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The Many Fiery Furnaces of Daniel 3: The Evolution of a Literary Model

The fiery furnace episode of Daniel 3 can be described as a martyr legend without a martyrdom. It shares many formal features with other martyr accounts but ends with the deliverance of the three young men. Early on, the episode was used as a model to narrate similar deliverances from fiery furnaces. But with time, the episode became the template for accounts which ultimately end in the death of the martyr. This article traces this development by surveying the use of Daniel 3 as a literary model from the Second Temple period to the present day. By re-working a narrative of deliverance into a narrative of death, Jewish and Christian traditions updated the legend to reflect the reality of a new situation, whilst also responding to a latent story of death already present in Daniel 3.

Keywords: Daniel, Reception History, Second Temple Literature, Rabbinic Literature, Martyrdom, Hagiography

1. Introduction

The fiery furnace episode of Daniel 3 is, at least formally, a martyr legend without a martyrdom. It follows the narrative pattern of other martyr legends in Jewish antiquity: a Gentile ruler orders Jews to renounce their ancestral traditions, a righteous few refuse, and the ruler sentences them to death.¹ But the episode in Daniel 3 deviates from this narrative in one respect—rather than suffering martyrdom, the righteous few are delivered from their fate. In the plain of Dura, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar erects a golden statue and demands that all nations under his rule worship it or else be thrown into a fiery furnace. Three Jews refuse to do so—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The young men tell Nebuchadnezzar they will neither serve his gods nor worship the statue, even if their God does not deliver them from the furnace. Enraged, the king orders his guards to bind the men and throw them into the fiery furnace. As the men are being thrown in, sparks of flame from the overheated furnace gush forth and kill the guards—and in the Greek versions, all those standing by the furnace. But when Nebuchadnezzar peers into the furnace he sees not three but four men unbound and unharmed walking amidst the flames. Upon seeing this, the king calls the men from the furnace, and the three Jews emerge revealing that the fire “had not had any power over the bodies of those men” (Dan. 3:27). The king then blesses the God of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah and issues a decree favoring their religion whilst promoting the men.

The story comes from a period when Jews of the fledgling state and diaspora community struggled to come to terms with the cultural program of their Hellenistic neighbors. Whereas some opted for a policy of assimilation, the actions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes made such acquiescence unthinkable for many Jews. By rededicating the Jerusalem temple to Zeus, outlawing Jewish ancestral customs, and requiring Jews offer sacrifices to pagan altars upon

¹ See the discussion in J. W. van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (JSJSupp, 57; Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 8-9. The episode in Daniel 3 is also similar to the court tales of Joseph, Esther, and Ahiqar, so J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Vision of the Book of Daniel* (HSM, 16; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977), p. 50.

pain of death (2 Macc. 6:1-11; Josephus, *War* 1.34-35), the Seleucid ruler openly invited acts of civil disobedience.² Two accounts, roughly contemporary to the final form of the book of Daniel, survive of Jews refusing to partake of the cultic sacrifices even to their death: that of Eleazar (2 Macc. 6:18-31) and the seven brothers and their mother (2 Macc. 7). In particular, Antiochus subjects the seven brothers to various tortures before their execution, though he is unable to break their resolve, as it says of the third brother, “for he regarded his sufferings as nothing” (2 Macc. 7:12). The confidence of the brothers is grounded in what appears to be a new development in Jewish thought—the resurrection of the righteous to everlasting life. In the words of the second brother, “The king of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws” (2 Macc. 7:9).

The fate of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in Daniel 3, however, offers a different source of comfort in the face of persecution. The equanimity of the three men rests in the power of God to intervene on their behalf. Their miraculous rescue from the midst of the fiery furnace means the episode is not a martyr legend in the strictest sense. And yet, with time, the episode in Daniel 3 would become a template for legends which nevertheless end in martyrdom. Tales of martyrs praising God unharmed amidst the flames of the furnace abound in Jewish and Christian hagiographical literature, even though the heroes eventually meet their death, either in the flames or by some other means. How did this martyr legend without a martyrdom become the template for genuine martyr accounts? Could it be that the original ending—the complete deliverance of the young men from their fate—was unacceptable to later generations? Is there a dose of realism in these fantastic tales of incombustibility? To better understand what led to this transformation, we will trace the development of Daniel 3 as a literary model in Jewish and Christian traditions, beginning in the Second Temple period, through the middle ages, and to the present day—as tales of the righteous delivered from persecution eventually give way to the miraculous preservation of the righteous amidst the travails of martyrdom.

2. The Fiery Furnace of Abram

Tales of Abram’s deliverance from a fiery furnace of the Chaldeans can be found throughout Jewish and Islamic literature. The legend has its origin in the interpretation of Gen. 15:7, “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans.”³ As the Hebrew *Ur* (אור) can also mean “fire,” the verse was taken to imply Abram’s rescue from a fire of the Chaldeans. The same word-play was applied to the death of Abram’s brother Haran in Gen. 11:28, “Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans.” The book of *Jubilees* contains an early attempt to explain both passages. Abram is shown burning the Chaldean house of idols, whilst his brother Haran dies in the flames attempting to save the idols. Thus it reads, “And [Haran] was burned in the fire and died in Ur of the Chaldees before Terah, his father” (*Jub.* 12:14).

The better known tradition, however, relates Abram’s rescue from a fiery furnace of the Chaldeans. This tradition finds its earliest manifestation in the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* which was mistakenly attributed to Philo. The episode in question (*LAB* 6) appears to take the word-play on Gen. 15:7 as its starting point, along with the rallying cry of the Babelites in Gen. 11:3, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” The rest of the

² For the origins of the conflict, see Elias Bickerman, *The God of the Maccabees: Studies on the Meaning and Origin of the Maccabean Revolt* (trans. Hoerst R. Moehring; SJLA, 32; Leiden: Brill, 1979), pp. 76-92; Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (2 vols.; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 255-309.

