A Hymn of Creation in Daniel

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STANDING BEFORE GOD

Studies on Prayer in Scriptures and in Tradition with Essays in Honor of

JOHN M. OESTERREICHER

Edited by ASHER FINKEL and LAWRENCE FRIZZELL
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A Hymn of Creation in Daniel

LAWRENCE FRIZZELL

Foremost among the areas suggested by Vatican Council II for fraternal dialogue among Catholics and Jews is the study of Sacred Scripture (Nostra Aetate 4). Fortunately this was already common among scholars investigating the Hebrew text and its ancient translations, and contacts were developing among exegtes. It is but the first step to learn what the human author intended. Each passage takes on an extended life when incorporated into the larger context of book and Testament. Differences will persist between Jewish and Christian interpretations of the total message, but we can profit from the insights offered by the other tradition.

In New Testament studies we try to discern which passages of the Hebrew Scriptures were applied by Jesus to his own life and ministry, and which were developed by the preacher-theologians of the early Christian communities. The Qumran scrolls indicate that the application of biblical passages to persons as well as situations of a later period was part of the Jewish heritage, especially appropriate to a liturgical and/or prayer-study setting. To quote Dom Hubert Zeller, “More has gone into the Scriptures than man will ever take out of them”; knowing the hermeneutical tools employed by each tradition, Christians and Jews together can plumb the depths of God’s gifts in the Word.

The incorporation of texts from the Hebrew Bible into the New Testament and the teachings of Christian communities is noticeable to even a casual reader. It is important also to recall that the Church took large sections of the Bible as they are and inserted them into the liturgy, where they became a vehicle of instruction and inspiration for the community of believers. The Psalter is the most obvious example of this

This essay is dedicated to Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher who, as a priest of the Latin rite, prayed the hymn of the three youths countless times as part of the Divine Office. This study appeared with an examination of Daniel by Asher Finkel in SIDIC (Rome) volume 11 (1978).
process. In certain manuscripts of the Greek Bible, a number of hymns are collected and placed after the 151 psalms attributed (for the most part) to King David. In Rahlf's' edition of the Septuagint they are called the nine odes of the Greek Church (Exodus 15, 1-19; Deut 32, 1-43; Samuel, 2, 1-10; Habakkuk 3, 2-19; Isaiah 26, 9-20; Jonah 2, 3-10; Daniel 3, 26-45, 52-88 and Luke 1, 46-55.68-79).\textsuperscript{2}

The first known commentator on these odes in such a collection is Verecundus, bishop of Junca, who died in 552 A.D. He states that Ezra gathered these canticles, presumably for liturgical use.\textsuperscript{3} O. Rousseau argues that Verecundus had no reason to invent this allusion to Ezra's work. Hilary of Poitiers credits Ezra with collecting the Psalms into one book, so perhaps Verecundus had access to a psalter with the canticles attached which alluded to Ezra.\textsuperscript{4}

I. The present study is limited to Daniel; as the Prayer of Azariah (3, 26-45) has been subject of an essay by M. Gilbert,\textsuperscript{5} we limit ourselves to the hymn of the three young men in the furnace (3, 52-90), considered first in itself and then as used by the Church.

Many scholars think that this hymn was composed in Hebrew.\textsuperscript{6} The Aramaic text recording the account of the trial by fire ends with Nebuchadnezzar blessing the God of the three youths, and decreeing that no one may blaspheme him with impunity (3, 28-29). The prayerful recognition of God's presence and gifts complements this very beautifully.

In a recent commentary, Carey Moore divides the passage into an ode (3, 52-56) and a hymn (3, 58-90). He notes that God is addressed in the former, creatures in the latter.\textsuperscript{7} Matthias Delcor describes the entire piece as a hymn, with introduction (v 51), praises to God (v 51-56), invitation to creatures (v 57-87) and the praises of the three youths for particular motives (v 88-90).\textsuperscript{8}

We shall follow the division suggested by Moore, but will quote the Revised Standard version. Differences in order of verses between the Greek text of Theodotion and the Septuagint will not be discussed.

