



The Book of Daniel

Daniel 3 and 6

Daniel 3

Daniel 3 is exceptional among the tales in Daniel 1-6, insofar as Daniel is not involved in it, but only his three friends. Conversely, the three friends are marginal figures in the other stories. It is likely that these stories circulated separately before they were brought together.

The issue that provides the drama in this story is the demand of Nebuchadnezzar that everyone bow down and worship an image that he had set up. There is no evidence that any ruler in antiquity made such a demand, but the story reflects the anxiety of Jews, especially in a Gentile environment. Jews were exceptional in the ancient world in their refusal to bow down before idols. The refusal to worship the local gods was easily construed as political disloyalty. A couple of centuries later, the Jews of Alexandria would be accused of "atheism" because of their refusal to worship the same gods as everyone else. In Daniel 3, the rivals of the three Jews, who resent the fact that these foreigners have been promoted to high office, are quick to accuse them. "There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon . . . These pay no attention to you, O King. They do not serve your gods or worship the golden statue that you have set up."

The three Jews are brought before the king. Nebuchadnezzar has no recollection of the preceding chapter. (This story was evidently written independently). Again, he is depicted as an irrational tyrant, who flies into a rage when he is thwarted. He demands that the Jews worship his statue, and asks the leading question: "who is the god that will deliver you out of my hand?" (3:17).

The response of the three young men is remarkable. They affirm that their God is able to deliver them; but they add that even if he does not, they will still not serve Nebuchadnezzar's gods or worship the image. The remarkable thing here is the acknowledgement that deliverance is not guaranteed. In fact, people who risk their lives for their faith must be prepared to lose them. We know that a number of Jewish people were killed for observing the Law in the Maccabean crisis. We do not know of any such incidents in the Babylonian or Persian eras, but the possibility was always there, when Jews refused to conform to the local practice. In Daniel 12, which was written in the time of the Maccabees, a new solution is found for this problem. The righteous who are killed for their fidelity are promised that they will be raised from the dead and will shine like the stars in heaven. There is no such promise here. The story

ends with miraculous deliverance, but the fidelity of the Jews cannot rely on such an ending. Even if they were to lose their lives, they would still refuse the demand of the king.

In the event, they are rescued miraculously. Nebuchadnezzar sees a fourth man walking around in the furnace, who looks like “a son of the the gods,” which is to say a divine being, or what we would call an angel. The Greek translation explains that “an angel of the Lord came down into the furnace to be with Azarias and his companions and shook the flame of the fire out of the furnace and made the inside of the furnace as if a moist breeze were whistling through. And the fire did not touch them at all and caused them no pain or distress.” In Christian tradition, the fourth man is often assumed to be Christ. In the original, Jewish, context, he would be identified as an angel.

The Greek translation of Daniel 3 also includes two lengthy prayers that are not in the Aramaic text. The first is a prayer attributed to one of the youths, Azariah. This is a confession of sin and of the righteousness of God, acknowledging that the afflictions of the Jews are due to the fact that they have not kept the commandments. This kind of prayer is very common in Second Temple Judaism. (Compare Ezra 9; Nehemiah 9; Daniel 9). Azariah asks that the lives of the three young men be accepted as if it were a sacrifice of rams and bulls. The prayer does not seem especially appropriate to its context, because the young men are not in fact being punished for any sin. The second prayer is the Song of the Three Young Men, which calls on all the elements of nature to praise God, for his mercy endures forever.

As in Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar is enormously impressed by the ability of the God of the Jews to perform the impossible. He decrees that anyone who speaks ill of him be cut in pieces and his house be made into rubble. He promotes the youths to yet higher office. Despite this, they play no further role in the Book of Daniel.

The story is hyperbolic, and a caricature in many ways. It mocks the decree of the king by listing all the people summoned to the dedication of the statue and all the different instruments used in the orchestra and repeating the latter a few times. Needless to say, when we meet Nebuchadnezzar again in chapter 4, he will have completely forgotten about the episode of the fiery furnace. Nonetheless, the story is a vivid one, and dramatizes effectively Jewish resistance to idolatry. In Christian tradition, Daniel 3 was often used in Christian burials as an allegory for resurrection.

Daniel 6

As Daniel is absent from Chapter 3, so the friends are absent from Chapter 6. The action of the chapter is prompted by the fact that Daniel is appointed satrap, or governor of a region, thereby prompting the envy of other courtiers. Darius I of Persia famously organized his empire into 36 satrapies. In Daniel 6, the number is inflated, and the organization is attributed to the fictitious Darius the Mede, who represents Media in the sequence of kingdoms.

As in the other stories, Daniel is represented as a faithful and loyal subject of the crown. He is neither corrupt nor negligent. Accordingly, the other satraps decide that the only way they can make a case against Daniel is to entrap him in a matter relating to the law of his God.