³ Brought to the attention of scholarship by Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (SPB, 4; Leiden: Brill, 1961), p. 88.

story, however, is modelled on Daniel 3.⁴ The Chaldeans demand that all people bake bricks in fire in order to build a tower in the plain of Babylon, but twelve men—including Abram—refuse to do so.⁵ The Chaldeans bring the twelve before their chieftains, where the men profess their worship of the one God, saying, “Even if you throw us into the fire with your bricks, we will not join you” (*LAB* 6:4). Enraged, the chieftains sentence the men to be thrown into the furnace along with their bricks. In an intervening section, which has no parallel in Daniel 3, one of the chieftains Joktan allows eleven of the men to escape, whilst Abram chooses to remain and face his fiery ordeal.⁶ When Abram is thrown into the fire, God causes an earthquake that sends sparks of flame gushing out of the furnace which kill many bystanders—numbering 83,500. Abram, however, is not harmed by the flames and emerges from the furnace unscathed.

Whereas the setting of the episode is provided by Gen. 11:1-9 and the character and place names are drawn from Genesis 10-11, the narrative of Abram being rescued from a fiery furnace for refusing to participate in idolatry comes from Daniel 3.⁷ Pseudo-Philo’s reliance on this literary model can also be seen in the distinctive vocabulary of the episode. Although the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* survives only in Latin copies, it appears to rely on a Semitic original whilst, at the same time, reflecting readings preserved in the LXX.⁸ As such, several details come directly from Daniel 3: the “fiery furnace” of *LAB* 6:16-18 (*caminus ignis*) reflects the “fiery furnace” (Aram. אַתּוֹן נוֹרָא; Gk. κάμινος τοῦ πυρός) of Dan. 3:6ff; the “sparks of flame” (*scintillas flamme*) of *LAB* 6:17 reflects the “sparks of flame” (שְׂרִיבֵי דִי נוֹרָא) of Dan. 3:22; the phrase “And it burned all those standing around in sight of the furnace” (*et combussit omnes circumstantes in conspectus camini*) in *LAB* 6:17 seems to reflect “And [it] burned those Chaldeans it found about the furnace” (καὶ ἐνεπύρισεν οὓς εὔρε περιὶ τὴν κάμινον τῶν Χαλδαίων) in LXX and θ’ Dan. 3:48; and the phrase “And Abram came up out of the furnace” (*et surrexit Abram de camino*) in *LAB* 6:18 seems to reflect the exit of the three men who “came up out from the fire” (וּפְקִין . . . מִן־גּוֹא נוֹרָא) in Dan. 3:26. The episode in *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 6 is thus the earliest known narrative of Abram’s rescue from the “fire of the Chaldeans” to feature multiple elements from Daniel 3.

The tradition of explaining the rescue of Abram and the death of Haran with a Danielic “fiery furnace” continues in Rabbinic literature. The most widespread tradition is that found in the *Genesis Rabbah*, where Abram is brought before Nimrod by his father Terah for insulting idol-worship.⁹ As before, Nimrod sentences Abram to be thrown into a fiery furnace. At the same time, Haran is given the choice to follow either the faith of Nimrod and live or the faith of Abram and be thrown into the furnace. Haran, however, waits to see whether the fire harms Abram. Upon seeing that the fire has no effect, Haran follows his brother into the furnace, but “his inwards were scorched and he died in his father’s presence”—as in Gen. 11:28.

⁴ Pace Yair Zakovitch who is of the unusual opinion that the Abram story served as the model for Daniel 3, not the other way around, “The Exodus from Ur of the Chaldeans: A Chapter in Literary Archaeology,” in Robert Chazan, William Hallo, and Lawrence Schiffman (eds.), *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch Levine* (Warsaw, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 429-439. To the contrary, the ubiquity of the tale featuring three hitherto unknown young men (instead of a patriarch) suggests its priority.

⁵ The names of the eleven are drawn from Gen. 10:26-29 (esp. LXX) and 11:18-29.

⁶ Here, Howard Jacobson sees the influence of Darius (Dan. 6:18) and Reuben (Gen. 37:22), though the verbal case is stronger for the latter (cf. *LAB* 6:6), *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum: With Latin Text & English Translation* (2 vols.; AGAJU, 31; Leiden: Brill, 1996), vol. 1, pp. 359-360.

⁷ So Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, pp. 89-90.

⁸ Daniel J. Harrington, “The Original Language of Pseudo-Philo’s ‘Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum,’” *HTR* 63 (1970), pp. 503-514; “The Biblical Text of Pseudo-Philo’s ‘Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum,’” *CBQ* 33 (1971), pp. 1-17.

⁹ *Gen. Rab.* 38:13; also *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Gen. 11:28; *Frag. Tg.* on Gen. 11:27-28; *Midr. Teh.* 118:9; *ARN* A 33.

