

French Wisdom at the Serbian Medieval Court

Prov 31,1-9 as the Biblical Frame for the Portrait of Queen Helen of Anjou by Daniel II

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Article abstract

Serbian Archbishop Daniel II (ca 1270-1337) described the Vitae of the medieval Serbian rulers from the Nemanjic dynasty. Among these royal hagio-biographies, the presentation of the life of Queen Helen of Anjou stands out since she is the only woman whose life was inspirational enough for Daniel II to incorporate it into the sequence of rulers and archbishops of medieval Serbia. In his picture of Queen Helen, Daniel II heavily employs various wisdom motifs from the Bible, especially from the Book of Proverbs. Prov 31,1-9 occupies a very prominent place as the background for Queen Helen's long admonition to her sons and future kings, Dragutin and Milutin. Daniel II emphasizes the main point of the motherly admonition in Prov 31,1-9 - the just adjudication of deprived people - to suit the historical milieu of the Serbian court by underlining the importance of just judgment for Helen's sons, the future kings. Nevertheless, at the same time, Daniel II does not develop a copy-paste reception of Prov 31,1-9 into his writing but consciously omits those elements of the instruction of Prov 31,1-9 (especially the warning against relationships with numerous women) which might appear to criticize the multiple marriages of King Milutin during his long reign (1282-1321).

French Wisdom at the Serbian Medieval Court

Prov 31,1-9 as the Biblical Frame for the Portrait of Queen Helen of Anjou by Daniel II

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The historical and hagiographical work of Serbian Archbishop Daniel II (ca 1270-1337) is presented in the form of the collection of hagiographies known as *Vitae regum et archiepiscoporum Serbiae* (VRAS). The methodology used in the composition of VRAS was that of the historic *akribeia*, based on the communication of the historian with the persons described. The crucial role of the author as the eyewitness of the described events and persons¹ is accentuated in the *Life of Queen Helen*, the Serbian Queen of French origin² :

добро и извъѣстно намъ подобаеъ съказати житиѣ блаженныѣ Юлены
[...] и о сихъ оубо поноуждаю се и въ сасъ кажоу съ истиною, яко
възвъѣстишеми прѣжде мене соуштеи съвѣдѣтели житиѣ сеѣ блаженіе

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- 1 On the importance of Daniel II's being an eyewitness of the described events for his historiography see Hafner (1991, 131).
- 2 Daniel II describes Helen in the following way : « отъ племени фружьскааго » (VRAS 58), which can be translated as « of French descent ». Regarding the French origin of Queen Helen see Mijatović (1903, 8.12.27-28), Ćorović (2006, 156), Popović (2010, 27-32).

Елены, еликоже и азъ очима моима видѣх, истиньно исповѣдаю (Daničić 1866, 57-58).

We should in a fair manner and accurately narrate the life of the holy Helen [...] and about all this I will make an effort to narrate it according to the truth : what the eyewitnesses before me reported about the life of this holy Helen and what I saw with my own eyes, I will truly confess³.

The personal experience of the eyewitnesses, both of the author and his predecessors, is an indispensable condition for the truthfulness and accuracy of the report. For Daniel II, the adverb *извѣстно* (accurately) reflects the attitude toward writing history. The adverb is the Old Slavonic translation of ἀκριβῶς in Mt 2, 8 or Lk 1, 3 (Petković 1935, 82). This kind of methodology of history writing probably compelled Daniel II to organize the historical material (hagiographies) in a very peculiar manner. It is noteworthy that he describes in detail only the persons he was acquainted with, while historical persons of the past, despite their immense historical and political importance, are put in the margins of his work. The pillars of the Serbian State and Church, Saint Simeon, Saint Sava, and Stephan the First-Crowned, are mentioned in a few words ; to King Radoslav (1228-1234) Daniel II dedicates only a few lines, while to Radoslav's brother Vladislav (1234-1243) he gives a whole page. Interestingly, the long and prosperous reign of Uroš I (1243-1276) is sketched only in a few pages. But, King Dragutin (1276-1282) and especially King Milutin (1282-1321) and their mother, Queen Helen, had in Daniel II a confident, capable, and loyal right hand, regarding the plethora of their State and Church affairs (Kašanin 1975, 219). It is no wonder that their *Vitae* is the most voluminous in VRAS and that Queen Helen, as the sole woman, found a prominent place in the strictly male-dominated genre of hagiography in medieval Serbia.

