

2 Daniel 3-5

3:1–4:3. This story has a very different tone to that of the previous ones, though the scene is still the court of Babylon. It has to do with a confrontation between Jews, worshippers of the one true God, and Gentiles, who worship idols; a similar situation arises in chapter 6. Following the Greek version (which is what the Catholic Church follows and which is used in modern Catholic translations [including the RSVCE]), the passage can be divided into three parts: the first tells about the young men’s refusal to worship the statue set up by the king; for this they are condemned to the fiery furnace (3:1–23); the second part, which does not exist in the Aramaic text, records the prayers that the young men say in the furnace (3:1–68: **notice the italic verse-numbering in chap. 3**); the third tells about the king’s discovering that they are unscathed; as a result, he praises the God of Israel (3:24–4:3). The RSVCE notes on page 23 provide a concordance of verse numbers for this passage.

The entire passage shows that God can save from death those who are ready to die rather than worship idols. Early on, the king asks: “Who is the God that will deliver you out of my hands?” (3:15); he provides the answer himself when he says at the end: “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants”.

3:1–23. The Greek versions place the episode in the “eighteenth year of his [Nebuchadnezzar’s] reign”, which would be 587, the year in which the king sacked Jerusalem. So, the statue would be commemorating that event. However, the formal style of the narrative (the scene is the central plain of the empire, the Dura; the author makes a point of repeating the list of the office-bearers who attend the dedication of the statue, and the list of musical instruments, and the fact that the king’s decree admits of no exceptions) suggests that the whole story is symbolic; the statue may symbolize idolatry as such, perhaps even Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Whatever about that, there is a counter posing here of the absolutism of imperial power (which wants to impose its religious agenda) and the faithfulness of these young Jewish men to their God. It is surprising that Daniel does not figure among them; maybe the reason is that this story was originally on its own, independent of the previous chapter—which would make sense because it does not seem right that Nebuchadnezzar who was depicted at the end of chapter 2 as confessing the God of Israel, should be adopting a hostile attitude to that same God here. Still, one needs to remember that the charge against the young men comes not from the king but from

the Chaldeans, who had no problem about doing what the king ordered; as the author goes on to tell us, not without a certain irony, it will be those very Chaldeans who will be burned by the furnace (cf. 3:22; 3:23–24).

The three young men stand up for the rights of conscience and for freedom of religion by offering passive resistance to an edict which exceeds the proper scope of the king's authority.

3:16–18. The young men's answer is a model of what people's attitude to God should be when tragedy strikes and particularly when martyrdom beckons: they should hope that God will come to their rescue, but even if he takes no action, they should stay true to him. "Because of their faith, they believe that they can escape death, but they say *if he does not deliver us out of your hand* so that the king will know that they may also die in the arms of the God they love" (St Cyprian, *Epistolae*, 58, 5). They do not seek to "compel" God to save them; they want to show that they obey his will, not the king's. That is the attitude our Lord had when his passion loomed: "Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Lk 22:42).

Prayer of Azariah insert - See note on vv3:1-68

3:1–68. As we have said, this section comes from the Greek versions and the New Vulgate translates it from Theodotion's version; it contains two pieces in verse: the first is a penitential piece, attributed to Azariah only (3:3–22); the second is a canticle of thanksgiving (3:29–68) sung by the three young men. Each piece is introduced by a prose description of the scene in the furnace (3:1–2; 23–28). The whole episode bears out the truth of what God told Israel in Isaiah 43:2: "When you walk through fire you shall not be burned."

3:3–22. As is conventional in penitential psalms, this begins by proclaiming that God is just in all his dealings, even when he punishes his people (vv. 3–5; cf. Ps. 32). Then it accepts that the people's sins justify all that has befallen them (even giving them over to the most wicked king in all the earth, vv. 6–10: perhaps a reference to Antiochus IV). Finally, it asks for God to take action on the grounds of the Covenant made with their ancestors (vv. 11–13) and the fact that the people have been brought so low and do repent their sins (vv. 14–18); God's goodness and mercy must now be revealed; his very honor requires that he rescue them (vv. 19–22).

3:23–27. A contrast is drawn here between the harm that comes to the Chaldeans and the fact that the young men are saved by the action of the angel of the Lord. In other passages of the Old Testament the “angel of the Lord” stands for God’s power and protection (cf. Gen 16:7–11; Ex 3:2; etc.); here he appears as a person alongside the three in the furnace, just as the angel who acts as Tobias’ guide eventually reveals who he is (cf. Tobit 12:15).

3:28–68. This magnificent hymn begins with praises addressed directly to God (vv. 29–34); then it calls on others to join in (vv. 35–65); and it ends by explaining why the three young men in particular should praise and thank God (vv. 66–68). This means that attention is focused first on God himself and his greatness, then on his creatures in heaven and on earth, and finally on the particular favors he does for those who fear him.