Beyond the “fiery furnace” and the focus on idolatry, however, the tradition shows few signs of Danielic influence.¹⁰ Though Nimrod is cast in the role of Nebuchadnezzar, only in later medieval accounts does he closely resemble the Babylonian king.¹¹ Rabbinic exegetes nevertheless associated the furnaces of Abram and the three men. One tradition relates that the LORD “smelled the savour of the Patriarch Abraham ascending from the fiery furnace; He smelled the savour of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah ascending from the fiery furnace” (*Gen. Rab.* 34:9). Another says that “Michael descended and rescued Abraham from the fiery furnace . . . and when did Michael descend? In the case of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah” (*Gen. Rab.* 44:13). Other traditions relate that an angel wished to intercede on Abram’s behalf, but God desired to rescue Abram himself, as it reads “I am the LORD *who* brought you [out of the fire] of the Chaldeans.” In return, God promises the angel, “You will have the merit of saving three of his descendants” (*b. Pes.* 118a)—of course referring to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

Traditions of Abram’s rescue from the furnace continued to grow in later literature. For instance, the Qur’an refers to the rescue of ʾIbrāhīm from a fiery furnace (21:51-71; 29:16-27; 37:83-99) and later Islamic tradition came to include more Danielic elements in the ʾIbrāhīm legend such as the burning of his shackles in the fire and the presence of an angelic being (cf. *Dan.* 3:25).¹² The most detailed expansions of the legend, however, are found in medieval Jewish literature. In the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, Abram’s rescue from the furnace is narrated no less than four times, with the first version resembling the one in the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*. Here, the detail that Nimrod heated the furnace for “seven (whole) days” (*Jerahmeel* 34:12) appears to owe to Nebuchadnezzar heating the furnace “seven times more than was customary” (*Dan.* 3:19).¹³ The *Sefer Ha-Yashar* includes even more details from the Daniel episode in Abram’s furnace: the fire melts away Abram’s bonds so he can walk around the furnace (*Yashar* 12:24-25; cf. *Dan.* 3:25); the servants who throw Abram into the furnace die in the flames (*Yashar* 12:26,29-31; cf. *Dan.* 3:22); and the king and the royal court repent upon seeing Abram walk around the furnace unmolested (*Yashar* 12:27-32; cf. *Dan.* 3:27-28).

The convention of telling the story of Abram’s rescue using Daniel 3 as a model began in the Second Temple period, though many of these traditions appear to be independent of one another. Over time, different details from Daniel 3 made their way into various iterations of the legend. The similarity of the “fire of the Chaldeans” in *Gen* 15:7 and the fiery furnace of the Chaldeans in Daniel 3 led many to the same conclusion: as God rescued the three men, so he rescued Abram.

3. The Fiery Furnace of Jair

The story of Abram’s rescue from the fiery furnace is not, however, the only episode modelled on Daniel 3 in the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*. The fiery furnace episode has also influenced the account of the judge Jair, who occupies a mere three verses in the Jewish

¹⁰ Daniel 3 does not appear to have directly influenced the tradition in *Gen. Rab.* 34:9; 44:13; *Exod. Rab.* 23:4; *Cant. Rab.* 1:56; *b. Eruv.* 53a; *b. Pes.* 118a; *PRE* 26 188; *Tg. Neof.* on *Gen.* 11:31 and 15:7; *Tg. Ps.-J.* on *Gen.* 15:7; *Tg. Est.* I 5:14; *Tg. 2 Chron.* 28:3; *Pes. Rab.* 33:4; *Midr. Tanḥ.* B *Toldot* 4:1; also Jerome, *Qu. Hebr. Gen.* 43; *Vg. Neh.* 9:7.

¹¹ The earlier examples provided by Richard Bauckham fail to convince, “The *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* of Pseudo-Philo and the Gospels as ‘Midrash,’” in R. T. France and David Wenham (eds.), *Gospel Perspectives: Studies in Midrash and Historiography: Volume III* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983), p. 43.

¹² *Ishāq ibn Bishr* 168b; *Ibn Kathīr, Tafṣīr* 5:352; *al-Mahlisī* 12:42-46; *Ibn ʾAsākir* 6:187-189. For discussion of the texts, see Shari L. Lowin, *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives* (Islamic History and Civilization, 65; Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 198.

¹³ R. Baḥya, writing contemporary to *Jerahmeel*, comments on *Lev* 10:2 that “[Nebuchadnezzar] had stoked the kiln for seven consecutive days” (*Eliyahu Munk, Torah Commentary of Rabbi Bachya Ben Asher* [7 vols.; Jerusalem: Urim, 1998], vol. 5, p. 1603).

scriptures (Judg. 10:3-5). As with other obscure figures like Kenaz (*LAB* 25-28) and Zebul (*LAB* 29), Pseudo-Philo crafts a new narrative for Jair out of seemingly unrelated scriptural material. The episode begins with Jair ordering Israel, “Everyone who will not sacrifice to Baal will die” (*LAB* 38:1). Once again, seven men refuse the order. The men are taken before Jair where they confront him, “And now if [Baal] is God as you say, let him speak as God and then we will sacrifice to him” (*LAB* 38:2).¹⁴ Angered by this, Jair orders his servants to throw the men into a fire. But when they are thrown in, the angel Nathaniel comes and extinguishes the fire for the men whilst burning the servants of Jair. The angel then blinds the people allowing the men to escape. When Jair arrives at the scene, he perishes in the fire along with a thousand men.

