

WILLIAM NGOWI

Jordan University College w Morogoro

THE EXEMPLARY STATEMENT OF FAITH OF THE THREE YOUNG JEWS IN DANIEL 3:16-18: AN EXAMPLE FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY

INTRODUCTION

Most literature on the book of Daniel deals with the apocalyptic eschatological part (chapters 7-12) which contains Daniel's visions; whereas few deals with the first part (chapters 1-6) which contains court tales.¹ The first part (1-6) are earthly events purported to exemplify Jewish faith in YHWH and rejection of foreign idolatry. They call for uncompromising faith and hope in God who rescues those who are faithful to his covenant with his people Isarel, even in times of foreign subordination and persecution. On the other hand, the visions of Daniel in the second part (7-12) are prophetic and universal, geared to inspire hope and trust in YHWH's victorious intervention to bring justice at the end of time.

¹ The other court tales are as follows: Chapter 1 introduces the four young Jews, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Babylonian Court; Chapter 2 narrates Nebuchadnezzar's first dream of a Great Statue which was revealed and interpreted by God through Daniel; Chapter 4 has the second dream of Nebuchadnezzar of a Great Tree; Chapter 5 has the tale of Belshazzar's Feast and the Writing on the Wall; and Chapter 6 contains the story of Daniel in the Lions' Den during the reign of Darius.

One of the most powerful statements of genuine faith in the bible is found in the story of the three young Jews Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in 3:1-30.² Though there are some similarities between the third tale in chapter three and sixth in chapter six; however, the language of the three young Jews in their response to Nebuchadnezzar's interrogation in the former, highlights emphatically their faith and trust in the God of Israel (3:16-18). Their firm faith in their God impressed even Nebuchadnezzar as he recapitulates their stance which was the reason why their God intervened by the miracle of rescuing them from the fiery furnace. He remarked, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God" (3:28). For this reason, the title of pertinent study is "Exemplary faith of the Three Young Jews" keeping in mind that the purpose of the tale was to demonstrate to the reader the courage needed in being faithful to God, even under the threat of death.

The reading of the tale of the Three Young Jews (3:1-30) poses serious questions: what was its key message? What was its ultimate purpose? For whom was it written? Using synchronic method, this study attempts to answer these questions with its implications in the New Testament teaching and its importance and function apropos Christian praxis in modern times.

PRELIMINARY INFORMATION ABOUT DANIEL 3

Historical Setting

The events in the book of Daniel are set in Mesopotamia during the Babylonian captivity (597-339 BC). Chapter 3 narrates the third court

² The study will use Hebrew Text or Masoretic Text (MT) as source. The MT has a shorter tale (3:1-30); whereas the Greek version or Septuagint (LXX) has a longer version (3:1-97), which includes the Prayer of Azariah (vv. 24-45) and the Song of the Three Young Jews (vv. 46-97).

tale about the golden image and the fiery furnace whereby the three young Jews Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego defiantly disobeyed king Nebuchadnezzar's decree that commanded all the citizens to serve his gods and worship the image of gold he had set up. The text does not say whether the image of gold was of the king himself or was of one of their many gods; perhaps of Marduk or Bel who was their supreme god.³ He threatened those who would not comply with his imperial command to be thrown into a fiery furnace (3:1-18).

It is important to note the differences between king Nebuchadnezzar's command and the accusation of the Chaldeans. Initially the king ordered all the people to worship the image of gold he had made, and did not mention his gods (3:5, 7, 10, 15). But later the Chaldeans added "your gods" (3:12b), perhaps in order to give more weight to their accusations against the three young Jews.⁴ From there on, the king added "my gods" (3:14, 28) and in response to his interrogation, the three young Jews continued to refuse to worship the king's deities "your gods" (3:18).

The three young Jews disobeyed the decree and when they were summoned by king Nebuchadnezzar for interrogation, they defiantly told the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we

³ Marduk was the supreme or national god; others were Bel, the god of destiny (cf. Isa 46:1; Jer 50:2; 51:44); Enlil, the god of wind, air, and storms; Anu, the god of the skies; Enki, the god of magic, creation, and mischief; Tiamat, primordial goddess of chaos; Ninurta, the god of war and hunting; Inanna or Ishtar, the goddess of war, sex, and fertility; etc. Moreover, applying his theory of spatial-body-frameset to the tale of Daniel 3, JOSEPH, JACOBUS DE BRUYN, "Daniel 3, Contesting Space for Clashing Images," *JSEM* 23 (2014) 37-52 proposes that since Mesopotamia was the domain of Marduk, it seems YHWH the God of Israel was interfering it. However, YHWH authority was universal and not confined to Mesopotamia, which was a mark of superiority. Therefore, for De Bruyn the story of Dan 3 is not about the faith of the three young faithful Jews, but a story about the God of Israel versus the pagan gods. Although the theory may sound good, it remains unconvincing because what is at stake is the position of their believers. Unlike the explicit contest between Elijah's YHWH and the prophets of Baal in 1Kgs 18:20-40, the deities in Daniel 3 remain passive while their adherents are actively defending their faith.

⁴ The later addition of "your gods" could be the reason for the variants לאֱלֹהֶיךָ and לֹאֱלֹהֶיךָ in the v. 12.

serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (vv. 16b-18). Their last words are the most striking “*But even if he does not, ...*” (v. 18a), implying that even if God does not intervene and rescue them from the fiery furnace, they would neither serve the king’s gods nor worship his image of gold. In other words, their uncompromising faith and trust in the God of Israel did not rely on his divine intervention. Such faith is probably rooted in their upbringing that God had already manifested his omnipotence in his mighty works (*g’dolīm ma’asē Adonay* – גְּדֹלִים מַעֲשֵׂי יְהוָה) in their salvation history (cf. Deut 3:24; Pss 92:5; 111:2; 145:6). Nebuchadnezzar was furious in rage when he heard such a reply.

The book is set in the 6th century BC, but it was probably written between the 3rd to 2nd century BC. Most scholars conventionally hold that it was written during the oppressive reign of the Seleucid’s king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Greek king of the Seleucid Empire of Judea in 167–164 BC who threatened to destroy traditional Jewish worship in Jerusalem (cf. 1-2 Maccabees). However, the actual narrated events belong to the period of Israelites’ experience in Babylonian captivity about three centuries earlier (ca. 597-539 BC). It is therefore believed that the purpose of the book was to encourage and inspire Jews to persevere in the face of severe Greek persecution similar to that of Babylon; for God will visit (rescue) them just as he had done before in Babylon. Scholars acknowledge that it was common among ancient writers to utilize an earlier historical event as a literary device to comment on contemporary situation, especially in times of persecution.⁵

The biblical text attests that the names Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were royal youth who were kidnapped and sent to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar during his invasion of Judaea in 597 BC (1:3, 6; cf. Ezra 8:2). They were given new Chaldean names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and

⁵ Cf. DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER, “The Book of Daniel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VII, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, 24.

to Azariah, Abednego (cf. 1:7; 2:26; 4:19; 10:1).⁶ Daniel became very famous for his wisdom and ability to interpret dreams, which was always attributed to his God, known as the God of Daniel or of heaven or the living God (cf. 1:17; 2:19, 47; 6:20, 23, 26; etc.). His fame was acclaimed by the four Mesopotamian kings who ruled during his lifetime. He provided interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's statue (2:48) and the handwriting on the wall (5:19); of the vision of Darius of Medes (6:1-3) and that of Cyrus of Persia (1:21; 6:28). On account of that, Daniel was offered the rare privilege of staying in the royal court and was even made by Nebuchadnezzar the ruler of the whole region of Babylon and chief prefect of all its wise men (2:48). Later on, Daniel had such powerful influence to the extent that he requested the king to make his compatriots administrators of the province of Babylon, while he himself remained in the royal court (2:49).

Literary Context

Basing on the content of its second part (7-12), the book is conventionally categorized as apocalyptic literary genre, which is characterized by its pseudonymity, visions, images, signs, universality and eschatological events. Nevertheless, as already explained, the six court tales in chapters 1-6 are not apocalyptic *per se*. Although the book of Daniel belonged to the Apocalyptic-Eschatological literary genre, the Hebrew bible (HB) put it together with the Writings (*K^etubîm*), whereas the Christian bible put it in the Prophetic part (*N^ebi'îm*). However, modern biblical scholarship categorizes the book Daniel as Apocalyptic literature, an Old Testament *sui generis*.

⁶ The name Daniel meant in Hebrew "God has judged". He was given the name Belteshazzar by king Nebuchadnezzar, the name of Babylonian god "Bel" (cf. Jer 50:2; 51:44) because the king thought the spirit of his holy gods was in him (Dan 4:8, 18; 5:12). Nevertheless, some scholars have concluded that Ezekiel's association of Daniel with ancient righteous figures like Noah and Job (Ezek 14:14, 20), indicates that Daniel could hardly belong to the 200 BC according to the book of Daniel.

