

Testing tales: Genesis 22 and Daniel 3 & 6

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Abstract

The widely though not universally accepted additions to the Genesis 22 text, namely of verses 1b & 15-18, show interesting parallels to the Daniel 3 & 6 texts on the concept of a God that tests the faith of faith heroes. According to this theological development in Hellenistic Israel, God had in some instances deliberately examined the depth of the faith of these figures. Although the idea of God testing belief is known from other Hebrew Bible texts, in these texts of Genesis 22 and Daniel 3 & 6, the idea is strongly narrativised. The piety of the idea of a God who tests is underlined by the context of prayer with which this theological idea is associated.

Three testing tales

The proposal put forward in this contribution is a simple one, namely on the theological possibility that God would test the faith of believers. The question to which an answer is sought, is: when would this theological possibility have occurred prominently, as far as it is attested to by the Hebrew Bible texts? It seems – as will be argued below – that this is a late development in the history of the religion of Israel¹, probably under Hellenistic influence, namely as a reaction to aspects of this dominating culture. Even if the kernel of the idea had existed earlier, with this kernel coming to the fore a few times in the Hebrew Bible, the idea became narrativised, that is, more prominent and in a way culturally and theologically “institutionalised”, late in the religious history of Israel. This, at least, as far as the texts give evidence of the development of this theological possibility.

This “lateness” should however not be construed as therefore being an inauthentic or syncretistic form of religion. Neither newness / lateness nor intercultural influence imply either lesser or greater legitimacy. The theological coherence of the possibility of a testing God was namely affirmed in the three narratives involved by its placement with prayer material of different kinds, giving credence to the experienced validity of such an aspect of faith, as I propose, late in Israel’s faith history.

The God who tests

The idea that Yahweh would test those who believe in him is not a dominant theme in the Old Testament. Employing the verb *nqâl*, to test, mere mention of this idea is for instance found in Psalm 26:2 (Probe me, Yahweh, examine me, Test my heart and my mind in the fire [NJB]; cf. 2 Chron. 32:31), Exodus 20:20 (Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; God has come to test you, so that your fear of him, being always in your mind, may keep you from sinning'), and Deuteronomy 8:2 (Remember the long road by which Yahweh your God led you for forty years in the desert, to humble you, to test you and know your inmost heart – whether you would keep his

¹ The problematic content of the concept “Israel” indicated by Davies (2006) and others is not meant to be overlooked here. Rather, the habit amongst scholars is followed of employing the term as a matter of shorthand, all the while acknowledging just how complex a construct this is as the people represented by it underwent changes over time.

commandments or not). The synonymous **לְדֹבֶר** occurs for instance in Job 23:10 (And yet he knows every step I take! Let him test me in the crucible: I shall come out pure gold), Zechariah 13:9a (I shall pass this third through the fire, refine them as silver is refined, test them as gold is tested), and Psalm 17:3 (You probe my heart, examine me at night, you test me by fire and find no evil). In more storied formats, the idea of God putting people to the test comes to the fore in texts such as Judges 2 (as a summary of typical deuteronomistic theology; cf. specifically verse 22), in the book of Job (in philosophical format, as question of theodicy rather than adherence to God in the face of other religions²), in Genesis 2-3 (especially 2:16-17 & 3 on the tree of knowledge of good and evil) and, in a way, in the Joseph story³.

In the three “short short stories” (Lombaard 2009:100) to be discussed below, though, the understanding of God testing people’s faith, stands in the foreground. As an act of loyalty, in Daniel amidst the presence of other religious expressions, narrativised expressions are found here of what has in these accounts become a demonstrable core theological position. Obstacles to faith are set, as an experience in itself, but also in order to refine faith. For this reason, Genesis 22 and Daniel 3 and 6 may be called “testing tales”: the dominant theme of these three legends of loyalty is an unwavering commitment to Yahweh. The communicative intent of such accounts is clearly to encourage faith commitment on the part of the intended audience, most probably when they found themselves in times of trouble.