The Jair episode features many of the same elements from Daniel 3 found in Abram’s rescue from the furnace. Righteous men are saved from midst of a fire after being thrown in for refusing to participate in idolatry at the behest of wicked rulers. The Jair episode, however, includes details from Daniel 3 absent in Pseudo-Philo’s account of the furnace of Abram. For example, the fire burns the servants of Jair, as the overheated furnace burns the servants of Nebuchadnezzar. At the same time, an angel rescues the seven men from the fire of Jair, as the one with the “appearance of a god” intervenes in Dan. 3:25. This figure was understood at an early stage to be an angel.¹⁵ Later Rabbinic tradition often assigns the role to Gabriel, who cools or repels fire for the righteous yet burns the wicked.¹⁶ The angel who rescues the seven men—Nathaniel, “who was in charge of fire” (*qui preest igni*)—is unattested outside of the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*. Given that other angelic names in *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* originate in word-play, Ginzberg speculates that the name could derive from *Atuniel* reflecting the Aramaic for “furnace” (אֲתוּנִיֵּל).¹⁷

In any case, the episode itself appears to have its origin in word-play. Judg. 10:5 tersely states that “Jair died, and was buried in Kamon.” The Hebrew place-name קַמּוֹן may have been read as the Aramaic קַמְיָן—derived from the Greek καμίνος for “furnace.” This would explain the words of the angel to Jair, “And in the fire in which you will die there you will have a dwelling place” (*et in quo igne morieris in eo habebis habitationem*). In both the fiery furnaces of Abram and Jair, a single word in the underling scriptural text has triggered a complex legendary tale modelled on otherwise unrelated scriptural material.¹⁸ Pseudo-Philo thus features two fiery furnace episodes modelled on Daniel 3 which seek to expand on the scriptural narrative.

4. The Fiery Furnaces of the Christian Martyrs

It is with the advent of Christianity that Daniel 3 came to be used to narrate the deaths of martyrs. This can be seen in the earliest Christian martyr act, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. When the fire is lit beneath the Smyrnaean bishop, there is “a mighty flame flashing forth” (*Mart. Pol.* 15:1: μεγάλης δὲ ἐκλαμψάσης φλογός), much like the “sparks of flame” that emit from the furnace in Dan. 3:22. The fire is then likened to a “furnace” (κάμινος) which gives off a

¹⁴ The speech of the seven men borrows language from Josh. 1:7-8 (cf. Deut. 5:32) and 1 Kgs. 18:24.

¹⁵ LXX and θ’ Dan. 3:46-50.

¹⁶ On the role of Gabriel repelling fire and burning the bystanders, see *b. Pes.* 118a; *b. Yom.* 21b; *Exod. Rab.* 18:5; *Midr. Teh.* 117:3.

¹⁷ Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin; 7 vols.; Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1909-1938), vol. 6, p. 202 n. 105; other angels in the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* are similarly named, i.e. the angel of strength who bears up Kenaz’s arms is called *Zeruel* (*LAB* 27:10) which presumably derives from זְרִיעַ (“strength” or “arm”), see again Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 6, p. 183-184 n. 17.

¹⁸ But as the association between “Ur/fire” and “Kamon/furnace” is not made explicit to the reader, it would be a mistake to classify the episodes simply as an “exegesis” of Gen. 15:7 and Judg. 10:5, *pace* Bauckham, “Pseudo-Philo and the Gospels as ‘Midrash,’” pp. 43, 52.

“fragrant smell” like bread or spices, a detail which could have its basis in contemporary Jewish tradition concerning Daniel 3, “[The LORD] smelled the fragrance of the flesh of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah coming up from the heated furnace” (*Gen. Rab.* 34:9).¹⁹ The executioners then see that “his body could not be consumed by the fire” (*Mart. Pol.* 16:1: μὴ δυνάμενον αὐτοῦ τὸ σῶμα ὑπὸ τοῦ πυρὸς δαπανηθῆναι), much like the Babylonian court sees “that the fire had not had power against [the] bodies [of the three men]” (LXX Dan. 3:94: ὅτι οὐκ ἐκυρίευσεν τὸ πῦρ τοῦ σώματος αὐτῶν).²⁰ A similar detail appears in the Syriac version of the contemporaneous *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, where Thecla’s persecutors attempt to burn her at the stake, but “not even an atom of her hair was singed” (*Syr. Thecl.* 7-8: ἁδὶαδὶκ ρισα ἡ ρα ρα ρα ρα ρα), as in Dan. 3:27, “the hair of their heads was not singed”²¹—though, unlike Polycarp, Thecla is rescued from the fate of a martyr.²²

With time, however, Daniel 3 became the template for increasingly fantastic accounts of Christians suffering martyrdom. One early medieval account relates that the martyrs Acisclus and Victoria were thrown into a fiery furnace, but come to no harm as they were heard singing amidst the flames. The two martyrs are then suspended over a fire, but the fire breaks out and kills many bystanders.²³ The martyr Christina the Astonishing is likewise said to have been thrown into a fiery furnace for five days, but she is protected by an angel, whilst fifteen hundred bystanders are killed in the blaze.²⁴ The *Sapientia* of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim relates that Karitas, one of Sophia’s three daughters, is thrown into a fiery furnace but comes to no harm and sings in the company of three angels, whilst five thousand men are killed by flames gushing forth from the furnace.²⁵ Euphemia of Chalcedon is also thrown into a fiery furnace but comes to no harm.²⁶ The same is said of Januarius, who is then thrown to wild beasts which refuse to touch him (cf. Dan. 6:22-23).²⁷ Prudentius relates that the flames of the furnace burned away the shackles of Fructuosus and his two colleagues, who remain unharmed in the flames until granted the death of martyrs, having prayed like the three youths in the Babylonian furnace.²⁸ Though there is no fiery furnace, one may detect the influence of Daniel 3 in the angelic rescue of Catherine of Alexandria from the breaking wheel which instead “killed many infidels standing near.”²⁹ In each case, the martyrs are miraculously preserved in the midst of

¹⁹ On the pleasing odor of martyrs in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition, see Suzanne Evans, “The Scent of a Martyr,” *Numen* 49 (2002): 193-211.

