

## **CONCLUSIVE CONSIDERATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES**

## 9. REVALUATING THE “TALES”:

### THE SPECIFICITY OF THE “HAGGADIC *DANIEL*” CIRCULATION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITIES

The present research tried to offer a synthetic reconstruction of the principal interpretative trajectories of *Dn* “tales” reception in preconstantinian Christianities. Since some internal considerations concerning the single chapters have already been traced at the end of each section of the work, this conclusive reflection will try to stress in a broad perspective the principal elements emerged from the entire analysis, contextually highlighting the strong points of the method adopted.

In a generic sense, the first *datum* which clearly emerges from the reconstruction and which has to be immediately mentioned consists in the decisive importance of the “tales” in paleochristian exegesis.

In the general introduction it has been possible to attract the attention on the necessity to enlarge the study of *Dn* reception – so far principally focused on the “apocalyptic” section of the “book” – with a specific survey concerning the circulation of the “tales”, and mainly adopting a pluridisciplinary method capable to include the massive evidences coming from the “neglected” figurative documentation.

At the end of the research, the significance of *Dn* types in iconographic panorama can be easily confirmed, and a new element clearly emerges: the “tales” play a central role also in literary source, being involved in exegetical processes which deal with both the elaboration of the principal theological speculations and the attribution of a meaning to the concrete experience of the communities.

This generic consideration has to be connected with another important evidence, which has immediately imposed to the attention since the earliest phases of the research: the diffusion of the “tales” in early communities can be principally considered as a “typological” phenomenon. The *datum* can be actually tested in its real consistence only adopting a pluridisciplinary method, since it mainly emerges from the entire panorama of iconography and from the areas of African and Asiatic literature.

In these contexts the stories derived from *Dn* are adopted as the narrations of “events” integrated in the parable of salvation history, whose principal value has to be grasped in the light of the Christian realities with which they are connected through a relation of “anticipation” and fulfilment. In other words, the stories from *Dn* are first of all conceived as instruments to give sense to the new economy, from which they are substantially accomplished and revealed.

Next to such trajectory, the “allegoric” assumption of the “tales” seems to remain a peripheral development, testified by the literature principally coming from Alexandrian context. The

interpretative outcomes belonging to this tradition cannot actually be considered as the real peculiarity of *Dn* “tales” circulation, but rather as an expression of a generic exegetical activity that indifferently involves the entire patrimony of Scriptures.

In the same way, the “literary” reading of the biblical “book” represents a marginal phenomenon in preconstantinian sources, and the outcomes pursued by the present research in this field are more connected with the study of *In Danielelem* commentary than with the reconstruction of *Dn* fortune.

For this reason, this conclusive reflection will try to stress some important aspects of its typological reception, which can be assumed as the most specific and distinctive trait of the “haggadic *Dn*” circulation in antiquity.

### 9.1. A “MARTYRIAL TYPOLOGY”

Though the typological readings of the “tales” are characterized by a significant heterogeneity, which has been highlighted, case by case, in the context of the entire work, an overall view of documentation sheds light on a common element: the variety of the exegetical processes applied to the biblical material seems to share a “martyrial” connotation. In other words, the stories of *Dn* appear to undergo a typological interpretation in the context of the elaboration of a specific *theologumenon*, namely martyrdom.

An interesting element concerning this point has to be stressed: both in the context of iconography and in that one of literature, the same portions of *Dn* are assumed and subtly manipulated to produce a range of contents which complete a full portrait of ancient martyrdom, unveiling the subsistence of different theological perspectives about the argument.

The elaboration of these theological concepts through the “tales” touches the following aspects:

1. Martyrdom as a form *sequela* and repetition of Jesus’ *Pascha*, in a way that stresses the connection between the paradigmatic experience of Christ and that one of Christians<sup>1</sup>.
2. Martyrdom as generic sign of the forthcoming apocalyptic time and as specific manifestation of the *tribulatio*, which means, in other words, as instrument through which God both leads his believers to his kingdom and condemns the persecutors to the eternal fire<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See *supra*, chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> See *supra*, chapter 3.

3. Martyrdom as *dies natalis*, which means as the moment that brings, together with the bodily death, also the final birth, that is eternal salvation<sup>3</sup>.
4. Martyrdom as concrete coordinate of the life of the believers, who were asked to assume the experience of persecution – from the moment of idolatry refusal to that one of the sufferance (however it could end) – as an event integrated in salvation history, meant to be interpreted in the light of the entire plan of God<sup>4</sup>.
5. Martyrdom as a distinctive character of early Christian church, whose configuration and self-comprehension exactly passed through such connotation<sup>5</sup>.

It would seem redundant to linger once again on the internal developments of each of those themes, since the dedicated sections at the end of the single chapters have already tried to offer a summary; in this context two generic aspects will be particularly stressed.

