

# The Meaning of the Susanna Story\*

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HAVING occasion recently to give some lectures on the book of Daniel to theological students, I was drawn to study the Greek additions to that book, which, as part of the Apocrypha, are not usually treated by Protestant and Jewish commentators and exegetes. The Apocrypha, that is to say, have in general not benefitted much by the modern development of scientific theological exegesis, which has recovered, or disclosed to us, such a wealth of religious values in the Old Testament. Rejected as mere human inventions by most of the Protestant churches, relegated to a secondary position in the Anglican bible, acknowledged as fully canonical only by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions, the Apocrypha have been left aside by the most influential and successful modern commentary series.<sup>1</sup> Everyone would admit, of course, that they contain much that is of high religious value. In particular, the tale of the chaste Susanna, one of the best-known and most attractive stories, is not only a valuable memorial of the piety of early Judaism but a religious document of timeless worth. Quite apart from any question of canonicity, it seems, from the literary and religious points of view, as deserving of study as the stories in Dan. 1-6. Much attention has been devoted by scholars to its origin and sources, but comparatively little to its religious meaning. It is the latter that I wish to examine here.

For the sake of reference, we may briefly summarize the familiar story: Susanna is a beautiful woman, devout and well-instructed in the Law, the wife of a wealthy Jew. Two wicked and lustful elders of the people, who hold the office of judge, are smitten with desire for her; they tempt her to commit adultery with them, but she firmly rejects the idea of thus offending God, even at the risk of her life. In revenge, they accuse her before the assembly, affirming that they caught her, *flagrante delicto*, committing adultery with a young man. The assembly accepts their testimony and condemns Susanna. But as she is being led out to be put to death, by divine inspiration the youthful Daniel intervenes; he re-opens the case, and by cross-examination induces the lying witnesses to contradict each other. Susanna is vindicated, and her accusers are themselves put to death.

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1. I have in mind such series as the *Handbuch zum Alten Testament*, or on a more popular level the *Torch Bible Commentaries*, the *Alte Testament Deutsch*, and the like. Some of these may plan to treat the Apocrypha separately, but, in the case that interests us here, none would include the additions to Daniel in their commentary on the canonical book. This is done in Catholic works; however, the latest scientific Catholic commentary on Daniel, that by Rinaldi in *La Sacra Bibbia* (1949), is disappointing in its treatment of the "deutero-canonical" sections.

This narrative is not contained in the Hebrew-Aramaic text of the book of Daniel, but it appears in two early Greek versions: that attributed to Theodotion, from the second century A.D., and the older so-called Septuagint translation, whose version of Daniel was produced in Egypt not later than the end of the second century B.C.<sup>2</sup> In Theodotion, Susanna begins the book, preceding what is chapter 1 in the Hebrew text; in the Septuagint it comes at the end, after chapter 12, and is followed by the stories of Bel and the Dragon. These two Greek texts show considerable variations in details, as they do also in other parts of Daniel, especially chs. 4-6. We shall consider the bearing of these differences in a moment.

The researches of several scholars, notably Baumgartner and Heller, have thrown much light on the origin and sources of the Susanna story.<sup>3</sup> Briefly, they have shown that two familiar themes of folklore are here combined: the Genoveva (or Genevieve) tale, as it is called, namely the story of the faithful wife, calumniated but later vindicated; and that of the Wise Child, who intervenes to give the correct judgment in a case that has misled, or simply baffled, professional judges. Many examples of these themes, some of them probably older than the Jewish work, have been collected and examined; and it seems reasonably clear that we have here a *haggadah* based on this originally non-Jewish material.

But what should interest the Biblical scholar is the use made of the material by the Jewish story-tellers. Israel always showed an astonishing capacity for assimilation, in the literary field as in other departments of culture; what makes such assimilated material of value for Jewish studies is, naturally, not so much the elements that remain in common with the earlier sources, as the specific differences that the Israelite product shows. The modifications are evidence of the working of the Israelite mind, based on its characteristic ethos and in particular on its distinctive religion, that concept of God as a unique covenant Deity, which made itself felt in every department of life and conspicuously in their literature.