²⁰ Other similarities include the cooling of the flame for the martyrs (*Mart. Pol.* 2:3; cf. LXX and θ’ Dan. 3:50), the prayer of Polycarp (esp. *Mart. Pol.* 14:2; cf. LXX and θ’ Dan. 3:40), and his “lawless” captors (*Mart. Pol.* 16:1; cf. LXX and θ’ Dan. 3:32).

²¹ William Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum* (2 vols.; London: Williams and Norgate, 1871), vol. 2, p. 146.

²² Though, again in the Syriac version, “many of those people who were sitting and looking on, perished” (*Syr. Thecl.* 12; cf. LXX and θ’ Dan. 3:48).

²³ Angel Fábrega Grau, *Passionario hispánico* (2 vols.; Monumenta Hispaniae Sacra; Serie Litúrgica, 6; Barcelona, 1953), vol. 2, pp. 12-13.

²⁴ Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea: vulgo historia lombardica dicta; ad optimorum liborum fidem* (ed. Theodor Graesse; 2 vols.; 3rd edn.; Breslau: Gulielmum Koebner, 1890), vol. 1, p. 387; elsewhere Christina is said to have thrown herself into fiery furnaces and come to no harm, i.e. Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita beatae Christinae mirabilis virginis* (*Acta Sanctorum* 32:652-653).

²⁵ Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, *Sapientia* 144-145 (Katharina Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of Her Works: Translated with Introduction, Interpretive Essay and Notes* [LMW; New York, NY: Brewer, 1998], pp. 93-94).

²⁶ *Passio Euphemiae* (BHG 619d).

²⁷ *Acta SS. Januarii Episc., Sosii, Festi etc.* (*Acta Sanctorum* 46:878).

²⁸ Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 6.100-120 (FC 43:173).

²⁹ Symeon Metaphrastes, *Matyrium S. Catharinae* (PG 116:297-298). The Daniel-inspired rescue of Abraham from the furnace also influenced similar tales: when the Franciscan martyr Jacopo di Padova emerges from flames unscathed, the Muslim inhabitants of Tana attribute it to a magical cloak similar to that worn by ʾIbrāhīm in the furnace (see Henry Yule [trans.], *The Travels of Friar Odoric* [Italian Texts and Studies on Religion and

their ordeal like the three youths in the furnace, even though the heroes go on to suffer martyrdom.

One exception to this is the strange episode narrated by Evagrius Scholasticus and Gregory of Tours.³⁰ The story relates how a Jewish boy is thrown into a fiery furnace by his father as punishment for receiving the sacrament. An angelic woman (possibly Mary) protects the boy in the flames and with the help of his mother he emerges from the furnace unscathed. The boy and his mother are then baptized, whilst the father is crucified. Despite the fanciful nature of the story, medieval Christians drew inspiration from this ugly episode in their attacks upon Jews.³¹

5. The Fiery Furnaces of the Jewish Martyrs

At the same time, a parallel tradition associating the three youths in the furnace with martyrdom arose in Jewish literature. The youths often appear alongside the martyrs of the Roman period as exemplars of the Rabbinic precept קידוש השם, the “sanctification of the Name.”³² Their willingness to die rather than commit idolatry, though never realized, became the basis for one of the three sins for which Jews were allowed to voluntarily suffer martyrdom: a Jew could only undergo martyrdom to avoid idolatry, sexual immortality, or murder.³³ It is perhaps no surprise then that elements from the fiery furnace of Daniel 3 also made their way into Jewish martyr accounts of the middle ages. The story of the three unburned Rabbis murdered by a Christian mob in Blois survives in several versions written soon after the event. The earliest account relates how the three Rabbis were tied to a stake and set alight, but could be heard singing amidst the flames and saying to the Christians, “Behold, we are in this fire but it has no power over us” (cf. Dan. 3:27). The Rabbis then severed their bonds and came out of the fire unscathed, only to be beaten to death and thrown back into the fire—which still had no effect on their bodies.³⁴ A later version recorded by R. Ephraim of Bonn conforms the story

Society; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002], p. 85; on the influence of Daniel 3 on this tale, see Christopher MacEvitt, *The Martyrdom of the Franciscans: Islam, the Papacy, and an Order in Conflict* [Middle Ages Series; Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020], p. 114).

³⁰ Evagrius Scholasticus, *Hist. Eccl.* 4:36 (Michael Whitby, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus* [TTH, 33; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000], 242); Gregory of Tours, *Gloria Martyrum* 100 (Raymond van Dam, *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs* [TTH, 4; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988], pp. 29-32).

³¹ See Dominique Rigaux, “Miracle, Reliques et Images dans la Chapelle du Corporal à Orvieto (1357-64),” in Nicole Bériou, Béatrice Caseau and Rigaux (eds.), *Patriques de l’Eucharistie dans les Eglises d’Orient et d’Occident (Antiquité et Moyen Age): Actes du Séminaire Tenu à Paris Institut Catholique, 1997-2004* (Collection des études augustinienne, 45; 2 vols.; Paris: Institut d’études augustinienne, 2009), vol. 1, p. 240. Another instance of anti-Semitism in a Christian furnace legend occurs in the *Passion of Romanus*, where three Jewish bystanders are consumed by the furnace (thus inverting Daniel 3), whilst Romanus remains unscathed amidst the flames (Thierry Ruinat, *Les Véritables Acts des martyrs, recueillis, revus et corrigés sur plusieurs anciens manuscrits* [Paris, 1708], p. 596).