Chapters 1-12 are thought to originate from a collection of Aramaic court tales and later expanded by the Hebrew apocalyptic revelations.⁷ Catholics have additional third part (chapters 13-14) which was originally written in Greek, and known as Deuterocanonical by Protestants. The main part of the book of Daniel (chapters 1-12) was written in two sister languages, Hebrew and Aramaic. Therefore, the pertinent story of the three young Jews in a fiery furnace in chapter 3 was written in Aramaic.⁸ The three languages are distributed in the book as follows:

1. The Hebrew texts are: (1:1-2:4 and 8:1-12:13)
 - The Introduction is in Hebrew set in the Babylonian era (1:1-2:4);
 - The Ram and the He-goat, during the Babylonian era (8:1-27);
 - The Angel's Revelation: Kings of the North and South, set in the Persian era (9:3-12:13).
2. The Aramaic texts are: (2:5-7:28; 9:1-2)
 - The Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of the four kingdoms, set in the Babylonian era (2:5-49);
 - The Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace, set in the Babylonian era (3:1-30/3:1-23, 91-97);
 - Nebuchadnezzar's madness, set in the Babylonian era (3:31/98-4:34/4:1-37);
 - Daniel's or Belshazzar's feast, set in the Babylonian era (5:1-6:1);
 - Daniel in the Lions' den (6:2-29);
 - The Beasts from the Sea, set in the Babylonian era (7:1-28);

⁷ JOHN, J. COLLINS, *Daniel*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993, 29. The book of Daniel is preserved in the 12-chapter Masoretic Text and in two longer Greek versions, the original being Septuagint version that appeared ca. 100 BC. The Hebrew was the language of Scriptures, and thus considered as sacred; whereas Aramaic was secular since it was used in social and political spheres. ANATHEA, E. PORTIER-YOUNG, "Language of Identity and Obligation: Daniel as Bilingual Book," *VT* 60 (2010) 98-115 argues that the switching of Hebrew to Aramaic and back to Hebrew allowed the audience to disengage themselves from the empire for the sake of the covenant.

⁸ JOHN, J. COLLINS, *Daniel: With an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, 31.

- Interpretation of the Seventy Weeks' prophecy, set in the Median era (9:1-2).
3. The Greek texts are:⁹
- The Prayer of Azariah or Abednego (3:24-45)
 - The Song of the Three Young Jews (3:46-90)
 - Susanna and the Elders (13:1-63)
 - Daniel and the Priests of Bel (14:1-22)
 - The Dragon and Daniel in the Lion's Den (14:23-42)

DELIMITATION OF DAN 3:16-18

The Hebrew version (Masoretic Text) of the story of the three young Jews in Dan 3:1-30 differs from that of Septuagint (LXX). Septuagint's chapter three is complex because it contains three types of literary genres: narrative or prose, prayer and poetry. The length of chapter three of the Hebrew Text (Masoretic Text) is 30 verses that contains the narrative only (3:1-30); whereas the Greek Text (LXX) has 97 verses (3:1-97). The Septuagint inserted additional two sections in the narrative pericope (vv. 24-90): the Prayer of Azariah who was given the Chaldean name of Abednego (vv. 24-45) and the Song of the Three Young Jews (vv. 46-90), then concluded with a narrative in vv. 91-97.

The first clear demarcation of the pericope is that chapter two contains a completely different story about Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great statue which was interpreted by Daniel. Whereas chapter 3 tells another

⁹ In his article SVEN TENGSTRÖM, "The Stages in the Literary Origination of the Book of Daniel", *SEA* 63 (1998) 69-92 hypothesized that the book originated from a three-stage literary collection: The first is the oldest narrative collection which came from the Persian period contemporary with Deutero-Isaiah that declared that the fall of Babylon and the rise of Persian empire were God's plan. And the duty of Israel was to make YHWH known universally to idolaters. The second is the Aramaic collection that came from Apocalypstists during the Maccabean period with the function of declaring the deliverance of Israel from Babylonian captivity. And that Daniel's predictions concern the apocalyptic-eschatology (end time) that called Israel to maintain hope, patience and perseverance. Lastly, the Hebrew section reflected the persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes and internal conflicts among Jews and reminded Israel that it was a Kairos period in which they had to choose between fidelity and apostasy in the light of the imminent judgment.

story in which Daniel is not mentioned. It is about disobedience of Daniel's companions Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to Nebuchadnezzar's decree to all citizens to serve his gods and worship his image of gold that he had set up. The subsequent chapter 4 narrates another different story about king Nebuchadnezzar's second dream of a mighty tree that Daniel again interpreted for him.

The second basis for demarcation is that the pertinent pericope is set in the Babylonian era.¹⁰ The literary context of the story is given in the story of conspiracy or denunciation by some Chaldeans (RSV)¹¹ against Jews, including Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were Nebuchadnezzar's confidants in 3:12-30. Probably the Chaldeans were envious of these foreign three young Jews' promotions and prominence. This is possible since king Nebuchadnezzar allowed Daniel to stay in the royal court and made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and chief prefect of all the wise men after he interpreted the meaning of the vision of the terrifying statue (2:48). Moreover, later Daniel requested the king that his compatriots be appointed as administrators of the province of Babylon, which he conceded (Dan 2:49; 3:12). And after witnessing

¹⁰ It seems some events written in Aramaic, including the pertinent pericope, may have been artificially or anachronistically placed in the Babylonian era, for the literary Aramaic was mostly used during the Persian epoch when the main actors (Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) were probably long gone (ca. 539-333 BC). For this reason, some scholars regard the stories of Daniel chapter 3 and 6 as folklores or conflict fiction stories or court tales that were circulating during the Persian and Hellenistic periods (333-63 BC). Cf. DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER, "The Book of Daniel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections", 20.

¹¹ The Aramaic name for Chaldeans is *Kas'dda'in* – כַּסְדָּאִין (cf. Dan 2:5, 10; 3:8, 4:4; 5:7, 11, 30), which derives from Hebrew "*Kas'ddim* – כַּסְדִּים" which alternatively appears in the same book in Dan 1:4; 2:2, 4; and 9:1; other versions like KJV and NIV have Astrologers. However, the issue at stake was about the disobedience of the three young Jews, it would be logical that it was about ethnic identity, Jewish (Y'hūdaye' – ayE) d"Why>) versus Chaldeans (Dan 3:8); rather than professional identity. Similar conspiracy episodes can be found in the stories of Joseph in Egypt (cf. Gen 39-41) and Esther in Persia. Cf. DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER, "The Book of Daniel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections", 21, 63; JOHN, J. COLLINS, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Augsburg: Fortress, 1993, 39-51; MATTHIAS HENZE, "Narrative Frame of Daniel: A Literary Assessment," *JSJ* 32 (2001) 5-24.

their God rescuing them from the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar reinstated them to their posts (3:30).

The third criterion for demarcation is the introduction of two new groups of characters who were not mentioned in the preceding chapter: the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials before the king (vv. 2, 3, 27) and the strongest men (soldiers) who carried out the king's command to bind and throw the three young Jews into the fiery furnace (v. 20-22).

THE TEXT

The text under study (Dan 3:16-18) belongs to narrative story of three young Jews Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the three companions of Daniel, who were accused by the Chaldean officials of disobeying the Nebuchadnezzar's decree that ordered all citizens to serve his gods and worship the statue of gold which he had set up (3:12).¹² The king summoned the three young Jews and questioned them about the accusation.¹³ It is in this process that the three young Jews confirmed their position of not obeying the royal decree (vv. 12-18). What follows is the king's command to punish them by ordering the fiery furnace to be overly heated and throw the three young Jews into it (3:19-23). In a dramatic manner the king saw four people in the furnace, and the three young Jews remained unscathed by the fire. And the fourth person in the fire looked like "a son of the gods". Calling them out in a loud voice, the whole assembly confirmed that they were unharmed by the fire (vv. 24-27). The episode concludes with the king's declaration that it was the God of the three young Jews who protected them from the

¹² The Masoretic version of the Tale has 30 verses, while the Greek version has 97. Some recensions of the MT have 33 verses because vv. 31-33 were wrongly joined to chapter 3 as their epistolary form indicate that they originally belonged to the next chapter 4:1-3 and the king will continue to address the people in the first-person singular. Cf. JOHN, J. COLLINS, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, 35; LOUIS, F. HARTMAN, *The Book of Daniel*, Anchor Bible, Vol. 23, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1978, 175.

¹³ Cf. C.L. SEOW, *Daniel*, Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, 50-51.

fire. He then wrote a new Decree that proclaimed reverence to the God of Israel and punishment to anyone who would dare to revile him (v. 29). The narrative concludes with reinstating the three young men as administrators in the province of Babylon (v. 30; cf. 2:49).

