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Those Who Are Wise:

The *Maskilim* in Daniel and the New Testament

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Introduction

Did earliest Christianity contain a group who were the equivalent of the *maskilim* (מַשְׁכִּילִים), the “wise, discerning ones” mentioned in Daniel? This question will be addressed by examining the evidence in Daniel for their nature and function, then by examining possible New Testament evidence which has been put forward to support the claim that earliest Christianity acknowledged the presence in its midst of a group who were the functional equivalents of Daniel’s *maskilim*. Since the function of the *maskilim* is defined in relation to the *harabbim* (הַרְבִּים) and the *resha'im* (רָשָׁעִים) in Daniel, a survey of the two groups will be included.

The *Maskilim* in Daniel

The *maskilim* in Dan 11:33-35; 12:3, 10 constitute a distinct group four within the covenant community during the tumultuous times leading up to “the time of the end” (Dan 11:32-35). The role and function of the *maskilim* according to Daniel include the following:

1. They “discern,” “possess insight into” matters in general (according to such passages as Amos 5:13 and Ps 14:2=53:3, Job 22:2), and specifically in Daniel (1:4; 11:33, 35; 12:3, 10) into revelations of the divine intentions. This is based on the usual meaning of the hiphil participle of the verb *sakal* (שָׁכַל) in biblical Hebrew (Koehler and Baumgartner 1990; Saeboe 1984: 824ff.).
2. They “give heed” (if *yabinu*, יָבִינוּ, in Dan 11:33 and 12:10 is taken to be hiphil); or “understand” (if the verb is taken to be gal). In either case the object of their “giving heed” or “understanding” is the apocalyptic

revelations such as those given to Daniel, and the recipients of their understanding are the *rabbim*.

3. They “instruct” (*maskil*, hiphil, participle of *sakal*) members of the covenant community in the essentials of apocalyptic revelations according to Dan 11:33). Compare Isa 52:13 where the same hiphil verb *yaskil* describes the work of the *‘ebed yahweh* on behalf of Yahweh’s people and should be translated “cause to understand” (Goldingay 1989: 279).¹
4. They “turn to righteousness” or “set right/vindicate” (hiphil of *tsadak*, צדק) the *rabbim*, Dan 12:3 (assuming that the second clause of the verse is in synonymous parallelism with the first, and that the *maskilim* is its subject).
5. They will “stumble” (*kashal*, כָּשַׁל) near the end of their career—repeated three times in Dan 11:33-35, apparently referring to the impact upon them of persecution and opposition.² Their stumbling proves to have a purifying and cleansing effect on the *rabbim* during the time of the end.
6. Finally, they will experience a restoration and reward described in Dan 12:3 by the word “shining” (hiphil of *zakar*, זָכַר) and likened to the firmament and the stars, in both their brightness and their eternity.

In summary, the *maskilim* appear in Daniel as discerners, instructors, and spiritual guides to the covenant community of the last days who are ultimately singled out by Yahweh for special reward.

The *Rabbim* in Daniel

While there is some debate about the meaning of the term *harabbim* in some passages of the Hebrew Bible, there is little doubt that in Daniel and certain other passages it designates “the main body of the ... community” (Dan 11:33, 39; 12:3; Esth 4:3; IQS6:20-23; cf. Isa 53:12; Goldingay 1989: 230, n.27a; cf. Wiklander 1974: 59-73). This is implied in Dan 11:33 “the *maskilim* shall instruct the many,” *yabiynu larabbim* (יְבִינּוּ לַרַבִּים), also in 12:3 the *maskilim* turn the *rabbim* to righteousness. The following features of the *rabbim* are singled out in Daniel:

1. They are the object of Yahweh’s saving activity (Dan 12:2).
2. They will become “refined” or “tested” (*tsaraph*, צָרַף which, probably implies suffering), “separated” (*barar*, בָּרַר), and “purified” (*laben*, לָבַן; Dan 11:35 and 12:10). Identical verbs are used in both passages, but are in a different order and are used to explain the working out of Yahweh’s will during the time of the end.
3. They are contrasted with the *resha’im* (רָשָׁעִים) the “wicked” (Dan 11:32ff.; 12:10).