I would draw attention to three main characteristics of this *haggadah*, which certainly did not belong to the stuff of folklore from which the story outline came. First, and most important, from being a piece of secular entertainment, it has been turned into a religious story, in which the Jewish concepts of God and His Law serve as a frame of reference by which the actions of the human characters are measured. It has become an Old Testament story, with exemplary value and significance for the hearers. In clear and simple style, and with notable elevation of thought, it portrays the ideal of moral conduct which the Pious in Israel admired.

2. The date is guaranteed by the reference to "Ananias, Azarias, Misael," in 2 Maccabees 2:59. Cf. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times* (1949), 440, 449. The date of the Theodotion text, like so much else about it, is unsure; it may in part be earlier than the 2nd century.

3. W. Baumgartner, "Susanna. Die Geschichte einer Legende," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 24 (1926), 259-280; *id.*, "Der Weise Knabe und die des Ehebruchs beschuldigte Frau," *ib.* 27 (1929), 187f.; B. Heller, "Die Susannaerzählung: ein Märchen," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* N.F.13 (1936), 281-287.

The following are some of these specifically Jewish and religious touches: Susanna is described as a God-fearing woman; her parents were just, and had carefully instructed their daughter in the Law of Moses; the villainy of her accusers is explained by their neglecting to "look towards heaven," and is characterized as "lawlessness"; the heroine exposes herself to calumny and death rather than "sin before the Lord"; she prays trustingly to the Lord, and He hearkens to her prayer; He brings about her deliverance, in the Septuagint by sending an angel to bestow the spirit of understanding on a youth, in Theodotion by stirring up the holy spirit which is in the youthful Daniel; the latter is made aware of the truth by this divine inspiration, not by human means; he upbraids the wicked elders for breaking the Law, and for acting like Gentiles, not Judeans; when the truth is disclosed the assembly praise God who saves those that hope in Him; they deal with the guilty according to the Law of Moses; in the Septuagint it is the angel of the Lord who actually puts the criminals to death.

This religious emphasis, pervading the whole narrative, convincingly shows how thoroughly the Israelite story-tellers "re-thought" and worked over their borrowed material. No commentator is doing justice to his text, if he glosses over or ignores this most obvious intention of the authors. Yet many have successfully shut their eyes to it. Here is a small but typical example: one competent scholar complains, "The behaviour of the very youthful Daniel is, at least, arbitrary. He loudly condemns both culprits before he adduces any proof of their guilt."<sup>4</sup> To take it this way is to miss a main point in the story, that God confers on His human instrument a supernatural knowledge of the truth. The same may be said, more broadly, of the various juristic interpretations, to the effect that the whole narrative is a plea for judicial reform in the shape of more careful examination of witnesses. Pfeiffer does justice to these with the remark, "The average reader, even when the story first appeared, would hardly consider the story of Susanna as an appeal for a stricter administration of justice—unless a scholar explained it to him in that sense."<sup>5</sup>

A second characteristic is that the story is located, even though vaguely, in the history of Israel. The vagueness comes apparently from a shift, both of time and place, that was imposed on the story when the "wise young judge" came to be identified with the Daniel of the stories in Dan. 1–6. The original introduction to the Septuagint version is now lost, and it seems likely that it was deliberately suppressed (perhaps by Origen?) because it could not be reconciled with this identification—Daniel being firmly associated with Babylon during the Exile. The Septuagint's ending of the story, however, has survived, and it quite ignores Daniel: "Therefore young men are dear to Jacob in their honesty. And we ought to watch over young men that they may become valiant sons; if young men are pious, a spirit of discernment and understanding will remain in them for ever." This stress on

4. J. T. Marshall, in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, IV (1902), 631, s.v. "Susanna."  
5. *History of New Testament Times*, 451.

the importance of educating boys in piety implies that all of them may thus enjoy the spirit which the angel bestowed on the young judge.

The original Septuagintal introduction probably located the story in Palestine, dating it by some Persian king or governor, or even Jewish high priest. Certainly the background of the action is entirely different from that of Dan. 1-6. It pictures a self-contained Jewish community, with its own rulers and place of assembly (the assembly itself is called the *συναγωγὴ*). There are Jews who live in neighbouring towns. The community has its autonomous legal system and the power of inflicting the death penalty. In short, one gets the impression that the Jews are not a minority but the predominant, perhaps sole, element of the population. As this is simply the setting of the story, and no particular stress is laid on it, we must suppose that it would not seem strange or alien to the original audience. Yet such isolation and independence do not agree with what we know of Jewish settlements in Mesopotamia, in any pre-Christian century; nor do they harmonize with the Jewish status in Alexandria. But they do seem to agree very well with conditions in Palestine itself during the period of Hasmonean rule—say, after 150 B.C. This probably was the background envisaged by the original composer of the story, and familiar to the original audience.