First of all, considering the entire “theology of martyrdom” rebuilt through *Dn* “tales”, it must be underlined that the typological process involving the narrations implies a direct and explicit reference to Christ mainly in the specific case of *Acta Martyrum*. In most of the other sources, the exegetical relation through which the experience of the persecution is interpreted, immediately concerns the members of the community.

Though a specific section of the present work has been dedicated to the most important evidences which can be associated with the elaboration of a “typology involving the church”<sup>6</sup>, it seems possible to say that such development represents the principal perspective assumed in the operation of selection and interpretation of the “tales”.

Another important consideration has to be formulated about the approaches of literature and iconography in this field. On one side, figurative source seems to offer, so to speak, the clearest and most generic definition of all the coordinates characterizing the theology of martyrdom developed through “tales”: in figurative documentation the types of *Dn* are introduced in elaborations in which the essential nature and functions of martyrdom are directly described and highlighted as fundamental propositions of the paleochristian belief. It is enough to mention either the widespread link between scenes derived from *Dn* and the principal symbols of Jesus’ *Pascha*, or specific and eloquent cases such as the program of the famous Velletri tombstone<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See *supra*, chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> See *supra*, chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup> See *supra*, chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> See *supra*, section I 1.

<sup>7</sup> See *supra*, chapter 2, pp. 49-58.

In the context of literature, the interpretative operations appear to get more subtle and directed to specific acceptations and implications of those statements, which are constantly adapted according to the historical circumstances, the thought of the authors and the function of the works.

A specific kind of relation between the two sources would be actually difficult to delineate, also due to the critical problem of the chronology of ancient iconography, which anyway must have known a long period of gestation. Notwithstanding this, it is possible to think that the elaboration of literature, which reveals to be evidently weaker and less defined than iconographic one in the specific context of *Dn* themes reception, must have felt the effects of those types' widespread diffusion in visual documentation. In other words, iconography seems to represent the privileged *milieu* in which the principal and essential trajectories of the “tales” typological use obtain to be fixed, sanctioning, so to speak, the “martyrial” fortune of them. Literature appears to both accept the fruitful exegesis produced in visual context, constantly adopting its contents as background, and punctually develop a range of possible variation and modulation of the theme.

The possible reasons underling the figurative diffusion of *Dn* types have to be better defined.

## **9.2. “TALES” AND THE LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF LITURGY**

As has been mentioned, the capillary diffusion, the skilful manipulation and the variety of use leave no doubt about the fact that *Dn* “tales” can be enumerated among the earliest iconographic themes which undergo a rich and significant exegetical process.

The visual fortune of these types has been generally connected by scholars with the so-called prayer of the *Ordo commendationis animae*<sup>8</sup>, from which the biblical subjects would have been selected and introduced in the figurative patrimony, with the principal function to evoke the salvation of the dead souls. For the specific case of *Dn* “tales”, without neglecting the importance of such prayer in the process of their figurative assumption, it seems necessary to reflect about the context in which those scenes must have been adopted, interpreted and used.

It has already been possible to underline the role of liturgy as privileged *Sitz im Leben* of ancient exegesis in a wide sense, referring to the production of all those hermeneutical contents merging into both literary and iconographic elaboration. The importance of typology, in a generic sense, can be connected with the same character of the experience of liturgy: in that context the reign was constantly renewed and the action of God on the cosmos was concretely perceived<sup>9</sup>, so that the community participated to a sort of “eschatological prefiguration” characterized by a double

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<sup>8</sup> This is in part. the theory exposed by P. PRIGENT 1995, in part. 222-223.

<sup>9</sup> See in part. D.L. BARR, *Tales of the End*, Santa Rosa 1998, p. 171; and A.R. NUSCA, *Liturgia e Apocalisse*, in BOSETTI E-COLACRAI A. (curr.) 2005, pp. 463-472.

movement, that one of the single Christian towards the earthly church and that one of the earthly church towards the eschatological one<sup>10</sup>. In this perspective, typology must have certainly represented a privileged instrument to define the role of such community in the entire parable of salvation history.

Focusing on *Dn* “tales” typology, it becomes reasonable to connect their *genesis* with a precise liturgical context, namely the martyrial one, with specific reference to the *refrigerium*, whose intrinsic features, as has already been noticed<sup>11</sup>, are very difficult to rebuilt in detail. It does not seem too hazardous to hypothesize that exactly *refrigerium* could represent the “physical space” in which the experience of the historical persecution was attributed of a deeper meaning, through the elaboration of a real “theology of martyrdom”. In that circumstance, the present of Christians became the object of an exegetical reflection activated by the entire community gathered together, so that both the single believers became part of the church, and the church could prefigure the eschatological *grex*.

The diffusion and the fortune of martyrial themes, among which the “tales” represent the principal ones, can be for this reason ascribed to the rich process of interpretation concerning the experience of the community exposed to the persecution and mainly activated in the context of the “martyrial cultural life”.

If the literary outcomes produced by this activity certainly had a fundamental role in the elaboration of the theoretical reflection about martyrdom, it is possible to think that the iconographic use of such figures presupposed also an additional function.