3:29–34. In prayers of praise, God is often called “God of our fathers” (cf. v. 3)—a way of acknowledging all the great things that God did in the past on behalf of his people. The references to the temple and the cherubim (vv. 31–32) look beyond the temple of Jerusalem to heaven itself, the dwelling-place of God.

3:35–68. These calls (similar to those in Psalm 148) are addressed first to all creation (v. 35), then to things in the heavens or firmament (vv. 36–51), then to things earthly, culminating in man (vv. 42–60) and finally to Israel and its different ranks of people (vv. 61–65). The canticle ends with the three young men calling on themselves to praise and thank God forever for his mercy/ steadfast love, a word that sums up the Covenant (cf. its use as a chorus in Psalm 136).

The order and “hierarchy” in this canticle implies that, while all creatures in the heavens and on earth extol the glory of God by the sheer fact of their existence, it is through man and the praise that God’s people and those who recite this hymn give to God, that the voice of this song in praise of God is found and God’s glory is seen to be one with his everlasting mercy. His glory is acknowledged and seen to accord with his eternal mercy. The Second Vatican Council alludes to these verses (its only quotation from the book of Daniel) when it says: “Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world; thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator” (*Gaudium et spes*, 14).

This canticle is called the “Benedicite” and is included in the Divine Office for Sundays and feast days. The Church also recommends it as a prayer for thanksgiving after Mass—Mass being the commemoration of Christ, the greatest manifestation of the glory of God.

Back to Main Text

3:24–30. At 3:24 the RSV in roman type links up again with the Aramaic text. The Greek translations introduce these verses by saying that the king heard the young men singing in the fiery furnace: hence his amazement; the Aramaic text simply says that he was astonished that they were alive (v. 24). Their deliverance reaches them in their place of torment, with the arrival of the angel to protect them. Nebuchadnezzar, looking down on the furnace, is able to see that they are safe. To someone like the king, a believer in all sorts of gods, the fourth person who looks like “a son of the gods” (v. 25) must have seemed a divine being; but the author makes it clear that he is simply an angel (v. 28). It is through the angel that God manifests his providence. The divine help given to the three young men, Novatian comments, “will not allow even their clothes to be singed by flame. This is just and right, for God sustains everything in the world in being and has power over all, each and every thing; therefore, he can furnish any thing or person with his help, since he is Lord of all” (*De Trinitate*, 8, 43).

The Fathers saw this “son of the gods” as meaning Christ. “Daniel knew the Son of God and saw the works of God. He saw the Son of God who cooled the fires of the furnace with dew. But when he says *Bless the Lord, all works of the Lord*, he does not include the Son among them, because he knows that He is not a creature, but the One through whom all creatures were made, and who should be praised and exalted in the Father” (St Athanasius, *Epistulae ad Serapionem*, 2, 6).

There is not a little irony in what the text says about the king’s reaction: he praises the very fact that the young men disobeyed his orders, risking their lives in the process, and he rewards them for doing so. The very people that the king ordered to worship the statue set up by himself, now benefit from a decree that commands that the God of the Jews is to be respected. The young men’s heroism (their readiness to accept martyrdom) and their miraculous deliverance have completely changed the king’s attitude.

4:1–37. Most of chapter 4 is taken up with another dream of Nebuchadnezzar’s and its interpretation—a theme like that of chapter 2. The passage begins with the king speaking and then telling Daniel about what he saw in the dream, for his magicians etc. have proved useless (vv. 4–19); then comes Daniel’s interpretation (vv. 19–27); and, finally, events prove that the interpretation is true, and the king professes faith in the Most High (vv. 28–37). What this passage describes is somewhat like the malady suffered by Nabonid, the last king of Babylon before the Persian invasion. Among the scrolls found at Qumran was a work called *The Prayer of Nabonid* which blames idolatry for an illness that caused the king to be excluded from the court for seven years; but the king then repented his sins and was cured.

4:4–18. Once again the superiority of Daniel’s wisdom is emphasized: he has “the spirit of the holy gods” (v. 8), which is how a pagan king would describe the spirit of prophecy. The Septuagint translation puts this episode in the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign (cf. the note on 3:1–23). The tree in the king’s dream is like the tree in Ezekiel’s oracle against the pharaoh, which likens the Egyptian king to a cedar of Lebanon that became so proud it was toppled (cf. Ezek 31). In the present dream, the emphasis is on the great size of the tree and its ability to give shelter (vv. 11–12), and on the fact that its ruin is designed to send out a message—that “the living may know that the Most High has power over all” (v. 17). The “watchman” and “holy one” in v. 13 must be an angel; the “seven times” in v. 16 means the fullness of time.

4:19–27. Daniel’s dismay when he hears about the dream (v. 19) arises from the fact that he realizes that the interpretation applies to the king; whereas the king seems to be quite at ease because he does not as yet know what the dream means. Daniel interprets it, applying every detail to the king himself, and he ends up telling him what he must do to avoid this terrible fate: he must practice righteousness and do works of mercy (v. 27). Daniel shows the king the path by which all those who do not know the true God can still attain salvation: “Nor does divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with his grace strive to live a good life” (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 16).