STRUCTURE OF THE HEBREW PERICOPE (DAN 3:1-30)

Narrative criticism of the text of the court tale in Dan 3:1-30 may lead to a chiasmic antithetic parallelism structure which forms an inclusion. According to the chiasmic structure, Nebuchadnezzar's interrogation of the three young Jews and their response to the accusations (3:13-18) forms the center.

a¹ Introduction: Nebuchadnezzar making the image of gold and its dedication (3:1-3)

b² The Royal Decree (*l'ém* – עֲמֻלָּה) calling all citizens to worship it and punish those who defy it (3:4-6; cf. 10, 12)

c³ Obedience of the king's decree by all citizens (3:7)

d⁴ Chaldeans' denouncement of the three young Jews' conspiracy (3:8-12)

e⁵ Nebuchadnezzar's interrogation of the three young Jews (3:13-18)

d⁴ Punishment for the three young men is pronounced and execution (3:19-23)

c³ Observance of Nebuchadnezzar and call of the three young men (3:24-28)

b² Nebuchadnezzar's New Royal Decree (*l'ém* – עֲמֻלָּה) proclaiming the God of the young Jews as the highest and living God (3:29).

a¹ Conclusion: re-appointment of the three young Jews as administrators in Babylon (v. 30)

The pericope seems to form a good inclusion of two opposing Royal Decrees: the first royal decree is given in vv. 4-6 and recapitulated in v. 10 that called all citizens to worship the image of gold which Nebuchadnezzar had set up in the plain of Dura (vv. 1-9).¹⁴ So, all that

¹⁴ The Hebrew text of verse 12 says "who pay no attention to the king's decree (*ma-kka' l'ém* – מַכְּכָא לְעִמָּה), also the LXX has "th.n evntolh.n"; but English versions (KJV,

follows from vv. 11 to 26 is about how the people responded to the royal decree. The pericope closes with Nebuchadnezzar's second New Decree that called upon all people to revere the Most High God of the three young Jews and sanctioned by severe punishment for those who revile Him (v. 29).

The axis of the chiasm that forms the inclusion would be the language of the three young Jews that defiantly rejected to obey the royal decree and changed the course of events, "...O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (vv. 16b-18). King Nebuchadnezzar confirmed the risk the three young Jews were ready to take by recapitulating, "they trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God" (v. 28b).

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERROGATION OF THE THREE YOUNG JEWS (DAN 13-15)

First, it shows in the interrogation that Nebuchadnezzar did not compare himself with God, i.e. he did not call himself "divine"; rather, he compared his gods with YHWH, the God of Israel. At this point, the king's challenge indicates that this court tale developed independently because he seemed to have forgotten what he did in the previous court tale when he eccentrically paid homage to Daniel and declared to him saying, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery" (2:46-49). The hypothesis that the court tales in chapters 1-6 had independent oral origins is hereby reinforced since the three companions

NIV, RSV) do not mention the word decree; instead, they refer directly to the king himself "who pay no attention to you" which means disobeying the king's decree is equivalent to repudiating his person.

of Daniel, i.e., Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were probably present and witnessed the event, could have reminded the king of his previous.¹⁵ Second, Nebuchadnezzar remained a polytheist even after admitting the superiority of the God of the three young Jews. He was a henotheist who believed in many gods and chose and worship one of them. In this manner he could easily accept the existence of the Jewish god while believing in the existence of other ethnic gods. In fact, his decree did not forbid the worship of other gods. Moreover, the Chaldean Dynasty did not promote deification of their kings, unlike the Egyptians, Phoenicians and Romans; rather, they believed that the king was appointed and legitimized by the gods.¹⁶ This is exactly what Nebuchadnezzar showed as he vacillated from his god to another: he paid homage using the same verb “*s^egad* – שָׁגַד” to Daniel (2:46), then uses the same verb for worship of the image of gold (3:14, 15, 28); and again, he uses the verb to serve (*palakh* – פָּלַח; (P’)) for both his gods (3:14) and the God of Israel (3:28). The text does not explicitly say what the statue of gold represented. R.S. Wallace thought that it could have represented anything: the king Nebuchadnezzar himself expressing his achievements, the god or goddess of city of Dura, or Bel the supreme god of the Chaldeans.¹⁷ From such polytheistic and syncretistic background they would not have distinguished the worshipping of their golden idols and service to their gods from that of the living God of Israel. Thus, the king put the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego

¹⁵ Cf. JOHN, J. COLLINS, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, 71.

¹⁶ Ezekiel, a contemporary of the three young Jews, speaks against the Phoenician King of Tyre who regarded himself to be a king (cf. Ezek 28:1-10). Chaldean kings were believed to have special close relationship with the deities from whom their authority derived, but they were not gods or deities themselves; neither is there a document mentioning their deification. However, the title king was given to their supreme gods like Marduk and Bel kings, but not the vice versa. And the fact that Nebuchadnezzar prayed to Marduk, the supreme god and ruler of heaven and earth, for longevity and progeny shows that he understood himself as a mere human being. Cf. JAMES, B. PRITCHARD, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955, 307; Geoffrey Wigoder, (eds. et al.), *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Press, 1989, 190.

¹⁷ Cf. RONALD, S. WALLACE, *The Message of Daniel: The Lord is King*, Illinois: Downers Grove, 1979, 64.

on the same level with the supreme god of the Chaldeans. From such perspective, the issue at stake was not so much about worship of the deities; rather, it was about participation or non-participation in the social event; an attitude that was considered an anti-social act.¹⁸

ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSE OF THE THREE YOUNG JEWS (DAN 3:16-18)

The king summoned the three young Jews to interrogate them about the accusations of the Chaldeans (v. 14). He reiterated in their hearing his command including “serving his gods” (v. 12b) which was added by the Chaldeans’ accusers and the threat, lest they might have misunderstood it. Moreover, he challenged those who would dare to disobey his decree by stating implicitly that no god can rescue them “from my hands” (*min-y^eday* – מִן־יָדִי) (v. 15; cf. v. 17). The Hebrew expression “from my hands” signifies to have authority and power over something, in the positive and negative sense (1:2; 2:38; 4:35; 9:15; 11:11, 41; cf. Ex 3:8, 19, 20; 7:4, 5 8; 13:3, 14; Jdg 4:24; 6:2; 1Sam 5:6; etc.). In this expression king Nebuchadnezzar considered himself more powerful than the gods he knew; and seems to doubt the existence of a god who could challenge him. Perhaps that is why he would be extremely anxious to test the power of the God of the three young Jews (cf. 3:26, 28).

King Nebuchadnezzar expected that the three young Jews who were his former associates (cf. 3:19) would defend themselves, perhaps saying that they were misunderstood; but they blatantly told him, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter” (v. 16). Their response to the Chaldeans’ accusations indicates that they were resolute in their decision not to obey the king’s decree. Nothing could make them waver in their faith in their God, including the king’s threat to throw them into the fiery furnace (v. 15).

¹⁸ Cf. JENNIE GRILLO, “Worship and Idolatry in the Book of Daniel through the Lens of Tertullian’s *De idolatria*,” in Nathan MacDonald and Ken Brown, (eds.), *Monotheism in Late Prophetic and Early Apocalyptic Literature*, Studies of the Sofja Kovalevskaja Research Group on Early Jewish Monotheism 3, FAT 2.72, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014, 246-262.

Then they continued to embarrass the king by telling him, “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king” (v. 17). The word “to serve” (*palakh* – פָּלַח) God appears 9 times in the book of Daniel with the general meaning of “worshipping” the true God (3:17; 6:17; 7:14, 27) or the false gods (3:12, 14, 18, 28). And the verb “*sagad* – סָגַד”) which appears only in Daniel is mostly used for paying reverence or homage to images or idols.¹⁹ They emphasized that their faith in YHWH was not mere assent of the mind; rather, they serve Him. Serving God means aligning their whole life, thoughts and activities with his will by abiding by his commandments, the Torah (cf. Ex 20:3-17, esp. vv. 3-11). They neither feared the gods nor the king himself because they firmly believed that their God can rescue or save (יִשְׁעֶזֶבֶת – יִשְׁעֶזֶבֶת) them from all dangers; however, not by coercion nor according to anybody’s wish, but according to his divine will and plan. Their trust and surrender to the will of God is even more expressive when they did not cry out to God to rescue them from the fiery furnace. In such distressful events, victims of danger were expected to ask God to save them (cf. Jdg 10:15; 1Sam 7:8; 1Chron 16:35; Pss 60:5; 106:47; 108:6; Jer 2:27; etc.), but the three young Jews did not; instead, they declared affirmatively that God will save them (v. 17).

The climax of the tale is found in the most radical and crucial statement of their faith in the first phrase of v. 18a, “But even if he (*God*) does not (*save us*),²⁰ we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up.” These last words of the three young Jews according to the Hebrew text, are the most powerful expression of their faith in God, in particular the v.

