

Worms, Rotting Flesh, and Falling Bowels: The Power of Disgust in a Motif of Kingly Death in Early Jewish Literature

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Introduction

Philo of Alexandria warns his readers in no uncertain terms that one of the punishments for “impiety and lawless iniquity” is:

diseases of the body which separately afflict and devour each limb and each part, and which also rack and torture it all over with fevers, and chills, and wasting consumptions, and terrible rashes and scrofulous diseases and spasmodic convulsions of the eyes, and putrefying sores and abscesses, and cutaneous disorders extending over the whole of the skin, and disorders of the bowels and inward parts, and convulsions of the stomach...¹

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- 1 *On Rewards and Punishments* 25.143. English translation in *The Works of Philo*, updated, ed., trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 678-79.

As the list continues, it becomes clear that the wicked are not plagued by just any sickness, but by the most extreme diseases. The notion that disease can serve as a divine punishment appears early within the biblical tradition,² but we also start to see a specific motif in biblical and post-biblical literature, one in which wicked kings, both foreign and Jewish, are afflicted with disgusting diseases by God. As I will show, disgust—marked by such disorders as worms, decay, and falling bowels—serves a distinct rhetorical function, one that radically focuses the story onto issues of power. By giving proper attention to the mechanics of disgust, we can see that these stories, in addition to being about the balance of power between a heavenly God and an earthly monarch, are also about the dynamics between that monarch and his disempowered subjects. The people, in reacting with disgust to these kings, become empowered and, thus, function as an extension of God’s punishing power.

This interpretation marks a significant departure from earlier analyses of these stories, which have taken two directions. Some scholars have treated these diseases as historical records of actual illnesses. This has prompted attempts at diagnosis, leading to suggestions ranging from sexually transmitted diseases to poisoning.³ What such conjectures fail to account for, however, is the simple fact that there are a plethora of conflicting accounts about the deaths of these same kings, many of which lack any disgusting details. An attempt at historical accuracy, then, does not lie behind these deaths.⁴ Thus,

- 2 We see this most notably during the ten plagues when the Egyptians suffer festering boils on their skin (Exod 9:8-12). See also Numbers 12, in which Miriam is punished with leprosy for speaking against Moses.
- 3 This is especially the case for the death of Herod the Great. See W. R. Litchfield, “The Bittersweet Demise of Herod the Great,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 91, no. 5 (1998): 283-84; and A. T. Sandison, “The Last Illness of Herod the Great, King of Judaea,” *Medical History* 11, no. 4 (1967): 381-88. For a review of the various medical diagnoses, see Nikos Kokkinos, “Herod’s Horrid Death,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 28:2 (2002): 28-31, 34-35, 62.
- 4 It is important to bear in mind that ancient historians were not driven by the need to accurately record the historical “truth” as we are today. Instead, “the distinctions between historical ‘truth,’ verisimilitude, and outright fiction were blurred in classical history-writing, for the authors were interested in teaching morals, demonstrating a thesis, or the need to supply a past where no information existed” (Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999], 5). Emblematic of this outlook is the statement by the historian Plutarch (*Alexander* 1.2): “We are not writing history but lives.”

despite the fact that we are dealing with historical personages, the following texts are best understood as deploying a *literary* motif. Other scholars have noticed this motif, but, unlike my arguments below, have concluded that the extreme suffering functions only to indicate the great wrongdoing of kings and the divine retribution meted out against them; the people have been left out of the equation.⁵

In contrast, by focusing on disgust, I propose a new reading that understands these stories as concerned with divine *and* human power. The gradual increase both in the use and complexity of this disgust motif indicates that it appealed to writers who wanted to engage with the pressing concern of political power in the Second Temple period. The turbulent political situation, marked by a continued domination by foreign imperial powers, ultimately presented an earthly, not heavenly problem.⁶ As such, stories of disgusting

- 5 This is the case with Thomas Africa, "Worms and the Death of Kings: A Cautionary Note on Disease and History," *Classical Antiquity* 1:1 (1982): 1-17; and David J. Ladouceur, "The Death of Herod the Great," *Classical Philology* 76:1 (1981): 23-34. Ladouceur identifies the existence of "one common paradigm, at times linked with the motif of divine retribution, the more villainous the character of a man (at least in the eyes of his historian or biographer) or the greater his sinfulness, the more ghastly the manner of his death. A specific variation of this scheme is death by loathsome disease" (25). O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Death of Herod: The Narrative and Theological Function of Retribution in Luke-Acts* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) refers to these stories collectively as "Death of Tyrant type-scenes" and focuses on them primarily as conduits for examining divine retribution (35-38). Contra Edward M. Merrins, "The Deaths of Antiochus IV, Herod the Great, and Herod Agrippa I," *BSac* 61 (1904): 548-62. Merrins denies that the statement, "he was eaten by worms," was "simply a picturesque phrase...added to the narrative to intensify the description of the horror and pain of the death," but instead has some basis in actual medical fact (548).
- 6 In brief, the Second Temple period began with the people's return from the Babylonian Exile and the rebuilding of the Temple under the relatively stable rule of the Persians (536 – 333 BCE). This stability ended with Alexander the Great's invasion in 332 BCE. The Greek Empire was then split between Alexander's generals, the *diadochi*, who formed new empires. Two of them, the Ptolemies and Seleucids, battled for control of the land of Israel—within a span of twenty years control of Jerusalem passed between the Ptolemies and Seleucids an astounding seven times. Direct Greek rule ended in 164 BCE after the Maccabean revolt led to the defeat of Antiochus IV, the Seleucid king. The success of the Maccabees resulted in the creation of the Hasmonean dynasty and the reestablishment of Jewish rule, but this was not without its own turmoil as they did not always garner popular support and they often struggled to retain control of the throne. This weakened the dynasty and enabled the Romans to enter Jerusalem in 63 BCE. Roman rule

disease channel the contemplation of earthly power into the most natural of areas—the human body. While God necessarily remains part of the picture, these stories demonstrate an alternative way to theorize power dynamics in this period. Namely, ultimate power stems not only from God’s ability to punish, but also from how the people react to these punishments; God’s power is mediated and extended through the people.

