

The Zelem

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Dan 3:19a

(BHS)

בְּאֵינָן נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר הַתְּמָלִי הִמָּא
וְצֵלֶם אֲנַפּוּהִי אֲשַׁתְּנֹו
עַל-שַׁדְרָךְ מִיִּשָׁךְ וְעַבְדֵי נֶגְוֹ

(NASB)

Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with wrath,
and his facial **expression** was altered
toward Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego.

This verse is not Hebrew. You are looking at Aramaic. Still, you can readily recognize the personal names. But the word of note here is in line 2, *zelem*. NASB treats it as “expression.” NLT reads, “his face became distorted.” NIV says, “his attitude toward them changed.” KJV glosses, “the form of his visage was changed.”

Zelem occurs frequently in chapters 2 and 3 of Daniel. It means, “image.” Remember the great *zelem* that the king saw in his dream, composed of gold, silver, bronze, and iron. Nebuchadnezzar defied that revelation from God, in effect shook his fist at the Most High, by setting up his *zelem* of gold—that represented himself as the king of Babylon. He demanded that everyone worship it when the music sounded.

So our verse says, “the image of his face was changed.” This language purposely incorporates into Nebuchadnezzar’s countenance a reference to the image. The *zelem* is no longer made of gold and external to the king. It is now his demeanor, his bearing, his semblance. You can see the *zelem* glinting in his eyes. The *zelem* was originally about him—now the veil is pulled back and it is clear that he is the *zelem*.

It is a biblical motif that people become like what they worship. “They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them” (Psa 115:7 – 8). The Babylonians repeatedly bowed down before a cold metal object, acting like mere puppets and not men who are fully alive. They are cartoonish cardboard characters in Daniel 3. This is what worshipping the king’s effigy did to them. Compared to them, the three Jews vibrantly stand out.

Those who worship the greedy and vindictive god Baal become greedy and vindictive themselves. This is the point of 1 Kings 21; Baal worshippers like Jezebel behave abominably. What happened to Naboth was typical. We have seen in the last century many atrocities committed by atheists with political power (atheists of course do worship something). In this century we see religion driving others to do terrible acts of savagery and evil. The biblical truth that people are what they worship is on display every day.

This is why it is important to dig deep and root out unbiblical expectations and assumptions about life from our own thinking. These thoughts coexist side by side with our Christian convictions. James calls it being double minded (4:8). Consider pride. When your will is crossed, what do you do? Does the *zelem* of your face change? What does it take to cause inordinate anger to rise in your soul like Nebuchadnezzar? Like him, in your heart of hearts, don’t you wish everyone would defer to you? What happens when you don’t get your own way? How different are you from the king of Babylon?

Please indulge me in a bit of possible totality transfer. The Greek renders *zelem* with *morphē* in our verse, “form;” the *morphē* of the enraged king’s face was changed when he didn’t get his own way. But when Jesus’ people were in trouble, his *morphē* changed also. Although he was in the very *morphē* of God, he emptied himself, and took on the *morphē* of a servant, even willing to be crucified (Phil 2:6 – 7). This is the opposite of Nebuchadnezzar’s attitude, who was even willing to throw the Jews into the furnace. Jesus thus identifies with the persecuted Hebrews. In fact, Nebuchadnezzar saw one “like a son of God” who was willing to stand in the fire alongside of them. Who do you suppose that was?

Paul says that we should put on the attitude of this Christ who humbled himself. Since Jesus is the one we worship, let us be like him. Let his *zelem* be in our faces and minds and hearts. It takes a lot of faith to be humble. It takes faith to say, “Not my will but thine be done.”

Remember that the Jews emerged from the fire unscathed. Jesus rose in power from the grave. And you too, when your time on earth is done, will rise victorious. So worship Jesus, image him—be even willing to suffer hot persecution for his sake. He will stand with you in the fire, and will bring you out of it in the end. It is to that day we press on, humble people with strong convictions like Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!