

RESCUE FROM FIERY DEATH: DANIEL CHAPTER 3 AND GENESIS CHAPTER 38

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The third chapter of the Book of Daniel focuses on Daniel's three companions, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Along with Daniel, these youths of Judean nobility were taken from Judea to Babylonia to serve King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1:3-6). Like Daniel they receive new, foreign names, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego (Dan. 1:7). In the third chapter they refuse to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue and are punished by being thrown into a fiery furnace from which they are miraculously saved. This episode is the classic biblical example of *Kiddush Hashem*, the willingness to risk one's life in order to sanctify God's Name. As such, it is the only biblical example mentioned by Maimonides in his discussion of the concept.¹ This biblical narrative inspired the midrashic account of Abraham being thrown into a fiery furnace by the wicked King Nimrod after refusing to worship the local idols.²

The third chapter of Daniel also functions as a literary parallel to Genesis 38, the story of Judah and Tamar. On a simple level, both tell of a righteous person saved from execution by fire, the only two such stories in the Bible. This parallel was noted by the Rabbis and formed the basis for a midrash relating that Judah's descendants, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, were saved from the furnace thanks to the merit of Judah, who rescued three people (Tamar and her unborn twins) from death by fire.³ *Targum Neofiti* also establishes a connection between the two narratives: Tamar prays to God to be rescued from the fire and promises to "raise up for You three righteous ones in the valley of Dura: Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah," who will sanctify God's Name by going into fire.⁴ There is, however, a more subtle parallel that gives us an insight into the literary structure of the Book of Daniel.

Chapter 3 of the Book of Daniel is unique in its being the only chapter in which Daniel is not mentioned at all. In the rest of the book, Daniel is clearly the protagonist and center of attention. His absence from this chapter is jar-

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ring and led to rabbinic speculation as to where Daniel was at the time.⁵ The absence of the protagonist also parallels Genesis 38. The parallels between the Daniel and Joseph narratives have long been noted and studied: both tell the story of an Israelite taken into captivity in a foreign land who rises to power through his ability to interpret the foreign king's dreams.⁶ The Joseph narrative is interrupted by the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, a chapter where Joseph is not mentioned at all, just as the story of Daniel is interrupted by that of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, where Daniel is not mentioned.⁷ Both interruptions focus on characters secondary to the main narrative and describe a rescue from a fiery death. There are, of course, differences between the narratives: Tamar is saved by Judah's intervention, whereas the three youths are saved by a miracle, yet both chapters digress from the main storyline and tell of salvation from a fiery death. We can now understand that the story of Daniel not only emphasizes plot elements and utilizes phrases⁸ that evoke the story of Joseph, but even has a literary structure that parallels the form of the Joseph story. In view of the fact that Daniel is not mentioned in chapter 3, contemporary Bible critics regard that chapter as "an independent story that originally had no connection with the Daniel cycle of stories."⁹ However, it is precisely the absence of Daniel that makes this chapter fit organically within the structure of the Book of Daniel as a parallel to the Joseph narrative.

Once this parallel is noted, we can see that Judah and Nebuchadnezzar both follow a similar trajectory of character development. They both condemn righteous individuals to death by fire on the basis of their proclamations (Gen. 38:24, Dan. 3:6) and later admit their error (Gen. 38:26, Dan. 3:28-29). There is a parallel between the victims in both narratives – Tamar in the one and Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in the other. The righteous victims in both cases accept their fate, yet make a declaration to the person who condemned them expressing their righteousness (Gen. 38:25, Dan. 3:17-18). In both cases the righteous are saved and unharmed, and they receive some kind of reward: the birth of twins to Tamar (Gen. 38:27-30) and promotion for Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (Dan. 3:30).