The introduction to the Theodotion version (which, since Origen's time at least, has been attached to the Septuagint as well) is itself secondary, or else has been mutilated. As it stands, it locates the incident in Babylon, but gives no date. In v. 5 there is the phrase "in that same year," which is now meaningless but must once have been preceded by "in the year X of King Y," or something similar. The ending, in this version, is a conventional glorification of Daniel, similar to those in the other Daniel stories: "And Daniel became great in the eyes of the people, from that day forward."

But this shift in time and space is not the only modification induced by the story's attachment to the canonical book of Daniel. Its teaching acquires a new emphasis as well. Whether there was ever a Hebrew-Aramaic edition of the book which included, at the beginning or end, this Susanna story, we cannot be sure. Some good arguments can be adduced in its favour. The main one is the presence of the story in the version of Theodotion, whose work is described by near-contemporaries as a revision of the Septuagint to bring it closer to the contemporary "original text"; certainly in the rest of the book, he agrees closely with the Massoretic text. Hippolytus about A.D. 200 reports that the Jews wished to cut Susanna out of the Scripture, which suggests that they acknowledged its former presence.<sup>6</sup> However, these and similar arguments may indicate no more than that a Hebrew (or Aramaic) text was in circulation, without necessarily proving that it was attached to the canonical book. We are certain only that it was, by the beginning of the 1st century B.C., part of the Greek version of Daniel, composed and used by the Jews of the Greek-speaking diaspora, and was also conserved, two centuries later, by Theodotion. In the latter form it was taken over by the Chris-

6. *Commentary on Daniel*, I. xiv (ed. by Lefèvre in *Sources chrétiennes* 14 [1947]).

tian church into its official Greek bible, and passed later into the Old Latin and Vulgate Latin versions. With the later doubts and denials of its canonicity we are not here concerned.

The third distinctive characteristic, then, is the new dimension, so to call it, which the story acquired by this association with the book of Daniel. Implicitly, it was classified with the other stories in Dan. 1-6, and this sheds considerable light on its understanding by Jewish readers and its religious meaning. The first chapters of the book contain two kinds of narrative. Chs. 2, 4, and 5 are examples of the wisdom bestowed on Daniel by the true God, in comparison with which all the skill and learning of the Chaldeans are as nothing. Chs. 1, 3, and 6, on the other hand, are martyr-legends: stories glorifying the fidelity of Jewish confessors to the worship and law of their God, and showing how He rewarded that fidelity by intervening miraculously to save them from destruction. It is to this latter class that Susanna belongs.

The *genre* of martyr-legends, which was to flourish so exuberantly in later Christian literature, is also abundantly represented in Judaism; and there are a few scattered but noteworthy examples in the Old Testament itself. The essence of martyrdom is heroic fidelity to the known will of God, in preference to all other goods, even one's earthly life. Such an attitude is hardly possible except to holders of a monotheistic creed, who believe in a divine revelation to men. But for such, it is always a possible situation. As we know, the situation became suddenly and agonizingly actual, for the Pious, i.e. the non-hellenizing party, in the province of Judea about 168 B.C., when the Seleucid persecution began. But it had arisen, sporadically and for a few individuals, earlier. For example, the riot in the Temple described in Jer. 26 very nearly led to the prophet's martyrdom, at the hands of his own people; and the editor of the text has added the story of another prophet of the period who actually was put to death (Jer. 26:20-23). In the Judaism of the intertestamental period the cult of the prophets led apparently to their all being looked upon as martyrs, and various apocryphal acts of their martyrdoms were composed. What distinguishes the Daniel stories is the divine intervention, by which the martyr is saved from death, and the Gentiles are converted to an acknowledgement of the supremacy of the Jewish God. This has of course the lofty religious purpose of encouraging the Jewish faithful to stand firm in their endurance of the hellenists' persecution. True, such interventions were not occurring before their eyes—the martyrs were really dying; but their newly-acquired faith in a bodily resurrection—expressed in Dan. 12:1-3, 2 Mac. 7:9, etc.—taught them that their salvation was only briefly delayed. Listening to these stories, the sufferers of the Maccabean period would understand the deliverance of the three confessors from the fiery furnace, and of Daniel from the lions' den, as the symbol and pledge of their own hoped-for deliverance from death, at the "appointed time."

