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Song of the Three Jews

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“Song of the Three Jews.” In *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, 354. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.

SONG OF THE THREE JEWS

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell

Set in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, the first six chapters (2-6 in Aramaic) of Daniel portray four Judean youths who are determined to remain faithful to their God while in a foreign land. Chapters 2 and 3 may have been independent accounts because in 2:47 the king confessed the supremacy of Daniel's God, yet later he designed a golden image to be worshiped by all (3:1-6). Accusation against Jews brought Daniel's three companions to trial. They confessed allegiance to their God; even if he were not to deliver them from death they would not commit idolatry (3:16-18). They were thrown bound into a fiery furnace; thereafter Nebuchadnezzar saw *four* men walking in the fire unharmed (3:2-25). The king then delivered them and praised their fidelity, decreeing death to anyone who would blaspheme their God (3:28-29).

The Greek translation inserted prayers into the heroes' mouths during their ordeal, the Prayer of Azariah (3:26-45) and a common hymn of praise (3:52-90). The three youths praised God directly (3:52-56) and then invited all creatures to find fulfillment in offering a blessing (thanks-and-praise) to the Creator. Drawing heavily upon Psalms 103, 148, 150, the text seems to be liturgical, perhaps translated from Hebrew (see Qumran "Hymns for the Sabbath"). The six-day structure of Genesis 1:1-2:4 may be background for 3:74-82, with human beings represented in history by the descendants of Israel (3:83-87). Then Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael exhorted themselves to celebrate God's intervention to deliver them from death (3:88). The goodness and mercy of God are manifest (see the refrain of Psalm 136 in 3:89); God deserves the praise of all true worshipers (3:90). The use of Hebrew names rather than those imposed by Nebuchadnezzar's eunuch (1:7) is logical in a prayer setting.

The relation between creation and history is stressed in the phrase "God of our Fathers" (3:52) and in the rescue of the heroes. The chosen people, constituted because of the divine promise to the patriarchs (3:83), are represented by priests and Levites ("servants of the Lord") and exemplified by the righteousness ("holy and humble of heart") like the three youths of the tribe of Judah (Dan 1:6). They believed that God the Creator can place the forces of nature at the service of the righteous (see Wisdom of Solomon 19:6, 20-21). The conclusion (3:88-90) drawing on a litany response of Temple worship (Ps 106:1; 136) links the hymn to the dilemma of the youths.

From the early period of persecution Christians found inspiration in the hymn and expanded upon its ending. By the late fourth century it was sung throughout the Church; then it became the canticle of Sunday Lauds, celebrating the divine work of creation and "open" to the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the resurrection of Jesus. Although the Jewish liturgy does not use these prayers preserved in Greek Daniel, many of the themes of the hymn are developed in *Pereq Shirah*.

Bibliography

See L. Frizzell, "A Hymn of Creation in Daniel," *Standing before God* (ed. Asher Finkel and L. Frizzell (N.Y. Ktav, 1981) p. 41-52.

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