One of the dominant features in Daniel II's composition of the hagiographies, especially when compared to the hagiographers who wrote before him, is his inclination to composite internal structure in the *Vitae*. Instead of the natural and unbroken course of exposition of the main biographical events in the life of a saint, Daniel II indulges in the incorporation of many subgenres into the wider structure of the biography, creating

3 The English translation of the passage from Daniel II is by the author of the article.

in this way a more sophisticated and a theologically more abundant literary compound. The *Life of Queen Helen* is probably the most conspicuous example of this kind of literary structuring : prayers, soliloquies, encomia and moral teachings (поучения) are interwoven into the general narrative course of Helen's *Vita* (Bogdanović 1997, 219-220). The harmonious coexistence of many literary genres reveals not only the narrative skills of the author but also the richness of Queen Helen's spirituality (Bogdanović 1991, 177) and her thorough acquaintance with the Bible and biblical genres (Podskalski 2010, 468)⁴.

In this article, the focus will be on the motherly admonitions (поучения) of Queen Helen toward her sons who were in conflict with each other.

In Daniel II's hagiographic account of the life and deeds of Queen Helen, the protagonist's patrimonial and charismatic authorities are predicated on her maternal role. [...] Using the key concepts derived from the constitutional literature of the Nemanjid dynasty, those of the brotherly love and the sacred Nemanjid patrimony, Queen Helen, in the guise of Stephan-Nemanja, admonishes her sons to live in harmony. Queen Helen's charismatic legitimacy is then addressed by Daniel II's depiction of her as a saintly queen-mother. (Vukovich 2013, 251-253)

In her important insights into the theme of the maternal admonition of Queen Helen, Vukovich correctly emphasizes the Marian representation of Queen Helen. But, this is only one perspective on the multi-layered nature of the theological associations in Daniel II's portrait of Queen Helen. What is not elaborated in Vukovich's article is the biblical background of Queen Helen's motherly admonition to her sons, which is utterly important for two reasons. First, the overall structure of the *Life of Queen Helen* is replete with biblical citations and themes which make the Queen's admonition rooted in biblical literature rather than primarily in the « constitutional literature of the Nemanjid dynasty ». The biblical wisdom admonition was the source of admonition in the very « constitutional

4 For any theologian who is interested in the investigation of the reception of the Bible in Serbian medieval literature, Podskalski's book (2010) is of immense importance since it underlines, both in its very title and pages, the dominantly theological character of Serbian medieval hagiographies.

literature of the Nemanjid dynasty⁵ » ; henceforth, it is more accurate to say that both Daniel II and his predecessors were dependent on biblical models of admonition. The most authoritative text for Daniel II's depiction of Queen Helen's admonition is the Bible and not the treatment of the same subject by his predecessors.

The second reason for underlining the biblical background of Queen Helen's admonition to her sons is that it belongs to the *topos* of « royal instruction, a literary genre which appears to have been current in the ancient Near East over a very long period of time » (Whybray 1994, 153). Normally, the royal admonition to the young prince is conducted by the father and king. Prov 31,1-9 is the only example of a queen giving instructions to her son (Martin 1995, 78). Although in the book of Proverbs the teaching of sons is performed by mothers too (Prov 1,8 ; 6, 20), this is the only example of such teaching not only in the Bible but in the whole Near Eastern wisdom literature (Dell 2006, 85 ; Fox 2009, 883). Henceforth, we can surmise that when Daniel II presented the admonition of Queen Helen to her sons he was patterning his female protagonist after the picture of the Queen in Prov 31,1-9. This is the reason why we will proceed in this article with the investigation of the parallels and differences between Queen Helen's admonition and its supposed biblical prototype, the admonition of King Lemuel's Mother. First, we will give a brief sketch of Prov 31,1-9 and after that, we will analyze a possible creative reception of Prov 31,1-9 by Daniel II in his presentation of Queen Helen's admonition to her sons.