The Genesis 22 text

The Akedah is not a text without its difficulties, with the main problems that may be summarised (cf. Lombaard 2013:1-5) as:

- The most appropriate exegetical methodology (historical or narratological; cf. also Boase 2001:312-335);
- The historical explanation possibilities for the origination of the text, during its main stages of composition (my proposal, Lombaard 2008:907–919);
- The theological-ethical considerations raised by a Bible narrative on divine instruction to commit child sacrifice (cf. also Čapek 2010:217-227); and
- The treatment of the verse 1b⁴ and 15-18 sections – with this last aspect as the most important for the argumentation here.

With rare exception (Coats 1973:389-412, 1983:152 and van Seters 1975:229), namely, verses 1b and 15-18 are held to be insertions within a then existing account we now have in Genesis 22:1-19 as composite text. The earlier text, *sans* 1b and 15-18, narrated an event in which patriarch Abraham was instructed by God to take his son Isaac to Moriah as a burnt offering. The historical aspects of meaning of this account as possibly related to protest against human sacrifice, aetiology, theodicy or power relations are not of prime concern here; most important to note for the sake of the argument here are the editorial additions. Accurately dubbed by Moberley (1988:302) “(t)he earliest commentary on the Akedah”, these few verses, particularly the framing insertion of verse 1b / “(and / that) God tested Abraham”, altered for the

² The contribution by Veijola 2002:127–144 on the link between Genesis 22 and the book of Job relating to theodicy, remains a worthwhile possibility to consider here.

³ My thanks to colleague Raik Heckl for pointing out this possible link to the Joseph narrative. Certainly, the wisdom link between the Joseph and Daniel accounts is strong enough – cf. Fox 2001:26-41, drawing on Rosenthal 1895:278-284 and Mastin 1995:152-169; Wesselius 2001:308.

⁴ By this is meant, specifically, the phrase: “(and / that) God tested Abraham”.

next more than two millennia the popular and much of the academic (usually based on methods such as close reading and narratological analysis) reception of Genesis 22. From now on, the meaning of this text would predominantly be that "God tests Abraham" (Kruger 1991:187).

The *theological* turn implied by the 1b and 15-18 insertions should not escape us. Especially 1b alters a text with cultic protest, or aetiological, or philosophical or power play intentions into an account of exemplary piety. God sets a test. The account now becomes one of how the father of all believers passed a rather dramatic examination of his fidelity. The result of this "success story" is, explicitly, reward: progeny, protection, and influence / honour. Verses 15-18 thus expand the kernel of 1b: obedience⁵ and unquestioning religious loyalty are compensated with very concrete blessings (namely progeny and international power, in 17 and 18). The implied encouragement intended to be taken from such a positive (now, with 1b & 15-18) testing tale: the intended audience should follow this example of blind trust in all, even incomprehensible and reprehensible, circumstances.

The dating which may be ascribed this textual and hence theological insertion has consistently been late; my own work has led me, albeit hesitantly, to propose the period of the first half of the 3rd century BCE (Lombaard 2008:915-917). Given what follows below on the Daniel texts, the theological parallels that come to the fore seem to offer increased intertextual linkage for such a dating.

The Daniel texts

With the composition history of the book of Daniel a principal research issue, the research trajectory of Michaelis (1781:22) and Montgomery (1979 [1926]:37) via Albertz (1988:157-159) and then van Deventer (2013:239-260; cf. Collins 1993:38) is followed here. The Hebrew chapters 8-12 is therefore regarded as the oldest textual collection in the book of Daniel, with the Aramaic chapters 4-7 added roughly a decade later, i.e. mid-2nd century BCE, to which was subsequently appended the Aramaic chapter 3. After this, at different stages, the opening and closing chapters were added to this loose collection of "Märchen- und Legendenmotive" (Müller 1976:340; Wesselius 2001:296 employs the imaginative term "dossier on Daniel"), with the deuterocanonical Greek prayer and narrative sections appended yet later.

