

PERSECUTION, A MIX OF POLITICS AND RELIGION – A HISTORICAL LOOK FROM THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET DANIEL

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ABSTRACT: Persecution, a Mix of Politics and Religion - A Historical Look from the Book of the Prophet Daniel.

The book of the prophet Daniel, in chapter 3, presents an episode in the life of the king Nebuchadnezzar, who made an image of gold, 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide, and set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon, and the king sent to gather there all the villagers, rulers, governors, judges, treasurers, all the rulers of the provinces to come to a great ceremony of dedication of the image set up by the king. In this setting everywhere the emperor Nebuchadnezzar appears in the centre: he had the idea and gave the order to make the image, he called and gathered all the dignitaries, he commanded them, he organized everything. Even though Daniel does not tell us anything precise about the timing of those events, it is interesting that the prophet Jeremiah writes about a delegation that went to Babylon, an event with which Jeremiah entrusted Seraiah with a scroll to read in Babylon.

In the context of those events described by Daniel, the political power sets up a burning fiery furnace next to the object of worship, the golden image in the valley of Dura, with a very clear message to all that those who do not worship the image will end up in the fiery furnace. The three young Jewish slaves in Babylon, who were high dignitaries of the empire, were asked to perform an act of worship, a religious gesture, specific to the Babylonian religion, which was against their religion. The refusal of a religious act on the part of the three young men was politically interpreted and drastically condemned by throwing them into the fiery furnace. The miraculous intervention of the God of the Jews to save them from the fiery furnace caused the king to change his attitude on the spot and to order all those in his empire, under penalty of severe punishment, not to dare offend the God of the Jews, whom the three young Jewish dignitaries worshipped and trusted.

Keywords: *emperor, politics, religion, persecution, mix, politics, religion, Prophet Daniel, freedom, babylonians, the three young jews, worship, gold chip, fiery furnace, faith.*

Introduction

The book of the prophet Daniel, in chapter 3, presents an episode in the life of the king Nebuchadnezzar, who made an image of gold, 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide, and set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon, and the king sent to gather there all the villagers, rulers, governors, judges, treasurers, all the rulers of the provinces to come to a great ceremony of dedication of the image set up by the king. In this setting everywhere the emperor Nebuchadnezzar appears in the centre: he had the idea and gave the command to make the image, he called and gathered all the dignitaries, he commanded them, he organized everything. Even though Daniel doesn't tell us anything precise about the timing of those events, it is interesting that the prophet Jeremiah writes about a delegation that went to Babylon, an event with which Jeremiah entrusted Seraiah with a scroll to read in Babylon:

The word which Jeremiah the prophet commanded Seraiah the son of Neriah, the son of Maaseiah, when he went with Zedekiah the king of Judah into Babylon in the fourth year of his reign. And this Seraiah was a quiet prince.¹

If this first-rate delegation that went to Babylon included the king and the high priest, it meant that it was a very important event that they were invited to attend. Whether their visit corresponds with the consecration of the image cannot be said precisely, but if it did then the consecration of the image would have been in 594 BC, which according to Jeremiah was the 4th year of King Zedekiah's reign, about 7 years after the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar described in Daniel chapter 2 and about 10 years after he was king. What happened in 7 years? There was a loss of the king's belief in the Creator God, a belief affirmed after the dream was revealed in the words:

1 Jeremiah 51,59.

The king answered unto Daniel, and said, Of a truth it is, that your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, seeing thou couldst reveal this secret.²

The emperor's interest and conviction in the God who revealed his dream began to fade with the passage of time, as his surrounding political environment was full of ambition, was vulgar and full of the pursuit of wealth. The environment in which we live can very easily distort what is moral, noble and beautiful in man. Man tries to assert himself, to look at himself, and is tempted to look at himself and his achievements first, and Emperor Nebuchadnezzar also had reason to be proud, because he had succeeded in everything he did, he had colossal military and material strength for the time, he had achieved a great deal. The people around him also had a contribution to make to the emperor's pride, because they flatter you, flatter you and push you to go on this path of self-elevation. It is possible that the people around the king, perhaps even the wise men of Babylon, who could not easily accept the idea that the God of the Hebrews had revealed the mystery to the king, were also trying to distance him from the good influence Daniel had on the king, people who were not happy that some Jews held positions of high dignity in the empire, that those Jews were smarter than they were and were solving very difficult problems, trying in various ways to remove those Jews from the emperor and from high positions. Perhaps they even instilled in the emperor the idea of making that golden image, because he was not only the head of gold, as the dream was written, but all of gold, as was the image (statue) raised, which also pleased the emperor. It was not the same to be the head of gold or to be entirely of gold.