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- 5 For the subject of the biblical roots of Nemanja's Farewell Speeches, where he emphasizes the theme of brotherly love among his sons and successors to the throne, see Krstić (2011, 185-197). The article tries to show the strong dependence of Saint Sava's picture of his father on biblical patterns, especially in the presentation of Nemanja's Farewell Speech which was built around Christ's Farewell Speech in the Gospel of John (Jn 13-17). The dominant theme of Christian love in John 13-17 is transposed into the *Life of Nemanja* with his insistence on brotherly love among his sons. Therefore, when Daniel II depicts Queen Helen emphasizing the theme of brotherly love among her sons, she is not dependent on the constitutional writings of the Nemanjid dynasty, as Vukovich claims, but she shares the same biblical wisdom teaching with Nemanja. Consequently, Queen Helen stands along the same line of reception of biblical paraenetic literature with other Nemanjids before her.

1 Prov 31,1-9 : A Queen Mother's Paraenesis

Admittedly, the royal court in Israel was one of the dominant social contexts of wisdom literature in Proverbs (von Rad 1978, 15-16 ; Clifford 1998, 48-49 ; Ansberry 2011). Many of the sapiential sentences are understandable in the milieu of the royal court. The same is true for Prov 31,1-9 since it presents the admonition of the Queen Mother to her son Lemuel :

31,1 « My words have been spoken by God, the oracular response of a king (βασιλέως χρηματισμός), whom his mother instructed (ἐπαίδευσεν) :

2 What, my child, will you keep ? What ? Divine sayings ! My firstborn (πρωτογενές), I speak to you, my son ! What, child of my womb ! What, child of my vows !

3 Do not give your wealth to women and your mind and life to remorse.

4 Do everything with counsel ; drink wine with counsel. Those in power are wrathful, but let them not drink wine,

5 lest they drink and forget wisdom and will not be able to judge the powerless rightly (καὶ ὀρθὰ κρίναι οὐ μὴ δύνωνται τοὺς ἀσθενεῖς).

6 Give strong drink to those who are in pain and wine to drink to those in sorrow ;

7 that they may forget their poverty, and not remember their labor any more.

8 Open your mouth with a divine word, and judge all fairly (καὶ κρίνε πάντας ὀγιῶς).

9 Open your mouth, and judge justly (κρίνε δικαίως), and plead the cause (διάκρινε) of the poor and weak (πένητα καὶ ἀσθενῆ)⁶.

The Queen is addressing her firstborn son since he was entitled to become the heir of his father's political power. The Queen is teaching her son by way of a disciplinary instruction, which is designated in Prov 31,1 by the verb παιδεύω. The queen's disciplinary instruction is in the form of παιδεία, which closely corresponds to the meaning of Hebrew מוסר (von

6 This is the translation of LXX Prov 31,1-9 since the medieval Serbian translation of the Old Testament was based on the Septuagint. The LXX version of the passage is significantly different from the Massoretic version. The English translation is taken from Pietersma et Wright (2007, 643).

Rad 1978, 53)⁷. She is providing two sets of admonitions to her son : what not to do and what should be done. First, she insists that he must not expend his strength (wealth) on treacherous women by avoiding unrestrained sexual relations with them (Whybray 1972, 180 ; Miller 2004, 294). Avoiding dangerous women is paralleled with avoiding strong drink, since involvement both with women and with alcohol reduces the cognitive capacity of a ruler whose primary goal is to administer justice, especially to those deprived and in need. Both these temptations may strongly influence a ruler's mind (νοῦν) and prevent him from judging rightly. The central subject of the Queen Mother's paraenesis is right and just adjudication, which is underlined by the iteration of the verb « κρίνω » (Prov 31,5 : ὀρθὰ κρίναι ; 31,8 : κρίνε [...] ὑγιῶς ; 31,9 : κρίνε δικαίως, διάκρινε). The objects of the king's right adjudication are all his subjects, but especially those in need (Prov 31,5 : ἀσθενεῖς ; Prov 31,9 : πένητα καὶ ἀσθενῆ). Avoiding unrestrained sexual liaisons with women and the consummation of any strong drink are only the prerequisites for maintaining sound mental and moral capacities for the king's just judgment of deprived persons.

