

Lecture 5: Daniel (as): A Young Muslim Refugee and How He Coped

It is not an anachronism to call Daniel (as) as Muslim. This is not merely true because the holy Qur'an refers to Biblical figures as Muslims. Nor is it merely a recognition of the fact that Daniel's (as) tomb continues to exist in Iran and is still the site of devotional visits by Muslims. I use the word to refer to someone who intends to submit entirely to the will of God, and this is, in my opinion, the only valid usage of the word.

All people, no matter what religious community or organization lays claim to their allegiance, are Muslims, if their intention is to submit their lives, belief, and behaviour to the will of the one true God, Creator of all things.

The experience of Daniel (as) as described in the book of the Bible that bears his name is surely a prime example of such submission. On more than one occasion he and his companions are reported to have risked their lives by disobeying the king in order to be faithful to their commitment to the will of God. I shall examine three of those occasions here, since they particularly deal with issues of interest to Muslims.

1. The Permitted Diet

The first narrative is found in Daniel 1:1–20.

1 ¶ In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it. 2 And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god. 3 And the king spake unto Ashpenaz the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes;

4 Children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans.

5 And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's meat, and of the wine which he drank: so nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king.

6 Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: 7 Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel the name of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego.

8 ¶ But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. 9 Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs.

10 And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.

11 Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 12 Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. 13 Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants.

14 So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days. 15 And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat. 16 Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse.

17 ¶ As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. 18 Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. 19 And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: therefore stood they before the king.

20 And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm.

The first thing to note about this story is that the young people were captives. They were separated from their families, whose fate is unknown to us and perhaps to the young people themselves. There is every possibility that they had died in the siege or in the battle of Jerusalem. So the young people were not only captives, but possibly orphans as well.

Furthermore, they had gone through the ordeal of becoming eunuchs, which was not only humiliating to the highest degree, but definitely life-threatening. It had been impressed upon them that the reason they had suffered all of these things was because their religion and culture were inferior to those of their captors.

On the other hand, these young people were selected for the highest possible honours. Their success in the reconditioning and education being offered them depended on strict submission, but was potentially a road to the greatest honours. So both their suffering and the honours placed before them provided the highest possible incentives for relinquishing the principles of their childhood faith.

The story describes their refusal to eat food that was forbidden by divine law. The divine law of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 is essentially the same as that of Shi'ite Islam. Sunni Islam differs from it in admitting all sea creatures, and Judaism differs from it in forbidding the mixing of milk and meat. This is the law to which Daniel and his friends were faithful.

The four young men were most diplomatic in approaching the matter. The text, however, notes that Daniel purposed in his heart. This means that he would refuse to eat forbidden foods at any cost, even at the cost of his life.

The officer himself even feared for his life. The text seems to indicate a miraculous intervention in favour of the young men, although the debilitating effects of rich foods and alcohol on the other students may have contributed to the relative excellence of the four young men as well.

Whatever the cause, the text clearly fosters absolute faithfulness. Liberal scholars indeed place its writing in the post-exilic period, which was an era of profound contemplation of these issues in the face of Hellenizing persecution of faithful Jews.

The word "pulse" here refers to a bland, meatless diet, apparently the simple peasant diet that was generally available, probably made up of coarse barley bread and lentils. It was certainly not interesting, varied, or attractive to young people. But it was the only alternative to the court diet, which consisted of fine foods containing flesh from animals that were slaughtered without draining the blood according to divine law, and species of animals that were forbidden by divine law.

Some have considered Daniel to represent a vegetarian faction within Israelite religion at the time, but this is not justifiable. The reason they were reduced to eating the simplest vegetarian food was because acceptable flesh foods were unavailable. There was no one even qualified to slaughter them properly.

The position of the four young men is an extreme example of what Muslim immigrants as well as those born in non-Muslim societies have to face. There is suffering on one hand, the punishment dealt out by society for non-conformity to non-Islamic customs. On the other hand, there is every inducement to seduce Muslim children to be unfaithful to Islamic (and thereby Biblical) principles by reaching for achievements offered in non-Muslim societies.

Although it is not likely that any Muslims in non-Muslim countries actually face death for refusing to eat non-halal meat, still the pressures to do so are sufficient to induce many to conform. A review of the experiences of Daniel might make such people pause to think about their behaviour and the reasons for it.

2. Idolatry

The second story is found in Daniel 3:1–27.

1 Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits: he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. 2 Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent to gather together the princes, the governors, and the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.

3 Then the princes, the governors, and captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, were gathered together unto the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 4 Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages, 5 That at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up:

6 And whoso falleth not down and worshipping shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. 7 Therefore at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and all kinds of musick, all the people, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.