³² The three youths are associated with the ten martyrs in *b. Sanh.* 110b; *Midr. Tanh.* B *Lech Lecha* 2:3; *Midr. Teh.* 90:7; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 5:4; R. Bahya ibn Paquda, *Chovot HaLevavot, Sha’ar Ahavat Hashem* 4:18; *Tosafot Rash mi-Shants ‘al Ketubbot* (*supra* n. 8) ad 33b; and with the martyrs Lulianus and Pappus in *Sifra* to Lev. 22:32; *Sem.* 8:15; *Ein Yaakov* on *Taan.* 18b (Avraham Yaakov Finkel [ed.], *Ein Yaakov: The Ethical and Inspirational Teachings of the Talmud: Compiled in the Sixteenth Century by Rabbi Yaakov ibn Chaviv* [Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 1999], p. 302).

³³ *y. Azod. Zar.* 2:2 (40d-41a); *y. Shab.* 14:4 (14d-15a); *She’iltot* 3:40-48;

³⁴ Abraham Habermann, *Sefer Gezerot Ashkenaz ve-Zarefat* (Jerusalem: Tarshish, 1945), p. 143 (English translation in Susan L. Einbinder, *Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France* [Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World, 8; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002], pp. 52-53).

closer to the Danielic episode by having the fire burn away the shackles which bound the Rabbis—as the furnace burns away the shackles binding the three men (Dan. 3:25).³⁵

Unlike the legendary figures of the Christian martyr accounts, the Blois literature concerns an incident in recent memory. Here, a historical persecution has been told from an early stage using the language of Daniel 3. The story of three Rabbis who met their death gladly in the flames naturally leant itself to the tale of three young men who sang in the fiery furnace. It is the image of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah preserved in the midst of a great fire—and not their miraculous rescue—that has shaped much cultural memory of Jewish persecution, from the middle ages to the present day. In the aftermath of the Shoah, the image came to have a new significance for many Jews. R. Yehoshua Grünwald of Huszt, who survived Auschwitz, could compare the smoke of the gas chambers to the pleasing aroma which arose from the furnaces of Abraham and Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.³⁶ Others have compared the miraculous preservation of the three youths in the furnace to the continuation of the Jewish people during and after the Shoah.³⁷

The image of the three youths in the midst of the furnace also finds a new expression in non-Jewish reflections on the Holocaust. Geoffrey Hill's meditation on the evils of the twentieth-century, *The Triumph of Love*, transforms the miraculous furnace of Daniel into a timeless vision of human suffering. Gone is the story of divine rescue, replaced by the image of "young martyrs" writhing in agony amidst the flames.

From the *Book of Daniel*, am I correct?
Quite correct sir. Permit me:
refocus that Jew—yes there,
that one. You see him burning,
dropping feet first, in a composed manner,
still in suspension,
from the housetop.
It will take him for ever
caught at this instant
of world-exposure.
In close-up he maintains appearance—
Semitic ur-Engel—
Terminal agony none the less
interminable, the young
martyrs ageing in the fire—
thank you, Hauptmann—Schauspieler?—
Run it through again and for ever
he stretches his wings of flame

³⁵ See text and translation in Einbinder, "The Jewish Martyrs of Blois," in Thomas Head (ed.), *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 546. This detail is repeated in the poem of R. Hillel of Bonn (Einbinder, "The Jewish Martyrs of Blois," p. 548).

³⁶ Gershon Greenberg, "Ultra-Orthodox Reflections on the Holocaust: 1945 to the Present," in Konrad Kwiet and Jürgen Matthäus (eds.), *Contemporary Responses to the Holocaust* (Praeger Series on Jewish and Israeli Studies; Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), pp. 87-121 (109).

³⁷ For example, Yizhak Ayzik Sher, *Leket Sihot Musar* (2 vols.; Bnei Brak: 1989/1990), vol. 1, pp. 140-141; R. Grossman, *Kovez Zikaron Keneset Yisrael Lezikhro Shel Rabenu Hagadol Rosh Ha'yeshivah Rabi Mordekhai Ze'ev Shulman* (Bnei Brak: 1982/1983), pp. 639-641. See the discussion in Greenberg, "Sacred Death for Orthodox Jewish Thought During the Holocaust: With a Preliminary Inquiry into Christian Parallels," in Marcel Poorthuis, Joshua Schwartz, and Josephu Turner (eds.), *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art and Literature* (Jewish and Christian Perspectives, 17; Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 289-315 (291-292).

upon instruction.³⁸

6. Ex Una Fornace Plures

Stories sometimes take unexpected turns as they travel through history. A tale of sex and violence, like Jael's assassination of Sisera, can become a story of chastity and even love.³⁹ New interpretations arise to meet the hermeneutical demands of the moment, so Ulrich Luz, "Neue Kontexte aktivieren in den Texten neue Sinnpotentiale."⁴⁰ This process may take the tale along a path which, at least on its surface, seems to go in the opposite direction of the "original" story. Where once the rescue of the three youths from the furnace of Nebuchadnezzar inspired similar tales of deliverance—of Abram from the furnace of Nimrod, of the seven from the furnace of Jair—with time, these stories began to change. Tales of complete divine rescue were gradually replaced by tales of miraculous preservation amidst the flames of martyrdom. The change occurred sometime during the second-century CE, around the same time the threat of government sponsored persecution left its mark on Christian and Jewish traditions with the martyrdoms of Polycarp and R. Akiva and his colleagues. The cultural memory of persecutions, both real and imagined, henceforth transformed a tale of deliverance into its exact opposite—a tale of martyrdom.⁴¹