2 The *Life of Queen Helen* as a French Queen Mother's Paraenesis : Similarities

Describing Queen Helen's relationship with her sons, the Serbian kings Dragutin and Milutin, Archbishop Daniel II emphasized her role as wisdom teacher. It is noteworthy that King Uroš, her husband, was not presented in this role, although in the biblical wisdom literature, and especially in Proverbs, a father is the primary teacher of his inexperienced son(s)⁸. Undertaking this bold step — presenting the Queen Mother (Helen) and not the King Father (Uroš) as wisdom teacher — Daniel II didn't have much choice in the selection of the biblical passage after which he might have patterned his picture of the teaching Queen Mother. His only choice was Prov 31,1-9 since, as it has been already mentioned, it is the only biblical text where any actual (wisdom) teaching of a mother to her son can be seen. The fact that the mother in Prov 31,1-9 is a Queen Mother fits perfectly into the narrative frame of the *Life of Queen Helen*

7 On the concept and meaning of the Hebrew term see : von Rad (1962, 431, n. 32).

8 Prov 1,8 ; 2,1 ; 3,1.21 ; 4,1.10 ; 5,1...

since she is a Queen Mother too, addressing and teaching her sons (kings). All the aforementioned elements bolster the point of this article, that Prov 31,1-9 is the only candidate for the biblical text that Daniel II might have had in mind while writing the teaching of Queen Helen to her sons. At this point, the content of Queen Helen's teaching to her sons should be analyzed to see whether Daniel II used some of the points of the biblical Queen Mother's admonition in his presentation of Queen Helen's admonition.

After the prayer to God for her sons, Queen Helen delivers the sapiential admonition. Already the content of her prayer points to the wisdom atmosphere of her admonition since she asks God to grant her sons with the basic prerequisite for wisdom — the fear of God (Prov 1, 7 ; 9, 10 ; 15, 13 ; Ps 111, 10 ; Job 28, 28) (von Rad 1978, 65-66 ; Waltke 2004, 100-101) : оутврьдиѹ въ страхъ (φόβος) твои боѹти се имени твоего светааго (« Strengthen them in your fear in order to fear your holy name ») (Daničić 1866, 70). Another wisdom motif is tackled when Daniel II describes Queen Helen's admonition as богоразоумьными глаголы (Daničić 1866, 70-71), which means that her admonition contains wisdom that originates with God. In this way, Daniel II prepares his readers to understand the passage in a sapiential manner, especially in light of the book of *Proverbs*. But, at the next step, the author narrows the sapiential horizon of the book of *Proverbs* down to the passage of Prov 31,1-9 by using the term that unmistakably describes Queen Helen's admonition, with a lexical allusion to the first verse of this chapter. Namely, the Queen Mother's admonition in Prov 31,1 is characterized as χρηματισμός ; Queen Helen's admonition to her sons is described by Daniel II with the participle оувѣштаваюшти (Daničić 1866, 71). The verb оувѣстити is used in the Slavic Bible in Acts 10, 22 to translate the Greek verb χρηματίζω, which would point to the lexical dependence of Daniel II upon the LXX version of Prov 31,1. Therefore, not only thematically (the topos of a Queen Mother's admonition to her son) but also lexically, Daniel II connects Queen Helen's admonition to Prov 31,1-9.

From the very outset of the admonition, Daniel II presents Queen Helen as assuring her sons that she is heavily dependent on biblical wisdom from *Proverbs*. Addressing her sons, she is depicted as alluding to Prov 1,8, which is the opening admonition of *Proverbs* (Miller 2004, 44). Consequently, Queen Helen begins her admonition in the same way that the

wisdom teaching in the *Proverbs* begins. Daniel II gives a picture of Queen Helen alluding to Prov 1,8 and appropriating it to her didactic needs, avoiding any mention of the role of King Uroš in the teaching of her sons. While in Prov 1,8 the roles of father and mother in the process of wisdom education are commensurate (Crenshaw 1985, 601-615), Queen Helen takes over both the fatherly and motherly roles in the disseminating of wisdom to her sons :

мои чедѣ [...] вы же вѣноушита разоумьно глаголы мою,
и не отъринита наказаниѣ матере ваю » (Daničić 1866, 70).

My sons [...] incline your ears with understanding to my words,
and do not reject the instruction of your mother.