Stories of Disgust

William Ian Miller notes that disgust above all is a “moral and social sentiment” that serves a societal function that, in turn, works to “confirm others as belonging to a lower status and thus in the zero-sum game of rank necessarily define oneself as higher.”⁷ In this regard, disgust is similar to humility, or the state of being low, in that it relates directly to a position on a hierarchical scale. But, if humility is the acknowledgement of this lowered state on the part of the individual, then disgust represents the perspective of the observer. The role of the disgusted observer is instrumental for understanding the following stories, because, while the power to punish unquestionably affirms God’s omnipotence over kings, we never read that God *is* disgusted. Instead, as we see in the Philo passage above, it is the people who react to the disgusting—anyone who sees or hears about the impious sufferers “will be alarmed” by the state to which the disease has incapacitated the sinner, removing all beauty, luxuriousness, and

was marked by very different types of rulers—from the long career of the client king, Herod (37 – 4 BCE), to a series of provincial governors who ruled for short periods and were, therefore, out of touch with the needs of the Judean province (there were fourteen of them in only sixty years from 6 – 66 CE). The period ended catastrophically with the Jewish revolt against the Romans and the destruction of the Second Temple (66 – 70 CE). This is obviously an over-simplified account of the Second Temple period, but it serves to show just how much the political scene continuously changed over the course of six centuries. For a more in-depth survey of this history, see *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999), 216-98; *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 276-386; and Lawrence Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1991), 33-119, 139-61.

7 William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2; x.

vigor.⁸ Thus, by focusing on the dynamics of power associated with disgust, it becomes clear that disgusting disease, aside from serving a punitive function, makes the afflicted an object of disgust. As such an object, he loses power as those who are disgusted by him gain it.

In order to demonstrate this rhetorical function of disgust, I will first identify narrative elements, such as plot points and asides, which indicate that authors and/or redactors adopted and adapted the motif consciously *because* it was considered disgusting.⁹ Having established that these stories do indeed exhibit a disgusting element, I will then focus on the dynamics between God, the king, and the people and the way the introduction of disgust alters this dynamic.

2 *Chronicles* 21

The earliest example of a disgusting death appears in the biblical text of 2 *Chronicles* 21. King Jehoram of Judah slays his rival brothers and sets up altars to lead the people of Jerusalem astray in their faith, two crimes that involve

8 *On Rewards and Punishments* 25.146.

9 My basic assumption is that disgust is a universal emotion. This was early on expressed by Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* 1872 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), 257-62, who considered it to be one of six basic emotions. Moreover, Miller holds that not only is disgust universal, but that it universally shapes culture: "Culture, independent of its precise content, strikes us as inconceivable without disgust playing some role in its construction" (11). However, this does not preclude *objects* of disgust from being culturally relative. For this reason, I highlight details within the stories that indicate that there is a disgusted reaction and, by necessity, an object of disgust. With all that said, there does seem to be strong indication that there are patterns of disgust, especially as noted within scientific studies of disgust. See, for example, Valerie Curtis and Adam Biran, "Dirt, Disgust, and Disease," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 44, no. 1 (2001): 17-31. Similar categories have also been delineated in psychological studies, such as that of Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark R. McCauley, "Disgust," in *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland (New York: Guilford, 1993), 575-94. These broad categories include such things as bodily excretions, body parts, animals, and decay, which all figure prominently in the stories from early Jewish literature. Thus, while we can assume that the particulars of our modern sense of disgust are in some respects different than those of the ancients, the following analysis hinges on the understanding that the generalities are similar.

the taking of power: the first from people, the second from God.¹⁰ For these offences, the text concludes that he did what was evil in the Lord's eyes (v. 6) and forsook the Lord (v. 10). As a result, Elijah the prophet sends him a letter warning him that he will fall victim to a "severe sickness with a disease of your bowels, until your bowels come out" (v. 15).¹¹ Jehoram pays this warning no heed and, subsequently, "the Lord struck him in his bowels with an incurable disease" (v. 18).

The image of Jehoram's bowels rotting and falling evokes what Aurél Kolnai, in the first philosophical study of disgust (1929), refers to as an object "pregnant with death."¹² In his list of disgusting objects, this is the first that Kolnai cites, namely, anything that is associated with putrefaction such as "corruption of living bodies, decomposition, dissolution, the odor of corpses, in general the transition of the living into the state of death."¹³ It is not death itself that is disgusting, but the "terminating section of life *in death*" that is.¹⁴ Thus, it would follow that the longer that this putrefaction takes, the greater the disgust. Such is the case with Jehoram. After the Lord strikes him with the disease, "In course of time, at the end of two years, his bowels came out because of the disease, and he died in great agony" (v. 19).¹⁵ While Jehoram's disease was surely marked by pain, the dominant feature of his dying is that he lingered between life and death, slowly decaying for a great length of time.

10 C. T. Begg, "Constructing a Monster: The Chronicler's *Sondergut* in 2 Chronicles 21," *Australian Biblical Review* 37 (1989): 39-40, posits that the Chronicler adds the account of fratricide (absent from the parallel account in 2 Kgs 8) based on the account in 2 Kgs 11:1 of Queen Athaliah's murder of the royal family to secure rule for herself. Since Athaliah is Jehoram's wife in 2 Chronicles, it makes sense to extend this crime to him.

11 Unless stated otherwise, biblical translations follow the NRSV.

12 Aurél Kolnai, *On Disgust*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer and Barry Smith (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2003), 85.

13 *Ibid.*, 53.

14 *Ibid.*, 54. Similarly, Miller argues that the horror of death, which is "fear-imbued disgust" (26), is felt because death is "a severance of body and soul and then, via putrefaction, of the body's integrity" (27). Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press US, 2011) also posits, "disgust recognizes the communion of death with the process of disintegration" (123).

15 The NRSV and most other translations translate *yamim shenayim* as "two years," not "two days." Cf. Judg 17:10 and 2 Sam 14:26.

The conclusion of 2 Chronicles 21 indicates that it is just such a death that disgusts the people. After his death, we are told, “He departed with no one’s regret” (v. 20). This is a confusing statement. Until this point in the story the people have followed him in his unfaithful ways; it is only the prophet Elijah that has criticized Jehoram. So why would the people suddenly not regret his death? I offer that the people have changed their attitude precisely because they are disgusted by his death. Although *vayyelekh belo hemda* is often translated and interpreted to mean that no one cared about his death,¹⁶ the phrase literally means, “and he went without desire” (v. 20). *Hemda*, “desire,” in the Bible often relates to *physical* attributes that can be seen or experienced.¹⁷ For example, in 1 Kings 20, the king of Aram tells King Ahab that his servants will raid his house and “whatever is desirable in your eyes, it will be put in their hands to take away” (v. 6). The implication is that this will be his silver and gold and his wives and children.¹⁸ Thus, the statement about Jehoram’s death reflects the opposite of physical beauty—*bodily* disgust. In other words, Jehoram’s disease has made him so physically disgusting that the people can feel no desire towards him. Neither do they want to bury him with those kings that they honored, so “they buried him in the city of David, but not in the tombs of the kings” (v. 20).¹⁹ Thus, while Jehoram himself never expresses humility, the final act on the part of the people—namely, denying him royal burial—establishes their power as they humble him, placing him both literally and figuratively outside of the realm of kings.