A. \textit{The Ode}

51 Then the three, as with one mouth
   praised and glorified and blessed God
   in the furnace, saying:

52 "Blessed are you, O Lord, God of our fathers,
   and to be praised and highly exalted for ever;
And blessed is your glorious, holy
   name
   and to be highly praised and
   highly exalted for ever;
53 Blessed are you in the temple of your holy glory
and to be extolled and highly glorified for ever.
54 Blessed are you, who sit upon cherubim
and look upon the deeps,
and to be praised and highly exalted for ever.
55 Blessed are you upon the throne of your kingdom
and to be extolled and highly exalted for ever.
56 Blessed are you in the firmament of heaven
and to be sung and glorified for ever."

B. The Hymn
1. Heavenly creatures are called to praise God
57 “Bless the Lord, all works of the Lord,
sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.
58 Bless the Lord, you heavens,
sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.
59 Bless the Lord, you angels of the Lord,
sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.
60 Bless the Lord, all waters above the heaven,
sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.
61 Bless the Lord, all powers,
sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.
62 Bless the Lord, sun and moon,
sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.
63 Bless the Lord, stars of heaven,
sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.

2. Elements from heaven should praise God
64 Bless the Lord, all rain and dew,
sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.
65 Bless the Lord, all winds,
sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.
66 Bless the Lord, fire and heat,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
67 Bless the Lord, winter cold and
summer heat,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
68 Bless the Lord, dews and snows,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
69 Bless the Lord, nights and days,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
70 Bless the Lord, light and darkness,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
71 Bless the Lord, ice and cold,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
72 Bless the Lord, frosts and snows,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
73 Bless the Lord, lightnings and clouds,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.

3. *Earthly creatures should praise God*
74 Let the earth bless the Lord;
let it sing praise to him and
highly exalt him for ever.
75 Bless the Lord, mountains and hills,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
76 Bless the Lord, all things that
grow on the earth,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
77 Bless the Lord, you springs,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
78 Bless the Lord, seas and rivers,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
79 Bless the Lord, you whales and all
creatures that move in the waters,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.
80 Bless the Lord, all birds of the air,
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sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.

81 Bless the Lord, all beasts and cattle,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.

4. The human race should praise God

82 Bless the Lord, you sons of men,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.

83 Bless the Lord, O Israel,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.

84 Bless the Lord, you priests of the Lord,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.

85 Bless the Lord, you servants of the Lord,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.

86 Bless the Lord, spirits and souls of
the righteous,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.

87 Bless the Lord, you who are holy
and humble in heart,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever.

88 Bless the Lord, Hananiah, Azariah,
and Mishael,
sing praise to him and highly
exalt him for ever;
for he has rescued us from Hades
and saved us from the hand of death,
and delivered us from the midst of the
burning fiery furnace;
from the midst of the fire he has
delivered us.

89 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his mercy endures for ever.

90 Bless him, all who worship the Lord,
the God of Gods,
sing praise to him and
give thanks to him,
for his mercy endures for ever.”

The relation between creation and history is clear in the phrase “God of our fathers” (v 52) and in the last stanza. The hymn draws heavily
upon the psalms (especially 103; 148) and breathes a liturgical fragrance. From approximately the same period, a Qumran text “The words of the heavenly lights” ends with a fragment under the rubric “Hymns for the Sabbath Day” which touches the same themes (see Ps 92, 1-5).

“Give thanks... (Bless) his holy Name unceasingly
... all the angels of the holy firmament
... (above) the heavens,
the earth and all its deep places,
the great (Abyss) and Abaddon
and the waters and all that is (in them).
(Let) all his creatures (bless him) unceasingly for everlasting (ages)."

Delcor suggests that v. 53 refers to the Jerusalem Temple rather than to the heavenly Temple, because the expression “You sit upon the cherubim” indicates God’s presence above the Ark of the Covenant. However, another Qumran text describes an angelic liturgy followed by a description of the *merkabah* (see Ezekiel 1-3). “The cherubim bless the image of the Throne-Chariot above the firmament, and they praise the majesty of the fiery firmament beneath the seat of His glory” (Vermes, p 212). Since all in the Temple is patterned after the heavenly prototype (see Exod 25, 9.40; Wis 9, 8, etc.), this Ode concentrates on the celestial reality. The phrase “You look upon the depths” (54) is understood better in this interpretation. The New American Bible transposes v 54 and 55; this gives an additional emphasis to the interpretation suggested here.

Following the Ode, it is natural for the poet to call first the heavenly creatures and the waters above the firmament (60) to bless God. God’s creative activity has the same movement and, to some extent, the six-day structure of Genesis 1 is background for the hymn. The last section (82-90) is not only the culmination of creation in the human being and the Chosen People, but it also represents the community possessing the authority to call all works of the Lord to the duty of blessing him. Behind this must be the theology of man and woman created in God’s image (see Psalm 8).