When we compare Queen Helen's admonition to her sons to pay heed to her teaching to a similar address in Prov 1,8, we easily notice not only the echo of this passage, but also the author's creative reception and sophisticated emendation of the verse. In Prov 1,8 the admonition begins with the address to the son (« My son ») ; similarly, Daniel II depicts Queen Helen as addressing her sons (мои чедѣ). The very structure of Queen Helen's words, which betray the classical *parallelismus membrorum* of the Hebrew wisdom poetry, indicates the biblical pattern of Prov 1,8. Namely, the imperative вѣноушита in the first line is parallel to the imperative не отъринита in the second one ; Helen's admonition to her sons is described as глаголы in the first line and as наказаниѣ in the second line ; finally, the possessive pronoun мою is parallel to the expression матере ваю in the second line. Last but not least, regarding the reception of Prov 1,8 at the beginning of Queen Helen's admonition to her sons, Daniel II's usage of the verb отъриноути points to the verb ἀπαθῆναι in Prov 1,8.

While in Prov 1,8 (LXX) the father is the source of instruction (παιδείαν, old Slavonic наказаниѣ) to his son, Daniel II ascribes teaching of the instruction to Queen Helen, i.e. to a Queen mother. She reminds her sons that they were nurtured by her to become Christian rulers. In the theological framework of Queen Helen's paraenesis, their ascension to the throne is viewed as the act of God's mercy and philanthropy (чловѣколюбиѣ). Since God has established their rule, they are obliged to serve Him with holiness (прѣподобиемъ) and justice (правдою) (Daničić 1866, 71) all the days of their lives. This is a direct allusion to Prov 31,9 where the Queen Mother insists on her son's abiding by justice and just judgment (κρίνε δίκαιως). After this follows Helen's stipulation to her

sons to act justly by recollecting the just judgment of God and her specification of just deeds. Since God has shown mercy toward them as rulers, likewise they must show mercy in helping the churches and the powerless and deprived people (ништиимъ) (Daničić 1866, 72). Helen repeats to her sons, the future kings, the admonition from Prov 31,5 to judge justly those who are deprived (ἀσθενεῖς) and poor (Prov 31,9 : πένητα καὶ ἀσθενῇ).

3 The *Life of Queen Helen* as a French Queen Mother's Paraenesis : Differences

Daniel II's reception of Prov 31,1-9 creatively appropriates the biblical passage to make the picture of the Serbian Queen of French origin as historically accurate as possible. Therefore, he does not simply copy-paste Prov 31,1-9 into his text but he has the freedom to also omit or alter some elements of Prov 31,1-9 that might undermine the historical veracity of his report. There are two major points in his "fluid reception" of Prov 31,1-9.

First, while the Queen Mother's admonition in Prov 31,1-9 is addressed to her firstborn son (πρωτογενέας), the historical context of the writing of the *Life of Queen Helen* (1317) (Bogdanović 1991, 177) points to the period when her younger son was reigning. The short reign of Helen's firstborn son, Dragutin (1276-1282), was not characterized by Daniel II as the epitome of the just rule. Dragutin's ascension to the throne was achieved by deposing his father, King Uroš⁹, which is judged by Daniel II as committing a grave sin (безаконовахъ) (Daničić 1866, 24) against his father and the direct breach of the Fifth Commandment. What is then the purpose of Daniel II presenting Queen Helen's admonition to both her sons, especially in the historical moment (1317) when the days of Dragutin's reign are in the distant past? Having the negative example of his older brother's unjust rule, the main addressee of Queen Helen's admonition to

9 For the complicated relationship between the ex-king Dragutin and the reigning Milutin see the detailed study by Dinić, (1955, 49-81). Dinić does not dedicate too much space to Queen Helen's relationship with her sons (see Dinić 1955, 67-68), omitting entirely any mention of the biblical context of Helen's admonition to her sons. Therefore, this study, although significant from the historical point of view, is of limited value for our subject. The same can be stated about the investigation of the same subject in Popović's excellent book on Queen Helen (Popović 2010, 87-91).

her sons is the younger one, Milutin. The bad example of his brother is adduced to persuade the reigning Milutin to rule justly to avoid the grim destiny of Queen Helen's firstborn son. This is the reason Daniel II omits any mention of the Queen's firstborn son as the addressee, diverging from Prov 31,2, and presents both Helen's sons as enjoying the sweetness of their mother's admonition.

