

Title Page

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BIB314 Daniel**

Exegesis

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Exegete Daniel 3:1-30.

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Introduction

For any child who is familiar with Veggie Tales, the story of “Rack, Shack and Benny” (1995) is a message about standing up for what they believe in, fully confident of God’s faithfulness. Indeed, as Tremper Longman notes, the well-known narrative in Daniel 3 carries the theme of the book: “In spite of present appearances, God is in control.”¹ This essay intends to examine the historical and cultural context of this passage for the original audience by examining firstly, the futility of idolatry; and secondly, the sovereignty of God. It then considers an appropriate application for churches and individuals in contemporary society, in order to encourage them to trust God’s faithfulness and fortitude no matter what external circumstances arise.

Context

The book of Daniel is found in the “Writings” section of the “Tanak,” the Hebrew Old Testament.² Although Daniel incorporates wisdom, prophecy and history,³ as an apocalyptic text, Jacqueline Grey notes that it tends to be viewed as having less authority than the Torah and the Prophets, though in Catholic and Protestant Bibles, it is interpreted in view of Christ.⁴ The genre of Daniel 3, a richly textured narrative, is widely considered to be a court legend,⁵ as with the stories of Joseph and Esther.⁶ W.

¹ Tremper Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 97.

² The TaNaK is comprised of three distinct sections: the *Torah* (“Law”), which includes Genesis through to Deuteronomy; *Nebi'im* (“Prophets”), including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve Minor Prophets; and *Kethubim* (“Writings”). Jacqui Grey, *Them, Us, and Me: How the Old Testament Speaks to People Today* (Sydney: APSS/SCD Press, 2008), 35-36.

³ Duane L. Christensen, *The Unity of the Bible: Exploring the Beauty and Structure of the Bible* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2003), 8.

⁴ Grey, 36.

⁵ Paul-Alain Beaulieu, “The Babylonian Background of the Motif of the Fiery Furnace in Daniel 3,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 2 (Summer 2009), 273.

⁶ Tawny L. Holm, “The Fiery Furnace in the Book of Daniel and the Ancient Near East,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 128, no. 1 (January-March 2008), 85. Some modern critical scholarship tends to consider Daniel and his friends as legendary characters, suggesting Daniel “probably never existed.” W. Sibley Towner in Zdravko Stefanovic, *Daniel: Wisdom to the Wise: Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Nampa: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2007), 15.

Lee Humphreys further classifies the chapter as a “court conflict,”⁷ in which Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are condemned to die in the fiery furnace for refusing to bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar’s image of gold.⁸ The reign of the king (605 to 562 BCE)⁹ sets the book of Daniel during the exilic period of Israel’s history, after he conquered Jerusalem and deported the Jews into Babylonia.¹⁰ However, the text is quite ambiguous as to the date of composition and authorship. The first six chapters are narratives about the sixth century and give no indication of the date or author.¹¹ Although the traditional position holds that Daniel composed this book in the sixth century,¹² certain scholars argue for later composition, challenging the use of both first (cf. Daniel 8:1; 9:22; 10:2) and third person (cf. Daniel 7:1-2a); indication that the prophecies were redacted in order to lend to the appearance of accuracy;¹³ the use of certain Greek, Persian, Aramaic and post-exilic Hebrew words which substantiate a later composition date;¹⁴ and alleged historical, stylistic and theological

⁷ Daniel 6 recounts a similar narrative with Daniel in the lion’s den. Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel* 97.

⁸ Holm, “The Fiery Furnace in the Book of Daniel and the Ancient Near East,” 85.

⁹ Scholars have suggested that the madness portrayed in Nebuchadnezzar’s character is reflective of the eccentric last king of Babylon, Nabonidus (556 to 539 BCE). In likeness to the gold image of Daniel 3, this king reportedly erected a new cult image of the god Sîn, at the expense of worship of Marduk, the city-god of Babylon. According to John J. Collins, “...it is not suggested that Daniel 3 preserves an accurate account of an event in the reign of Nabonidus, only that such an event may have provided the starting point for the growth of a legend.” Beaulieu argues, thus, that the tale originated as a critique of Nabonidus’s failed attempt to impose worship of the god Sîn as state cult, but the transmuting of tradition substituted Nebuchadnezzar for Nabonidus to rather highlight the idolatry of the pagan king. This may be further evidence that the book was written later than the sixth century. Beaulieu, “The Babylonian Background of the Motif of the Fiery Furnace in Daniel 3,” 275-277.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 274.