The specific trap is that the king is persuaded to issue an order forbidding anyone to pray to any god other than himself. No Gentile king in antiquity ever issued such a megalomaniac order. But again, the fictitious issue speaks to a real anxiety for Jews living in foreign lands. The worship of the local gods was deeply embedded in the social and political fabric of society. The refusal of Jews to participate in pagan worship could easily be taken as evidence of disloyalty. Conversely, their persistence in worshipping their own God could also be taken as evidence of disloyalty, or at least of divided loyalty.

Daniel persists in praying three times a day to his God, with his windows open towards Jerusalem. This practice is never required in the Torah. It is apparent that when the chapter refers to “the law of his God,” the reference is not to the biblical laws as we know them, but rather to ancestral custom.

It is often claimed in modern scholarship that there was no distinction in antiquity between religion and other aspects of society. Religious observances were part and parcel of local cultures. Jews living in exile, however, routinely made such a distinction. Daniel is a loyal subject of Darius, but the worship of his God takes precedence over his political loyalty. Again, Daniel can follow most of the customs of his environment, except in matters relating to the gods. This distinction reappears in the literature of the Hellenistic Diaspora, in Egypt in the first century CE. The Greco-Egyptian grammarian Apion complained that the Jews wanted to be regarded as citizens of the Greek city of Alexandria but refused to worship the same gods as everyone else. Distinctions between state and religion may have been exceptional in antiquity, but they were very much part of the Jewish experience, especially in the Diaspora.

Daniel 6, and more generally the stories in Daniel 1-6, wants the reader to believe that the Gentile rulers actually appreciate religious commitment, even when it conflicts with their own orders. Darius is exceptionally well disposed. He is eager to save Daniel. When he is entrapped by “the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked” he tells Daniel, “may your God whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!” He hurries to the lions’ den in the morning and asks Daniel whether his God has been able to save him, in full confidence that he has. Daniel tells him that God sent his angel to shut the mouths of the lions. Daniels accusers are then thrown to the lions and devoured, while the king, like Nebuchadnezzar, praises the God of Daniel.

The motif of the lions’ den also appears in the apocryphal story of Bel and the Dragon, which is appended to the Book of Daniel in the Greek translation. That story is an idol parody, mocking the Babylonians for worshipping idols. Daniel demonstrates that the priests and their families eat the offerings that the king and the populace believed were eaten by Bel. He thus disproves the claim that Bel is a living god. He then shows that the dragon (snake) lacks intelligence by feeding it a concoction that kills it. When he is thrown into the lions’ den, he is aided by the prophet Habakkuk, who is transported miraculously from Judah to bring food. These stories are

independent of the court tales in Daniel 1-6. It is apparent that several stories about Daniel were in circulation before some of them were edited into the Book of Daniel as we know it.

There are also substantial differences between the Old Greek translation and the Aramaic in chapters 4-6, so much so that these chapters of the Greek were replaced with a revised translation, attributed to Theodotion, who wrote in the second century CE. These chapters of Daniel circulated orally before they were written down. The Old Greek was undoubtedly based on an Aramaic text, but one that has not survived. We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that other biblical texts (Samuel, Jeremiah) also circulated in more than one form. In those cases, fragments of Hebrew texts corresponding to the Greek translation were found in the Scrolls. Even though no other Hebrew or Aramaic form of Daniel 4-6 has been found, it seems clear enough that the Old Greek was based on such a text. Bel and the Dragon were also based on a Semitic text, whether Hebrew or Aramaic. In that case a medieval Aramaic text has been found, but it seems to have been translated from the Greek.

The stories in Daniel 3 and 6 resemble later Christian stories of martyrdom in significant respects. These stories typically involve an altercation between the martyrs and the tyrant who is putting them to death. The stories in Daniel, however, are not strictly martyrdoms, since the heroes do not actually die. They are rather stories of miraculous deliverance.

The deliverance allows the stories to end on a positive note. Daniel 1-6 affirms that it is possible for Jews to live and prosper in the service of Gentile kings, despite the tensions that arise because of their different religion. In fact, these stories insist that fidelity to their own religion is the key to the success of the Jewish courtiers, because it ensures the aid of their God. The stories are written to encourage Jews to be faithful to their religion even while pursuing careers in the service of pagan kings. These are not revolutionary stories. There is no question of overthrowing the pagan kings. There is, to be sure, a note of mockery in Daniel 3, and even in Daniel 6 “the law of the Medes and the Persians” is a caricature that suggests that these foreigners are not very intelligent. But Darius the Mede is a sympathetic character, and Daniel prospers in the service of several monarchs. We will find a very different attitude to pagan rule in Daniel 7-12.

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