Crucial in any martyr-legend is the test which the hero must face. In

Dan. 1, it is the avoidance of unclean foods. The possible sanction is not expressly indicated, but we are significantly told that Daniel determined he would not defile himself, which suggests a readiness for any sacrifice. In chs. 3 and 6—the fiery furnace and the lions' den—the challenge is explicit: they must apostatize or die. The point at issue is the essence of the Jewish religion, the exclusive worship of the one living God.

If we compare the Susanna story with these, we see that it is a martyr-legend of the same type, and its general teaching is similar. At the same time, there are some interesting differences. First, the Gentiles do not appear in it at all. The plot evolves entirely within a Jewish community, and the principle at stake is one that can be plausibly raised within that setting. The unbelieving Gentiles are here replaced by impious Jews. The rather surprising detail, that they are such eminent members of the community, elders and judges, suggests a background of internal criticism or party strife. This was already reflected in the canonical Daniel, where a sharp distinction is made between the faithful and unfaithful among the Jews themselves. The kingdom of God is not for all the children of Abraham but only for the saints. Susanna's elders may well have had a very specific reference, originally; but I doubt if we can identify the situation now.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the protagonist is a woman. This seems to complement the other stories remarkably well. In Dan. 1 the confessors are teen-age boys. In ch. 6 Daniel is a mature, perhaps elderly, man. In ch. 3, the three heroes are described repeatedly as men, Aramaic *gubrin*, Greek *ἄνδρες*; yet there was a curiously persistent tradition that they were still boys. According to Theodotion's chronology (he starts ch. 3 with "after 18 years"), they would be over 30 years old. Yet even Hippolytus, who is commenting on Theodotion's text and remarks this lapse of time, continually refers to them as *παῖδες* and even *παῖδες νεώτεροι*.<sup>8</sup> Anyway, we may observe that Susanna adds the category of women to the men and children of Daniel; and certainly she makes a heroine worthy to stand in her piety and valour beside Ruth or Judith—and is probably more attractive to us than is the latter.

Third, and most interesting: the principle at stake is not a question of worship or cult, it is a question of morals. It is true that this distinction would not be so clearly perceived by the Jews of that time as it is by us. The whole burden of the mission of prophetism, insofar as it had a "practical" aim, had been to denounce the unholy divorce between faith and life: between what God's people claimed to believe and the way they acted. The immense emphasis on the Law in the post-exilic age was fundamentally a sincere effort to respond to the prophets' demands for a life in harmony with the Lord's will. Thus creed and morals were bound tightly together,

7. In Charles' *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* I, 644, D. M. Kay is sure that the story is by a Pharisee, satirizing the Sadducees.

8. The explanation that this comes from the use of *παῖδες* as "servants", later misunderstood as "boys," is unsatisfactory. LXX calls them *παῖδες* only twice, each time with a following genitive, "of God"; otherwise they are *ἄνδρες* throughout the chapter. Similarly in Theodotion.

and all rested upon the divine command. The Kantian idea of a self-sufficient moral law was unknown to them. Categorical imperatives came directly from God, and were all contained and set forth in the Law of Moses. Thus, the three obligations of not worshipping idols, of not committing adultery, of not eating pork, were for them practically on the same level. The first is represented in Dan. 3, the second in Susanna, the third in Dan. 1 and also in the martyr-legends in 2 Mac. 6 and 7. For any one of these taboos the faithful Jew should be ready to give his life.

Nowadays we are more inclined to distinguish grades in such obligations; yet, if we take seriously the possibility of divine revelation, we dare not say that the prohibition of certain foods, for example, is not or could not be a sufficiently grave cause for which to sacrifice one's life. Eating a mouthful of pork is no more trivial an action, in itself, than is the dropping of a few grains of incense on the fire burning before the statue of an emperor; and the Christian church has always paid honour to the early martyrs who were put to death for refusing to do just that. It is not the physical act but its religious symbolism that counts. Similarly, the old Yahwist story of the Fall of Man, in Gen. 3, turns precisely on a food taboo; and those who regard such a test as childish and unworthy of a moral and just God, have not, I think, grasped the religious outlook of the Israelite author of that passage. Paradoxically, it might be put thus: the more trivial and arbitrary the command, the more apt it is as a symbol, the better fitted is its observance to express man's due relationship to God.