Jesus ben Sira’s reflection on Gen 1, 26-28 articulates a theological background for this hymn in Daniel. It dates to approximately 200 B.C.

“The Lord created man... and granted (human beings) authority over the things on earth.
He endowed them with strength like his own, and made them in his own image.  
He placed the fear of them in all living beings, and granted them dominion over beasts and birds . . .  
He set his eyes upon their hearts to show them the majesty of his works.  
And they will praise his holy name, to proclaim the grandeur of his works.”  
(Sir 17, 1-10, see 39, 14-16; Wis 9, 2).

God reveals himself through creation (see Wis 13, 1-5); the acknowledgment of his attributes leads those made in his image and likeness to praise the manifestation of his person (the Name). Because God’s Name is revealed at Sinai (Exod 3, 14; 34, 6-7), Jesus ben Sira moves immediately from creation to Covenant:

“‘He bestowed knowledge upon them, and allotted to them the law of life,  
He established with them an eternal Covenant, and showed them his judgments.” (17, 11-12).

In the same way, both Ps 148 and the hymn of the three young men come to a climax with the Chosen People, constituted because of the promise to the patriarchs (83, see 52 “God of our fathers”), represented by the priests and Levites (“Servants of the Lord”—Ps 135, 1-2, 20; 1Chr 9, 33) and exemplified by the righteous, defined as “holy and humble in heart.” Typical of the righteous are the three youths, members of the tribe of Judah (Dan 1, 6).13

Usually, blessing is considered in its descending and ascending aspects: God’s gifts and human acknowledgment (thanks for the gifts, praise to the Giver). It is striking that this entire prayer is pure praise until v 88, when motives for the ascending blessing are given. There seems to be a movement from the general response of creatures to their raison d’être to the specific deliverance of the martyrs. King Nebuchadnezzar intended to kill them, but fire did not harm them, even though their executioners died in the flames (3, 22.48). The Creator controls the forces of nature, placing them at the service of the righteous. The Book of Wisdom reflects thus on the plagues and the Exodus experience:

“For the whole creation in its nature was fashioned anew, complying with your commands, that your children might be kept unharmed . . . Fire even in water retained its normal
power, and water forgot its fire-quenching nature. Flames, on
the contrary, failed to consume the flesh of perishable creatures
that walked among them.” (Wis 19, 6.20-21).

The finale (89-90) reverts to the litany formula (Ps 106, 1; 136) of the
Temple liturgy as the theme which unites all worshipers of the one God:

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures
forever.”

The goodness of God manifests itself in forgiveness (Prayer of Azariah)
and in other forms of mercy towards those caught in the ambiguities of
the human order.14

II. Christian interpretations of the hymn consider it first within the
context of Nebuchadnezzar’s persecution, indeed as a source of inspira-
tion to the Church in a similar trial.15 Hippolytus, priest of Rome, wrote
the first extant Christian commentary on the Book of Daniel about the
year 202-204 A.D.16 It deserves our attention.

The Greek texts of Daniel 3, 1 note that it was in the eighteenth year of
his reign that Nebuchadnezzar made the golden statue. The first two
letters of the name Jesus in Greek add up to the number eighteen. So,
according to Hippolytus, Nebuchadnezzar “imitated Jesus, the Son of
God, who when he lived in the world, raised up his own statue from
among the dead, that is the man that he was, and manifested it, pure
and irreplaceable (as if from gold), to his disciples. The sixty cubits in
height imitate the sixty patriarchs who prefigured, according to the
flesh, the statue of God, the Word . . . The six cubits in width imitate the
six days of creation, for it was on the sixth day, molded in dust, that man
was created” (II, xxvii).

The theme of resurrection develops also from the fact that fire burned
the bonds but not the clothes of the martyrs (Dan 3, 25.27). God’s power
can restore the corruptible body just as he preserved the clothes which
shared the holiness of the young men (II, xixii).