Rabbinic literature views the protagonist's absence in both of these chapters as serving the same purpose, to allow secondary characters to come into their own. The Midrash teaches that Judah demonstrated his leadership qualities

by publicly admitting that he was wrong about Tamar in Gen. 38:26.¹⁰ Similarly, the Talmud explains that God manipulated events so that Daniel would be out of the country during the fiery furnace episode in order to focus on Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, thus showing that they merited a miraculous deliverance even without the help of Daniel.¹¹

Much like the three men in Daniel chapter 3, Tamar disappears after her role in Genesis 38,¹² but in rabbinic literature she is recalled as a mother of "kings and prophets,"¹³ her son Perez being the Davidic line's progenitor. Genesis 38 contains many allusions to places within the future territory of the tribe of Judah (Adullam, Timnah, Enaim), and to people who play a role in the life of King David, (Tamar and Bat-Shua/Bathsheba). These associations place the Judah-Tamar episode in a wider context, that of the Davidic monarchy. This chapter is understood by Bible scholars to foreshadow Judah's future leadership role, not only as an individual, but as the tribe from which King David will emerge.¹⁴ Rabbinic tradition likewise assigns a key role to Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in this same context. Whatever happened to the three righteous men? The sages tell us that they moved back to the Land of Israel, married there and had children.¹⁵ They are identified with the *men who are a symbol* (Zech. 3:8), those who, along with Joshua the High Priest, are told by an angel that the rebuilding of the Temple will soon be complete. The angel foretells the coming of *My servant, the Branch [Tzemaḥ]* . . . *On that day, says the Lord of Hosts, each man will invite his fellow to sit beneath the vines and fig trees* (Zech. 3:8-10. That phrase recalls the glorious era of King Solomon (I Kgs. 5:5) as well as the messianic future (Micah 4:4). *My servant, Tzemaḥ* is traditionally identified with either Zerubbabel, scion of the Davidic line when the Second Temple was under construction (Rashi, Ibn Ezra), or the King Messiah himself (Targum). The role of the *men who are a symbol* is to prove the veracity of the promises made by the angel is making. The miracle that they experienced is a sign of more miracles to come, on a mass scale.¹⁶ Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, descendants of Judah, are thus considered in rabbinic literature to have played a role in heralding the reestablishment of Davidic leadership, continuing what Tamar had begun.

Chapter 3 of Daniel serves in many ways as a parallel to Genesis chapter 38. The parallel has to do with content, a narrative about righteous people saved from death by fire; and also with form, interrupting the main narrative

about an interpreter of dreams without mentioning the interpreter. Recognizing these parallels on some level, the rabbis cast the righteous individuals in both narratives as significant figures in terms of the future Davidic monarchy.

NOTES

1. Maimonides, *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, 9; *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, 5:4.
2. Genesis Rabbah, 38:13.
3. TB *Sotah* 10b, Genesis Rabbah, 97:8 (Albeck edition). See also Genesis Rabbah 99:8 in the Vilna edition and *Yalkut Shim'oni*, Vayehi, remez 159.
4. Esther Marie Menn, *Judah & Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) p. 218. The prayer of Tamar itself is paralleled by the prayer of Azariah, found in the Greek version of Daniel; see Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Anchor Bible – The Book of Daniel* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1978) pp. 164-5.
5. TB *Sanhedrin* 93a.
6. See my article, "The Wise Courtier in Rabbinic Literature," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 39:3 (2011) pp. 169-170.
7. Jan-Wim Wesselius, "The Literary Nature of the Book of Daniel and the Linguistic Character of its Aramaic," *Aramaic Studies*, 3 (2005) p. 250.
8. See Shemuel Ha-Kohen and Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra – Daniel* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994) pp. 309-316.
9. *The Anchor Bible – The Book of Daniel*, p. 159.
10. Exodus Rabbah 30:16, *Mekhilta*, Beshallah, Va-yehi 5.
11. TB *Sanhedrin* 93a.
12. Tamar does not appear as a character in any further biblical narratives; she is, however, recalled as the mother of Perez in Ruth 4:12.
13. TB *Nazir* 23b, TB *Megillah* 10b.
14. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 264.
15. TB *Sanhedrin* 93a.
16. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra – Zechariah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990) p. 13, note 24.