¹¹ Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 21.

¹² Stefanovic, 15.

¹³ Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 22.

¹⁴ Ronald S. Wallace, *The Message of Daniel* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 18.

inconsistencies in the text.¹⁵ This uncertainty, however, as J. Baldwin notes, “does not greatly affect the interpretation.”¹⁶

Idolatry

In Daniel 3, the author explores the destructive and unfruitful nature of idolatry. The erection of the image of gold (Daniel 3:1) is often interpreted by scholars in correlation with Nebuchadnezzar’s vision in Daniel 2.¹⁷ Some scholars suggest that the king was drawn to the notion of himself as the head of gold, which then corrupted his initial reaction of praise for God and inspired him to create perhaps an image of himself, or a symbol of his regal power.¹⁸ As Hippolytus of Rome argued in the second century, Nebuchadnezzar “made a copy of this image, in order that it might be worshiped by all as God.”¹⁹ Zdravko Stefanovic, on the other hand, suggests that Nebuchadnezzar set the statue up in response to rebellion within “his own army” (according to official Babylonian records) in order to establish a visual representation of the solidity of his

¹⁵ Stefanovic, 15.

¹⁶ J. Baldwin in Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 24. Jan-Wim Wesselius argues that a number of the inconsistencies held against the book of Daniel, such as the use of Hebrew and Aramaic parts or the change from first to third person in Daniel 7-12, can be cleared if the literary nature of Daniel is understood. For discussion on this, see Jan-Wim Wesselius, “The Literary Nature of the Book of Daniel and the Linguistic Character of Its Aramaic,” *Aramaic Studies* 3, no. 2 (July 2005), 254.

¹⁷ In Daniel 2, the king has a dream of a statue made of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay, in which the king is the head of gold.

¹⁸ The image could have been of a Mesopotamian god, but Beaulieu notes that its position in the plain of Dura precludes its religious nature, as public displays of statues of gods were not common. Beaulieu, “The Babylonian Background of the Motif of the Fiery Furnace in Daniel 3,” 276. Alternatively, the image could have been on the king, but Longman notes that statues were typically created as representations of invisible beings (cf. Daniel 2:11, “[the gods] do not live among humans”). Thus, since the king is physically present, it is more likely that he would have commanded worship be directed to himself, rather than a statue. Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 101.

¹⁹ Hippolytus of Rome in Beaulieu, “The Babylonian Background of the Motif of the Fiery Furnace in Daniel 3,” 276. Beaulieu argues that this interpretation fits well only when read in association with Daniel 2, whereas Daniel’s absence from the tale suggests, as scholars have argued, that Daniel 3 originally circulated as a separate narrative from Daniel 2. *Ibid*, 277. However, Longman suggests that Daniel’s absence may be implicitly resolved in 2:49, which suggests that he remained in the royal court. Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 99.

enduring reign.²⁰ Whatever the motivation, certainly the image was intended to glorify the power of man independent of God.²¹ This is further emphasised by the use of repetition in describing the pompousness of the celebration of the statue. The use of repetition creates, as Danna Nolan Fewell suggests, “a scenario in which conformity is normative, disobedience is unthinkable.”²² The repetition of the prestigious list of guests (2, 3, 27) and instruments (5, 7, 10, 15) heightens tension towards the three friends who are singled out, emphasising their refusal to participate in idolising a human creation.²³ This highlights the critique in Daniel against “the idolatry of substituting some human endeavour for God, in this case turning temporal power into an object of worship.”²⁴ The author therefore establishes Daniel 3 as an exploration of the futility of human attempts to glorify themselves against God, highlighted through the example of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Sovereignty of God

Daniel 3 also highlights God’s sovereign power in the face of persecution against faithful believers. Although the text identifies the three friends as “Jews” (8, 12), The accusation made is not class against race,²⁵ as would be reflected in an attempt to disrepute “all the Jews,” as in the story of Esther (3:13; 4:13; 9:24). Rather, the text implies that the Chaldean astrologers were disgruntled that foreigners had been granted respected positions as administrators over the province of Babylon.²⁶ The

²⁰ Stefanovic argues this theory is supported by Daniel 2, which implies mistrust of the wise men (cf. 2:8-9). Stefanovic also uses this to date the text to 594 BCE. See Stefanovic, 120, 121.

²¹ H. A. Ironside, *An Ironside Expository Commentary: Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 30.

²² Danna Nolan Fewell in Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 98.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Hippolytus of Rome in Beaulieu, “The Babylonian Background of the Motif of the Fiery Furnace in Daniel 3,” 276.