From then on, the story of complete divine rescue in Daniel 3 appears to become something of an embarrassment. For those on the other side of the bloody second and third centuries, it presented at least two problems. First there was the issue of why God would save the three youths and yet let so many others die. The *Midrash Tehillim* has Habakkuk pose the question to God: "For having foreseen that Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah would be cast into the fiery furnace and be saved, but having foreseen that Hananiah ben Teradyon and his companions would be burned for the Law's sake and not be saved, forthwith Habakkuk raised a cry, saying: Master of the worlds! These are righteous, and those are righteous. These are pure, and those are pure. These are holy, and those are holy. Yet these are saved, and those are not saved! *Therefore the law is slacked, because justice doth not go forth plainly* (Hab. 1:4)."⁴² Christian tradition, on the other hand, attempted to sidestep the issue by placing the greater value on suffering martyrdom. Augustine, for example, argues that the reward of the Maccabean martyrs was greater than the three youths: the youths were delivered from a temporal fire and given mundane life as a reward, whereas the Maccabean martyrs, on account of their deaths, were delivered from an eternal fire and given the heavenly reward of life everlasting.⁴³ Some went so far as to minimize the greatness of the miracle altogether, as R. Alexandri states on the authority of R. Hiyya bar Abba, "Greater is the miracle that is done for

³⁸ Geoffrey Hill, *The Triumph of Love* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 1998), pp. 10-11. In the same work, Hill describes the bombing of Leipzig as a "sevenfold fiery furnace" (p. 5).

³⁹ See Colleen M. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter in the Tent of Jael: A Cultural History of a Biblical Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴⁰ Ulrich Luz, *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments* (Neukirchener Theologie; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), pp. 521-522.

⁴¹ At the same time, the ancient tales of deliverance were updated to reflect contemporary persecutions: thirteenth and fourteenth-century Jewish accounts of Abraham's ordeal replace the fiery furnace with a burning stake, see Katrin Kogman-Apel, *A Mahzor from Worms: Art and Religion in a Medieval Jewish Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 139.

⁴² *Midr. Teh.* 90:7 (Braude, 2:91).

⁴³ Augustine, *Sermo* 301.1-3 (PL 38:1380-1381); 343.2 (PL 39:1506-1507); also 286.7 (PL 38:1300); and Catherine Brown Tkacz, "The Seven Maccabees, the Three Hebrews and a Newly Discovered Sermon of St. Augustine (Mayence 50)," *REA* 41 (1995): 59-79 (74-75).

a sick person than the miracle that was done for Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah” (*b. Ned.* 41a).⁴⁴

The second problem was that the hope of complete divine rescue seemed far-fetched, even for the ancient faithful. Christian tradition derided heretics who prophesied their own miraculous deliverance, only to meet their deaths.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the same tradition is anxious to downplay the prospect of complete divine rescue for Christian martyrs. This tradition may have been shaped by the embarrassing memory of martyrs who mistakenly predicted their own deliverance.⁴⁶ In any case, Christian martyrs were encouraged to embrace death in order to enter heavenly glory, forsaking all things mundane, not desirous of any intervention on their behalf.⁴⁷ Jewish tradition went further by condemning those who put themselves in harm’s way expecting a miracle. According to a saying of R. Yannai, “A person should never stand still in a dangerous place, saying that they’ll do a miracle for him. Maybe they won’t do a miracle for him. And if they do a miracle for him, they will then deduct it from his store of merit” (*b. Shab.* 32a).⁴⁸ Nor should one be confident of miracles when performing mitzvot: “And wherever the possibility of accident [when performing a mitzvah] is ready at hand, there is no relying on miracles” (*b. Qid.* 39a).⁴⁹ The *Sifra* on Lev. 22:32 applies this principle to martyrdom: “Everybody who yields himself [to martyrdom] with the purpose that a miracle will be wrought for him—for him no miracle will be wrought. But (everybody who yields himself with the purpose) that no miracle will be wrought for him—for him a miracle will be wrought. For thus we find concerning Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah” (*Sifra Emor* 9:5).⁵⁰ In both Jewish and Christian traditions there is the tacit understanding that one could—and therefore should—not expect complete divine rescue like the three youths in the furnace. God may still intervene on rare occasions, even preserving the martyr amidst the flames, but nothing can stay the executioner’s hand. The recognition of this grim reality, in turn, reshaped the use of Daniel 3, so that the element of deliverance eventually vanished from fiery furnace narratives.

⁴⁴ Cf. Chrysostom, *Hom. 1 Cor.* 18.5 (PG 61:150), who finds the bravery of the three youths at least as miraculous as their deliverance from the furnace.

⁴⁵ Hippolytus (*Haer.* 6.20.3 [ANF 5:81]) claims that Simon Magus died attempting to recreate Jesus’ resurrection; a similar claim is made concerning Dositheus by Epiphanius, *Pan.* 1.1.13 (Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Book I (Sects 1-46)* [NHS, 35; Leiden: Brill, 1987], p. 36); and much later, Abu’l Fath, *Kitāb al Tarīkh* 48 (Paul Stenhouse, *The Kitāb al Tarīkh of Abu’l Fath: Translated into English with Notes* [Sydney: The Mandelbaum Trust, 1985], p. 215).

⁴⁶ The crowds in the Gospel of Mark misinterpret Jesus’ cry from the cross as an unanswered plea for deliverance (Mark 15:35-36); Matthew counters that Jesus could have sent for more than twelve legions of angels, but does not request it (Matt. 26:53). Josephus notes the many Judeans who, during the revolt, confidently predicted divine intervention on their behalf, even in defeat (*War* 6.285-287). Christian tradition may have sought to downplay similar embarrassing unfulfilled predictions of deliverance: i.e. the confident assertion of Saint Theodore before his martyrdom, “My Lord and God is before my face, releasing me from these tortures; you do not see him because you do not look with the eyes of the soul” (translation from L. Stephanie Cobb, *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts* [Oakland, CA: University of California, Press, 2017], p. 119). The invisible quality of this and similar miracles might be an attempt to hide the obvious: no such deliverance ever took place.