As in the Köln papyrus 967,17 Hippolytus attributed the prayer of
Azariah to all three youths. After confessing their sins and those of
Israel, they invited all creatures to join them in praising, blessing and
glorifying God. In his summary, Hippolytus adds after v 63: “Bless, all
you elements who move in the heavens, sing praise to him and exalt him
for ever.” After, “sons of men” (82), Hippolytus named the beings of the
underworld, the spirits of the angels of Tartarus (see 2Pet 2,4; James 2,
19) and the souls of the just. Thus, he interprets v 86 as referring to
demons and the dead; the litany should be all-inclusive. “After making
the rounds of all creatures, they name themselves as the smallest, the most humble” (II, xxix).

Then Hippolytus speaks directly to the youths, requesting their prayers so that he may obtain the reward of martyrdom. He asks them to describe the fourth person in the furnace (Dan 3, 25). “Who is this man who, by your mouth, reviewed all creation without forgetting any creature that exists or existed? You only spent an hour in the furnace, but you learned all the creation of the world. It was the Word which was with you, and who spoke by your mouth, because he alone knows the way in which the world was created . . . They named everything: celestial, terrestrial, and subterranean beings, proving thus that everything created by God’s Word is his servant.” (II, xxx).

Hippolytus identifies the angel who brings a dew-laden breeze to the furnace (Dan 3, 49-50) with the one who drowned the Egyptians and punished the Sodmites. He is the “Angel of great counsel” (Isa 9, 6 Septuagint, see Rhabanus Maurus, P.L. CXIII c. 1152) and therefore is related to Jesus as the Messiah (II, xxxii).

Chromatius, bishop of Aquileia (387-407?) relates the rescue of Paul and Silas from prison (Acts 16, 23-26) to the three youths and notes that when two or three are gathered in common prayer, the Lord will be with them (Matt 18, 20) to rescue them (C.C. IXa p. 492-493).

The canticle of the three young men entered the Christian liturgy at an early date. Writing about 406 A.D., Rufinus noted that it was sung by Christians throughout the world (P.L. XXI c. 612-614). In the seventh century the council of Toledo expressed concern: “The hymn of the three youths, in which all creatures of heaven and earth praise God, and which the Catholic Church celebrates everywhere, is neglected by certain priests in Sunday Masses and martyrs’ feasts” (canon 14). The Roman Missal used the canticle as a text on Ember Saturday, and suggested it for the priest’s thanksgiving after Mass. The fourth biblical prayer of Lauds in the Divine Office was always a canticle of the Old Testament. The song of the three youths was selected for Sunday Lauds (followed by Ps 148). This relates to the commemoration of creation on the first day of the week.

As the word “Benedicite” (the common title of the hymn as used in the Office) indicates, the liturgical text begins with v 57. Instead of the motives given after the names Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael (v 88), the Church inserts “Let us bless the Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit; let us sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.” As with many of the psalms, Christians considered this hymn to be “open” to a reading in the light of the way in which revelation developed through Jesus’ teaching. The interpretation of the experience in the furnace to
Christ’s redemptive work goes back to Hippolytus, if not earlier. The inclination to seek hints of the Trinitarian mystery throughout the Old Testament provided the basis for this addition. It is, of course, a variant of the usual prayer (“Glory be to the Father . . .”) which terminates each psalm.

"The three, as with one mouth . . . praised God' (v 51). These three men . . . symbolize the elect of God who, united in belief of the Holy Trinity, adore, worship and proclaim one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. . .". 20

The ecclesiastical use of this hymn ends with v 56, addressing God directly in his eternal dwelling-place. This would seem to be the Church’s expression of a desire to unite worship of the earthly community with that of the heavenly court, as in the Sanctus and the Te Deum.

Often an additional note of interpretation is found in the antiphon recited before and after a given psalm or canticle. The antiphon for the ordinary Office throughout the year reads: “The king commanded, and the three children were cast into the furnace, fearing not the flame, but saying: Blessed be God.” The duty of creatures to praise God in word and deed is placed within the context of the total response which is martyrdom. At Easter, there is an explicit link with the resurrection of Christ: “He who delivered the three children from the burning fiery furnace, Christ is risen from the grave.” The antiphon for the feast of Jesus’ Baptism (the Sunday after the Epiphany) is of particular interest: “The fountains of water were hallowed when Christ appeared in glory on earth. Drink water from the fountains of the Savior (see Isa 12,3); for now Christ our God has sanctified every creature.”