Politics, religion and the relationship between them - seen through the prism of an event in the book of the prophet Daniel

The relationship between politics and religion depends on what things relate to. If we relate to the culture of Babylon of those times, then they must be together, if we relate to the culture of Jerusalem, then they, i.e. politics and religion, must not be together.

When the state of Israel was created in the Sinai desert, Moses was the civil ruler of the state, one might say the political ruler, and Aaron,

2 Daniel 2, 47.

his brother, was the High Priest. The two aspects of state leadership, the political and the religious, were completely separate and remained so until the period of the Maccabees, 164-160 BC, when the Maccabees, who were priests, and also became involved in politics, insisted that the same person hold both offices (civil and religious), namely the office of king and high priest, which created conflict, scandal and led to the formation of the sect of the Pharisees, whose main objective at the time was to reject the alliance between politics and religion within the people of Israel. From a biblical point of view, politics must go its own way and religion must go its own way, without interfering in each other's affairs.

In the events described in the book of the prophet Daniel, we are discussing a different historical context, because the Jews were slaves in Babylon, being under a different rule, with a different leadership structure than the one in Jerusalem, and in that situation, the specific situation there in Babylonian society was referred to.

In that context the Babylonians could tell the Jews that they had granted them the religious freedom they needed to worship their God. The Babylonians could tell them that they were also granted the kind of food they requested, to observe the precepts of their religion, that they were given the right to sit together at a table, showing the Babylonians how generous they were to the Jews. The Babylonians thought that if they granted religious freedom to the Jews, they should at least for once understand the Babylonians' position. This was the Babylonian position: they gave you 99% freedom, but still even if in a tiny percentage, 1%, they wanted you to worship in the way of their religious conception. This was evidenced by the events of the Plain of Dura, described by the prophet Daniel in his book, which highlights a fundamental principle: Is it possible for the political and by a very small percentage of 1% to affect the religious? The young men presented by the prophet Daniel in his book, dignitaries of the Babylonian empire, show that they do not accept such worship, considering that their religious life must be totally independent, without being forced and obliged by any human legislative decree.

Speaking of the aspect of legality, Holy Scripture presents that man must obey the laws of the land. Even a dictatorship is better than an anarchy, even if one ends up in a situation of obedience to a law that is not very just in itself, it is still better than a society without any law, considering that a legal framework is more preferable than an anarchy. Holy Scripture

presents that God's requirement is that man obeys authority, whether that ruler is a very enlightened and very good man or is a dictator, but when the legal framework interferes with the religious framework by interfering in a person's religious life, then God says that man must obey God more than men:

„But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.”³

„Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.”⁴

This has happened and is still happening today in our human history. The prophet Daniel describes the situation in the time of King Nebuchadnezzar with the great feast in the plain of Dura, where a golden image of sixty cubits in length and six cubits in breadth was set up, to which feast all the rulers, the caretakers, the rulers, the chief judges, the treasurers, the lawgivers, the judges, and all the princes of the lands were summoned to consecrate the image:

Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits: he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.

Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent to gather together the princes, the governors, and the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.

Then the princes, the governors, and captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, were gathered together unto the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages,

That at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up:

3 Acts 4, 19.

4 Acts 5, 29.

And whoso falleth not down and worshipping shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.⁵

What the prophet Daniel presents, that he presents himself in the plain of Dura, is the fact that the act of worship, which is religious, is supported by political power, which is always a power of force. Expression: "Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages"⁶, shows the involvement of politics by command, by force in the conduct of the religious act.

In those events described by Daniel, the political power sets up a burning fiery furnace next to the object of worship, the golden image in the valley of Dura, with a very clear message to all that those who do not worship the image will end up in the fiery furnace: "And whoso falleth not down and worshipping shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace."⁷

This described forced and forced worship is the main element, specific to Babylon. Wherever in the history of our world, we meet near the place of prayer or worship, a soldier with a sword, a gun, or handcuffs, and if the religious act is not performed, the authority binds and punishes you, this is nothing but an extension of the Babylonian system of thought, which the Bible condemns, from its beginning to its end, emphasizing the idea of not accepting such a Babylonian system by the words :

And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.