⁴⁷ Tertullian, *Fug.* 4 (ANF 4:118); Cyprian, *Epist.* 55.5 (ANF 5:348-349); *Epist.* 80.3-4 (ANF 5:407-408); Pseudo-Cyprian, *De laude mart.* 22-23 (5:585); Clement maintains that the true martyr goes to their death without ulterior motives (*Strom.* 7.11 [ANF 2:542]); cf. Cyprian, who elsewhere makes divine intervention conditional on faith: “Nor is there anything which the Almighty is not able to grant, unless the failing faith of the receiver be deficient and give way” (*Fort.* 10 [ANF 5:66]).

⁴⁸ Par. *b. Taan.* 20b.

⁴⁹ Also *y. Yom.* 1:4; *b. Pes.* 64b; cf. *b. Pes.* 8b; *b. Hull.* 142a.

⁵⁰ Translation from van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie (eds.), *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 144-145. The fate of Haran in the Daniel-inspired furnace of Abram is an application of this theme: Haran only enters upon seeing Abram unharmed in the flames, for which reason he dies (*Gen. Rab.* 38:13 and par.).

But if readers remake stories in their own image, the reverse is equally true. By transforming Daniel 3 into a story of martyr-death, Jewish and Christian traditions were also responding to an ambiguity already inherent in the original narrative. Interpreters made much of an odd construction in the three youths' response to Nebuchadnezzar: "If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. *But if not* (וְהָיָה לֹא), be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up" (Dan. 3:17-18). Were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah not confident of God's intervention on their behalf? Did they doubt God's power to deliver them from the furnace? Rabbinic tradition is eager to explain the youths' apparent hesitancy. The *Canticles Rabbah* imagines one scene where Ezekiel inquires of God on their behalf, "Will you stand by them or not?" God, however, tricks Ezekiel, "I will not stand by them." When Ezekiel breaks the bad news to the three youths, they respond, "Whether He stands by us or not, we will offer our lives for the sanctification of His name." Once they leave, God speaks again to Ezekiel, "Ezekiel, do you think that I will not stand by them? I certainly will . . . but let them go and tell them nothing. I will let them go on unsuspecting."⁵¹ Rather than doubting the power of God, the three youths were simply responding to the (albeit misleading) divine word.

Cyprian, on the other hand, contends that the youths wished not to diminish the power of their testimony: "Although they believed, and, in accordance with their faith, knew that they might even be delivered from their present punishment, they still would not boast of this, nor claim it for themselves, saying 'But if not.' Lest the virtue of their confession should be less without the testimony of their suffering, they added that God could do all things; but yet they would not trust in this, so as to wish to be delivered at the moment; but they thought on that glory of eternal liberty and security."⁵² Likewise Chrysostom affirms that the miracle required the youths be kept in ignorance: "For what marvel is it if when they had a guarantee for safety, they defied all terrors? Then God indeed would have been glorified in that He was able to deliver from the furnace: but they would not have been wondered at, inasmuch as they would not have cast themselves into any dangers." But even in their ignorance, why were they not confident in the power of God? Chrysostom answers, it was because of their sin: "Because they esteemed themselves assuredly too mean, and unworthy of such a benefit." The only reason they did not say this is that it "would have seemed to the barbarians to be sheltering the weakness of God under the pretext of their own sins."⁵³

The fact remains that Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah descended into the flames uncertain of their fate, half-expecting to meet their death. Their response, "if not" (וְהָיָה לֹא), introduces an element of doubt into the story of miraculous deliverance. It conjures up an alternate reality where the martyrs meet their death in the flames. The transformation of the fiery furnace narrative into a tale of martyrdom, rather than going against the grain of the "original" text, is suggested by the story itself. The potential of the text can be understood using Deleuze's ontological categories of the *virtual* and the *actual*. Brennan Breed explains: "A text can also be thought of as a virtual multiplicity. The differential relations between lexemes, sentences, and paragraphs, for example, [create] a potential field of reading that can be actualized in divergent ways."⁵⁴ If the deliverance of the martyr from the furnace is the *actual* reading, then the death of the martyr in the flames is the *virtual*. It is the words of the youths that make this reading possible, and allowed it to become a template for legends in the age of martyrdom.

⁵¹ *Cant. Rab.* 7:13.

⁵² Cyprian, *Epist.* 80.3 (ANF 5:407).

⁵³ Chrysostom, *Hom. 1 Cor.* 18.6 (NPNF 12:104).

⁵⁴ Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 122.

By tracing the development of Daniel 3 as a literary model, we may observe how interpretive traditions are shaped by forces without and within. The cultural memory of persecution seemingly pulled the tale in a new direction. The complete divine rescue of the three youths became not just unrealistic, it was no longer desirable. The shift from tales of deliverance to tales of preservation resulting in death reflects changing attitudes towards martyrdom in Jewish and Christian traditions. These tales, however implausible, were responding to the sober reality of a new situation. But in so doing, they were also responding to cues already hinted by Daniel 3. At the heart of Daniel 3 is a latent story of death. This potential or *virtual* reading lay dormant in the text until awoken by circumstance. Neither the reader nor the text is ever wholly autonomous—one requires the other. In the final analysis, Daniel 3 became the template for fantastic tales of incombustibility amidst the travails of martyrdom because history demanded it, and the text allowed it.