The Chronicler depicts the burial of two more sick kings as being placed apart from the other royal burials by the people. King Joash, Jehoram’s grandson, is guilty of killing a priest, who, as he dies, cries out to God to avenge his death. God listens and causes Joash to lose a battle, leaving him severely wounded. His servants then murder him in his bed (2 Chr 24). Like Jehoram he is not

16 The differences in translation testify to the uncertain meaning of this phrase. While the NRSV uses, “he departed with no one’s regret,” other translations include the RSV, “his passing went unsung,” and the NJPS, “He departed unpraised.” The last translation follows the LXX, which uses οὐκ ἐπαίνω, “not with praise.”

17 While *hemda* can also mean “delight,” “desire” is the primary definition given in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), s.v. חֵמְדָּה. 2 Chr. 21:20 is given as an example and translated, “without desire.”

18 This is my own translation. See also Ezek 24:16 and Isa 53:2.

19 The people also do not kindle a fire in his honor as they had done for his fathers (v. 19).

buried in the tombs of the kings (v. 25). It is noteworthy that the word used for his wounds is *maḥaluym* (v. 25),²⁰ which is unique to this passage and is very similar to the word used for the diseases, *taḥalu'im*, that struck down Jehoram (2 Chr 21:19). Could it be that disgust at these wounds similarly figured into Joash's separate burial?

The answer to this question is much more explicit for another king, Uzziah. In 2 Chronicles 26, Uzziah makes the mistake of giving an offering to the Lord in the Temple. Because this act is reserved for priests, Uzziah is guilty of usurping their power and God strikes him with a skin disease. He must live in a separate house as his son rules in his stead (vv. 20-21). When he eventually dies, "they buried him near his ancestors in the burial field that belonged to the kings, for they said, 'He is leprous'" (v. 23).²¹ Here the disease is clearly the reason for his separate burial. While biblical law instructs that lepers be kept apart in life,²² there is no mention of isolation in burial practices. In other words, there is something about this disease that has empowered the people to give Uzziah an isolating, and less esteemed, burial.

I would argue that it is not a fear of contagion or ritual impurity that motivates the people—the dead kings already buried in the tombs are surely not at risk for either from Uzziah—but disgust at the diseased body of the king.²³ As Miller puts it, "There is nothing quite like skin gone bad; it is in fact the marrings of skin which make much of the substance of the ugly and

20 According to *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. מַחֲלָיִים means "sickness, suffering (caused by wounds)."

21 Although many translators use the word "leprosy" to translate *tsara'at*, we should not assume that this disease has the same symptoms as modern day leprosy. In fact, *tsara'at* does not correspond to any one single disease, as it includes human skin diseases and growths that affect houses and fabric such as mold, fungus, and mildews. See Rachel Adler, "Those Who Turn Away Their Faces: *Tzaraat* and Social Stigma," in *Healing and the Jewish Imagination*, ed. William Cutter (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub, 2007), 142.

22 The laws for dealing with skin diseases are found in Leviticus 13-14. See, especially, Lev 13:46, which reads, "He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." For other instances of isolating the *living* leper, see Num 5:2 and 12:14.

23 The spread of the disease itself is hardly a concern in the Bible and, instead, ritual uncleanness from contact with the leper is the main concern (see Leviticus 13-14 where the priest freely examines the affected person). Dead bodies cannot be made unclean as they are already unclean (e.g., Num 19:11).

monstrous.”²⁴ This is echoed in other biblical examples of skin disease. *Tsara’at*, the skin disease that plagues Uzziah, is relegated to his forehead, a disease which is described in Leviticus 13 as a “reddish-white disease spot” (v. 42). Because a white spot alone is not impure (Lev 13:4), the addition of the reddish color suggests raw flesh.²⁵ Similarly, when Miriam falls ill with leprosy, Aaron prays, “Let her not, I pray, be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother’s womb” (Num 12:12).²⁶ There is something about this skin disease, therefore, that involves putrefaction of the flesh. As such, the sufferer of *tsara’at* is treated like one who has come into contact with a dead body. The degree and duration of the impurity is the same as well as the ways of contamination and the purification rites necessary to remove it.²⁷ Thus, throughout the biblical text, there is such an association between skin diseases and corpses that it is as if the living *tsara’at* victim is considered as one who is partially dead.²⁸

In this regard, Uzziah’s skin can be understood as putrefying just like Jehoram’s rotting bowels. Similarly, just as Jehoram slowly decayed for two years, Uzziah lingers between life and death; he lives with his skin disease long enough to necessitate his removal into a separate house and the abdication of his kingship to his son (2 Chr 26:21). Their similar burials, then, reflect a similar reaction of disgust by the people.

24 Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 52.

25 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 801.

26 Ibid., 819. Milgrom also makes a similar association between decay and skin disease based on Job 18:13, which reads, “His skin is eaten away, death’s firstborn consumes his limbs.” Since Job suffered from boils, a form of skin disease (Leviticus 18-23), Milgrom’s assumption is that skin disease is responsible for the consumption of skin and limbs.

27 Ibid. Contamination can occur both by direct contact and by dwelling in the same abode. Purification for both requires animal blood that comes into contact with cedar, hyssop, scarlet thread, and fresh water (compare Lev 14:4-7 with Num 19:1-13).

28 Ibid. Milgrom agrees: “the common denominator of all these skin ailments described in Lev 13 is that the body is wasting away.” As such, they are “reminders of the disintegration of the corpse and the onset of death.” This, then, is the reason they are impure. This understanding is also echoed by Adler, who writes, “entities with *tzaraat* seem to have in common that their wholeness is being compromised. They are being eaten into, decayed, caused to come apart” (142).

