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The Comedic Function of the Enumerations of Officials and Instruments in Daniel 3

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The Comedic Function of the Enumerations of Officials and Instruments in Daniel 3

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I. Introduction

In William Langland's fourteenth-century tale of Piers the Ploughman, the description of the marriage of Lady Fee, a personification of corruption, includes the following list of guests: "men of every status, high and low: knights and clerics, jurors and summoners, sheriffs with their clerks, beadle and bailiffs, business brokers and purveyors, victuallers and advocates."1 Langland punctuates this lengthy list by adding that he could not "number the throng that ran at Fee's heels."2 The list, of course, is not meant simply to supply a good descriptive narrative. The enumeration is a sarcastic commentary on the comprehensive corruption of the bureaucracy of medieval England. The list also illustrates that, in the hands of a superb literary craftsman such as Langland, a lengthy enumeration could serve as a most effective comedic device.3

In the court tales of the Book of Daniel (chaps. 1-6) one finds recurrent, at first sight superfluous, and lengthy enumerations of officials, diviners, 

2 ibid.
3 Excellent examples of the use of enumerative techniques for comedic effect are also found in lines 675-79 of Aristophanes' The Wasps, and in chap. 22 of Gargantua by Rabelais.
function of the Officials and Daniel 3

teenth-century tale of *Piers the Plough* of Lady Fee, a personification of corrupt quests: "men of every status, high and low: clerks, sheriffs with their clerks, beadles, purveyors, victuallers and advocates." The list by adding that he could not "number." The list, of course, is not meant simply enumerative. The enumeration is a sarcastic corruption of the bureaucracy of medieval that, in the hands of a superb literary author, could serve as a most stylistic feature of the court tales. Even recent treatments of the use of enumerative techniques in the Bible and of the comedic artistry of the Book of Daniel have not demonstrated a sustained interest in the enumerations of Daniel.

Yet the recurrence of lengthy lists that otherwise need not be mentioned more than once indicates that these are not peripheral features. As will be argued here, the enumerations in the Book of Daniel, and those in chap. 3 in particular, are an integral technique in the author's satire on pagan culture and behavior. Moreover, this essay will demonstrate that even though he never commented directly on the court tales of Daniel, Henri Bergson's view of comedy provides a very plausible explanation for the function of the iterations of enumerations in Daniel 3.

II. Methodological Issues

Perhaps the most important issue in an analysis of comedy in the Bible is the definition of comedy itself. Although the definition of comedy has

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metals, and musical instruments. Commentators such as Montgomery, Porteous, Hartman and Di Lella, Lacocque, Collins, Towner, and Goldingay usually confine their comments on enumerations to lexicographical matters. Although the humorous tone of the individual enumerations is acknowledged sometimes, there is never an effort to examine these lists as a coherent stylistic feature of the court tales. Even recent treatments of the use of enumerative techniques in the Bible and of the comedic artistry of the Book of Daniel have not demonstrated a sustained interest in the enumerations of Daniel.

One may characterize an enumeration in Daniel as a sequence of two or more nouns which are separated by no more than a conjunction or other allied particles (e.g.,, ), and which share the same grammatical function within a given clause. Enumerations of metals are found in Dan 5:4 and 23. Enumerations of diviners are found in Dan 1:20; 2:2, 24, 27; 4:4, 5:11. Unless noted otherwise, all biblical citations follow the MT.


For example, Lacocque (Daniel, 55) does not go beyond observing that the "concatenating style" of Daniel 3 is reminiscent of liturgical texts and that the selection of instruments might be part of a "parody." Porteous (Daniel, 38) attributes the list of instruments to the author's proclivity for sonorous names. Goldingay (Daniel, 68) notes that the enumerations in Daniel 3 may be humorous for the "Western reader." But he doubts that the original author used them for satirical effect.

Evoked discussion from many scholars, it is Henri Bergson's theory of comedy that best describes the comedic function of the enumerations in Daniel. Bergson argued that simple mechanical iteration is a great source of comedy. When humans act as automatons or in an absentminded manner, they become subjects of comedy. He encapsulated this idea about comedy in his dictum: "Du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant." Just as the iteration of certain acts is a source of comedy, so is the iteration of certain words and phrases. One may think of Orgon's mechanical repetition of "et Tartuffe?" in Moliere's Tartuffe as a good example. R. Alter notes the frequent repetition of to see in the Balaam narrative.