¹⁹ The Aramaic verb “*palakh* – x1;(P’)” with the meaning of serving or worshipping appears 9 times in the OT, 8 of which are used in Daniel 3:12, 14, 17, 18, 28; 6:17, 21; 7:14, 27; and once in Ezekiel 7:24. It is distinguished from “*sagad* – סָגַד” which oftentimes is distinguished from the former verb with the meaning of paying homage or reverence to an idol or an image (Dan 3:5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 18, 28) or even human beings (Dan 2:46).

²⁰ The bracketed words in italics are implied in the phrase. Most scholars accept that v. 18 is the climax of the tale. Cf. JOHN, E. GOLDINGAY, *Daniel*, WBC Vol. 30, Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1989, 68.

18^b “But even if he does not” (*w^ehen la’* – ܠܐ ܝܗܝܐ)²¹ implying he does not save us from the fiery furnace or rescue us from your hands. This meant that they would remain faithful to God even if He does not give them a sign. The Aramaic conjunction “w>” here is contextually adversative “but” when it is combined with the conditional “*hen* – ܝܢ – if” (also vv. 15, 17), which is the equivalent of the Hebrew particle “*’im* – אם”. And the Aramaic negation “ܠܐ” (cf. 2:5) is the equivalent of the Hebrew declarative negation “*lo’* – ܠܐ ܕܝܐܠܝ – aAlī”.

This phrase may imply three things: either the three young Jews were contemptible of the king’s command for they thought such a powerful king should not end up telling people to worship stones or inanimate things. Indeed, right from the beginning of the interrogation they had told him, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter” (v. 16). In other words, they had already decided not to abide by the king’s command under any circumstances. Perhaps that is why the king was so furious with rage (vv. 13, 19) for he had trusted them and offered them some administrative authority (cf. 2:49; 3:12). Or they resigned to their fate in despair because they had no way of escape. The fatalistic concept is rare in the biblical tradition because Israel had always believed that nothing happens without God’s will and plan.²² Or it was a statement of their faith and trust in YHWH which meant that they did not need any visible sign. Their living God cannot be reduced to compete with a human king or empty idols.²³ They were therefore ready for the consequences since they were convinced

²¹ The Aramaic conditional expression “*w^ehen la’* – ܠܐ ܝܗܝܐ” appears twice in same chapter in Daniel 3:15 and 18; and its Hebrew form “*w^ehen lo’* – ܠܐ ܝܗܝܐ” appears once in Ex 4:1.

²² It is in the same line that even the oppressive Pharaoh could not refuse to release the Israelites if he was not permitted by YHWH who hardened his heart (cf. Ex 4:21; 8:15; 10:1; 11:10; 14:4).

²³ Contrary to JOHN, E. GOLDINGAY, *Daniel*, WBC Vol. 30, 71 who maintains that philologically the conditional phrase, “Even if he does not” may also include the existence of God, that “if he does not exist”. Such position is untenable because the three young Jews had already explicitly said, “the God we serve is able to save us from it, and will deliver us out of your hand, O king” (v. 17). Cf. STEPHEN, R. MILLER, “Daniel”, *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 18, USA: Broadman and Holman, 1994, 120.

that whatever happened was God's will for them. They were not afraid of death provided they obeyed God's will for them. Their attitude is reminiscent to Jesus' exhortation to his disciples when he sent them out to preach, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt 10:28; cf. Lk 12:4-5).²⁴ Therefore, the latter is more probable for as already pointed out, many scholars regard the main purpose of the book of Daniel was to inspire fellow Jews who were facing persecution from foreign powers, more so during the Seleucid's reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (ca. 175-164 BC). It was a statement of radical faith that stood up in the face of terrible threat and powerlessness (3:28). Forced to make a choice between God and idolatry, they chose to adhere to their living God who revealed himself to their ancestors and continued to accompany them throughout history through the prophets. Though they were constantly unfaithful to the covenant, God remained faithful to his promises. They understood that what Israel was going through was the consequences of her failures.

Perhaps the closest interpretation of the three young Jews' fate could be sought from the Prayer of Azariah of the Greek version (LXX 3:26-45), which was probably inserted later by redactors for the same purpose. Azariah understood their impending suffering as "sacrifice or offering" (h' quisi,a) which they were offering to God for the sins of Israel (3:40-41). They were ready to offer it whatever the circumstances because in hope they trusted in their God's justice, mercy and supreme power and glory (vv. 42-45).²⁵ But what kind of sacrifice were they offering? It was

²⁴ Israelites believed that God's will is sovereign for sometimes he allows suffering of the righteous for his own mysterious higher good as Job's reflection of his tragedy demonstrated (Job 13:15; cf. Rom 5:3-5). Cf. STEPHEN, R. MILLER, "Daniel", 120; LOUIS, F. HARTMAN and ALEXANDER, A. Di LELLA, "Daniel," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, by Raymond, E. Brown, Joseph, A. Fitzmyer, and Roland, E. Murphy, (eds.), reprint, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 2000, 412.

²⁵ HEINZ-DIETER, NEEF, "Das Gebet des Asarja – Daniel 3:26-54 LXX und Theodotion," in Hermann Lichtenberger and Ulrike Mittmann-Richert, (eds.), *Biblical Figures in Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature*, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2009, 123-145 proposes that the main theme of the Prayer of Azariah was divine justice (v. 27) and not martyr theology. I would rather speak of sacrifice theology which is

sacrifice that proved the truth of the faith they upheld in the God of Israel. This may be understood as the “offering of their lips” which Hosea 14:2 spoke about concerning Israel who with empty words promised God to repent. Hosea told them, “Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may *offer the fruit of our lips*.’” Similar words are found in the Epistle to the Hebrews 13:15 calling upon Christians to live their faith in Jesus their High Priest, “... therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the *fruit of lips that confess his name*.” What is spoken must be demonstrated in action, what James 1:22 called “doing the word.”

Jesus confirmed the reality of his words before the doubting scribes that he had authority to forgive sins when he told the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven” by telling them, “For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins”, he said to the paralytic, “Rise, take up your pallet and go home”. Only when the paralytic picked up his pallet and went home did the scribes and the crowds come to believe that Jesus really forgave the man of his sins (Mt 9:5-8). Similarly, whereas the three young Jews were convinced that their God was omnipotent without empirical proof, king Nebuchadnezzar, like the scribes, came to believe only after the miraculous rescue from the fiery furnace. Indeed, according to the Synoptic gospels, Jesus offered himself as vicarious sacrifice during the Last Supper (cf. Mt 26:26-29 par.) as his Father’s will (cf. Mt 26:39, 42 par.) a day before he actually died on the cross (cf. Mt 27:45-50 par.; Jn 19:28-30). John tells the reader that many abandoned Jesus because of his teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood (cf. Jn 6:52, 60-71).²⁶ They could understand Jesus’ language only after his death and resurrection (cf. 1Cor 10:16; 11:23-29). In a similar manner the three

clearly found in the text itself (v. 40). And surely the ancient redactors who inserted the Prayer of Azariah (vv. 24-45) and the Hymn (vv. 52-90; cf. Ps 136) are the earliest and best interpreters of the episode.

²⁶ According to the Gospel of John Jesus proclaimed those words before his apostles and the crowds much earlier in Galilee. Unlike those many who withdrew from following Jesus, similar to the three young Jews, Peter still believed firmly that Jesus is “the Holy

young Jews demonstrated their statement of faith in the living God of Israel by unconditionally accepting to suffer for it even before he actually saved them from the fiery furnace. Their faith was not based on empirical proof. Again, Jesus had previously told his disciples repeatedly that he would rise after three days (cf. Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:34 par.), but Luke's story of the disciples on their journey to Emaus show that they had forgotten probably because they did not believe in his words (cf. Lk 24:6). Jesus constantly requested his followers to have faith in his words even before they witness a sign and frequently accused them as "men of little faith – *ovligno,pistoi*" (cf. Mt 6:30; Mt 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Lk 12:28). This is the kind of faith that Jesus emulated when he told the apostle Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (Jn 20:29).