The linking of divine disease to dishonorable burial is the work of the Chronicler, because the kings' crimes, deaths, and burials all differ in the parallel accounts of 2 Kings. Joash does not kill a priest and, consequently, is not punished by God, has no wounds, and is buried in the kingly fashion (2 Kings 12). Uzziah (called Azariah) does in fact suffer from leprosy in 2 Kings 15, but his burial is typical. And, finally, while Jehoram in 2 Kings 8 is similarly guilty of doing "what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (v. 18), there is no mention of fratricide. His crime, therefore, has less to do with seizing power and, in turn, he does not die a disgusting death. Instead, all we read of his death is that he "slept with his ancestors, and was buried with them in the city of David" (v. 24).²⁹ The Chronicler has clearly made changes to all three stories.³⁰ In doing so, he highlights God's power to smite these kings, but he has also created a pattern in which God's punishment leads to illness and that illness leads to a separation in burial.³¹ In between these two acts, I would argue, is the element of disgust, a disgust that is signaled by the peoples' desire to remove the disgusting object from their presence (and that of the good kings' graves). As

- 29 The Chronicler makes other changes to the Jehoram narrative, such as the letter from Elijah that predicts Jehoram's death. It is also significant that the Chronicler omits from Jehoram's death the usual conclusionary statement regarding the king's reign, the citation of his deeds in the annals of the kings, and the note that "he rested with his fathers" (e.g. 2 Chr 9:29-31; 12:15-16; and 26:22-23). For two attempts at understanding why the Chronicler changes 2 Kings' account of Jehoram, see Louis Jonker, "Textual Identities in the Books of Chronicles: The Case of Jehoram's History," in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography: Biblical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Gary Knoppers and Kenneth Ristau (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 197-217; and C. T. Begg, "Constructing a Monster," 35-51. Jonker proposes that the Chronicler's Jehoram narrative reflects "a Second Temple Jerusalemite community in the process of negotiating a new identity" (211), whereas Begg maintains that the editorial changes were based on other Deuteronomistic materials.
- 30 Elsewhere the Chronicler also uses death, or the lack thereof, to make ideological statements. At the end of 2 Chronicles, the deaths of the last four kings of Judah are not recorded. For explanations of why the Chronicler might have done this, see Mark J. Boda, "Identity and Empire, Reality and Hope in the Chronicler's Perspective," in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography: Biblical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Gary Knoppers and Kenneth Ristau (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 249-72.
- 31 There is an exception to this pattern in the account of King Ahaz in 2 Chr 28. He is guilty of apostasy, but God does not punish him. His burial is in Jerusalem, but not in the tombs of the kings (v. 27).

a result, they divest the disgusting king of any sort of royal legacy; the people finish what God has started.

The Prayer of Nabonidus

Among the Dead Sea Scrolls there is another early example of a disgusting affliction in the *Prayer of Nabonidus* (4QPrNab).³² The fragment of the extant text reveals how Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king (556-539 BCE), was smitten with “a bad disease”³³ for seven years on God’s command (4Q242 frgs. 1+2a 1.2).³⁴ Again, we have a scenario in which God punishes a king for his sins with a severe and long-enduring disease (line 3).³⁵ Although the details about the disease are limited, the text also implies that there is something abhorrent about this disease, for Nabonidus reveals that as a result of his affliction he was “banished far from men” (line 3).³⁶ As with Jehoram and Uzziah, this disease lasts for a long period of time and makes him unacceptable as a king.

- 32 Although the scroll dates to the second half of the first century BCE, the tradition most likely is at least as early as the fourth century BCE as it served as a source for Daniel 4. See J. T. Milik, “Priere de Nabonide et autres ecrits d’un cycle de Daniel,” *RB* 63 (1956): 407-11.
- 33 The word translated as disease is *shelhin*, which appears as the boils in the sixth plague in Egypt in Exod 9:8-11 and Deut 28:27 (as well as one of Job’s afflictions in Job 2:7). Florentino García Martínez, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English, Second Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 289, refers to this as a “malignant inflammation.” Geza Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English, Revised* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 614, refers to the affliction as an “evil ulcer.”
- 34 This translation is taken from J. J. Collins, “Prayer of Nabonidus,” in *Qumran Cave 4.XVII: Parabiblical Texts, Part 3*, ed. J. C. VanderKam (DJD 22; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 83-93.
- 35 While the passage does not explicitly say that Nabonidus is punished for his sins, I take the fact that the Jew ends up pardoning Nabonidus’ sins as implying that they were a cause of the illness. We also learn that during the time that he was stricken he prayed to idols. It is unclear whether this was the cause of the original affliction or only the reason it lasted for seven years.
- 36 Admittedly, this is a reconstruction of a lacuna taken from García Martínez, *Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*. It hinges on the existence of the preposition *min*, “from.” In contrast, Collins fills in the lacuna to read, “but from the time that God set his face on me.” See the discussion of this in Peter W. Flint, “The Daniel Tradition at Qumran,” in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, ed. John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint (Boston: Brill, 2001), 336. However, in fragment 4, line 1 there is the statement “apart from them,” which supports the fact that Nabonidus was

A parallel account is found in Daniel 4 in the story of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar who is punished for his arrogance with an animal-like madness that drives him far from people to live like an animal in the fields.³⁷ However, when the affliction is a physical, not mental, disease as in the *Prayer*, the king's removal from society only makes sense if the people are the ones to drive him away. It would seem that both stories are responding to and attempting to explain Babylonian source material, which reveals that Nabonidus was mysteriously absent from Babylon for a number of years, but does not mention a reason.³⁸ It is significant for our tracing of the disease motif, therefore, that the author of the *Prayer of Nabonidus* purposely chose an evil, physical disease to explain why Nabonidus was unfit for life among the people.

Although the end of the story is missing, the fact that the narrative is told from a first person point of view would indicate—at least for the purposes of the narrative—that he recovered from the disease. This occurs after he meets with one of the Judean exiles, prays to God, and has his sins pardoned. Although the obvious moral of this story is that faith in God heals, the author's implicit message appears to be that without his people, Nabonidus is without power. Only by acknowledging God and ridding himself of the disease will Nabonidus again be accepted by his people, return to Babylon, and regain his own power.

Second Maccabees

While these first two stories are rather brief, in 2 Maccabees 9 we have an extensive account of the disgusting death of Antiochus IV (c. 215 – 164 BCE),

not with his people. Furthermore, the fact that Nabonidus is in Teima and not Babylon similarly suggests that he had to leave his people.