For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies.

And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.⁸

5 Daniel 3, 1-6.

6 Daniel 3, 4.

7 Daniel 3,6.

8 Revelation 18, 2-4.

The situation where someone forces you, compels you, to worship their religion, even if they are Christian, they are adopting Babylonian religion, having a Babylonian way of thinking and acting by forcibly imposing a certain religious creed.

The three young men in Babylon were asked to perform an act of worship, a religious gesture specific to the Babylonian religion, which was against their religion. Holy Scripture makes this very clear in one of the commandments, the second commandment:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of *any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth:

Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me;

And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.⁹

In other words, man cannot worship that image because in the eyes of others he appears as one who worships that exalted image, i.e. that man's worship is ambiguous, giving another interpretation, even though he has in his soul his God whom he worships, even though the man might say that he didn't actually worship that deity, deity, etc., saying that he actually in his heart defamed him, cursed him, or even said burn him with fire and that he actually worshipped his God.

Under these conditions man had to worship before that image and the divine commandment says not to worship before it either, because by worshipping before it, you have actually approved it, because in the end, it doesn't matter what is in your mind, but the message that you as a man transmit to others from the outside matters, not whether you as a man believe something or not, but the message that you as a man leave around matters.

There is another side to be pointed out, namely the side of loyalty to God, which implies that if you as a human being love God, then you must be loyal to this God in every situation, because you as a human being cannot say that you love God and then go and pay homage to other deities.

9 Exodus 20, 4-6.

Let us take the case of a representative of a government, of a person who is in another country, a country that is in conflict with his country, and he raises the flag of his country, and next to it there is a furnace and he asks that all the flags of other countries be brought there and burned in front of the flag of that country, and that representative throws the flag of his country into the fire, believing that after he leaves there he will be exactly the same man as he was before, loyal to his country. Would that work? Even politically it might work, though it is highly unlikely, but divinely it does not work at all. I as a man cannot deny my God for a moment. I cannot say that I don't know Him, that I don't worship Him, that I don't know who He is, even though the Apostle Peter did:

Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him, saying, Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee.

But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest. And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth.

And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man.

And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee.

Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew.¹⁰

Then he bitterly regretted what he had done: "And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly."¹¹ That was considered treason.

In the book of Daniel in chapter 6, where the decree of Darius appears, which forbade the worship of any god but his god, recognized by the empire, Daniel is shown praying to his God. This idea itself is also along the lines described above, because we are talking about a historical period in which belonging to one or more gods was vital to social relations. If you were in a community and you didn't show your allegiance to those deities you were considered a source of curse to the community and you were eliminated, you were sent away. We lose sight of this today because we live in a secularised society.

10 Matthew 26, 69-74.

11 Matthew 26, 75.

In this context where religious loyalty had to be publicly affirmed, there were also people who were very careful whether this was really done. The scriptural text makes it very clear that some of the Chaldeans approached the king and burned the Jews who did not worship:

Wherefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and accused the Jews.

They spake and said to the king Nebuchadnezzar, O king, live for ever. Thou, O king, hast made a decree, that every man that shall hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, shall fall down and worship the golden image:

And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth, that he should be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.

There are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.¹²

It may be noted that there was even then this phenomenon of observing those who worship or do not worship, where they worship, how they worship, when they worship, who they talk to, etc. It is true that it is possible that those defendants were not at all pleased by the fact that those young Jewish slaves held positions of high dignity in the Babylonian empire at the time.

The way of reporting to such people is perhaps easier to understand for those who also lived during the communist regime, when there were all kinds of informers in the churches (it is difficult to say in which and how many), who were very attentive to certain aspects of religious life: what is spoken there, how it is spoken, who comes to church, who is baptized, who were the guests, where they came from, what they said, with whom they were in contact, etc. All these things were tracked and reported, and the believers had to know (if they knew) how to deal with them so they wouldn't get in trouble with the authorities. People didn't even know who in the church could give information about things that were going on there. These kinds of attitudes and elements are typical of the Babylonian religion, which spied on you, even your privacy, which God does not allow:

12 Daniel 3, 8-12.

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.¹³

Babylonian religion intervenes in two different ways in this intimacy. In the situation of the event on the plain of Dura it intervenes in the sense of evil worship, forcing you as a human to worship in a way that is false to you, which you do not agree with. In the book of the prophet Daniel, in chapter 6 the Babylonian religion intervenes in not worshipping you in the good version, considered by you. The two things: You're not allowed to go to your church, but it also forces you to go to his church. The moment someone doesn't have the truth and doesn't have the arguments to convince, force is used. The furnace next to the face is proof of the weakness of the Babylonian religion, a weakness that is only sustained by fear, pressure, threats and not by evidence, by truth, which has always happened in history and unfortunately, we must say, that elements are foreshadowing that this could happen in the future, which should be a special cause for reflection.