THE ROOT OF THE STEADFAST FAITH OF THE THREE YOUNG JEWS

The blatant reply of the three young Jews to Nebuchadnezzar's interrogation, "But even if he (*our God whom we serve*) does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dan 3:18) could have been a sign of despair or suicidal attitude after realizing that they had no way of escaping from his threats. However, their previous response, "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king" (3:17) points to the contrary. They demonstrated a solid and unwavering faith in the God of Israel who can rescue them; and even if He doesn't, they would still not obey the king. Such strong faith and trust could probably be traced in their life as faithful Jews who believed in one God, the God of their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (cf. Deut 6:4-9). They remembered that Moses admonished them as a chosen and covenanted people of God, to keep the Torah wherever they were if they were to prosper and

One of God" (cf. Jn 6:22-71). Faith enables the believer to go beyond what seems to be ineffable to the knowable.

multiply and avoid oppression and death (cf. Deut 30:15-20). And God had always remained faithful to his covenant with Israel, providing and defending them against their enemies. Undoubtedly, the three young Jews used to sing in the Temple and synagogues, the popular Psalms about the great deeds (*g'dolîm ma'asê Adonay* – גְּדֹלִים מַעֲשֵׂי יְהוָה) which God performed for them (cf. Pss 92:5; 111:2); and nothing could stop his divine plan of salvation. Ineffable

Therefore, three main sources could lie behind their strong trust in God: First, it could have come from holy fear. Having been captured together with Daniel, from Jewish royal stock in Jerusalem and deported to Babylon (cf. 1:3, 6; cf. Ezra 8:2), they had witnessed how the prophetic words of God's punishment for the unfaithful and corrupt royal family of Judah had been fulfilled. Following Moses' exhortation, the prophets had predicted divine chastisement of the royal house of Judah and destruction of Temple because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant and worship of idols (cf. 2Kgs 24:20; Jer 2:19; 11; 22:24, 28; 27:22; 44:22; Bar 2:1-2); even those who fled to Egypt will not escape the divine punishment (cf. Jer 2; 24:8; 42-43). Nebuchadnezzar's army ransacked the Temple and deported the royal family, including king Jehoiachin to Babylon and his successor king Zedekiah and his sons who met ignominious demise (cf. 2Kgs 24:8-25:21; Jer 24:1ff; 27:20). They learned that no unfaithful human being can escape from the hand of the God of Israel. Therefore, Nebuchadnezzar's threats cannot intimidate them from their loyalty to their God.

Second, possibly their faith was rooted in hope. Deeply ingrained in their salvation history, they believed that the God of Israel always came to the rescue of those who were faithful to him.²⁷ He saved the righteous Noah from the great Flood (cf. Gen 6:9-9:28); and this may be the reason why Ezekiel had put Daniel the companion of the three young Jews alongside Noah and Job (cf. Ezek 14:14, 20). He also rescued the

²⁷ The Prayer of Azariah in the Greek version shows that the three young Jews' hope was rooted in their firm belief that their God exacted justice to the unfaithful and wicked and rewarded the just (cf. Dan 3:27-37). Cf. PHILIP, R. DAVIES, *Daniel*, Old Testament Guides, JSOT, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985, 86.

patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph from danger (cf. Gen 12-50); as explicitly mentioned in Joseph's story in Gen 39:2-5, 21-23. Job proved Satan's accusations wrong that he was faithful to God because of the blessings he showered on him (Job 1:9-11). He remained faithful in the face of his wife (Job 2:9) and friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, even after the tragic loss of his family and property.²⁸ He intervened to liberate Israel from the Egyptian bondage by series of mighty deeds by the hand of Moses in the Pentateuch and Joshua (Josh 3) who led them to the Promised Land. Even the mighty army of Pharaoh could not stop God from fulfilling his divine plan (cf. Ex 7:3; 14:4, 17).²⁹ He also punished unfaithful and corrupt kings like Saul (1Sam 15:10-34), Joash (2Chron 24:18-25), Jehoiachin (cf. 2Kgs 24:20; Jer 22:24, 28; 27:22) and Zedekiah and his sons (cf. 2Kgs 24:8-25:21; Jer 24:1ff; 27:20). They had probably witnessed how God was working miracles, like interpretation of dreams, through Daniel who firmly believed in him (cf. 2:17-49).³⁰

The third basis of their steadfast trust and hope in their God was probably the message of their contemporary prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In the hearing of the three young Jews, the prophets had warned Israel of the impending divine punishment because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant by practicing idolatry and wickedness. At the same time, they preached hope of return and restoration (cf. Isa 10:20-22; 11:11; 37:31-32; Jer 23:3; Ezek 28:25-26). Daniel's prayer for

²⁸ Cf. JOHN, E. GOLDINGAY, *Daniel*, WBC Vol. 30, 74.

²⁹ Many scholars maintain that the apocalyptic book of Daniel was written in the second century BC in order to encourage those faithful Israelites who were under persecution during the Seleucid's reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (ca. 175-164 BC) to persevere since ultimately victory was theirs. Such strong faith is found in the martyrdom of Eleazar (2Macc 6:18-31) and of the mother and her seven sons (2Macc 7). They could persevere their terrible death because they believed in afterlife in God of their ancestors as demonstrated by Judas who called for a collection to be sent to Jerusalem to provide for sin offering as atonement for the fallen in his campaigns (cf. 2 Macc 12:43-45). Cf. A. LECOCQUE, *The Book of Daniel*, Atlanta: John Knox, 1979, 70; DANIEL J. HARRINGTON, *Invitation to the Apocrypha*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, 109-110.

³⁰ Daniel's divine gift of interpretation of dreams is similar to Joseph's (cf. Gen 40:8ff; 41:15-16). There are many common aspects between the story of Joseph in Egypt and of Daniel in Babylon.

Israel demonstrates this dual function of the oracles (9:1-19; cf. Jer 15; 21). Therefore, they firmly believed that God had not forsaken them; rather, if they repent, he will make them (a remnant) return to their homeland (cf. Isa 40; 41; 43; 48; 49:8ff; Jer 16:14-21; 29:10ff; 30-31; Ezek 12; 20:33-44; 36:1-38; 39:21ff; 40; etc.).³¹ In résumé, it was in this background that the three young Jews were able to remain faithful and staunch in their faith. They believed that they no longer needed signs from heaven, for God had already demonstrated that no human authority can thwart his plan to save and return his people from their captivity.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S VERDICT AND EXECUTION (DAN 3:19-23)

The furious king Nebuchadnezzar commanded some of the strongest soldiers to firmly bind the three young Jews and throw them into the fiery furnace (v. 20). Again, the fiery furnace was so hot that it killed the soldiers who threw the three young Jews into it (v. 22). The description here is probably an exaggeration because such unarmed young lads could hardly resist trained soldiers. Therefore, it could be understood as a hyperbolic literary device meant to demonstrate the resolve and power of the king from whose hands no one could escape, as well as the omnipotence of the God of Israel who miraculously intervened to save the three young Jews (cf. 3:29b). The same could be said about the rescuing of Daniel from the lions' den where after throwing him into the den of lions and closing its mouth with a boulder, it said that king Darius himself "sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed" (Dan 6:17).

Even the fourfold repetition of the word "bind" (*kapatah* – כָּפַת) (vv. 20, 21, 23, 24) serves to underscore the firmness of the king's order

³¹ The words of Azariah's Prayer in the Greek version, "In our day we have no ruler, or prophet, or leader, no burnt offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense, no place to make offering before you and to find mercy indicate that the story was not written during the Captivity in Babylon, but sometimes later, probably in the 2nd century BC, because there were some active prophets during the Babylonian captivity, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, perhaps including Deutero and Trito Isaian school.

and that the young Jews could not escape from the fiery furnace. Perhaps it would ultimately show that the God of Israel who created all things would not be deterred by such trivial human power. Nebuchadnezzar himself would be amazed that four men were walking unbound in the furnace (v. 25). Another rhetoric device was the use of hyperbolic mentioning of the clothes the young Jews were wearing: robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes (v. 21). It served to emphasize that the fiery fire of the furnace was ineffective before the God of Israel, and could not harm them at all, not only their bodies but also their clothes (v. 25; LXX 3:49-50), not even the smell of fire was on them (v. 27). For that reason, the redactors of the Septuagint inserted the Song of the three young Jews to celebrate their God's sovereignty and omnipotence (LXX 3:52-90).

DESCRIPTION OF THE DIVINE INTERVENTION (LXX 3:49-50)

The detailed description of the rescuing miracle in the furnace is given by the Septuagint (LXX 3:49-50). The Greek version particularly highlights the power of the living God of Israel over the futile punishment of Nebuchadnezzar by making a contrast between the Chaldeans' effort to enkindle the fire by stoking the furnace to the extent that the fire consumed those who were too close to it (LXX 3:46-48; MT 3:22), and the angel of the Lord who came down into the furnace to be with Azariah and his companions, and drove the fiery flame out of the furnace, and made the inside of the furnace as though a moist wind were whistling through it (LXX 3:49-50a).

The biblical tradition provides many examples of people who believed in God's word even without giving them a sign: Abram left his homeland of Ur of Chaldea without hesitation on God's promise only (Gen 12:1-4); he also obeyed God's demand to sacrifice Isaac, his only son without a prior sign (Gen 22:2-12); and Mary believed in the message of the angel Gabriel without asking for a sign (cf. Lk 1:28-38). Instead, it was the angel Gabriel himself who gave her assurance of God's word by revealing to her that Elizabeth her old relative was six months pregnant (cf. Lk 1:36). Just as the three young Jews believed that the omnipotent God of Israel could not be intimidated by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar or

his gods (cf. 3:15), the angel Gabriel told Mary “For nothing is impossible with God” (Lk 1:37). And the first four disciples of Jesus dramatically abandoned their properties and parents to follow him without any prior sign (cf. Mk 1:16-20; Mt 4:18-22).