- 37 In Daniel 4, a voice from heaven explicitly states, "You shall be driven away from human society and your dwelling shall be with the animals of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like oxen and seven times shall pass over you, until you have learned that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he will" (v. 31).
- 38 For a review of the relationship between the *Prayer of Nabonidus*, Daniel 4, and the Babylonian *Nabonidus Chronicle*, see John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 216-19; and Flint, "Daniel Tradition at Qumran," 332-38. The assumption is that Daniel's author replaced Nabonidus with the better-known Nebuchadnezzar, who directly affected the Jewish nation when he exiled them and destroyed the Temple in the sixth century BCE. Cf. Matthias Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 63-73, who highlights the differences between the two texts.

the Seleucid king infamous for his religious persecutions of the Jewish people. It begins with Antiochus bent on revenge over the defeat of his general by the Jewish rebel, Judah Maccabee, but God halts him “with a pain in his bowels for which there was no relief and with sharp internal tortures” (v. 5). It is explicitly stated in numerous verses that it is Antiochus’ arrogance that brings about his downfall, for he has a “superhuman arrogance” and imagines “that he could weigh the high mountains in a balance” (v. 8).³⁹ In order to counter this arrogance, God continues to afflict Antiochus so that his body “swarmed with worms, and while he was still living in anguish and pain, his flesh rotted away” (v. 9). The emphasis on *zōntos*, “still living,” is important given Kolnai’s focus on the disgustingness of decay within the living. As with the illnesses of Jehoram and Nabonidus, Antiochus’ sickness lasts for a length of time and appears to worsen in stages—first, the internal pain and then the worms and rotting flesh.

The worms arouse disgust for a multitude of reasons. On the simplest level it is because they are inherently connected to the rotting flesh, the exemplar of putrefaction. By feeding on what is disgusting, worms are disgusting as well.⁴⁰ But the worms are also distinct from the rotting flesh, and, indeed, it is the fact that the worms are very much alive that provokes another level of disgust; because “what the animals remind us of, the ones that disgust us—insects, slugs, worms, rats, bats, newts, centipedes—is life, oozy, slimy, viscous, teeming, messy, uncanny life.”⁴¹ In other words, the contrast between Antiochus’ rotting flesh and the thriving worms further highlights the fact that Antiochus is alive *in death* all the more so because creatures are alive *in his death*.

That these worms are more alive than he is further triggers the realization that Antiochus’ “discrete individual identity is insignificant, giving way to swarms, nests, hives, infestations,” so that “the exalted human will become one with the worm.”⁴² While this eventuality normally occurs unseen after death, with Antiochus it is apparent for all to witness, leading to a deeper level of disgust, a form of disgust tinged with fear. It is not only the immediate threat of something like a fierce beast that is dangerous, but “objects that

39 See also 9:4 and 9:7.

40 Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 123, writes “Thus maggots, worms, roaches, flies in the swarms and masses needed to cleanse the amount of filth expelled by us and our fellow animals—they too are disgusting.”

41 Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 49.

42 Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 123.

disgust pose long-term threats that are all the worse for being absolutely inexorable."⁴³ Worms, "as mindless life-forms that invade and complete the process of disintegration,"⁴⁴ cannot be stopped and underscore that disgust is not merely about revulsion, but about recognizing the inevitability of death, even for mighty kings, and the fear that that realization engenders.

After the worms, the "stench" comes (v. 9). The result, not surprisingly, is that "because of the stench the whole army felt revulsion at his decay. Because of his intolerable stench no one was able to carry the man who a little while before had thought that he could touch the stars of heaven" (vv. 9-10). Here it is explicit within the text that his disease evokes reactions of disgust in those around him, so much so that they cannot bear to be near him. The emphasis on stench—the word *osmēs* is used three times in the span of four verses—further punctuates this story with the rhetoric of disgust. In studies of disgust, much attention has been paid to the senses, because, as opposed to other emotions, "disgust cannot dispense with direct reference to the sensory processing of its elicitors."⁴⁵ Although all of the senses can react to an object with disgust, there is a consensus among theorists of disgust that smell is one of the primary senses, if not *the* primary one, that is the most easily offended:

The sensation of disgust rests precisely on this distinction: in order to experience something as disgusting, it must first have entered—however partially—our sense of smell or taste; it has to be "taken in" or "consumed" before being judged as totally unenjoyable.⁴⁶

Thus, it is the intimate and potent contact with Antiochus' decay as experienced through smell that repulses the people. Not only can they not be around him, but, presumably, their distance prevents them from serving him as king. In a

43 Ibid., 122.

44 Ibid.

45 Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 36.

46 Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003). While Menninghaus equates taste with smell, for Miller smell and touch, not taste, are the core senses that experience disgust, because if something smells or feels bad, then we do not put it in our mouths (52, 60-79). Similarly, for Kolnai the sense of smell is the primary register of disgust for the simple fact that we smell many more things than we put in our mouths (48-52).

vicious, but just, cycle, power begets arrogance, which then leads to disgusting disease, which finally ends with loss of power.

However, in the case of Antiochus the disgusting disease also engenders humility—"And when he could not endure his own stench, he uttered these words, 'It is right to be subject to God; mortals should not think that they are equal to God'" (v. 12). Miller's study is further applicable to the way disgust functions in the end of this story: "Another's contempt for or disgust with us will generate shame or humiliation in us if we concur with the judgment of our contemptibility, that is, if we feel the contempt is justified."⁴⁷ It is significant, then, that Antiochus, as much as he disgusts others, also disgusts himself. Through his self-disgust he confirms the disgust of others and recognizes that his power is illusory and God's power is the real power.

Following this realization, Antiochus utters a vow to the Lord, which repeals the laws he instituted to persecute the Jews (vv. 13-17) and concludes with the promise that he "would become a Jew and would visit every inhabited place to proclaim the power of God" (v. 17). Part of recognizing God's power, then, is recognizing God's people and granting them renewed power as well. It is also significant that a letter to the Jewish community immediately follows this vow to God. Antiochus begs the people to treat his successor, Antiochus V, with goodwill (v. 26). Taken together, Antiochus directly addresses both the one who causes the disgust and the ones who are disgusted, thereby acknowledging that God *and* the people are now more powerful than him.

Although there are many ancient accounts of Antiochus IV's death in both Jewish and non-Jewish sources, this is the only one that attributes his death to a disgusting, physical disease. Even within the same text of 2 Maccabees there is a remarkably different account of Antiochus' death, one in which he is stoned and then beheaded while raiding a temple.⁴⁸ Again we have what appears to be a deliberate move on the part of an author to color a king's death with disgusting details in order to make clear the true hierarchy of power—God and God's people over an ungodly king.⁴⁹

47 Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, x.

