WHY NABONIDUS?
EXCAVATING TRADITIONS FROM QUMRAN,
THE HEBREW BIBLE, AND NEO-BABYLONIAN SOURCES

Carol A. Newsom
Emory University

One of the most fruitful places for examining the transmission of traditions and the production of texts is surely the literature associated with the figure of Daniel. Even before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, scholars explored the differences between the versions of Daniel found in the Masoretic Text of Daniel and the Septuagint, with its additional narratives and poems, as well as the different version of Daniel 4–6 in the Old Greek manuscripts. The Qumran finds showed that there was an even more extensive Danielic literature, with two compositions featuring Daniel making historical and eschatological predictions in a court setting (4Q243–244, 4Q245), and two compositions using language or motifs similar to those of Daniel 2 and 7 (4Q246, 4Q552–553). The longstanding suspicion of scholars that Daniel 4 was originally a narrative about Nabonidus received additional support from the discovery of 4Q242 Prayer of Nabonidus.

These texts are evidence both for the complexity of the Danielic tradition and the creativity of its authors, as they appropriated and recycled useful elements, combining them with usable bits and pieces from other literary and oral traditions in order to produce new compositions. Nowhere are we better positioned to examine this process.

---


than with the texts that were originally associated with Nabonidus, for in addition to the Jewish narratives, we also have an extensive neo-Babylonian literature, including both Nabonidus’ own self-presentation in his inscriptions and literary representations of Nabonidus by his enemies. Although this material has been intensively studied, recent research on the historical Nabonidus may shed additional light on the composition and development of the Jewish Nabonidus literature. In addition, two questions have not heretofore received sufficient attention. First, to the extent that one can peer through the Jewish Nabonidus texts to the early stages of their composition, what can one say about the motivation for their composition and their possible function as social rhetoric? Second, since important comparative material exists, is it possible to develop a model that suggests how the authors of this literature actually produced new stories from their source material?

The Corpus of Jewish Nabonidus Literature

One of the initial issues to be explored is the extent of Jewish Nabonidus literature. The Prayer of Nabonidus is the one text explicitly identified with him. But within the canonical book of Daniel, Daniel 4 is widely agreed to be originally a Nabonidus story. To this one can add Daniel 5, since it is a story about Nabonidus’ son Belshazzar. It has also been suggested that other compositions of the Daniel cycle may have originated as stories about Nabonidus, notably Daniel 3. Although the details of the narrative do not correspond to anything actually done by either Nebuchadnezzar or Nabonidus, the erecting of a strange image and requiring worship of it may well preserve a parodic echo of Nabonidus’ notorious championing of the moon god Sin. Indeed, two of his most controversial actions were the installation of a new and non-traditional cult statue of the moon god in Sin’s temple in Harran and his attempt to persuade the priests of Marduk

3 These documents have recently been edited and translated by Hanspeter Schaudig, Die Inschriften Nabonids von Babylon und Kyros’ des Grossen samt den in ihrem Umfeld entstandenen Tendenzschriften (AOAT 256; Ugarit-Verlag: Münster, 2001).
4 See n. 2.