs. 7, 8, and 11–12 which, for limits of space, is not possible to develop here. For more details, see David Bryan, *Cosmos, Chaos and the Kosher Mentality* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1995), in particular his chapter, “Daniel 7: Read in the Light of the Kosher Mentality,” 213–48.

## SOME PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

To return to the thesis of Levinas, there are at least three philosophical inferences that we can make:

1. The interpretation of the statue in Dan 2 as a historical process of moral degradation finds support in the narrative itself and in the rest of the Book of Daniel. This topic seems to model the complete structure of the thought of the book. The representation of history as a great *icon* is an implicit theological radiography of the moral condition of the human kingdoms and their progressive acts of violence, hubris, and *animality* (Dan 7).<sup>57</sup> The statue is a faithful reflection of the idolatrous nature of mankind and its moral decay. From the perspective of the Book of Daniel, only the Son of Man will bring the kingdom of God and the enduring righteousness.
2. The idol in Dan 2 and its metallic degradation seem to be an ironic contrast to the temple in Jerusalem. For Levinas, the ancient Hebrew sanctuary and its spectrum of holiness revealed a noticeable ethical system, displayed by an ascendent dynamic of the value of its furniture and rituals.<sup>58</sup> The contrast between the temple and idolatry<sup>59</sup> (prefiguring symbolically the conflict

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<sup>57</sup> See Hannah M. Strømme's *Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida*, particularly her chapter "Political Animals," where the author analyses the Book of Daniel based on the important question, "Is it a case of the 'human,' denoting the civilized and the humane, and the 'animal' the barbarous and bestial in the political order?" Cf. Hannah M. Strømme, *Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida*, SemeiaSt 19 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2018), 92, 91–108.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. the criticisms of Nissim Amzallag, "Beyond Prestige and Magnificence: The Theological Significance of Gold in the Israelite Tabernacle," *HTR* 112.3 (2019): 296–318.

<sup>59</sup> A contrast is already observed by Victor Hurowitz, "העגל והמשכן [The Golden Calf and the Tabernacle]," *Shmaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 7–8 (1983): 51–59, and recently Naama Golan, "The Statue in Nebuchadnezzar's Dream and the Golden Calf," *TheTorah.com*, 2020, <https://thetorah.com/article/the-statue-in-nebuchadnezzars-dream-and-the-golden-calf>. Hurowitz also mentions that the calves in Dan and Bethel operated in contrast with the temple of

between the God of Israel and the Babylonian gods) is a principal topic in the Book of Daniel, one that is announced from its beginning<sup>60</sup> and which reaches its culminant point with the destruction of the image of history (Dan 2), for the final establishment of Zion.<sup>61</sup>

3. The idea of knowledge, in Dan 2, reveals again a contrast between God's wisdom and Babylonian wisdom. In line with Levinas's argument that the West secularized idolatry as philosophy (knowledge as ontology), human history, which is represented as an idol presumes a moral degradation, by building its own being (ontology) through idolatrous knowledge.<sup>62</sup> In the Book of Daniel, authentic divine knowledge humiliates human pride ("he is able to humble," 4:37), purifies life,<sup>63</sup> transforms the moral character,<sup>64</sup> and brings the final victory to the

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Jerusalem.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Bornapé, "Profanación en historia y profecía."

<sup>61</sup> LaCocque, *Daniel*, 153.

<sup>62</sup> See the complex interrelationships among mantic practices, idolatry, and the cuneiform system of writing in Babylon in Marc van de Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks: The Pursuit of Truth in Ancient Babylonia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>63</sup> "The period of the king's madness and humiliation is considered here as purifying: chastisement leads him to repentance and to confessing that only the God of Israel is the master of kings and empires (v. 31)." LaCocque, *Daniel*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> Interestingly in Dan 11:33 and 12:10, the moral character of חָכָמִים, "the wise," suffers a deep transformation implementing an imagery of metal refinement. The language "is a metaphorical description of character refinement and purification that involves spiritual growth in response to difficulties." Roy Gane, "Methodology for Interpretation of Daniel 11:2–12:3," *JATS* 27.1–2 (2016): 329. A fine study that investigates these metaphors is Yitzhaq Feder, "The Semantics of Purity in the Ancient Near East: Lexical Meaning as a Projection of Embodied Experience," *JANER* 14.1 (2014): 87–113.



“the saints of the Most High.”<sup>65</sup> The philosophy of history in the Book of Daniel conveys a “knowledge of salvation.”<sup>66</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Three are the conclusions of this article, as follows. First, the literary features of Daniel 2 evidence an emphasis on the end time by the succession of the empires moving to the establishment of God’s kingdom. To represent these political and religious realities, the God of Israel reveals to the Babylonian king a statue formed by different metals which, by featuring a degrading line of value, convey a moral degradation of mankind (metals are empires/humans). The vision of idolatry, present in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East, support these ideas.

Second, by comparing Dan 2 with chs. 4 and 5, this pattern of moral degradation becomes more clear, given the fact that a more subtle but precise anthropological portrait is elaborated. Concepts, such as, desecration and hubris are crucial here. Finally, thanks to a dialogue with some philosophical reflections in the Hebrew Bible by Emmanuel Levinas, we have discovered a deep philosophy of history in which concepts such as secularization and idolatry elucidate the meaning of Dan 2.

The dream given to Nebuchadnezzar was a revelation of the continuous moral decline of humanity affecting the exercise of the political and religious powers, and the decay of its knowledge as

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<sup>65</sup> “At the heart of the biblical future expectation as expressed in OT apocalyptic is the deliverance of God’s people and the physical resurrection of the dead. This is the goal of apocalyptic eschatology as expressed in several major visions in the book of Daniel.” Gerhard Hasel, “Resurrection in the Theology of Old Testament Apocalyptic,” *ZAW* 92 (1980): 281.

<sup>66</sup> Humberto Giannini, “El sabio y el filósofo,” in *Breve historia de la filosofía* (Santiago de Chile: Catalonia, 2005), 13–14. The author adapted this philosophical notion from Max Scheler, *Philosophical Perspectives*, trans. Oscar A. Haac (Boston: Beacon, 1958), 13–49. Cf. Dan 12:1–3 and 13. I want to thank the systematic theologian Jose Miguel Alarcon for this illuminating reference.

idolatry. However, the humiliating reaction of the Babylonian king after Daniel's interpretation was the preamble for his process of transformation, a change that exemplifies the moral purpose of biblical prophecy.