48 See 2 Macc 1:13-17. Other early sources for Antiochus' death include: 1 Macc 6:1-17, Polybius 31.9, Diodorus Siculus 31.18a, *Antiquities* 12.354-59, Apian, *Syr.* 11.66. While some of these do report that Antiochus died from illness, it is rooted in mental, not physical, disease.

49 It has been suggested that the author of 2 Maccabees drew on the Nabonidus tradition and applied it to Antiochus. See Doron Mendels, "A Note on the Tradition

Josephus

By the first century CE, the disgust motif appears to have gained a secure foothold and we see it deployed on numerous occasions by the Jewish historian, Josephus (37– ca. 100 CE), whose disgusting accounts are not only manifold, but even more detailed than the ones we have seen. For instance, when Josephus retells the account of King Jehoram in his *Antiquities*,⁵⁰ he imbues the disease with even more pronounced disgusting elements:

He should himself die of a distemper in his bowels, with long torments, his bowels falling out by the violence of the inward rottenness of the parts, insomuch that, though he see his own misery, he shall not be able at all to help himself, but shall die in that manner. (9.101)⁵¹

While the earlier account in 2 Chronicles 21 stated that Jehoram's bowels came out, Josephus has elaborated that it was because they were violently rotting. Furthermore, Josephus makes it clear that Jehoram understands his own disgusting state in that "he saw his own bowels fall out" (9.103). However, unlike Antiochus, whose recognition of his disgusting state leads to humility, Jehoram makes no amends in regards to his power. Thus, the people "abused his dead body" and "buried him like a private man" (9.104). Jehoram's disgusting disease has not only ended his life, but allowed the people to strip him of his royal stature, indicating that Josephus has read 2 Chronicles 21 in the same way that we have.

According to Josephus, a disgusting death also befalls Aristobulus I (reigned 104 – 103 BCE).⁵² The fact that he was the first Hasmonean king inherently

of Antiochus IV's Death," *IEJ* 31 (1981): 53-56.

50 For a thorough comparison of Josephus' account with that of the Bible, see Christopher Begg, "Joram of Judah According to Josephus (*Ant.* 9.45, 95-104)," *JSQ* 1:4 (1993-1994): 323-39.

51 Translations of Josephus are taken from William Whiston, trans., *Josephus: The Complete Works* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998).

52 This account of Aristobulus appears both in *Jewish War* 1.70-84 and *Antiquities* 13.301-19. Unfortunately, no other account of Aristobulus' death exists to help us determine the extent of Josephus' use of the disgusting motif, but, as the following analysis demonstrates, many of the abovementioned components of the motif are here present.

involves issues of power as he transitions “the government into a kingdom” and puts a diadem on his own head (*Ant.* 13.301). This political change garners strong, negative reactions from his family and so, like King Jehoram, he kills his family members. After killing his brother to maintain his own power, he immediately repents. As with Antiochus, repentance does nothing to affect the disease, and Aristobulus becomes deathly ill as his “entrails were corrupted by his intolerable pain, and he vomited blood” (*Ant.* 13.314).

While the focus on entrails is, by this point, a familiar aspect of the disgusting disease motif, this is the first time that blood has been highlighted. Miller’s understanding of bodily fluids is, once again, helpful:

Dangerous bodily excreta are benign if in their proper place inside the body...Saliva in the mouth, snot in the nose, blood in the veins, feces in the colon, urine in the bladder are basically not present, being safely where they belong as long as attention is not called to them.⁵³

Instead, when they exit the body, a “magical transformation”⁵⁴ takes place and they become disgusting. This transformation has clearly occurred when Aristobulus’ blood exits from his body via his mouth (it is not even spilled from the more natural veins). Furthermore, he clearly vomits up a lot of blood as indicated by the fact that one of his servants must carry it away (13.314). It is the blood, in turn, which functions as the turning point in the story. The servant slips and spills some of the blood on the very spot on which Aristobulus’ brother had been murdered. In response, a group of spectators, thinking he did this on purpose, cry out. Although it is not clear whether their cries are motivated by disgust, their strong reaction to the scene rouses Aristobulus’ fear. This, in turn, causes him to call out to God to bring on a sudden death:

And now, O thou most impudent body of mine, how long wilt thou retain a soul that ought to die in order to appease the ghost of my brother and my mother? Why dost thou not give it all up at once? And why do I deliver up my blood, drop by drop, to those whom I have so wickedly murdered? (13.317)

53 Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 97.

54 Ibid.

This lament clearly references the horror, as seen in the other stories, that one will be alive *in death*; while there is no mention of putrefaction, Aristobulus acknowledges that part of him, his soul, is dead, but that his body lingers on. After uttering these words, he dies. Thus, while his death may have been inevitable, it is the people's outrage that alerts him to his own gruesome state and hastens his desire for death. The people once again play a powerful part alongside God in ending the king's power.

Josephus' most disgusting depiction, however, is reserved for the death of Herod the Great (74 – 4 BCE), the Judean king who is remembered as villainous in Jewish and Christian sources alike. In brief, Herod ruthlessly murdered many of his family members, including his beloved wife, and persecuted various groups of Jews, doing away with any rival factions. He is remembered as "the most barbarous of all tyrants."⁵⁵ He is specifically accused of torturing the bodies of his subjects,⁵⁶ which seems to correlate with what Josephus says of his death:

Now Herod's distemper greatly increased upon him after a severe manner, and this by God's judgment upon him for his sins; for a fire glowed in him slowly, which did not so much appear to the touch outwardly, as it augmented his pains inwardly; for it brought upon him a vehement appetite to eating, which he could not avoid to supply with one sort of food or other. His entrails were also ex-ulcerated, and the chief violence of his pain lay on his colon; an aqueous and transparent liquor also had settled itself about his feet, and a like matter afflicted him at the bottom of his belly. Nay, further, his privy-member was putrefied, and produced worms; and when he sat upright, he had a difficulty of breathing, which was very loathsome, on account of the stench of his breath, and the quickness of its returns; he had also convulsions in all parts of his body, which increased his strength to an insufferable degree.⁵⁷

55 *War* 2.86.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ant.* 17.168-69. See a similar description in *War* 1.656.