NEBUCHADNEZZAR’S NERVOUSNESS AND CALL OF THE THREE YOUNG JEWS (3:24-28)

Dan 3:24-28 is the first of the three parts of the resolution of the narrative (vv. 24-30), which includes witnessing the divine miracle (vv. 24-27) and applauding the bold faith of the three young Jews and king’s recognition and acclamation of the God of the three young Jews as the Most High (v. 28); the second is proclamation of the new decree in favor of the God of Israel (v. 29); and the third is conclusion which relates the promotion of the three young Jews to administrators of the province of Babylon (v. 30). The text does not offer chronological time of the events. However, the literary or narrative time shows that the events took place on the same day. In short, it is not known for how long the three young Jews stayed in the fiery furnace. Nevertheless, it is so curious that the king was so anxious about the fate of the three young Jews that he rose up in haste and amazement (from his throne or from sleep?) after hearing them singing in the fiery furnace and seeing them alive, and exclaimed before his counselors, “Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?” He then retorted, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods” (vv. 24-25; LXX 3:91-92).

The king’s description in v. 25 of the figure he saw in the midst of the fiery furnace as having an “appearance of a son of the gods” (*dameh bar-^ʾlahîn* – דַּמֵּה בֶּרֶאֱלֹהִין) became controversial among scholars.³² Was

³² The Hebrew equivalent of the expression “son of the gods” is not found in singular in the Bible; rather in the plural “sons of gods” (*bʿnê haʾʾlōhîm* – בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים) (cf. Gen 6:2, 41; Job 1:6; 2:1). However, the plural form of the deity could be translated numerically as “gods” or as intensification or majestic plural “mighty god”. Probably in the context of Daniel 3, the plural was numerical because they believed in multiple gods (polytheistic). The Aramaic plural “son of gods” (*bar-^ʾlahîn* – בֶּרֶאֱלֹהִין) stands

the figure that resembled “a son of the gods” divine or simply a heavenly being? There are those who think Nebuchadnezzar had in mind a divine figure, a god, since he was addressing his fellow Chaldeans who were polytheistic. But later when he confirmed that the three young Jews had been rescued from the blazing fire, he realized that it was a miracle from their God whom he called the Most High (vv. 26-27). It is only after he ascertained the miracle did begin to acclaim and praise the Most High God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Probably realizing that he was not only addressing the Chaldeans but also Jews, he could no longer think of the existence of other gods; therefore, he regarded the figure he saw in the midst of the blazing furnace as an urgent or an angel of the God of the Jews (v. 28). Similarly, addressing Israel, the Psalmist metaphorically called their oppressive leaders “gods” and “sons of the Most High – בְּנֵי עֶלְיוֹן” in plural since they considered themselves as agents of God. But he further added, “But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler” (Ps 82:6-7), indicating that they were not divine, but human beings who will eventually die.

An “angel” (*mal'akeh* – מַלְאָכָה) (3:28; cf. 6:23) is a heavenly figure who serves God, standing in contrast to “sons of men or human beings” (*bēnê 'anasha'* – בְּנֵי-אָנוּשָׁא) in 2:38 and 5:21. Psalm 34 expresses precisely the concept that God sends his angel to rescue his faithful and righteous

in contrast with the unique singular in Aramaic “son of man” (*bar 'nash* – בַּר אָנוּשׁ) in Dan 7:13 who shares divine authority, glory and sovereign power with the Ancient One (cf. Dan 7:14). The Hebrew equivalent “*nôsh* – אָנוּשׁ – man) is quite common in the MT (cf. 2Chron 14:11; Job 5:17; 9:2; Pss 8:5; Isa 13:7; 56:2; etc.). Whereas the appellation “sons of God” (singular) does not appear in the Masoretic Text, the LXX replaced the words “sons of Israel” (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) with “angels of God” (avge, lwn qeou/) which would have been “sons of God” (בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים). The Hebrew expression “son of Adam/man” (בְּרִאדָם) both in singular and plural with the sense of human being is quite common among the major prophets particularly in Ezekiel whom God addresses as son man 94 times (Ezek 2:1; 2:3, 6, 8; etc. cf. Isa 51:12; 56:2; Jer 50:40; 51:43). (cf. Deut 32:8f). Cf. HELMER, RINGGREN, “אֱלֹהִים”, *TDOT 1* (1990) 277, 281; HORST, DIETRICH PREUSS, “אֱלֹהִים”, *TDOT 1* (1990) 272-273; FRITZ MAASS, “vAn*a/”, *TDOT 1* (1990) 346-347; STEPHEN, R. MILLER, “Daniel”, 123.

people in trouble, “The angel of the Lord (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה) encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them” (Ps 34:7, 17-22).³³

In other words, the expression “son of” did not always imply physically begotten of; rather, it could mean member of a guild or company; for example, sons of exile (*b^enê galôta*’ – בְּנֵי גִלְוָתָא) (2:25; 5:13; 6:14), sons of prophets (*b^enê hann^ebî’îm* – בְּנֵי יְהִיְיָאִים) meant member of the school of prophets (cf. 2Kgs 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1; Am 2:11) or professional association, such of singers (cf. Neh 12:28), of perfumers (cf. Neh 3:8) or of wisemen (cf. Isa 19:11).³⁴ This means the “son of the gods” who the king saw in the midst of the fire was probably a subordinate heavenly being, and not God himself or a deity begotten of god. This could be compared with the episode in the story of Job where the expression “sons of God – בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים” appears (Job 1:6); and certainly, those who were presenting themselves before God were not deities, but supernatural beings, such as angels. And it would be anachronistic to think of the figure in the blazing furnace as the Second Person of the Sacred Trinity because the mystery was yet to be revealed.³⁵

The anxious reaction of the king at this juncture raises several questions: Why was he at the forefront to follow up the fate of the three young Jews? Was he sympathetic to the defiant three young Jews? Did he doubt the power of his hands or his gods? The manner in which he fretted to open the gate of the furnace and called them out “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” (v. 26; LXX 3:93) may indicate that he was indeed anxious. For the first time the king identified the three young Jews as servants of the “Most High God – ^E*laha*’ (‘*illaya*’) [‘*illa*’*h*] – (עֲלֵיָא) (עֲלֵיָא) [‘*illa*’*h*] – (עֲלֵיָא) [‘*illa*’*h*]”.³⁶ This

³³ The expression “angel of YHWH – מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה”, probably a late title after the revelation of the personal name of God (Ex 3:14), appears 45 times in the Hebrew Bible standing in contrast with “the angel of God – מַלְאֲכֵי הָאֱלֹהִים” or “an angel of God – מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים”, appearing 7 times; in Daniel the Aramaic equivalent “god – אֱלֵה” or “the god – אֱלֵהָ” and the plural “gods – אֱלֹהִין” appears 52 times.

³⁴ Cf. GEORG FOHRER, “ui’ou.j, ktI”, *TDNT*, VIII (1972) 346.

³⁵ Cf. JOHN, E. GOLDINGAY, *Daniel*, WBC, Vol. 30, 71; STEPHEN, R. MILLER, “Daniel”, 123.

³⁶ The divine name “^E*laha*’ – ah’il’a/” is the Aramaic “^E*lah* – אֱלֵה” with the definite article “a” “the God” and the Aramaic adjective “*illaya*’ – עֲלֵיָא” meaning

divine designation appears only in the book of Daniel: used by king Nebuchadnezzar (3:26, 32; 4:31); by Daniel (4:17, 21, 22, 29; 5:18, 21) and by the writer or narrator (7:25). Nebuchadnezzar did not use the divinely revealed proper or personal holy name of the God of Israel “I AM WHO I AM – אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה” or the Tetragrammaton YHWH (cf. Ex 3:14).³⁷ He used the general name “god or deity – ^Elaha” (אֱלֹהָא) which derives from the Hebrew root “’El – אֵל”, that usually appears in compound forms³⁸ and in its plural “^Elohîm – אֱלֹהִים”, which is probably an intensifying or majestic plural.