### 9.3. WHY ARE “TALES” SO DIFFUSED IN ICONOGRAPHY?

As has been noticed, the scenes of *Dn*, from their pristine elaboration process to their introduction in single programs, have performed a special role in the representation of the community and mainly in the self-definition of the church as an *ecclesia martyrum*<sup>12</sup>. Exactly such necessity to inscribe the experience of the dead in a “martyrial frame” may have played an important role in the diffusion and use of those types.

The attribution of a range of martyrial symbols to the community can be assumed as an attempt to “extend”, so to speak, the salvific prerogatives of the single martyr to the entire *consortium* of believers, through a process which reminds in some measure of that phenomenon of

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<sup>10</sup> G. PELIZZARI 2006/2007, p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> See *supra*, in part. chapter 2, p. 75.

<sup>12</sup> See *supra*, chapter 6, pp. 296-337.

“sepulture *ad martyras*”<sup>13</sup> according to which the same physical closeness to the martyrs could ensure the salvation for the entire church.

In other words, it cannot be excluded that the diffusion of those types in iconography did not simply depended on the generic importance assumed by the theme of martyrdom in funerary context and mainly in *refrigerium*, but also on a more precise intention to establish a concrete proximity between the dead ones and the efficacious symbols of the martyrs, so that the former could benefit of the destiny of salvation conquered by the latter.

Such presence of the scenes derived from “tales” in the context of liturgy, of which they represented a sort of “scenography”, may have determined their further assumption and diffusion in literary reflection.

The peculiar disproportion in the use of Daniel *in lacu leonis* scene can be probably explained in a similar perspective. It has already been possible to mention the special connection between this subject and the dimension of Eucharist, mainly conveyed by the introduction of the figure of Habakkuk bringing salvific loaves in the traditional scheme of the type; it cannot be excluded that the “cultural” value of the subject had in some measure conditioned its widespread diffusion in the context of liturgical celebrations, also considering the strong link between Eucharist and *refrigerium*<sup>14</sup>.

In literary sources those exegetical meanings and functions, directly connected with the physical presence of the types in the concrete context of the celebrations, necessarily lose their efficacy and importance, so that even the fortune of the scene decreases.

Such reflections highlight the range and the complexity of the fortune of these figures in iconography: here, their value and their diffusion results from both an activity of theological exegesis and a concrete participation to the cultural life, whose “setting” and effective development have a special role in the use of the biblical materials: early Christians’ life is fully involved in the interpretative process.

#### **9.4. FROM *DN* TRANSLATIONS TO THE MEMORY OF “TALES”**

The study of the “tales” circulation allowed to notice some essential traits, which may characterize ancient exegesis in a wider perspective. The principal aspect in this sense is represented by the fluidity and the variety of the panorama, perfectly denouncing the complexity and the richness of the process that leads to the formation of the early Christian thought.

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<sup>13</sup> See in general Y.M. DUVAL, *Auprès des saints, corps et âme. L'inhumation «ad sanctos» dans la chrétienté d'Orient et d'Occident du IIIe au VIIe siècle*, Paris 1988 (Études Augustiniennes. Série Antiquité 121).

<sup>14</sup> See *supra*, chapter 2, p. 75.

Such complexity involves, as has been noticed, a range of different aspects: the categories of sources which mediate the reflection, the hermeneutical instruments adopted to produce the interpretation, the contents and the meanings to which scriptural materials are connected. In addition, the fluidity of the exegesis significantly concerns also an important *realia* of the “tales” circulation, namely the translations of *Dn* adopted by the sources.

The argument mainly regards early Christian literature, which has been usually considered by critics as prone to assume *Dn*<sup>o</sup> rather than *Dn*<sup>OG</sup>. The specific study of the section of the “tales” reveals a much more complex situation, since the adoption by the authors of a specific translation of the text cannot be in many cases concretely defined.

Apart from the literal quotations of the text (which reveals, in point of fact, a different reality from the prevalence of *Dn*<sup>o</sup> commonly stated by critics<sup>15</sup>), the narrations appear to be in many circumstances already fixed in the memory of the author and for this reason mentioned in their generic traits, so that the definition of the translation from which they are assumed becomes impossible.

Such specificity of the “tales” circulation can be reasonably once again explained in the light of the role performed by iconography in the diffusion of those themes. Their widespread figurative fortune must have turned this material into something very familiar to early believers, immediately available to be introduced in texts – so to speak – “by heart”. Unavoidably, their visual diffusion must have also influenced the selection of specific moments of the biblical events to the detriment of others.

In conclusion, it seems possible to affirm that the complexity of *Dn* “tales” ancient fortune cannot be actually tested and understood outside of a comprehensive study of their fluid circulation, which is a cross-cutting phenomenon, involving the concrete life of the community, from the cultural context to the theological speculation.

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<sup>15</sup> See in part. the case of Cyprian, *supra*, chapter 5, pp. 271-273.