Bergson also was acutely aware of the social function of comedy. For Bergson, comedy must have a social significance. Since Bergson emphasized the significance of provoking laughter in social critique, the word comedy has been used by various English-speaking scholars to translate his ideas about laughter. However, one also could use the English word satire to convey Bergson's ideas about the role of laughter in social critique.

Insofar as Bergson is concerned, therefore, comedy is a mode of discourse which provides a social critique, exposes weaknesses in its target, and elicits laughter in the process. For example, Balaam beating his ass three times is comedic not only because it exposes and reiterates how thoughtless and imperceptive this non-Israelite "seer" was, but also because it elicits laughter in the process. In the same manner, the iteration of enumerations in Daniel 3 is comedic because it serves to expose the mechanistic and thoughtless behavior of the pagan worshippers, of the pagan government bureaucracy in particular, and because it elicits laughter in the process.

The second methodological issue is the extent to which the enumerations of officials and musical instruments formed an original part of the court tale in chap. 3. Indeed, recent studies have stressed the literary stages in the growth

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15 H. Bergson, Le rire (Chartres: Durand, 1900). A critique of Bergson's theory is provided by Smith (The Nature of Comedy).

16 Bergson, Le rire, 149.

17 Ibid., 39; translation: "The mechanical superimposed on the living."

18 Bergson (ibid., 105-34), in fact, devotes a section to "Le comique de mots."

19 Alter, Biblical Narrative, 104-7.

20 Bergson (Le rire, 8) says: "Le rire doit avoir une signification sociale."

21 For example, Sypher, Comedy; and Alter, Biblical Narrative, 106. The very title of Bergson's work (Le rire) also suggests the appropriateness of the English word "comedy" for his ideas about the integration of laughter and social critique.
I. THE ENUMERATIONS IN DANIEL 3

III. The Enumerations of Daniel 3 in Literary Context

The most developed use of enumeratory comedic technique is found in what may be characterized as a tale of court conflict. The occasion for the

of the court tales in the Book of Daniel. Nonetheless, most scholars who advocate various stages in the growth of the tales in Daniel agree that chap. 3 is part of the early literary core. Moreover, fragments of Daniel from Qumran (ca. 100 B.C.E.-ca. 50 C.E.) show substantial agreement with the MT in general, and with the presence of the lengthy enumeration of officials in Daniel 3:2 in particular. Accordingly, one may assume that, despite some minor variations, the lengthy enumerations in the MT of Daniel 3 reflect an early, if not original, component of these tales.

A related issue is the date of composition. Most modern scholars date the present form of the court tales of Daniel to the Seleucid period. Gammie prefers a date in the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator (221-204/3 B.C.E.) for Daniel 1-6. Collins argues for a date prior to 165 B.C.E. Since the mindlessness of pagan behavior is the target of the enumerations in Daniel 3, our thesis may accommodate dates within the Babylonian, Persian, Ptolemaic, or Seleucid periods. As will be noted below, however, a general date within the Hellenistic period for the present form of Daniel 3 appears to be the most consistent with the specific assortment of instruments used in the story.

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conflict is provided by the dedication of a large image built by Nebuchadnezzar in the plain of Dura. The king issues a decree that all “peoples, nations, and languages” must worship the statue or they will be executed in a fiery furnace (vv 5-7). The decree provides an excellent opportunity for certain Chaldeans to rid themselves of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, three Jews who held high positions in the king’s court (vv 8-13). These pious Jews were devoted to the true God, and they refused to obey the king’s decree. After being interrogated by Nebuchadnezzar, the three young men are thrown into a fiery furnace (vv 14-23) from which they are delivered miraculously by God (vv 24-27). The story ends with a decree by Nebuchadnezzar which acknowledges the true God, and with the promotion of the three young men in the king’s court (vv 28-30).

But this court tale is also an example of Daniel’s comedy at its best. The main source of satire stems from the contrast between the mechanistic and automatic behavior of the pagans and the assertive and pious behavior of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In fact, the mechanistic behavior of the pagans is a good example of what Bergson regards as one of the universal themes of comedy—the human automaton. According to Bergson, a comic character is an absentminded one. This type of character does not think much about his or her actions. He/she is a pathetic, passive, and gutless individual whose actions resemble a mindless automaton.