Susanna's test, however, is on a point of acknowledged importance, even from the sociological point of view—which, needless to say, is not the viewpoint of the author. In the ancient traditions of Israel, there was a story which would immediately come to mind by way of comparison: that of the patriarch Joseph and "Potiphar's wife." There, a man is in a similar situation, and like Susanna he resists temptation on religious grounds. The Joseph story may very well be an adaptation of part of the Egyptian *Tale of Two Brothers*, just as Susanna has various parallels and precedents in folklore. But in each, the Israelite conscience has insisted on elevating the material to the religious level. What might have been nothing but a novelistic intrigue, to be worked out in terms of human relationships, is here set in relation to the primary duty of faithfulness to God and His Law. Susanna does not think of personal preferences or aversions, nor even of the wrong that would be done to her husband. She says, "It is better for me to fall into your hands than to sin before the Lord."<sup>9</sup> Similarly Joseph: "How should I do such a great wrong as this, sinning against God?"

9. It is not a bad test of the seriousness of one's morality, to ask oneself how "sympathetic" this reaction of the heroine appears. Even in Jacobean England, a dramatist could take for granted his audience's sympathy with, and approval of, the absolute rejection of sexual sin, even at the cost of life. (That is, they paid homage to the principle; what their conduct might be is another question.) This is shown by *Measure for Measure*, in which Isabel is intended to be a sympathetic character and Claudio a coward. How completely the popular outlook has changed in our day is shown by the unpleasant effect that Isabel's firmness has on modern audiences, and the often vehement reactions of

Thus Susanna's test is a domestic one, such as does not suppose any general persecution; it is a private though none the less tragic dilemma. This in a sense increases and widens its appeal as a statement of values. Even in hellenistic times (and how much more, in subsequent ages) the affirmation that it is better to sacrifice one's life than to commit adultery was a principle whose application would be more frequently called for, than that excluding the worship of a false god.

I should like to conclude with a remark on the literary style of the passage, again using the other stories for comparison. In the first six chapters of Daniel, we find a marked formality and solemnity; these stories of "great Babylon" were composed for an educated audience, in a *milieu* which preserved a vivid idea of the protocol and manners of the Persian court. (It is doubtful if there is any genuine reminiscence of neo-Babylonian customs, except possibly the execution by fire.) The kings are majestic and superhuman; terrible in their anger, but awe-inspiring in their justice. The Jewish heroes, and likewise the "Chaldeans," show profound deference before the king, yet speak with conscious dignity. On both sides, there is formal courtesy and a lofty style. At the opposite extreme are the stories of Bel and the Dragon, the last of the Greek additions to the book. Their style is popular, almost vulgar; they have been brought down to the democratic level, for an uncultured audience impatient of long speeches, of ceremony, or of historic background. The Greek Daniel's familiar behaviour towards "King Cyrus"—he laughs aloud in derision of something the king says, and holds him back physically from walking forward—would be inconceivable in the Aramaic sections—as it would have been inconceivable at the Persian court.

If one had to determine the local origins of these stories, one could with some confidence ascribe the narratives of chs. 1-6 to a Jewish colony in Mesopotamia, and Bel and the Dragon, with equal confidence, to the Jewish urban population of Alexandria in the 2nd century B.C. These products of a popular polemic, irreverent, quick-witted, rather vulgar, show the qualities to be expected among the lower-class citizens of a bustling and sophisticated metropolis.

The style of Susanna, again, falls between the other two. It is serious and straightforward; not solemn, but not mocking, either; a trifle naive, and unselfconsciously pious. It comes from a Jewish community far more isolated from Greek influences than the one in Egypt. And this again seems to indicate southern Palestine. It is here that Susanna is at home, and her story is a lasting memorial to the faith and moral standards of the Judean populace.

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modern critics. A contemporary playwright who puts his heroine in a similar dilemma, in *The Lady's Not For Burning*, does not venture to bring in religious motives. His heroine—mediaeval in setting, 20th century in mentality—makes an arbitrary "autonomous" decision, in the best existentialist tradition.