4. Finally, the *rabbim* (if this anarthrous occurrence is to be taken as equivalent to *harrabbim*) who sleep in the realm of dust will wake up, some (presumably those of the *rabbim* who responded to the ministry of the *maskilim* during the time of the end) to everlasting life, some (presumably the *resha'im* among the *rabbim*) to everlasting shame (Dan 12:2).

The *Resha'im* in Daniel

Who are the *resha'im*, the evil ones? Are they outsiders to Israel, Israelites whose faulty relation to Yahweh has earned them this disparaging designation? The evidence suggests they are Israelites who have ceased to respond to Yahweh's offer of righteousness and who no longer heed His wisdom, as communicated via the *maskilim*, thus creating tension between the wicked and the rest of Israel. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible the *maskilim* and the *resha'im* are juxtaposed in strong contrast to one another.

In Ps 36:1-4, the wicked person (*rasha'*) has given up being wise (*haskil*). In Prov 21:12 the righteous *maskil* subverts the house of the *resha'im*. In both these passages and in Daniel the *resha'im* seem to be Israelites whose spiritual decay has manifested itself and who stand out by reason of their departure from the ways of the faithful.

In summary, the *maskilim* in Daniel seem to be discerners of the will of Yahweh, especially as it comes in apocalyptic format. They are also instructors to the covenant community, *harabbim*, during the time of the end. Partly by their response to the spiritual guidance from the *maskilim* the *rabbim* are polarized into two groups, the faithful and righteous ones, versus the *resha'im*, who having rejected wisdom are denied Yahweh's righteousness.

Are there Functional Equivalents to Daniel's *Maskilim* in Earliest Christianity?

Research has begun to point out that the earliest Christians may have held a self understanding which was informed by Jewish apocalypses, especially the book of Daniel. If this is so, it is reasonable to expect that traces can be found of early Christian equivalents to Daniel's *maskilim*. A brief survey and critique of this research follows.

Evidence from Mark's gospel. Sean Freyne has argued that the evangelist Mark presents the disciples as having been chosen to receive special knowledge from Jesus, thus placing them in the role of an early Christian analogy to Daniel's *maskilim* (1982: 7-23).³ Freyne makes a case for Mark's depiction of the disciples as *maskilim* following the Danielic pattern, with the focus on their reception and transmission of special knowledge. Freyne's analogy is not perfect: Daniel's *maskilim* seem to grasp the instruction while the disciples in Mark sometimes fail to understand Jesus or His message (4:10-20; 33ff.; 8:14-21). Freyne recognizes this, and suggests that Jesus shared with the disciples the mission of preaching—a term which serves as an

overall summary of his, and their, activity (see Mark 13:10; 1982: 10), but this activity is contrary to the role of the *maskilim* in the book of Daniel, where the teaching is made available only to the covenant people, the *rabbim*, not to others.

Surely a more convincing link between Daniel's *maskilim* and the disciples in Mark is the scene in 13:1-5 where Jesus delivers to a select inner group of disciples, Peter, James, John, and Andrew, special eschatological instruction in apocalyptic form. More than the other synoptic evangelists, Mark focuses on the select small group. Matthew's "his disciples come to Him privately" preserves the private nature of the setting in which kingdom secrets are conveyed, but not the inner circle of recipients. Luke introduces the same scene with the indefinite "they asked Him ..." I suggest that the early Christian equivalents of Daniel's *maskilim*, the four disciples, appear in Mark 13, but, unlike Freyne, I do not see any evidence of markan interest in their function as *maskilim*. The evangelist seems unaware of the analogy.

Evidence from the Revelation of John. The clearest case for early Christian equivalents to Daniel's *maskilim* in the New Testament has been made by Gregory Beale⁴ who argues that although the Greek equivalent of *maskilim* is not used in the Revelation, the combination of *nous* (νους, "mind," *vous* "understanding") with *sophia* (σοφία, "wisdom") in Rev 13:18 and 17:9 reflect the same meaning as the combination of the verbs *sakal* "understand, have insight" and *byn* (בין, "understand, gain insight" (1980: 163-170). "In Dan 9:22, 23; 11:33; and 12:10 the combined verbs have the same meaning as in Revelation 13:18 and 17:9 ..." (Beale 1980: 164). Further on he writes "In the light of this discussion, we conclude that the idea of eschatological insight in Daniel 2, 9, 11, and 12 is the best background against which to understand Rev 13:18 and 17:9. The combination of *sakal* and *byn* stands out most in this background" (Beale 1980: 165). Beale thus cites evidence which, unlike that from Mark's gospel which at most revealed the identity of early Christian *maskilim*, focuses on their *function*. First, however an observation on what seems to be a misapprehension on Beale's part when he goes on the state "This usage indicates that John understands Christians to be the fulfilment of the prophesied *maskilim* in Daniel 11 and 12" (1980: 165ff. Again "... John sees the true saints in 13:18 and 17:9 as the fulfilment of the predicted *maskilim* in Daniel 11:33-35 and 12:3, 10" (Beale 1980: 168). This conclusion is unfounded. There is no evidence for postulating that in Revelation the entire early Christian community is presented as the equivalent of the *maskilim* in Daniel. Rather, the Christian community in Revelation, like the end time community in Daniel, includes both faithful and unfaithful members, and both groups would be ministered to by Revelation's equivalent of Daniel's *maskilim*.