The officials in Daniel 3 fit this mold. For example, on Nebuchadnezzar’s orders in v 2, the following officials are summoned to dedicate and worship the statue on the plain of Dura: “The satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the province . . .” This entire list is repeated not only in the story, but also immediately in the next verse.

It is not impossible that the author intended to provide an accurate portrayal of such an event. But if this were the only purpose, then the list need not have been mentioned more than once. In fact, Papyrus 967, an important prehexaplaric Greek witness to the text of Daniel, simply substitutes οτι προγεγραμμενοι (“the aforementioned”) for the list in v 3 of the MT. As in of genre in Daniel 1–6 by S. Niditch and R. Doran (“The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach,” JBL 96 [1977] 179-93).

31 For another interpretation of Dura, see E. M. Cook, “In the Plain of the Wall (Dan 3:1),” JBL 108 (1989) 115-16.

32 Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of the Bible are those of the RSV.

33 According to Bergson (Le rire, 17), “Le comique est inconscient.”

34 Papyrus 967 exhibits other instances of reproducing the first occurrence of an enumeration and then telescoping or omitting subsequent ones (e.g., it bears an enumeration of officials in Dan 5:7, but provides a generic οτι προγεγραμμενοι for the enumeration in 5:11 of the MT). For the edition of Papyrus 967, see W. Hamm, Der Septuaginta-Text des
the story, but also immediately after it. In effect, the iteration of 
numerations helps to portray those pagans as a version of Pavlov’s dog.

Indeed, as soon as the instruments sound, the pagans genuflect en masse before a lifeless image without a second thought. In effect, the iteration of enumerations helps to portray those pagans as a version of Pavlov’s dog.


33 Gamme ("The Classification," 198) suggests that μανος is a gloss from the redactor who was also responsible for Daniel 7–12. However, the MT includes it in three of the four enumerations. The omission can be explained easily as a haplography prompted by the placement of μανος between two words in the Aramaic text (cf., vv 10 and 15). However, a decisive conclusion is complicated by the fact that Theodotion and other Greek witnesses omit σουμβωνα in every enumeration of musical instruments in chap. 3. The precise definition of the word is also problematic. Although scholars such as M. Elkenbogen (Foreign Words in the Old Testament [Luzac: London, 1957] 122) and S. B. Finesinger ("The Musical Terms of the Old Testament," HUCA 3 [1926] 21-77) see it as a musical instrument, E. W. Gaüpin (The Music of the Sumerians [Oxford: Clarendon, 1937]) sees it as an orchestra. Whether it is an instrument or an orchestra, the general comedic function remains the same. For an earlier treatment, see C. F. Moore, "Σουμμωνα not a Bagpipe," JBL 24 (1905) 166-75.
The comic and absurd mechanistic behavior of the pagans is in stark contrast to the behavior of the three pious Jews. Whereas the officials (every single one of them!) assemble automatically after being summoned, the three young men must be coerced into coming before the king. The use in v 13 of the haphel infin. ( rekln = “to bring”) and the haphel pass. pf. 3d masc. pl. ( rkl = “they were brought”) of the verb rlk (“to come”) to describe the summoning of the three young men by Nebuchadnezzar emphasizes the involuntary nature of the Jews’ actions. Unlike the obsequious officials of vv 2 and 3, and despite their own high rank, the three young Jews are not overly impressed by human authority.