8 Wherefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and accused the Jews. 9 They spake and said to the king Nebuchadnezzar, O king, live for ever. 10 Thou, O king, hast made a decree, that every man that shall hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, shall fall down and worship the golden image:

11 And whoso falleth not down and worshipping, that he should be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. 12 There are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. 13 Then Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Then they brought these men before the king.

14 Nebuchadnezzar spake and said unto them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? 15 Now if ye be ready that at

what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made; well: but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?

16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. 17 If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. 18 But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

19 Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated. 20 And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. 21 Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

22 Therefore because the king's commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. 23 And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

24 Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonied, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king.

25 He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God. 26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire.

27 And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king's counsellors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them.

This story refers to a time when the companions of Daniel were no longer youths, but mature functionaries in Babylon. The significance of the story lies in the fact that they are clearly able to survive in the pagan or secular state and still be true to their childhood faith. This one exceptional event merely confirms this. The story states the deliverance to be miraculous, however, indicating that their success was dependant on more than mere luck, diplomacy and skill.

The first think that will strike the Muslim reader is the king's reference to one like the Son of God. It is

interesting that this is the only reference to the Son of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, although the Greek New Testament includes it a number of times in a number of ways. It is notable that the concept of the Son of God, insofar as Scripture goes, was invented by a pagan king while engaging in idolatrous worship. That ought to give pause for reflection.

The most obvious issue in this story is the issue of prostration in worship to the image of an idol. There is a secondary issue that is not quite so obvious, and that is the role of music. Music is almost universally a vehicle for worship. There are many reasons for this.

One is that music creates unified action, making concerted congregational liturgy possible with a minimum of directions. Another reason is that music transmits a common emotion or purpose to the group directly without appeal to reason and the act of decision. In this case it is clear that music is being used for even more sinister purposes and in even more manipulative ways.

An examination of the musical terms found in Daniel three gives indication of this misuse of music. The word translated “psaltery” in verses 5, 7, and 15 above is *sumponyah* and appears to be based on the Greek word meaning “to sound together” from which we also have the English symphony. The ancient use of sounding tones together to produce certain effects by their intervals is widespread and well-known to musicologists.

The art was highly developed by the Sumerians, from whom it was inherited by the Babylonians. It is conceivable that the Babylonians could produce intervals of sound that effected prostration on the crowds of people. In other words, they were forced to fall down by the sound of the music itself.

In that case, we are justified in seeing the intention of the text to report a miracle in that the three men were able to resist the effects of the music and remain upright before the golden image. It is very possible that this miracle was seen to have reinforced their intention to faithfulness even in the face of threatened death.

The connection between idolatry and music is one often overlooked, but one that is clearly consonant with Islamic thought. Music in non-Islamic societies that has the reputation of being secular is not thereby divorced from idolatry.

It is not the repute of the music that is significant, but the very character of the music. Mass contemporary concerts are characterized by stereotyped behaviour particular to those events, behaviour that is a forced form of idolatry in the guise of swaying, raising the hands, hysterical shouting, and swooning.

None of these behaviour patterns occur normally without the stimulation of the required music. Research has shown such music to be not only associated with chemical addiction, but to be an addiction in itself. But research is hardly needed to demonstrate the fact, as every observer and every participant is able to satisfy him or herself of the fact directly.

The story of Daniel's three friends is a vivid reminder not only of the Islamic principle of avoiding idolatry in all forms, but of the Islamic warning against the misuse of music. Muslims living both in supposed Muslim societies and those living in other societies are all susceptible to the detrimental effects of music. The witness of the book of Daniel is that such music in itself constitutes idolatry, and as such in Islamic terms is shirk.

3. Prayer in Prostration

The third story of the book of Daniel that is highly relevant to Muslim life is the famous story of Daniel (as) in the lions' den as reported in Daniel 6.

1 ¶ It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom an hundred and twenty princes, which should be over the whole kingdom; 2 And over these three presidents; of whom Daniel was first: that the princes might give accounts unto them, and the king should have no damage. 3 Then this Daniel was preferred above the presidents and princes, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king thought to set him over the whole realm.

4 Then the presidents and princes sought to find occasion against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find none occasion nor fault; forasmuch as he was faithful, neither was there any error or fault found in him. 5 Then said these men, We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God.

6 ¶ Then these presidents and princes assembled together to the king, and said thus unto him, King Darius, live for ever. 7 All the presidents of the kingdom, the governors, and the princes, the counsellors, and the captains, have consulted together to establish a royal statute, and to make a firm decree, that whosoever shall ask a petition of any God or man for thirty days, save of thee, O king, he shall be cast into the den of lions. 8 Now, O king, establish the decree, and sign the writing, that it be not changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not.