The question is, what was the implication of using the common designation of a deity or god? There are two possible answers: either as the king’s comment about the three young Jews that they “were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God” (v. 28b) indicate that he put YHWH, the God of Israel at par with Babylonian highest god like Bel or Marduk. Or he acknowledged the superiority of YHWH over his gods, for YHWH’s intervention for the three young Jews rendered his edict and exaggerated execution of his punishment ineffective and futile. Nevertheless, the praise he gave to the God of Israel who rescued Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego, did not imply that Nebuchadnezzar converted from his polytheistic and syncretistic faith to monotheistic Jewish faith in the living God (3:26; LXX 3:95). The king simply admitted that Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego were right to serve and trust the Most High God who

“Most high” equivalent to the Hebrew adjective the become the proper name of God “^Eliyôn – עֲלִיּוֹן” (cf. Gen 14:18, 19, 20, 22; Numb 24:16; Deut 32:8) and in Aramaic “^Eliyônîn – עֲלִיּוֹנִין” (cf. Dan 7:18, 22, 25, 27) and the next word “’illa’ah – [עֲלֵאָה]” which was normally written on the margin of the text (Qere) by the Masoretes indicated how the word was pronounced. The designation derives from the name of God “’Illa” with the suffix “a” meaning “the Highest God”. The divine epithet “Most High God” is used by both Gentiles and Jews. It appears 13 times in the book of Daniel, and for the first time in this tale of the three young Jews in fiery furnace (Dan 3:26; 4:2, 17, 24, 25, 32, 34; 5:18, 21; 7:18, 22, 25, 27). Cf. JOHN, E. GOLDINGAY, *Daniel*, WBC Vol. 30, 71.

³⁷ The proper holy Name of God of Israel “יְהוָה” appears 7 times only in chapter 9 in the Hebrew part of the book of Daniel (9:2, 8, 10, 13, 14², and 20).

³⁸ Some examples of compound forms with the appellation ‘El are: house of God (*Beth-’el* – בֵּית־אֵל) (Gen 12:8); the Highest God (‘*El-’eliyôn* – אֵל עֲלִיּוֹן) (Gen 14:20) or God almighty (‘*El-shadday* – אֵל שַׁדַּי) (Gen 17:1); etc.

could save them from his hands. For him the God of the three young Jews was simply one of the many high gods. Indeed, this is indicated by Nebuchadnezzar and Darius his successor, who continued to describe Daniel as one “in whom the spirit of the holy gods (plural absolute קְדִישֵׁי רִיבְּאֵלֵהֶן) is in him/you” (cf. 4:8, 9, 18),³⁹ by the queen of king Belshazzar (5:11-12) and the king Belshazzar himself (5:14).

In short, the king’s final remarks, “They (Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego) trusted in him (their God) and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God” (3:28) may ultimately indicate that the real purpose or function of this court tale was not so much about the superiority of the God of Israel over the pagan gods of the Chaldeans; rather, served as an example of trust and unwavering faith in their God, which they confirmed by their readiness to offer or sacrifice their lives for it (cf. LXX 3:40-41). Their exemplary faith and trust in God served as an inspiration to all Israelites under persecution or even under the threat of death because they were convinced that God’s will was always for their good.

THE PARALLEL SECOND ROYAL DECREE (V. 29; LXX 3:96)

After witnessing the divine intervention to rescue the three young Jews from the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar understood that his first decree (3:4-6) has been defeated and nullified by the God of Israel. In admission, he abrogated it and issued another decree (3:29) in the presence of his counselors. The decree prohibited any revilement against the God of the three young Jews as antithetic parallel to the first decree which forced

³⁹ For theological reasons some modern versions have attempted to modify the plural of the Aramaic text “the spirit of the holy gods – קְדִישֵׁי רִיבְּאֵלֵהֶן” into singular “the spirit of the holy God” or simply “divine spirit”. But the principle of “*lectio difficilior* – difficult reading” should be applied here. Cf. PHILIP, R. DAVIES, *Daniel*, 83, 85 contra RONALD, S. WALLACE, *The Message of Daniel*, 70-71 who argued that Nebuchadnezzar repented and turned to the faith of the three young Jews. The king’s doxology in v. 28 tells nothing about the faith of the king; rather, it extolled the God of the three young Jews who endorsed their faith. Cf. STEPHEN, R. MILLER, “Daniel”, 123-124.

all people to serve the king's gods and worship the image of gold he had made (vv. 4-5). The severity of the punishment for those who would speak against the Most High God of the three young Jews "be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble" (v. 29b) stands in parallel with the previous one for those who would have disobeyed the decree to be "immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace" (v. 6). Unlike the first royal decree which the three young Jews disobeyed, the new one does not give any report of people who might have disobeyed it by saying anything against the God of Israel. Most probably because people in that polytheistic society could accommodate any deity. Formerly the king seemed not to acknowledge the existence of a god who was stronger than his gods and his hands or power (v. 15c), subsequently he became a rival to the God of the three young Jews. But after the miraculous rescue of the three young Jews from the blazing furnace, he became the champion protector of their God from blasphemy.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION OF THE EPISODE (V. 30; LXX 3:97)

After witnessing the tenacity of the three young Jews and eventual intervention of their Most High God, king Nebuchadnezzar reinstated them into their earlier position as administrators of the province of Babylon (v. 30; cf. 2:49; 3:12). Whereas the king could only offer them political dignity, their God rescued and preserved their lives. They could now worship their God with their heads up over the defeated Chaldeans and their humiliated king.

JESUS' TEACHING ON SIGN SEEKING APROPOS DANIEL 3

Jesus' teaching concerning his followers' request for divine signs before committing themselves to his cause is explicitly negative. On one occasion some scribes and Pharisees who obstinately refused to believe in Jesus requested a sign from him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous

⁴⁰ Cf. PHILIP, R. DAVIES, *Daniel*, 84.

generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Mt 12:38-39; 16:4; cf. Lk 11:29-32). Jesus’ reply indicates that looking for signs is indicative of lack of faith and repentance. He branded them as an evil and adulterous generation, and worse than the people of Nineveh. Jesus applied again the variant expression “adulterous and sinful generation” to the multitude and his disciples after predicting his own death and resurrection that ended up by rebuking Peter (Mk 8:31-33). He warned them of the consequences of being ashamed of him and his words (Mk 8:38). He harshly scolded Peter by calling him “Satan” or “Adversary” because he was after ostentatious power devoid of suffering or pain. Peter was similar to those who were seeking signs from Jesus in order to believe in him.

Earlier Jesus refused to give any sign to the Pharisees and scribes (teachers of the law) who were accusing him of casting out demons or evil spirits by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Mt 12:24; cf. Mk 3:22).⁴¹ It was in this background that he called them “a wicked and adulterous generation – genea. ponhra. kai. Moicali.j” (Mt 12:39; 16:4).⁴² It is obvious for such people, even if he were to perform any miracle, no matter how spectacular it was, they would still not believe in Him.

Probably Jesus did not mean physical or bodily adultery; rather, a spiritual adultery since Old Testament prophets frequently described metaphorically the covenantal relationship between God and Israel as marriage; God as the groom and Israel as the bride (cf. Isa 54:1-6; 62:4-5; Jer 3:14, 20; 33:32; Ezek 16:1-63, esp. 32; Hos 2; etc.). Therefore, they used the generic adjective “adulterous nation or people” for Israel whenever they were unfaithful to the covenant by worshipping other gods from

⁴¹ In several occasions Jesus refused to perform signs so that people may accepted or believe in him (cf. Mt 12:38-42; par Mk 8:11-12; 16:1-4; par Lk 11:16, 29-30; Jn 2:18; 6:14, 30; 12:18).

⁴² There are a variety of negative related expressions in the NT that Jesus used to describe his audience because of their lack of faith: wicked generation (h` genea. ponhra.), unbelieving generation (h` genea. a:pistoj), faithless and perverse generation (h` genea. a:pistoj kai. diestramme,nh), adulterous and sinful generation (h` genea. moicali.j kai a:martwlo,j), crooked or corrupt generation (h` genea. skolia.), etc.

their neighbors. For the prophets, adultery (זִנְיָה – *zenûṭ*) was almost synonymous to idolatry (גִּלּוּלִים – *gillûlîm*).⁴³ For example, Ezekiel refers to Israel's unfaithfulness as rooted in "their adulterous hearts" (*et-libbam hazzôneh* – אֶת-לִבָּם הַזֶּה), when they saddened God by turning away from Him and worshipped idols (Ezek 6:9; cf. 16:1ff). The life metaphor of Hosea's marriage with a prostitute as commanded by God, is the best example that expressed the deteriorated relationship between YHWH and Israel (Hos 1-4; cf. Jer 3:1ff; 5:7; 7:9). Even some false prophets and other leaders of Israel were called "adulterous" whenever they misled the people (cf. Ezek 23:1ff; 29:23).