Given the seeming deferred addition of Daniel 3, a brief description of the Daniel 6 text sets the initial context here. This chapter namely deals with the possibility of socio-political challenges to the faith of an individual. During succession politics, machinations by court officials render Daniel's personal piety *religio non grata*; the resultant death sentence in the famous lion's pit Daniel miraculously survives. This leads to two outcomes, rhetorically meant to encourage the intended readership during testing times: royal recognition of an "act of God" (here meant in a positive, redemptive, sense) and state acceptance of the Jewish faith.

This "success story" is expanded in Daniel 3. In a world of high politics – an emperor, a bevy of powerful officials, international relations and orchestrated religion (cf. Goldingay 2001:649) – now a group of people are threatened for religious reasons. Associated with Daniel by means of the renaming scene inserted in the Hebrew chapter Daniel 1 (specifically Daniel 1:7), the Daniel 3 three of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego find themselves as assembly successively on the receiving end of imperial fury, a fiery death sentence, divine protection and, again, royal affirmation

⁵ Cf. Fischer 2012:303 for a different take on Abraham's obedience.

and state sanction. This affirmation of overtly recognised loyalty to God namely forms a kind of mantra throughout the Daniel stories, clearly meant as lessons of encouragement to the intended audience.

In both these testing tales in Daniel, despite their differences, the relative passivity of the main characters begs attention. It is namely not through their own activity that these characters find themselves protected and their fidelity vindicated (cf. Goldingay 2001:648); the saving grace is divine, and the resulting confession at once official and heathen, with both these aspects that are beyond the sphere of influence of the Jewish characters. The communicative intent with this scenario is evidently to place the events outside of the hands of the faithful adherents: threatening circumstances develop external to their control (the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes); divine protection coincides with fidelity (cf. e.g. DiTommaso 2012:217)⁶, though above all human expectations; a restoration of religious peace occurs in superlative forms. The placement of these tales at the imperial court increases the sense of identification with leadership (hence, also, the connection of the three with Daniel in 1:7) by the intended audience, and adds in this way a universalising scope to these events. In this emancipating theology, when God allows for testing times, redemption is dramatic and at once wide-ranging and personally representative.

In God we trust: the three testing tales taken together

It should be clear by now that the idea of historical reliability subscribed to in this contribution, is not the kind in which it is assumed that historical veracity about the figures referred to in these narratives, principally Abraham and Isaac and Daniel and the Daniel 3 three, is a goal (cf. Lombaard 2014:210-216). Rather, the kind of historical understanding that may be deduced from the texts is restricted to the community in which these writings were developed and / or accepted. The idea-logical context, that is the theology and mores of the “acceptance community”, can namely be inferred. This idea-logical context may be described in broad outlines only, given the difficulties of all historical reconstruction. However, already such broad insight is enough to grasp at least some of the religious sensibilities of an “acceptance community”.

From the above testing tales, then, within their respective editorial histories and dating possibilities as outlined above⁷, the argument can be made in overview that it was only late in the history of Israel’s religion that the theological possibility of God setting tests to heroes of faith became more fully developed. Though the concept occurs wider in the Hebrew Bible, in passing reference and in more expanded texts which together indicate that the idea was alive within ancient Israel’s faith conception, the divine assessment of the quality of the commitment on the part of believers is in these accounts given strong prominence. This happens late:

- The additions (verses 1b and 15-18) within the narrative of Genesis 22:1-19 transform by editorial insertion a fully different account into a testing tale. In the earlier 3rd century, the already venerated patriarch Abraham now becomes a hero of fidelity to all who take this text seriously.
- A century or a little more later, the Daniel 6 text and the Daniel 3 addition narratologically expand this idea, respectively related to the individual and,

⁶ The questions of theodicy are not brought into focus by these theologically imposing representations of envisioned restoration.

⁷ Naturally, this could be done in greater details with each of the texts involved. However, I believe the outlines drawn here are already sufficient so that on this basis, the proposal made in this contribution can be supported.

then, “democratising” this message by also relating the same idea to a group (cf. van Deventer 2013:257, drawing on Boccaccini 2002:164).