When the three young men arrive in front of the emperor, he tries to convince them and says: maybe they didn't understand what it was all about, although he knew them very well, they were collaborators of the imperial administration. He was not actually asking them to worship the emperor, but it was a kind of oath of loyalty to him by accepting the worship of a god, in fact it was a religious act, at the emperor's command.

Refusing a religious act is interpreted politically. The emperor explains the situation once again and asks them to bow down before the golden face. This time there is no more discussion, no more comment, but they are ordered to bow when they hear the musical signal again. Interestingly, the three young men reply to the emperor that they do not discuss or negotiate the matter and refuse to speak again: "we *are* not careful to answer thee in this matter".¹⁴ Refusing to speak to an emperor was a very powerful offense to the monarch. Dialogue was impossible, because even the emperor would not compromise at his command. In other words, the emperor would only accept one position, that is, that they should all bow, and the three young men would only accept one option, that is, not to bow, so there was nothing to discuss.

13 Matthew 6,6.

14 Daniel 3,16.

There was, however, another aspect and that was that these three young men could appeal to the situation described in Chapter 2 and explain to him : King, but you know that we worship that God who enlightened Daniel and revealed to him the mystery of the dream and told him the dream :

Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, The secret which the king hath demanded cannot the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, the soothsayers, shew unto the king; But there is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets, and maketh known to the king Nebuchadnezzar what shall be in the latter days. Thy dream, and the visions of thy head upon thy bed, are these; The king answered unto Daniel, and said, Of a truth it is, that your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, seeing thou couldest reveal this secret.¹⁵

Then they could argue that when they came to Babylon, they were given a certain kind of food and they said, let's do a diet test and it showed that that kind of food was better, because they looked better than all the other young men:

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs.

And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.

Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah,

Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.

Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants.

So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days.

15 Daniel, 2, 27,28,47.

And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.

It is possible that Emperor Nebuchadnezzar resorted to the following attitude: You know, I know you well, you're nice guys, I appreciate you, but now is a special state. It was a plot against the king, it was a threat to the kingdom, for the safety of the kingdom, for its peace, for its stability... bow as a sign of praise.

It was a special problem, and Emperor Nebuchadnezzar was not the kind of man who didn't know all these elements, but a crisis arises. All great changes are made in crisis situations. And our world is slowly but surely moving towards a terrible crisis, and in such situations the laws change. Take the Covid 19 pandemic. And the authorities, the decision-makers, end up saying: for our safety, for our peace, now you have to do it this way, that is to say even worship in a way that goes against your laws. It is not impossible, on the contrary it is very simple, because crises introduce such situations.

The three young men of Babylon do not enter into a debate with the king, they do not contradict him, and yet the king becomes irritated and even extremely angry. The king was angry because he had met some people who had a dignity and position that he could not defeat. The emperor there pre-figured the type of dictatorial ruler. When the dictator meets a man whom he cannot manipulate, whom he cannot change, whom he cannot bend, with whom he cannot do what he likes with, that man becomes extremely dangerous in the eyes of the dictator, even if he is convinced that that man is the most honest man. That is what happened then in Babylon and it is what happens today. All those people who have had, have, or will have a firm position, a dignity, a faith, which cannot be changed, become hated.

The context in which the three young Jews were then in Babylon brought terrible pressure on them to place the burning fiery furnace next to the object of worship. The motivation of the three young men, to confront the king and not worship before that image, was that they had a real faith in the God they were worshipping and not a formal one, they had a God they believed in wholeheartedly because of the experiences they had had with this God up to that point. They had a demonstrated faith, practically experienced in years of collaboration and service to God. Only when one

has a practical and very strong faith can one say, like Martin Luther : *Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise!*

Faith must be lived naturally and normally, day after day and moment after moment, without making tests of faithfulness, continually showing love and thanksgiving, admiration and gratitude to the God before whom you worship Him, because small deeds prepare man for great moments. Heroes cannot be prepared in a particular school, they prepare themselves day by day in the small acts of demonstration of faith, on the divine principle presented by the Holy Scriptures:

He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.¹⁶

From the attitude of the young Jews in Babylon it can be seen that they behaved very normally, without panicking, without arguing, without threatening in any way, without even resorting to their right of defense, realizing that it was pointless.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.¹⁷

These three young Jews, Ananias, Mishael and Azariah, who were also given Babylonian names (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego), were living an experience of faith at the highest level, which is hard to explain, but it shows that if man lives the relationship of faith, in a normal way with God, similar moments cannot surprise people who live this way, because they are part of their lives, only helping them to grow in faith.

The emperor's decision, following the attitude of the three young Jews, was that they should be thrown into the fiery furnace seven times hotter:

Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated.

16 Luke 16,10.

17 Daniel 3, 16-18.

And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.¹⁸

The test of religious faith is how calm one can be in the face of a crisis. When the relationship with God is very strong, one can be at peace. The example of the Apostle Peter who was in prison bound, awaiting his execution the next day, and he was asleep is conclusive in this regard:

Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.

And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)

And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.

Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.

And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.¹⁹

Another example given in Scripture is that of Paul and Silas, who by chance fell into the hands of the rulers, who commanded them to strip them of their clothes, beat them, throw them into prison and put their feet in stocks. In these unpleasant conditions in the dungeon, stripped naked, beaten and with their feet in the stocks, the two Paul and Silas sang and prayed:

And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying:

The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation.

And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.

18 Daniel 3, 19-20.

19 Acts 12, 1-6.

And when her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone,
they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace
unto the rulers,
And brought them to the magistrates, saying, These men, being
Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city,
And teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither
to observe, being Romans.
And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magis-
trates rent off their clothes, and commanded to beat them.
And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into
prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely:
Who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner
prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks.
And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God:
and the prisoners heard them.²⁰

How can one sing or sleep peacefully when he knows death awaits him? Yes, one can, if from the point of view of faith in that person's heart, in his soul, all things are in order, if his relationship, as a human being, with God is perfect. If your conscience, as a human being, does not reproach you for any sin, you can be at peace. We believe that the three young Jewish men in Babylon were at peace because of these facts, having a conscience that did not rebuke them, an impeccable life and a dignified position for their God, and above all a conviction that their God is all-powerful, that He can do anything, even take them out of the furnace. They present God as the Creator God, lord over all the forces of nature, even over the laws of nature, because He has fixed them and He can annul them whenever necessary, and the most important thing is that God can recreate a man even if there is nothing left of him, as in the case of fire. There have been millions of people who were burned for their faith and there was nothing left of them, but God has the power to recreate those people because : "For He spake, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast"²¹

If one believes that all our human deeds are recorded with God, as well as our genetic data, this may be the motivation for a genuine Christian to remain calm, even in the face of death. For a certain person losing a sum of money may be a very hard trial, which for someone else would not be

20 Acts 16, 16-25.

21 Psalm 33,9.

the same. Losing one's job might be viewed quite detachedly by someone on the basis of their faith, while someone else might be willing to give up everything, perhaps even their religion or family just to keep their job.

As humans, we place ourselves on different rungs of faith, some lower and some higher, and the trial does not go beyond the rung on which we as humans are situated. To suffer the ultimate persecution, to reach the point of martyrdom, is the highest honor that God bestows only on people who have reached the highest point of faith. In other words God doesn't allow someone to come to the fiery furnace or the lions' den or any other situation if that man can't withstand that situation, but in the situation where someone comes to that stage of confidence, then it is a very great honor, it is the greatest honor, that God bestows on a man to come to the point of martyrdom. And the three young Jewish men in Babylon, they became martyrs, they were as good as dead, only a divine miracle however saved them from a terrible death.

From the words of the young Jews, it can be seen that they were willing to go further. The fact that they appear with their names and experiences presented in the Bible is proof that they were great heroes of the faith. These young men knew from home, from their families, how God brought them as a people out of Egypt, how He parted the Red Sea, how He gave them food and water in the wilderness by miracles for 40 years, how the Jordan crossed, how the walls of Jericho fell before them, how the sun stood still, in order that they as a people might grow in faith. The young people appropriated that faith, believing that they were worshipping a formidable God. The second aspect, in addition to faith, was determination. When they left home and arrived in Babylon, they were determined not to defile themselves with the king's food:

And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's meat, and of the wine which he drank: so nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king.

Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah:

Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel the name of Beltshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego.

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he

drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.²²

That is, they have decided to remain faithful to their God. Thirdly, on the road that they decided to go, the God that they worshipped gave them very good health, gave them wisdom, gave them prosperity, gave them a career advancement, and all of these were experiences, so that in that particular holiday situation, they came to a conclusion that their God could also save them from the fire.

One question remains: Does the God who can do anything, really intervene in all situations to escape? The One Above judges situations. In the situation described, the choice of divinity was to save those young Jews, while in other situations the solution was different, e.g. John the Baptist. People should not comment on what does not concern them anyway, but concerns divinity, we can only comment on the position of the three young Jews. The moment of climax, of glory, of the display of Babylonian pride, when the furnace was heated seven times hotter, when the climax of evil was reached, that was the moment of divine intervention, precisely when the angry king exclaimed to see which god would take them out of his hand: „and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?”²³

Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated.

And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.

Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

Therefore because the king's commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.²⁴

22 Daniel 1, 5-8.

23 Daniel 3,15.

24 Daniel 3, 19-22.

The ovens of that time had a mouth at the top where it was fed and where the three young men who were tied up were thrown, and it also had a mouth at the bottom, where you could see what was in it, because that's how all brick ovens were at that time. When the emperor looks through the bottom he sees the people in the oven, expecting to see them roasted, but he sees them free, untied, because they had been tied at the hands and so they were thrown in, and looking much more closely he sees four people instead of three. Then the king goes into a crisis, because it was shocking to throw three people into the fire and then there are four and they are all alive and free in the middle of the fire.

The way Emperor Nebuchadnezzar reacts attracts attention:

Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king.

He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.

Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire.

And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king's counsellors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them.²⁵

Various theologians have argued over the ages as to why the emperor concluded that the fourth angel in the furnace resembled a son of God. It's hard to answer that question, not knowing what was on the emperor's mind at the time.

But first of all the king could not think of his deities, the Babylonians' deities, which were many, but no more powerful than fire. The fourth person could not be one of the sons of these deities. King Nebuchadnezzar knew that the God of the Hebrews had two names: Yahweh and Elohim.

25 Daniel 3, 24-27.

In both Hebrew and Aramaic Elohim had a plural form, and the king was aware that the fourth person was a divine person. The emperor was a very intelligent, religious man, and had some special experiences with the God of the Hebrews. By that time the God of the Jews had revealed his dream to him, and at that time the God of the Jews came personally to save his believers in crisis, right in the fiery furnace.

The Jews believe that an angel was there in the furnace, which also appears in the Septuagint translation, while the Masoretic text, the Hebrew text, goes for the version that the fourth person was a son of God, and Christians believe that the fourth person was the Son of God. So at the climax of the Babylonian triumph the Son of God intervenes for his believers in a time of great crisis.

Conclusions

Interestingly, at the end of that feast of the sanctification of the Babylonian image, gratitude, thanksgiving and glory were not brought to the Babylonian gods, but to the true God, Creator of all, including the Lord of fire. Even though the king was humbled by the fact that things had taken a different turn, he still has the power to acknowledge the true God, Creator of all:

Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God.

Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort.²⁶

The king, however, again issues a Babylonian-style command to force everyone not to defame the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, regardless of whether they wanted to or not:

Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Me-

26 Daniel 3, 28.

shach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort.²⁷

It is possible that in the darkest night of hardship for a faithful man God the Maker of all may light the brightest light. In the context of those events described by Daniel, the political power sets up a burning fiery furnace next to the object of worship, the golden image in the valley of Dura, with a very clear message to all that those who do not worship the image will end up in the fiery furnace. The three young Jewish slaves in Babylon, who were high dignitaries of the empire, were asked to perform an act of worship, a religious gesture, specific to the Babylonian religion, which was against their religion. The refusal of a religious act on the part of the three young men was politically interpreted and drastically condemned by throwing them into the fiery furnace. The miraculous intervention of the God of the Jews to save them from the fiery furnace caused the king to change his attitude on the spot and to order all those in his empire, under penalty of severe punishment, not to dare offend the God of the Jews, whom the three young Jewish dignitaries worshipped and trusted.

Bibliography:

- *King James Bible online.* <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>

27 Daniel 3, 29.