In short, Jesus called those who were seeking signs "an adulterous and sinful or evil generation" because they were wayward people who would follow any preacher or miracle worker who might even have no faith in the God of Israel (cf. Mt 24:24; Mk 13:22); for example, Simon the Magician (cf. Acts 8:9, 18-24). Nevertheless, it may seem Jesus contradicted himself when in the long ending of Mark's gospel, he promised his disciples that miracles of healing will be accompanying their proclamation of the good news (Mk 16:15-18). But it is important to note that he did not send them to perform miracles in the first place; rather, he told them "Go into all the world and proclaim (khru,xate) the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (vv. 15-16; cf. Mt 28:19-20). And then signs (shmei/a) will accompany (parakolouqh,sei) those who believe and be baptized, not the preachers (vv. 17-18).⁴⁴ The first priority for them was to proclaim the gospel and not otherwise. They were not sent to call ailing or poor people to come and receive

⁴³ The Hebrew language does not have the abstract noun "idolatry"; rather, it uses the plural form of "idols – gillûlîm" (גִּלּוּלִים) to express practice of worshipping an "idol – gîlûl (גִּלּוּל)".

⁴⁴ The word "parakolouqh,sei" which is a composite word from the preposition "para, – alongside, beside" and the verb "avkolouqe,w – to follow, to accompany" renders the word to mean "follow beside or follow after", which means there is something more important and the thing that follows or accompanies it is secondary. Just as the apostles were told to follow Jesus who is the leader (cf. Mk 1:17, 18).

healing or worldly riches from them; rather, miracles would be result of their preaching.

On the contrary, modern preachers summon people to be healed and receive earthly wellbeing, and only secondarily to hear the good news. These preachers identify themselves as powerful healers and not prolific preachers of the good news. Miraculous acts have replaced preaching. People do not gather around them to hear the good news, but to receive healing miracles! Consequently, many Christians have become itinerant people or vagabond Christians, who move from one church, denomination or congregation to another, seeking for signs and miracles. St. Paul warned the Thessalonians that some false signs which could be done by the activity of Satan may mislead such people (cf. 1Thess 2:9-10). The crucial question is, where do we find the power and authority of Jesus Christ? Matthew remarks that after Jesus had finished preaching the Sermon on the Mount that “the crowds were amazed at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Mt 7:28-29). This should be the reaction of those who come to listen to modern preachers and not about their prowess to perform miracles. King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished that the three young Jews were willing to sacrifice their lives for their trust in their God, even if he would not have performed a rescuing miracle for them (cf. Dan 3:28). Likewise, people should not believe or trust in God only when he has performed signs or miracles for them. It is amazing that hardly would modern preachers speak about the Cross of Christ or suffering Christ; rather, they mostly preach the triumphant Jesus Christ without the Cross, a position which Paul objected vehemently (cf. 1Cor 1:17-18; Gal 6:12-14; Phil 3:18). In line with his theology, Paul spoke of suffering from “a thorn in the flesh” which came from Satan to torment him (cf. 2Cor 12:7). He accepted it and interpreted it as divine will for him (2Cor 12:8-10) in order to keep him from “being too elated”, which means to keep him humble. In a world of materialism, utilitarianism, consumerism and relativism, it is rare to find a person who follows Paul’s attitude of accepting afflictions as sharing in the suffering on Christ (cf. Col 1:24; 2Tim 2:3).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, under the threat of death, the three young Jews did not test God by requesting him to rescue them from the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. They so firmly believed and trusted in their God and his covenantal promises to his people Israel to the extent that they told the king, “God will save us if he wills” and it is not the question of being able to do it (3:17). And even if he is not willing to rescue them, “But even if he does not”, they were not going to obey him (3:18a). It is clear to them that one who already believes does not need signs any more, for the function of signs is to inspire steadfastness in their faith. In other words, they extraordinarily entrusted their lives in their God’s will at that time of adversity.

Unfortunately, modern materialistic generation of Christians are fond of empirical faith, i.e. seeking signs from above (God) that would indicate that He is truly present among them. They claim to believe in Jesus, but they maraud from one church to another, from one denomination to another in search for miracles from their pastors. This is nothing else but manifestation of what Jesus called “little faith – *ovligopi, stj*” or lack of faith (cf. Mt 21:21; Mk 11:23). The situation is more serious in some parts of Africa, including East Africa, where numerous preachers and miracles workers (healers) who take advantage of their miserable condition. They resemble the scribes who questioned Jesus’ authority to forgive sins when he said to the paralytic “Your sins are forgiven”, until he confirmed the reality of his words by telling the paralytic, “Rise, take up your bed and go home” (Mt 9:5-8). It is similar to testing God saying, “show us that you are truly God by giving us a sign”. The risen Jesus reproached the doubtful apostle Thomas because he refused to believe until he touched his risen body. And Jesus praised those who believe without seeing (cf. Jn 20:29).

Jesus would today say the same to those who seek signs, healing miracles and riches from God. Their faith is based on spectacular signs. These are Christians who would consider a minister who does not perform miracles as spiritually bankrupt and ineffective in his or her ministry. The situation has been exacerbated by the growth of televangelists and mega

churches, including unmonitored catholic charismatic movements and groups whose testimonies and prayers are supposed to be accompanied with miracles (physical and spiritual healings). They preach a triumphant gospel (Alleluia!) and the prosperity gospel, without the cross, which Paul steadfastly avoided (cf. 1Cor 1:17-18; Gal 6:14; Phil 3:18).⁴⁵ Moreover, Paul emphasizes that the gospel should be offered for free, “What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it” (cf. 1Cor 9:18; 2Cor 11:7-9).⁴⁶ Inappropriately, some preachers today are exorbitantly rich and live in opulent dwellings from the money they syphon from their disciples! They commit simony by distributing the so-called blessed items such as oil, water and prayer formula scripts, for money.

Nonetheless, the New Testament provides us with examples of disciples who mirror the exemplary faith of Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego. The apostles Peter and John openly refused to obey the Sanhedrin’s order that forbade them to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. In reply they told them, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:18-20). Peter reiterated their bold stance after being rescued from prison saying, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Despite the dangers they were facing, they fearlessly stood up to their faith in the risen Jesus Christ. The acceptance of God’s will for us is nothing else than following the examples of Job 2:10; Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego (Dan 3); of Eleazar (2Macc

⁴⁵ Recently Jesse Duplantis, an American televangelist, called poverty a ‘curse,’ saying that his wealth is because he’s ‘blessed’. He added, “You know that ‘poverty is a blessing?’ That’s a lie. Poverty is a curse. It’s not in Heaven, none whatsoever,” he said, quoting common phrases some Christians use to challenge the prosperity gospel. “‘Jesus was poor.’” When was He poor? Did you ever hear Him say, ‘I can’t eat today [because] I don’t have anything?’” Cf. leonardo.blair@christianpost.com

⁴⁶ Paul was probably responding to the Jewish preachers from Jerusalem who were accusing and ridiculing him of being a false apostle and weak because he had no mandate from the pillars in Jerusalem (cf. 2Cor 11:13). Therefore, instead of preaching the crucified Lord; these Judaizers were preaching triumphant Lord for payment (cf. 2Cor 11:19-20). Cf. WILLIAM NGOWI, *Paulo na Nyaraka Zake*, Morogoro: Salvatorianum, 1999, 64-65.

6:18-31); of the Mother with her seven sons (2Macc 7); of Blessed Mary (Lk 1:38); of Jesus Christ himself (Mt 26:42); and ultimately it is putting into practice the third petition of the Prayer of Our Father, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10).

Abstract

Studying the Court Tale found in chapter 3 of the book of Daniel led to the proposition that its key message is based on response of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to king Nebuchadnezzar’s interrogation, “But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (3:18). The three young Jews did not put their trust in God based on whether He will rescue them or not. The point of the tale is not about whether God exists or more powerful than the gods of the Chaldeans. Rather, it is their exemplary statement of faith and trust which they demonstrated before king Nebuchadnezzar and his officers. This is in contrast with some exegetes who hold that the purpose was to compare the God of Israel and the Chaldean gods in order to demonstrate which god had absolute influence in the Babylonian kingdom. Such conclusion derives from the fact that the original command and decree of the king did not request the people to worship his gods; rather, the image he had raised up (3:5, 7, 10, 15). Indeed, the refusal to “serve your gods” was added by the Chaldeans in their accusation against the three young Jews (3:12b). Again, the chiasmic structure of the narrative makes 3:18 the pivot of the story, in which the two antithetic royal decrees (3:4-6; cf. 10, 12 and 3:29) form an inclusion. Therefore, the key message of the story was to demonstrate the firm trust in God without relying on signs or empirical proofs. It is conventionally accepted by scholars that though the historical setting of the tale goes back to the period of the Babylonian Deportation (ca. 597-539 B.C.), it was written between the 3rd -2nd century B.C. purported to inspire pious Jews to persevere in their faith under the oppression and persecution of Seleucid’s king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Greek king of the Seleucid Empire of Judea in 167–164 BC. Similarly, the example of pure trust in God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is extremely relevant for our contemporary times when the Church is facing formidable challenges from within and without of believers who have become itinerant seekers of spectacles of miracles of healing and wealth, known as the gospel of prosperity. Jesus himself was against such sign or miracle seekers, whom he called “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign” (Mt 12:38-39; 16:4; cf. Lk 11:29-32).