9 Wherefore king Darius signed the writing and the decree. 10 Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.

11 ¶ Then these men assembled, and found Daniel praying and making supplication before his God. 12 Then they came near, and spake before the king concerning the king's decree; Hast thou not signed a decree, that every man that shall ask a petition of any God or man within thirty days, save of thee, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions? The king answered and said, The thing is true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not.

13 Then answered they and said before the king, That Daniel, which is of the children of the captivity of

Judah, regardeth not thee, O king, nor the decree that thou hast signed, but maketh his petition three times a day.

14 Then the king, when he heard these words, was sore displeased with himself, and set his heart on Daniel to deliver him: and he laboured till the going down of the sun to deliver him. 15 Then these men assembled unto the king, and said unto the king, Know, O king, that the law of the Medes and Persians is, That no decree nor statute which the king establisheth may be changed.

16 Then the king commanded, and they brought Daniel, and cast him into the den of lions. Now the king spake and said unto Daniel, Thy God whom thou servest continually, he will deliver thee. 17 And a stone was brought, and laid upon the mouth of the den; and the king sealed it with his own signet, and with the signet of his lords; that the purpose might not be changed concerning Daniel.

18 ¶ Then the king went to his palace, and passed the night fasting: neither were instruments of musick brought before him: and his sleep went from him. 19 Then the king arose very early in the morning, and went in haste unto the den of lions. 20 And when he came to the den, he cried with a lamentable voice unto Daniel: and the king spake and said to Daniel, O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions? 21 Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live for ever.

22 My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt.

The story is of a time far later than our first meeting with Daniel (as) as a youth. This is significant, for it shows that Daniel (as) retained the forms of worship and the principles of faith that he had attained as a child throughout a long and brilliant diplomatic career in a heathen court. Even if he had retained these as a fresh youth, one might have expected him to conform over time and with maturity. But we find that he has not done so.

There are several points of particular significance here. The first is Daniel's (as) obvious belief that public prayer in prostration towards the holy city three times a day was obligatory. If he had not thought it obligatory, he would certainly have discontinued it for the mere thirty days of the prohibition. It was thus more than his stated custom. It was the expression of his deep religious belief.

Besides the obligation of the prayer, we need to note the obligatory elements of the prayer as well. First, it is addressed to God alone. Secondly, it takes place at regular daily intervals, which are specifically early morning, afternoon, and evening. Thirdly, it includes the physical posture of prostration.

Fourthly, it takes place in a specific direction, that is, the city of Jerusalem. The place of sacrifice and worship was moved to Jerusalem at the time of David (as) where it remained until the time of Muhammad (as). Jerusalem was the focus of prayer or the kibla of Daniel's time.

It is necessary to note that the temple of Jerusalem had been destroyed probably at the time when Daniel (as) was taken captive. We thus find Daniel (as) praying in the direction of a pile of rubble for seventy years or so. We find him doing so even at the risk of his life.

One is overcome with awe before faith of this magnitude, but the implications are devastating for contemporary behaviour. One wonders by what right have the people of any religious tradition paying lipservice to the Bible relinquished the practice of daily, regular prayer in prostration towards the holy city. This one narrative alone identifies the Bible as the book of those who pray daily in prostration and of no other people.

Although all three of these narratives from the book of Daniel make strong appeal to miraculous divine intervention, they also raise a very relevant issue. That issue is the possibility of maintaining a pure and active faith and practice within a hostile environment. This is precisely what Muslims are called upon to do, not only in Western societies but oftentimes under the neo-colonial regimes of the Middle East and other parts of the world. The book of Daniel is a strong witness that this is not only possible, but that it is the only right alternative.

Two factors are involved in the process, and it is not my intention to proclaim them as the right way for Muslims to go. Nevertheless, they arise naturally from the text. The first is the attitude of courtesy and diplomacy on the part of the four men in every situation. That is, they do not rise up in rebellion. They do not start revolutions in Iraq or Iran. They deal with the existing powers in ways that are open to them. Secondly, they make no compromise whatsoever with their belief and practice. The result is polite insubordination. It is effective because they are willing to lay their lives on the line.

It appears clear that the book of Daniel is a Biblical text containing issues of the highest relevance specifically to Muslims. It thus shows the Bible to be much the property of Muslims, much more so than the property of the religious traditions that actually claim it, but which deny in practice the sacred duties expressed in its pages.

Beyond this, the book of Daniel appears to be worthy of further, more detailed study for the contemplation of strategies for dealing with these issues that continue to be relevant in the contemporary world. A two-pronged approach, on one hand using valid means of action and avoiding violence, and on the other absolute adherence to Islamic principle and practice, might be far more productive than the perpetration of such tragedies as the events of 11 September 2001.