Second, it is conspicuous that Daniel II, in his reception of Prov 31,1-9, deliberately and completely omits any mention of the Queen Mother's admonition regarding sexual licentiousness, which is, as we have seen, a very important element of the maternal admonition in Prov 31,3. Not being involved with many women is for Prov 31,3 the first prerequisite for a king to rule justly. It is quite understandable why Daniel II omitted the licentiousness of Prov 31,3 in his reception of Prov 31,1-9 : at the time of composing the *Life of Queen Helen* (1317), Milutin was married to Simonida which was his fifth marriage ! It would be quite inappropriate and for the writer probably very dangerous to remind Milutin of Prov 31,3 ! Therefore, it was easier for Daniel II to skip Prov 31,3 from the reception of Prov 31,1-9 and to focus exclusively on the just judgment of the king in Prov 31,5-9 as the sole content of his reception of the biblical passage.

4 Conclusion

Among many male characters in Daniel II's VRAS, Queen Helen, the French-born wife of King Uroš I (1243-1276), stands out as the only female protagonist. Daniel II presents Queen Helen in a highly positive manner : she is of (French) aristocratic origin, well-educated, morally perfect. She exerted tremendous influence upon her sons, the Kings Dragutin (1276-1282) and Milutin (1282-1321) by way of the admonition that is reminiscent of the wisdom teaching set at the royal courts. Archbishop Daniel II patterned the admonition of Queen Helen to her sons after the sole biblical text that presents an actual instruction of a Queen Mother to her sons — Prov 31,1-9. The writer successfully transposes the main point of the motherly admonition in Prov 31,1-9 — the just adjudication of the deprived and needy — to the historical milieu of the life of Queen Helen of Anjou. Nevertheless, Daniel II does not develop an overly compliant reception of Prov 31,1-9 into his writing but consciously omits those elements of the instruc-

tion of Prov 31,1-9 (especially the warning against being involved in relationships with numerous women) which might refer to the numerous marriages of King Milutin during his long reign (1282-1321).

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Abstract

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hagio-biographies, the presentation of the life of Queen Helen of Anjou stands out since she is the only woman whose life was inspirational enough for Daniel II to incorporate it into the sequence of rulers and archbishops of medieval Serbia. In his picture of Queen Helen, Daniel II heavily employs various wisdom motifs from the Bible, especially from the Book of Proverbs. Prov 31,1-9 occupies a very prominent place as the background for Queen Helen's long admonition to her sons and future kings, Dragutin and Milutin. Daniel II emphasizes the main point of the motherly admonition in Prov 31,1-9 - the just adjudication of deprived people - to suit the historical milieu of the Serbian court by underlining the importance of just judgment for Helen's sons, the future kings. Nevertheless, at the same time, Daniel II does not develop a copy-paste reception of Prov 31,1-9 into his writing but consciously omits those elements of the instruction of Prov 31,1-9 (especially the warning against relationships with numerous women) which might appear to criticize the multiple marriages of King Milutin during his long reign (1282-1321).

Résumé

L'archevêque serbe Daniel II (vers 1270-1337) a écrit les *Vitae* des dirigeants serbes médiévaux de la dynastie des Nemanjić. Parmi ces biographies royales hagiographiques, la présentation de la vie de la reine Hélène d'Anjou (vers 1237-1314) se démarque puisqu'il s'agit de la seule femme dont la vie était assez inspirante pour que Daniel II l'incorpore dans la séquence des dirigeants et archevêques de la Serbie médiévale. Pour dépeindre la reine Hélène, Daniel II emploie massivement divers motifs de sagesse tirés de la Bible, en particulier du Livre des Proverbes. Ainsi, Pr 31,1-9 se situe à l'arrière-plan de la longue admonition dispensée par Hélène à ses fils, les futurs rois Dragutin and Milutin. Daniel II accentue le point principal de l'admonition maternelle de Pr 31 – le juste verdict en faveur des personnes spoliées – pour l'adapter au milieu historique de la cour serbe, en soulignant l'importance du juste jugement pour les futurs rois. Néanmoins, au même moment, Daniel II n'opère pas un simple copier/coller dans sa réception de Pr 31 mais omet consciemment les éléments de Pr 31 (notamment l'exhortation à éviter les relations avec de nombreuses femmes) qui pourraient paraître critiquer les

nombreux mariages du roi Milutin durant son long règne (1282-1321).