This is by far the most detailed description of illness⁵⁸ that we have encountered, which has led many scholars to attempt to medically diagnose this disease.⁵⁹ However, even if there is some historical truth to Herod's plight, it is more productive to view this death in the same way that we have viewed the others, especially because Herod's disease incorporates elements of the previous examples. He has the internal decay, falling bowels, worms, and stench (as well as new ailments such as extraneous bodily fluid and convulsions). Again, the disease is divinely ordained on account of the king's sins. And, again, it is a disgusting disease that slowly progresses so that Herod is living in death.⁶⁰

Despite the large number of disgusting symptoms, neither those around him nor Herod himself are disgusted.⁶¹ Furthermore, Herod appears, at least to his mind, to maintain power after the disease strikes. On his deathbed, he calls his sister and her husband to him and acknowledges, "I know well enough that the Jews will keep a festival upon my death, however, it is in my power to be mourned" (*War* 1.660). Thus, he orders a group of Jews to be imprisoned and killed upon his death, so that the whole country will mourn them and, thereby, mourning will occur on the day of his death. It seems that he has learned the lesson of Jehoram's death—that while God's punishment will rob him of his life, it is the peoples' lack of mourning that will adversely affect his power, even after his death. The great irony of this final act becomes apparent to the reader as the one thing he is sure of, his power, is nullified when, after his death, the men are freed.⁶² The decay of his body, therefore, appears to both mirror and

58 Ladouceur, "Death of Herod," 28-29, attributes the complexity of the account in *Antiquities* to Josephus' use of Thucydides' account of the plague to depict Herod's disease.

59 See n. 3 above.

60 We first read of Herod's illness in *Ant.* 17.146 in relation to his aging and only periodically are we told of its progression as it is intermingled with the rest of the narrative that deals with the issue of Herod's successors. Even the above, cited description of his disease comes only half way through the account of his dying. See Allen, *Death of Herod*, 53-56 for a discussion of this.

61 Herod, however, does deplore his condition (*Ant.* 17.179) and tries to kill himself in order to "prevent a natural death" (*War* 1.662). Perhaps he experiences what Miller terms "fear-imbued disgust," which is characterized by the inability to flee from the disgusting object, "because it is frequently something that has already gotten inside of you or takes you over and possesses you, there is often no distinct other to fight anyway. Thus the nightmarish quality of no way out, no exit, no way to save oneself except by destroying oneself in the process" (*Anatomy of Disgust*, 26).

62 *Ant.* 17.193.

signal the decay of his power. Herod never experiences humility, but, as in Jehoram's case, the lack of grief at his death signifies his lowly stature.

This disgusting death is made all the more vivid in a comparison with the description of Herod's death in Matthew 2:19, which, in the course of Jesus' larger infancy narrative, simply reports, "when Herod was dead."⁶³ It appears that Josephus has designated the most disgusting of diseases for the most powerful of kings.⁶⁴ Thus, the story of Herod, which is notable for both its extreme depiction of disgusting details, but also for its lack of anyone experiencing disgust, suggests that Josephus' use of this motif is so firmly established that merely inserting a description of a death full of rotting flesh, worms, or falling bowels would signal to the reader a distinct rhetoric about power within the story. In other words, any signs of a disgusting death have come to signify the ultimate loss of power of an evil king and the rise in the power of those who oppose him.

The surest sign that Josephus has incorporated disgust into his work in order to disempower a ruler is the use of this motif against his personal enemy, Catullus, the governor of Cyrene. Catullus was not only guilty of attempting to persecute the Jews of his city, but he also specifically made an accusation against Josephus to the Roman emperor (*War* 7.448). As a result, "his very entrails were so corroded, that they fell out of his body, and in that condition

63 The author of Matthew appears to also be using Herod's death to make a point. In this case, the verse parallels with the description of Pharaoh's death in Exod 4:19, emphasizing that Moses is a typology for Jesus. This, therefore, highlights the degree to which history could be recorded in variant ways to suit different agendas. See W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 270-71. For a further comparison regarding Herod's death, it should be noted that Plutarch read Nicolaus of Damascus, Herod's personal court historian, and was interested in Herod, but does not include Herod in his list of those who died from worms. See Africa, "Worms and the Death of Kings," 10 n. 63.

64 For the most part, Josephus uses the records of Herod's court historian, Nicolaus of Damascus, but this does not explain the negative, and even hostile, portrayal of Herod by Josephus; thus "it has been speculated that it was not another author but Josephus' own attitude and unwritten tradition that explain the nature of his Herodian books" (Mark Toher, "Nicolaus and Herod in the *Antiquitates Judaicae*," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 101 [2003]: 430). In contrast, Africa, "Worms and the Death of Kings," 11, attributes the description of Herod's death to anti-Herodian writers, who borrowed imagery from the death of Antiochus IV, so that Josephus "had no compunction about sweeping aside the whitewashed account of Nicolaus in favor of the lurid tales of Herod's foes."

he died. Thus he became as great an instance of Divine Providence as ever was, and demonstrated that God punishes wicked men" (*War* 7.451-53). While Josephus is very clear that the death was a sign of God's power, the fact that this episode concludes the *War* allows Josephus to quite literally have the last word. By bearing witness to Catullus' disgusting death, he has established himself as the victor over his enemy.

Acts 12

A disgusting death also befalls the last Jewish king, Herod Agrippa (10 BCE – 44 CE), in the Book of Acts. Like many of the other kings, Herod Agrippa is guilty of arrogance; when his flatterers equate him with God, he does not refute them. As a result, "immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died" (Acts 12:23). In contrast, the account of Herod Agrippa's death in Josephus' *Antiquities* attributes his death to a severe and violent pain in his belly (19.346).⁶⁵ Although this is also an internal disease, there is no disgusting element depicted. This suggests that both traditions reflect an actual illness that caused Herod's death,⁶⁶ but it is clear that the author of Acts has made a discernible shift toward the disgusting. This is not surprising given Herod's more negative portrayal overall in Acts.

While Herod in both accounts is guilty of failing to counter the peoples' assertion of his divinity, the Herod of Acts is also guilty of imprisoning Peter and executing James the son of Zebedee. He is clearly an enemy of the early Christians. Furthermore, the story in Acts 12 begins with the narration that "Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon" (v. 20). Thus, Herod only interacts with the people to settle a dispute and so the peoples' praise of Herod sounds hollow, as if they extol him just to pacify his anger.⁶⁷ The dissonance between the people and the king, therefore, makes for the perfect setting for a disgusting death.

In contrast, the Herod of Josephus' account is viewed largely in a positive light. This Agrippa I did much for the people, most notably removing taxes, reinforcing the walls of Jerusalem, and insuring the rights and privileges of

65 For a comparison of these two accounts, see Allen, *Death of Herod*, 6-7 and 66-74.

66 Allen, *ibid.*, 12, posits that "there is probably some historical kernel underlying the tradition shared by Josephus and Luke—e.g., Agrippa taking ill in some public setting in Caesarea and dying as a result of the illness."