Revelation 13:18 and 17:9. Evidence will be presented here supporting the argument that a small group within the early Christian community was

understood to be the equivalent of the Danielic *maskilim*. Beale correctly sees a connection between the words *nous* and *sophia* in Rev 13:18 and 17:9 describing a last day community and their counterparts *biyn* and *sakal* in Dan 9:22, 23; 11:33; and 12:10 describing the *Maskilim*.

The combined words ... have the following ideas in common:

- (1) "Insight and understanding" in order to comprehend.
- (2) Eschatological events of tribulation.
- (3) Brought about by an evil king(s), who persecutes the saints and deceives others into acknowledging his absolute sovereignty ... (Beale 1980: 164).

But why does Beale argue that in the Revelation all Christians are the *maskilim*? The descriptions of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 may contain the key for unlocking additional information about the identity of those possessing *nous* and *sophia*. Inserted after each letter is a direct address to "the one having (*ho echon*, ο έχων) ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). These addresses are not incorporated within each of the seven letters, otherwise they would address the (particular) "church" (singular) rather than "the churches" (plural). So while each letter would be understandable to its recipient church and *aggelos* (ἄγγελος), another category of recipients was envisioned by the Seer when he wrote these insertions, a category of hearers able to extract from all seven letters some additional meaning which would give insight into the condition of the church at large. Who were these special ones "having (*ho echon*) ears?" An almost identical form of this address, "if anyone has (*ei tis echei*, εἰ τις ἐχει) ears, let him hear" occurs in Rev 13:9 at the conclusion of the description of the first of that chapter's two beasts. I suggest that in all its occurrences this expression refers to the same group later referred to in the expression "the one who has understanding (*ho echon nous*), let him calculate ..." (Rev 13:18). The identical expression occurs in Rev 17:9. Thus when the expression "here is *sophia/nous*" (wisdom/understanding) in Rev 13:18 and "here is *nous/sophia*" in Rev 17:9 is linked to "if anyone has ears" in Rev 13:9 against the background of the address following each of the seven letters to "the one having ears" it should be understood as a (possibly coded) address to the early Christian *maskilim*. These early Christian *maskilim* have the following responsibilities to the larger believing community according to Revelation 13 and 17:

1. They "hear" what the Spirit declares to the churches as a whole and discern a special message promising victory and reward to the overcomer who endures to the end; and
2. They discern the identity, nature and fate of the beast which is working to bring about the destruction of the end time community.

In other words, they are functionally identical to Daniel's *maskilim*.

Summary

Thanks to the efforts of researchers including Freyne and Beale it is possible to postulate the existence of a special group among the early Christians who served a function in relation to the new covenant people of God analogous to that of Daniel's *maskilim*. If the correctives outlined above to their research are accepted it appears that these early Christian *maskilim* provided a special ministry of discernment, instruction in eschatological matters, and spiritual guidance to the larger community of believers.

Are there modern equivalents of the *maskilim* in the believing community today? I would say that there are, and that the one to whom this volume of essays is dedicated fits the description. May he like his ancient counterparts experience the reward promised in Daniel 12 to faithful *maskilim*!

Notes

1. Note that every occurrence of *maskil* in Qumran Hebrew means "teacher."
2. A wordplay on *sakal* "discerning" and *kashal* "fall" is suggested by Goldingay, 1989: 279, n. 33c.
3. I am indebted to this article for several insights into the role of the *maskilim* in Daniel.

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