In effect, the mechanical repetition of the lengthy enumerations in vv 1-15 forms part of a satirical prologue to the assertive response of the three young men in vv 16-18. The response comes after the king asks them a question which again includes a tedious enumeration of musical instruments (v 15). This satirical prologue may be schematized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Type of enumeration</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Officials</td>
<td>All officials are requested to act automatically and obsequiously at Nebuchadnezzar’s summons to worship the image.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Officials</td>
<td>All pagan officials do act automatically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>Everyone is to act automatically when the orchestra plays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>Every pagan does act automatically once the orchestra plays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>The Chaldeans remind the king that he wants everyone to act automatically when the orchestra plays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>The king wants the Jews to act automatically just like everyone else when the orchestra plays.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three pious Jews, however, refuse to be puppets. Their response (vv 16-18) informs us that they are only impressed with the true God, the only one being capable of intervening in human affairs. Moreover, they are not afraid of death. The worship of the lifeless image is, according to the story, one of the greatest absurdities of pagan society, and the mechanistic iteration of the enumerations is a most effective means of conveying the absurd and thoughtless behavior of pagan worship.
anic behavior of the pagans is in stark contrast to the pious Jews. Whereas the officials (every matically and obsequiously at Nebuchadnezzar's summons to worship the image. The enumeration of officials in v 27, though relatively shorter than the ones in vv 2 and 3, still retains the satirical force of previous enumerations. Other comic aspects of the story are no less effective. Some of these aspects center around the superficiality of human might. The supposedly powerful Nebuchadnezzar, for instance, is exposed as a pusillanimous character in v 24. When he sees four men in the furnace he becomes nervous and rushes about seeking counsel. In v 20, the mighty men of his [Nebuchadnezzar's] army (נברכ היל הינש) meet their demise outside the furnace, while the three young men stroll comfortably and fully clothed in an oven that is seven times hotter than normal. The mention of the extraordinary temperature offers yet another satirical contrast between the amazing hardiness of the three pious Jews and the weakness of the so-called mighty men of Nebuchadnezzar. Moreover, Nebuchadnezzar is portrayed as a sort of senex iratus who rants and raves repeatedly (vv 13 and 19).

The enumeration of officials in v 27, though relatively shorter than the ones in vv 2 and 3, still retains the satirical force of previous enumerations. The officials who were quick to bow down before the image are now forced to witness what the true God is all about. The repetition (some thirteen times within the story) of the foreign names of the three young men (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) also may have struck the original Jewish readers as comical. These names, of course, were also a pagan imposition on young men who originally bore Hebrew names.

IV. Conclusion

This study of Daniel 3 shows that the lengthy lists of officials and musical instruments are neither peripheral nor minor components. Instead, Daniel 3 demonstrates the complex and artistic manner in which lengthy and repeated enumerations could be integrated in a socioreligious critique of pagan social institutions such as the Babylonian government bureaucracy.

37 Gammie (“The Classification,” 198) notes the the σεμμένη (εμμένος) was a favorite of Ptolemy IV. Polybius 26.1.1-4 (LCL; 6 vols.; ed. W. R. Paton; London: Heinemann, 1944) alludes specifically to the shock (το παράδοσον) caused by Antiochus IV dancing with the νεφέλωνια.
38 The smaller number of officials here may be conditioned by the more intimate setting around the fiery furnace. In contrast, vv 2 and 3 are set in the wide space of Dura.
39 The possibly comic effect of the repetition of the personal names was first suggested to me by F. M. Cross in a personal communication (October 23, 1986).
The message sent by Daniel concerning the thoughtless nature of pagan worship is not new. Such messages may be found in Isa 44:9-20 and Jer 50:38 concerning idolatry. Moreover, enumerations per se are not always satirical in Daniel or other parts of the Bible. What is distinctive about the court tale in Daniel 3 is that it consistently uses repeated enumerations for comedic effect to a degree not seen in Biblical Hebrew literature. As such, Daniel's use of repeated enumerations represents an innovation within the biblical corpus. Although composition of the tale during the Persian period is possible, composition in the Hellenistic era is most consistent with the musical orchestra described and satirized in the present form of the tale. On a broader scope, the author's masterful use of enumerations for comedic effect matches the mastery of William Langland and other writers, old and new.

For example, biblical genealogies are common examples of noncomedic enumerations. Lists of good attributes in the Jewish youths in Daniel 1:4 and 17 are probably not comedic unless they are juxtaposed with the pagan youths. Niditch and Doran ("The Success Story of the Wise Courtier," 189) also note the stereotypical summoning, usually expressed by an enumeration, of court members in Ahiqar and in other court tales. However, in Dan 2:2,10, and 27, the enumerations of diviners seem to juxtapose the comprehensive incompetence of the pagan wise men with the wisdom of a single Jewish wise man like Daniel. As such, the enumerations of pagan wise men in Daniel 2 may have a comedic function.

My thanks to F. M. Cross, Hugh Page, Larry Wills and Carey Walsh for their insightful comments. Any shortcomings are solely my responsibility.