67 *Ibid.*, 72.

Jews, especially those in the Diaspora. Furthermore, his reaction to his illness portrays him in a positive light as he immediately experiences humility when he realizes his error, saying:

I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. I am bound to accept of what Providence allots, as it pleases God. (*Ant.* 19.347)

Not only does Agrippa recognize God's power, but he affirms God's punishment and accepts it resolutely. However, when the people hear this they sit in sackcloth and beseech God to save him and "all places were also full of mourning and lamentation" (19.349). Thus, the peoples' positive relationship with Agrippa and their reluctance to accept his fate would make a poor setting for a disgusting death.

These parallel accounts of Herod Agrippa's death, therefore, further demonstrate that Josephus made active choices to describe a ruler's death as disgusting or not. Just as he chose to fell Herod with the most disgusting of ailments, he chose to allow Herod Agrippa to die from a generic stomach illness. The author of Acts, on the other hand, has added worms into the picture, revealing that the disgusting motif had spread to early Christian writers.⁶⁸

68 It should be noted that there are a number of stories in non-Jewish sources that also use the disgusting death motif. For example, there is Plutarch's description of the death of Sulla, in which "the flesh changed into worms too quickly, and no washing away could keep pace with their numbers" (*Sulla* 36.3). Similarly, Herodotus' account of the death of Pheretima, the Queen of Cyrene, reads, "No sooner had she returned to Egypt after her revenge upon the people of Barca, than she died a horrible death, her body seething with worms while still alive" (*Histories* 4.205). Although he lived in the second century CE and post-dates our discussion, Pausanias' depiction of the death of Cassander also fits the disgusting motif: "But he himself was not to come to a good end. He was filled with dropsy, and from the dropsy came worms while he was yet alive" (*Description of Greece*, 9.7.2). For other comparable descriptions, see the list in Allen, *Death of Herod*, 17-20. Examples such as these point to the widespread existence of this motif, which most likely influenced the Jewish use of it. In fact, Africa, "Worms and the Death of Kings," 9, speculates that Jason of Cyrene, the author of 2 Maccabees, drew directly from Herodotus' story.

Conclusion

This article has delved into disgust in many of its forms, everything from decaying body parts to bodily fluids to stench to worms. While an examination of the narratives from early Jewish literature makes it clear that these descriptions were indeed disgusting, as evinced by the reactions of the people in the stories, the additional survey of theories of disgust has helped us to understand *why* and to *what* end. In particular, the bodily fluids, worms, and decay elicit a reaction through the senses, because there is something unnatural and uncontrollable to them; what is supposed to be inside is on the outside; what is supposed to be a singular human is now becoming many creatures; and what is supposed to be living is full of death. The fact that the disgusting has oozed from the bodies of the powerful makes them objects of disgust. As such, the scale of power shifts.

Recounting any sort of death at the hands of God would work to demonstrate God's ultimate power over kings, but the inclusion of disgust does important rhetorical work. Disgust sharpens the focus in the story onto the disgusting person and, thereby, onto the disgusted people. The conclusion of each story emphasizes the point that it is not just God who comes out on top in terms of power, but also the people. It is their disgusted reaction, therefore, that denies Jehoram his proper burial, forces Nabonidus to flee, causes Antiochus to reverse his prohibitions, strikes the fatal blow to Aristobulus, makes a mockery of Herod's mighty reign, and removes the persecuting threat of Herod Agrippa. Thus, each of these stories works to serve as a coherent lesson about power—a lesson not merely about the transitory power of evil rulers and God's power to punish those rulers, but, just as significantly, the ability of the people to gain their own power through God's punishment.

This focus on human power situates these stories neatly within the turbulent political context of the Second Temple period. Disgusting diseases afflict both Jewish and non-Jewish kings alike because native empires often-times proved as oppressive as foreign ones. Furthermore, this disgust motif highlights a pronounced concern for the violability of the physical body. This concern, in turn, echoes the larger discourse surrounding Second Temple period Judaism, a period that exhibited increased interest in (and anxiety about)

the purity of the body,⁶⁹ bodily resurrection,⁷⁰ and demonic affliction of the body.⁷¹ This disgust motif not only resonates with these contemporaneous somatic issues, but it suggests that we revise our perceptions about the body's role in the Jewish thought of this period. In particular, the ability for the disgust motif to mediate so easily between the human body and the rhetoric of power suggests that these other bodily concepts are in actuality not entirely about holiness, the after-life, exorcism, or even the more abstract need to delineate social boundaries,⁷² but also about issues of political power.

69 Nowhere is this more present than in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where it is clear that the Qumran community anticipated fighting alongside an angelic host at the end of days (*War Scroll* 7:6) and therefore needed to remain pure in preparation. Thus, very stringent purity standards are found in their rule books. For an overview of these purity rules, see Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls: The History of Judaism, the Background of Christianity, the Lost Library of Qumran* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 97-112.

70 The first reference to the eschatological notion of bodily resurrection appears in the Hebrew Bible in Daniel 12:2 (ca. mid-second century BCE) and is also found in other Second Temple texts such as the *Messianic Apocalypse* from Qumran. Of course resurrection of the dead became an important concept in early Christianity as well; see, e.g., Mark 12:18-27 for a debate between Jesus and the Sadducees over whether God can raise the dead. We see resurrection most notably in the belief that Jesus himself was resurrected after his death (e.g., Acts 4:2).

71 For example, there is a belief present in some Second Temple texts (e.g., the Enochic *Book of Watchers* and *Jubilees*) that in the antediluvian period there were giants on the earth who subsequently drowned in the flood, but then survived as evil spirits roaming the earth and harming people primarily through sickness. See L. T. Stuckenbruck, "Giant Mythology and Demonology: From the Ancient Near East to the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Demons: The Demonology of Israelite-Jewish and Early Christian Literature in Context of Their Environment*, ed. Armin Lange, Hermann Lichtenberger, and K. T. Diethard Romheld (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 318-38; and James C. Vanderkam, "The Demons in the Book of Jubilees," in *Demons: The Demonology of Israelite-Jewish and Early Christian Literature in Context of Their Environment*, ed. Armin Lange, Hermann Lichtenberger, and K. T. Diethard Romheld (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 339-64.

72 For studies on how impurity was often used polemically in late antiquity to establish social boundaries and to indicate immorality, see the work of Christine Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).