²⁵ Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 99.

²⁶ Ibid, 100.

astrologers thus play the Jews' refusal to bow as a threatening display of disloyalty to the king (10-12).²⁷ However, in response to Nebuchadnezzar's threats (15), Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego offer a striking demonstration of God's sovereignty. The weight of the king's threat is almost undermined as these three men focus attention upon the question of God's presence and willingness to save them (cf. 17-18).²⁸ Consequently, Nebuchadnezzar commands the furnace²⁹ be heated seven times hotter than usual,³⁰ yet instead of burning up, God demonstrates his authority by sending an angel, preserving Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, unbound, unharmed, not burned and not scorched (cf. 25, 27). Choon Leong Seow notes that the Greek translation of the story elaborates on the saving power of the angel who "descends into the furnace, drives out the flames, and causes a cool breeze to blow through it," indicating that God saved them *from* the fire.³¹ The Aramaic text, on the other hand, only notes that there was a fourth being who "looks like a son of the gods" (3:25). This translation preserves the message that although they were walking *in the midst* of the fire, it was in this place that the men encountered the divine presence.³²

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Choon Leong Seow, *Daniel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 57.

²⁹ Beaulieu notes that the size of the furnace, large enough to accommodate four men walking around, could have been an exaggeration of "a real mode of execution where the condemned was bound and fit in a smaller oven," as seen in some Egyptian sources, though these could simply be rhetorical methods of punishment. Beaulieu, "The Babylonian Background of the Motif of the Fiery Furnace in Daniel 3," 287.

³⁰ According to Holm, capital punishment, by burning or otherwise, was not unknown in the Ancient Near East. He notes examples of burning for offences made against a hierarchical superior (Gen. 38:24; Lev. 20:14; 21:9); for false prophecy and other sins (cf. Ahab and Zedekiah, Jer. 29:22); and as the "eschatological punishment par excellence in post-exilic prophecy and apocalyptic literature" (cf. Isa. 26:11; Dan. 7:11; 1 Enoch 18:9-16; 1 QS 4:13). However, since the use of a furnace for capital punishment is rarely found, Holm suggests the author may be literally applying metaphors of furnaces used for purification or refining, as seen in biblical psalms or descriptions of Israel's suffering during the exodus or exile. Holm, "The Fiery Furnace in the Book of Daniel and the Ancient Near East," 86.

³¹ Seow, 59. Notably, Daniel 3:22 indicates that the fire was so hot that the soldiers who took the three men to the entrance were killed, yet already at this point God was protecting Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego for they did not die (conversation with colleague).

³² Ibid.

Longman suggests that for the original audience suffering grief for those lost to persecution, this narrative offered encouragement of God's unfathomable wisdom in choosing who to save.³³ Therefore, this narrative encourages readers to trust the sovereignty and wisdom of God, despite seeming impossible circumstances, trusting that he will come through.

Application for the Church

Daniel 3 contains many themes that are applicable for individuals and the Church. Longman notes that the Old Testament can portray ideals for the contemporary Christian community to emulate, as with the faith displayed by Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, highlighted particularly in Daniel 3:16-18.³⁴ The challenge presented here is to believe with full conviction that God will come through and to commit to trusting him even if he doesn't respond in the anticipated way. This steadfast faith is reflected in Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane, in which he asks God, "Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). In recognising God's sovereign ability to save him, Jesus also affirms that God's "good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2) will be done. For Christians, this offers a personal challenge to completely trust that despite all physical or spiritual circumstances, God will come through and to steadfastly believe in him even if the response is not at the time or in the way that is expected. Furthermore, in the same way that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to any god but God, believers and the Church as a whole should endeavour to recognise and discern that which society has set up as idols and commanded worship of, and refuse to conform.

³³ Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 101.

³⁴ Tremper Longman, *Making Sense of the Old Testament: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 14.

Conclusion

Daniel 3 is a well-known passage encouraging readers to have faith in God, no matter what circumstances arise and regardless of what his response is. The text highlights King Nebuchadnezzar's idolatry, birthed out of jealous ambition to establish himself as worthy of more worship than God. However, God is still proven to be sovereign, for when the king reacts to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's refusal to bow down to the image of gold, he is the one who ends up shamed and repentant. This essay examined the historical and cultural context of the passage in order to demonstrate the intrinsic message that "in spite of present appearances, God is in control."³⁵

³⁵ Longman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 97.

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