In these accounts, the core idea is thus *unfolded*, in fully construed narratives, that God has at times examined the faith of important figures. The intended implication is apparent: that those who read / hear these texts and hold them as religiously important, should emulate these examples.

Apart from the dating of the pertinent verses and chapters here to Hellenistic times, it seems also that aspects of the Hellenistic culture provide milieux which best fit these testing tales. This placement is not simply to be part of a trend (again recently indicated by Levin 2014:1), namely that by far the greater part of the Hebrew Bible is now understood to be late; as Lemche (2011:92) warns, “The Old Testament may be a Jewish collection of literature dating to the Hellenistic and Roman Period, but it is definitely not a Greek or Roman book.” I do not propose the Hellenistic background to these testing tales simply for the sake of such a late dating trend. In the two Daniel accounts discussed here, the influence of the politics of Antiochus Epiphanes is namely foundational to understanding them; in the Genesis 22 additions, parallels from Hellenistic mythology such as the testing of Jason by Hera may well have provided additional impulses to expand an existing idea into a fuller theological construct, and then to relate that idea of divine examination to some of the basic foundations of Israel’s theology, namely blessing in its various forms.

The thematically relatively close-knit nature of the Genesis 22 additions and these two Daniel stories, discussed above, may be further explored. Terminological similarities may for instance be indicated by pointing to the recurring occurrence of the angel of God *motif* in all three the accounts discussed. However, given the methodological uncertainties related to linguistic links, thematic association provides for a broader frame of reference here. The occurrence of prayer in all three these texts provide a case in point. This relates at the same time also to the issue of the perceived legitimacy of a theology about a God who tests, rather than a God who either remains unremittingly true regardless of the actions of the human party or who would omnisciently know the result before a test would be set. Such theological questions are not argued in these texts, but clearly this “testing theology” has no difficulty functioning along one of the most intimate acts of experienced-and-expressed religiosity, prayer⁸. In Genesis 22 the interaction between Abraham and God is namely constituted by the former’s response, in word and deed, to the divine initiative. In Daniel 6, it is the faith hero’s daily devotions that is the trigger of the events set up to play out the way they then do. In Daniel 3, the Greek prayers (Dan. 3:24–90 LXX, the so-called Prayer of Azariah and song of the three holy children), often disregarded in academic discussions (Albertz 1988:9), show a continued acceptance, or expansion, of the theological notion of a testing God.⁹ That such affirmation could be expressed by means of an inserted prayer is not an unknown phenomenon in the Hebrew Bible, with the “underwater prayer” in Jonah 2:2-10 as a well-known example. Such prayer shows that the theological context in which it appears is experienced as valid and legitimate. A God who tests is not, as could perhaps be assumed, on the prey; rather, the figures affected pray. This too was

⁸ For modern, social-scientific analyses of such dynamics, cf. the studies collected in: Giordan, G & Woodhead, L (eds) 2015. *A sociology of prayer*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

⁹ The more well-known prayer in Daniel is of course in chapter 9, with its strong deuteronomistic influences.

most probably intended to direct and / or reflect the experience of the intended audience/s of these texts.

Addendum: On a wing and a...

Perhaps the proposal made in this contribution is couched too comfortably in my own theological history, in which the notion of *sola gratia* has been foundational. From such an existential vantage point, the idea that God would test believers does not fit well. The latter does not of itself make invalid the proposal here, that the three Old Testament testing tales discussed above are late developments in Israel, under Hellenistic influence – precisely because it is not understood here as a corrupting influence, though possibly as a somewhat syncretistic development, which is natural in all expressions of religiosity. (The implications of this for contextualising more thoroughly the testing of Job should well be thought through further.) However, along with all the historiographical vagaries involved in reconstructing a part of the history of religion of ancient Israel, this contextual situatedness of me as investigator is another aspect that should lead to intellectual modesty: that this possibility is proposed rather than put forward firmly. When theology and history meet, the result is as much a case of faith seeking understanding as it is seeking to understand an aspect of ancient Israel's faith.

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