

The Quest for ‘Maskilim’ in the Book of Daniel

Hebrew/Aramaic root ‘SKL’ in the Old Testament: Range of meanings (depending on context and grammatical forms) as summarized below and as noted in Harris, Archer, Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the OT*, Moody 1980, p. 877

1. To consider, ponder, think carefully about (‘understand’ in Is 41:20)
2. To have insight or comprehension (‘understands’ in Jer 9:24)
3. To cause others to gain insight, i.e. to teach/mentor/instruct (‘instruct’ in Ps 32:8)
4. To act circumspectly, using good sense (‘prudent’ in Prov 19:14; ‘be wise’ in Ps 2:10; ‘deal wisely’ in Jer 23:5)
5. To prosper/have success (‘had success’ in I Sam 18:14-15; ‘shall prosper’ in Is 52:13)
6. Noun forms with ‘M’ prefix:
 - a. Title to 13 Psalms: Apparently for contemplation, requiring musical skill, and/or giving insight (Heb. **Maskil**)
 - b. Person with characteristic(s) described above (Heb. **maskil**; ‘prudent’ in Amos 5:13)
 - c. Group of people with characteristic(s) described above (Heb. **maskilim**; Levites described in 2 Chron 30:22)

In the Book of Daniel (quotes from ESV in *italics*; words with ‘skl’ root in **bold**)

1:4 Nebuchadnezzar’s recruitment criteria among Jewish nobility: *“Youths without blemish, of good appearance and **skillful** in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace...”*

1:17 Summary of the 3 years of training to ‘summa cum laude’ status: *“As for these four youths, God gave them learning and **skill** in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.”*

5:11-12 Testimony of the Queen Mother to King Belshazzar re. Daniel’s reputation in contrast to the wisdom found in the other royal counselors: *“There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, light and **understanding** and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar your father – your father the king – made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and **understanding** to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel...”*

7:8 As Daniel was carefully looking at the 4th beast and its 10 horns: *“I **considered** the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.”*

9:13 Daniel confesses Israel’s and his own failings to God: *“...all this calamity has come upon us; yet we have not entreated the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and **gaining insight** by your truth.”*

9:22-25 Gabriel declares the reason for his visit: *“O Daniel, I have now come out to **give you insight** and understanding...for you are greatly loved... Know therefore and **understand** that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince there shall be seven weeks and sixty-weeks. It shall be built again.”* (last section of quote per ESV footnote)

11:33-35 Describing those who know their God, stand firm, and take action in times of trial: *“And **the wise** among the people shall make many understand, though for some days they shall stumble by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder. When they stumble, they shall receive a little help. And many shall join themselves to them with flattery, and some of **the wise** shall stumble, so that they may be refined, purified, and made white until the time of the end, for it still awaits the appointed end.”*

12:3 Describing God’s people whose names are written in His book and are resurrected to everlasting life following the troublous time of the end: *“And **those who are wise** shall shine like the brightness of the sky above, and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”*
 12:10 God’s people in similar context as described above: *“Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined, but the wicked shall act wickedly. And none of the wicked shall understand, but **those who are wise** shall understand.”*

Conversely, an example of someone with impressive insight/ability/skill gone awry (only negative use of ‘skl’ root in Book of Daniel):
 8:25 *“By his **cunning** he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall become great. Without warning he shall destroy many. And he shall even rise up against the Prince of princes, and he shall be broken – but by no human hand.”*

Disclaimer and Clarification: My references in class to ‘maskilim’ are drawn solely from the OT (and particularly the Book of Daniel) and involve no intentional association with the Jewish intellectual enlightenment movement ‘Haskalah’ of 2 centuries ago whose members (known as ‘maskilim’) promoted a secular Jewish culture and the revival of the Hebrew language.

While OT references to ‘maskilim’ typically refer to godly elements within Israel, I believe that all serious followers of the LORD of any race and era can emulate their example: purified lives influencing others toward righteousness in trying times. These themes are traceable in our church’s ongoing study of I Peter, where a mixed Jew/Gentile ‘priesthood’ of Christ-followers appears to be in view.