The recent reform of the Office places the “Benedicite” at Lauds of the first and third Sundays in the four week cycle and at Lauds of major feasts; it uses Dan 3, 52-57 at Lauds on the second and fourth Sundays. The antiphon for Easter Sunday now reads: “Our Redeemer has risen from the grave: let us sing a hymn to the Lord our God.”

The Church uses this canticle to express her vision of creation’s response to God, both in his creative activity and provident presence to all levels of nature and in the coming renewal which is the Kingdom, whose first-fruits are found in Christ’s resurrection (1Cor 15, 20-28). Although one may wonder whether this prayer developed from a Jewish theology of the human being as high priest of creation (recalling the cosmic symbolism in Philo’s description of the High Priest’s vestments), this is certainly present in the Christian vision of reality. The two components of the phrase “kingdom of priests and holy nation” (Exod 19, 6) may have been applied to the entire people of Israel, at least in Hasmonean times, and this is the Christian understanding. “You are a
chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1Pet 2, 9).

Like the leaven in the dough (Matt 13, 33), the movement of creatures through history towards the Kingdom consists in a presence orienting and co-ordinating all things to serve God. Those created anew in Christ (2 Cor 5, 17) conform themselves ever more to his image (Gal 4, 19) so that they can help bring the inanimate world to the service of love (Matt 25, 31-46), wherein the image of God is recognized in all human beings. It is singularly appropriate that the "Benedicite" is suggested as a prayer after the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Having elevated bread, wine and other elements of daily life to the mediation of God's highest gift to his people, the Christian community recognizes that every level of creation is straining toward the same goal (Rom 8, 19-23), and through Christ is more and more integrated into the crescendo of thanks-and-praise which is a response, in time and beyond, to God's gift of himself.21

NOTES

1. See, for example, the forthcoming monograph by Asher Finkel Vigilance in the Gospel of Mark.


3. The commentary is edited in Corpus Christianorum (Latin series) XCIII. No manuscript of the Hebrew Psalter exists with the Odes attached; see Schneider, p 33.


7. Carey Moore, Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: the Additions (Garden City; Doubleday 1977) p 75. We follow his division of the hymn on the same page.


11. Delcor, p 104.
13. Moore, p 73, considers the names in v 60-88 as listed “in ascending order of importance”. This judgment fails to take into account the all-inclusive nature of the phrase “sons of men”, and the parallelism of the succeeding verses. In the last centuries of the second Temple period, it was recognized that belonging to the Chosen People included an explicit call to righteousness and holiness on the part of the individual. This was accompanied by a sense of unworthiness and sinfulness exemplified in the Qumran *Hodayot* (1QH). Thus, the truly righteous are recipients of gifts and must be “humble in heart”. They would not be considered the “most important” but the Israelites who have lived the vocation for which all have been chosen.
14. Probably the stories of the three youths and Daniel in the lions’ den were circulated among Palestinian Jews during the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. In 2Macc 6-7, the martyrs give witness by their blood and God’s triumph is in terms of resurrection and final retribution in the new life. Note the valiant mother’s speech: “I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being... Accept death, so that in God’s mercy I may get you back again with your brothers” (7, 28-29). The allusion to the Maccabean martyrs in relation to Dan 3 is made early in the third century (Hippolytus of Rome, *Commentary on Daniel*, II, xx; see xxxv on the reason God does not act thus to save the Christian martyrs). St. Augustine asks this question in *Sermo* 32 (C.C. XLI p 406) and *Enarrationes in Psalmis* 32 and 136 (C.C. XL p 1277, 1988).
15. Earlier, Tertullian discussed the power of prayer in spirit and truth (John 4, 23) with reference to Daniel. “Of old prayer delivered from fire, beasts and famine (Dan 3, 93; 6, 24; 14, 33-39) and yet did take its form from Christ...” Christian prayer transforms the individual so that he understands the mystery of suffering for God’s name (De Oratiane 29, C.C. I p 274).
19. Sermons in the early Church frequently draw a parallel between the three youths and St. Lawrence of Rome, who was burned alive.
20. Because St. Jerome cannot understand how the wicked Nebuchadnezzar could have seen the Son of God, he follows Symmachus, who translates “son of God” by “angel”; see Commentary on Daniel Book III (C.C. LXXV a p 807-808).
21. Although the Jewish liturgy does not make use of prayers preserved in the Greek additions to Daniel, many of the themes found in the “Benedicite” are developed in the later “Perek Shirah” (see *Encyclopedia Judaica* 13 c. 273-275.)