4:28–37. The story does not really say very much about what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. It simply records that the dream and its interpretation were borne out by subsequent events, and

that the king came to acknowledge the one true God as a result of his misfortune. The narrator stresses the king's conversion by having him speak in the first person from v. 34 on: it is as if the king were making a personal confession. St Jerome comments: "If he had not lifted up his eyes to heaven, he could not have been restored to his former state. [...] Nebuchadnezzar understood that he had suffered for seven years and was humbled because he had raised his pride against God" (*Commentarii in Daniele*, 4, 31 and 34).

5:1–30. The structure here is similar to that of chapters 1 and 2, which focussed on Daniel as an interpreter of dreams; here it is not a dream but a vision. First comes an account of the king's vision (vv. 1–12), then Daniel's interpretation (vv. 13–28), and finally the king's reaction, and the events that prove Daniel right. The author uses considerable artistic license in his references to the historical context: Belshazzar was not Nebuchadnezzar's son (v. 11), nor did Darius the Mede succeed Belshazzar (6:1); cf. "Introduction", pp. 794f, above. But by depicting Belshazzar as Nebuchadnezzar's son, the sacred writer creates a link with the previous chapter and is able to explain the disappearance, by divine decree, of the empire, that is, the statue's golden head (cf. 2:38). The dependence of this on the previous chapter, to which it refers (cf. 4:5 and 5:11–12, 18–21), suggests that it is designed to round off the earlier one by showing Daniel's connection with the last king of Babylon (according to the book itself, that is—not in real life). The story illustrates, also, what was said in 1:17—that Daniel "had understanding in all visions and dreams". It is a gift that he makes available to the sacrilegious king, in the hope of changing his heart.

5:1–12. The sacrilege committed by the king and his court, and their idolatry, too, make this Belshazzar a sort of symbol of Antiochus Epiphanes, the king who sacked the temple and looted its sacred vessels (cf. 1 Mac 1:20–24; 2 Mac 5:11–16). The hand that writes on the wall, a sign of the living God (vv. 4–5), is something quite different from the pagan idols, which are incapable of movement. It is surprising that the king did not consult Daniel earlier (vv. 7–8), given that he was the official chief astrologer (v. 11). However, the sacred writer tells the story as he does, in order to highlight, once again, the superiority of Daniel's wisdom over that of all the wise men of Babylon and all their magic arts. Daniel's gift is seen by this polytheistic people as a spirit of a god which makes Daniel like the gods.

5:13–28. The king is ready to believe in Daniel’s supernatural powers, and offers him great rewards to use them on his behalf (vv. 14–16); but Daniel makes it clear that he never acts for personal gain. He is ready to interpret the writing on the wall, but he wants the king to acknowledge the Most High God, as his father had to do when misfortune overtook him (vv. 18–21). Therefore, he plainly tells the king what his sin has been (vv. 22–23) and reveals to him the sentence that God has passed—in other words, the meaning of the writing on the wall (vv. 24–28).

Four words were written by the mysterious hand according to the Masoretic text (which repeats the first word). They are the names of Eastern measures and coins—the mina, the shekel and the half-mina or paras. In his interpretation, Daniel links them to three verbs that sound like them—the verb *manah*, meaning to measure; *saqal*, to weigh; and *paras*, to divide. The last of the words in the Masoretic text is the plural (*parsim*), so that it sounds like “Persians” in Aramaic. And so, by this play on words, the end of the Babylonian empire and the arrival of the Persians is announced.

This sentence is passed on Belshazzar not only because he failed to glorify the God who gave him life (v. 23) but because he showed him disrespect through the sacrilegious use of the sacred vessels. Theodoret of Cyrus, commenting on v. 23, points out that Daniel “teaches them that they should worship the Lord God, not the things that they can see. Therefore, he denounces the vanity of the king, and tells him that the invisible God holds the high heavens in his sway. ‘You,’ he says to the king, ‘you have not humbled your heart, nor seen the greatness of the heart of heaven, who is God and Lord of everything that is. If you had not been blinded by your pride, you would not have taken the vessels of the Lord from his temple’ ” *Interpretatio in Daniele*, 5, 23).

5:29–30. The very abrupt end to the story shows the king keeping his promise to reward Daniel (cf. v. 16), so he must have believed the interpretation. But events quickly prove Daniel right (v. 30). There is no mention of the king’s having a change of heart and praising the true God, as

happens in the previous chapter and in the one that follows. Maybe there is an implication that the king's punishment was immediate, precisely because he did not seek forgiveness.¹

¹ Gavigan, J., McCarthy, B., & McGovern, T. (Eds.). (2005). *Major Prophets* (pp. 814–835). Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.