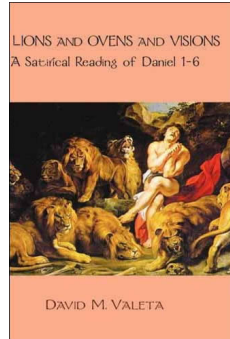


○ **REVIEW OF DAVID M. VALETA, *LIONS AND OVENS AND VISIONS: A SATIRICAL READING OF DANIEL 1-6*. HEBREW BIBLE Monographs, 12 (SHEFFIELD: SHEFFIELD PHOENIX PRESS, 2008)**

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This is a rewritten version of Valeta's doctoral dissertation in the combined PhD program of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology; Gregory Robbins was his thesis director. In his Preface, Valeta states that his goal is to read Daniel 'as a coherent whole, particularly as a text of resistance to the hegemony of imperial powers of the Ancient World' (p. ix).

Befitting a thesis, the first chapter is a detailed and thoroughly documented review of past and present commentaries and studies of Daniel; particularly of Daniel 1-6, the six narratives of the book that precede the four visions of chapters 7-12. Valeta will address the latter in a proposed future work. Most studies of Daniel 1-6 fit the stories into one of three common genres: court tale, folklore or wisdom tale. Each designation focuses on different characteristics of the tales. Valeta maintains that there is considerable genre confusion in Daniel studies marked by this plurality of genres, by the differing definitions of each genre by its proponents and by the fact that all these studies assume a positive attitude toward imperial rule. The latter assumption sets up a sharp contrast with the negative attitude towards kings in the four visions.

Relying on Bakhtin's literary theories Valeta proposes a different genre and reads Daniel 1-6 as 'prenovelistic Menippean satires that seek, through humor, to resist the oppressive political forces of their day' (p. 21). The genre derives from the Greek cynic Menippus of Gadara (3rd c. BCE) and includes later writers such as Lucian and Apuleius. Valeta builds on other analyses of Daniel that stress the humour and the ridicule in the stories but maintains that his use of Bakhtin's Menippean satire is a new direction in Daniel studies that incorporates the humour in an overall interpretation of the book.

In chapter 2, Valeta briefly lays out the salient features of Bakhtin's views, particularly on heteroglossia, dialogism and genre. The first two relate to Bakhtin's belief that any linguistic utterance, from an everyday comment to a literary work, has a larger social setting and a history that take it beyond its immediate context. Both Bakhtin and Valeta focus on a literary work,

whether a tale or a novel. Even if he wishes to produce an independent work, an author can never limit or exclude other and previous uses of his language. These uses appear in the work in a dialogue or debate with the author's intentions for his work. Heteroglossia and dialogism are the rich and complex aspects of language, from individual words and phrases to extended discourse, that have a life of their own outside a particular literary work. Valeta, at a few points, relates these to the bilingual nature of Daniel; narratives and visions appear in both Aramaic and Hebrew. He suggests that Aramaic, the imperial language of the Persians and after, is used, especially with abundant wordplay, to ridicule imperial power by twisting its official language (pp. 179–91). Valeta incorporates the bilingual aspect into his reading of the text itself. This is a decided advance over the somewhat mechanical views of other explanations of the bilingual aspect which see it as somewhat of an accident of composition, translation or transmission. I hope that he builds on these insights in his future work on Daniel.

Genre, here we refer to the literary use of the term, is a metalinguistic category; a social form for literary communication that is a relatively stable confluence of structure and content, of form and ideology, in all their myriad appearances underlying both a work and its interpretation. We already encountered the genre classifications as folktale and such. Others note the large number of so-called subgenres found in Daniel 1-6, e.g., date formula, dream report, dream interpretation, hymn of praise and prayer (see pp 162–65 for list and discussion). Menippean satire includes such subgenres as an inherent part of its makeup.

Bakhtin and Valeta regard Menippean satire as a particular type of classical serio-comical literature; a carnivalesque and popular literature that stands over against the status quo and questions, if not undermines, accepted norms and social structures. Valeta presents Bakhtin's 14 characteristics of Menippean satire (see pp. 59–64 for the list and discussion) and tests the form and contents of Daniel 1-6 against them. The characteristics include the comic, the fantastic, a free and inventive manner that is multi-styled and multi-voiced, sharp contrasts, the crude and the lofty reaching from hell to earth and to heaven, a concern for present truth, unusual perspectives, characters who are strange in experience and behavior, hints at social utopia, and multiple inserted genres.

In the main four chapters of his book, 3-6, he analyses Daniel 1-6 in that order employing different groupings of the 14 characteristics. Chapter 3 looks for the comic and the fantastic; chapter 4 for the transgressive, liminal and carnivalesque; chapter 5 for social realities and truth and chapter 6 for genre, language and dialogism. These are the strong point of his work and I can only note the detailed, thorough and impressive analyses of the tales that he presents in the four chapters; even a summary of features and themes that he discusses would exceed this review. He does not restrict himself to the tale being analysed but frequently notes parallels and contrasts with the other tales and with how they are read in his other chapters. He is also open about his dependence on previous work. Although there is some repetition, as he goes through the six stories four times, I think it is necessary; trying to read through them once with all 14 characteristics at hand would have been cumbersome and confusing.

Chapters 3 and 4 perhaps could have been combined since both detail the incredible variety of these characteristics as seen in the larger than life characters and events. The mighty Babylonian and Persian kings vaunt their power and majesty and yet are quickly undermined by their own courtiers, including the queen mother in Belshazzar's case, and by the Hebrew God who never actually appears but who reduces the kings to puppets. Kings are controlled by their

emotions, whether in their attempts to build a statue or issue a decree that only the king can be prayed to, or in their frustration with dream interpretation or the escapes of Daniel and his friends from fire and beasts. Pagan kings quickly convert and offer powerful praise to the Hebrew deity. The grand scale of the tales is evidenced in large and repetitive lists of officials, instruments and such.

I found chapter 5 – the concern for social realities, the search for truth and a utopian questing – to be the weakest chapter. Valeta presents his case that the tales are a serious questioning of imperial power and a vision of an alternate society, glimpsed in the prayers and hymns of praise, but it is a preliminary and not a full or final case. These insights should also be built upon in future work.

Valeta states, without strong argument, that Daniel is a condemnation of the Seleucids, particularly of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (pp. 148–50). This is the majority opinion on the historical setting for the book of Daniel but I do not find it required by Valeta’s analyses of the Daniel stories. The satire of kings and imperial power is solidly established but what kings and whose imperial power: Seleucids and/or Hasmoneans? (Or others?) Valeta shields Daniel, and by extension other Jews including the Maccabees, from the satirical barb in these 6 tales, but I do not find the shield effective. He argues that in the golden statue story of Daniel 3, Daniel is absent because his three friends, his ‘twins,’ fully take his place in the story. I do not think that we can rule out the possibility that Daniel has sold out and worshipped the statue.

The final chapter on genre, language and dialogism (already referred to in earlier comments on bilingualism and subgenres) is a strong close to the book that brings together much of the preceding analyses. The chapter accounts for the

variety of inserted genres within the work...[and the] multi-styled, multi-toned, multi-voiced work that includes a variety of genres, voices and languages in dialogue with one another... These elements combine to form an intentionally constructed narrative that paradoxically creates an organic unity even while the various features remain in tension (p. 161).

Valeta does a commendable job of establishing such unity within the multifarious genres and features that he has so carefully laid out in his work.