

THREE HEBREWS IN THE FURNACE

According to the book of Daniel three young men in Babylon at the time of [Nebuchadnezzar](#) were cast into a fiery furnace, guided by a guardian angel (Dn. 3:8-30). Six Coptic documents are devoted to the fate of the relics of the three young men:

1. The narrative of the journey to the sepulcher of the saints by JOHN COLOBOS is among the Sahidic extracts of the saint's life included in two Vienna Nationalbibliothek folios edited by W. C. Till (1938, pp. 230-39).
2. A Sahidic fragment in the Cairo Museum was published by H. Munier in 1916.
3. A fragmentary homily preserved in the Vatican Library ([Coptica](#) 69, fols. 103r-129v) and parallel to the Tischendorf fragments in Leipzig and others in Cairo, was published by H. Devis in 1929.
4. A panegyric for the three saints attributed to THEOPHILUS OF ALEXANDRIA (385-412), for the day of their commemoration on 10 Bashans, was also published by H. Devis.
5. Another panegyric for 10 Bashans, by [Saint CYRIL](#) I OF ALEXANDRIA (412-444), consists of two homilies on the miracles and prodigies at the time of the construction of the oratory in Alexandria (Vatican Library, [Coptica](#) 62, fols. 143r-88r, published by H. Devis).
6. Seven unpublished leaves of a homily in which reference is made to a monk Bacheus (Zoega no. 264) is in the Naples National Library.

From the summary account in the SYNAXARION for 10 Bashans it clearly emerges that the attempt by John Colobos to bring back the relics of the three young men at the request of Theophilus, who had built the church without having the relics, ended in failure. The three saints declared to John Colobos, who had got as far as the place of their burial under the image of Nebuchadnezzar, that they were not permitted to leave that place, but that they would appear through the lamps lit in their church.

The Munier fragment shows that the complete narrative underlying this account was fairly complex. Here Jechonias gives the following report: The three young men have been carried into [heaven](#) on a chariot, and [Nebuchadnezzar](#) remains inconsolable. He honors them all his life, and at the point of death the three inform him that his place is among them. The account of Bacheus specifies that 10 Bashans is the day on which the three young men came out of the furnace. A homily, the beginning of which is lost (ed. Devis, pp. 64-120), is rather an exegetical commentary, not without some reflection in the manner of midrashim. SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH is there cited as "the greatest among the patriarchs," and anti-Gaianite polemic is clearly present. One must admire the adroitness of the author, who makes the three young men sons of Joachim, brothers of Jechonias, and uncles of Daniel.

The panegyric attributed to Theophilus (ed. Devis, pp. 124-57) is totally different. This is the story of the appearance of ATHANASIUS to Theophilus, after the latter has completed the martyria of JOHN THE BAPTIST, Elisha, and the three young men. The latter come the following Sunday to give [instructions](#) to Theophilus for obtaining their relics. They ask him to send John Colobos to Babylonia. Theophilus at once dictates to his secretary, the future Cyril, a letter addressed to John Colobos. John comes first to Alexandria, where seven months later Theophilus builds the house of the three saints, before John returns from his journey.

The sites visited by John in [Jerusalem](#) are typically those of the anti-Chalcedonian resistance, Saint Mary of Josaphat and the cenacle of the apostles on the Mount of Olives. John's journey requires his prayers to tame large numbers of dangerous animals; in fact, for miracles John's story passes all bounds of extravagance. John sees the gold image built by [Nebuchadnezzar](#) as preserved by God for the confounding of his memory. Finally, on the banks of the river of Babylon, he meets the three saints, who lead him to the place of the furnace, now transformed into crystal. Last of all, they show him the cavern of their burial, a place filled with splendor. But the saints explain that they cannot give him any material

relic. They will appear in the lamps, which are not to be lit. Later, the saints do come themselves, heralded by a demoniac, and perform a series of cures.

The last panegyric, attributed to Cyril (ed. Devis, pp. 60-202), is of a very different nature. It relates eight miracles wrought during the construction of the martyrrium. The most curious is the story of an aged man who has no children, and who promises fifty pieces of gold if he has a son, twenty-five if he has a daughter. The saints give to him and his wife twins, a son and a daughter, but the man pays only for the son. In time he becomes especially attached to the daughter for whom he did not pay. She falls ill, and to cure her the man hands over the additional twenty-five pieces to the saints.

The complete Coptic dossier about the “three children,” its links with the life of John Colobos, and the [adoption](#) of some episodes in the history of SAWIRUS IBN AL-MUQAFFA’ all contribute to give countenance to the cult of the three young men under Theophilus. But there is a series of parallel documents on the Chalcedonian side, which make the authenticity of the Coptic pieces suspect. In Armenian and Georgian there is a history of the discovery of the three young men in Persia, published by G. Garitte in 1959 and 1961. The emperor LEO I (457-474) had caused the relics deposited on the tomb of Daniel the Stylite by the patriarch Euphemius (490-496) to be brought from Babylon. What is more, Apollinarius, the Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria (551-570), had the hand of one of the three young men deposited at Alexandria. In the Life of Saint Macarius the Roman (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*, 1004-1005h) the pilgrims gather at the tomb of the three young men at Ctesiphon. The story of the discovery takes place under Bahram V (420-438/439), probably in 422 since there is reference to a notable [Christian](#) rehabilitated after seven months in prison, according to the actual facts of history. The Armeno-Georgian discovery is not encumbered by anything miraculous. It relates how a *hegumenos*, a deacon, and a Jewish [Christian](#) succeeded in deceiving the Jewish guardians of the

house in which miracles took place in Babylon. They stole the relics of the three saints. Indeed, in addition to the relics demanded by Leo I, other relics of the three young men were deposited in two chapels in Jerusalem, one on 25 August in the building of the patriarch Juvenal (422-458), the other in the building of Flavia, a monastery founded on the Mount of Olives in 454/455. All these foundations are strictly Chalcedonian. Therefore it was necessary to refurbish and even accentuate the tradition concerning John Colobos and Theophilus. If it is very probable that Theophilus built a chapel under Theodosius the Great, it seems also evident that mention of the relics on the [opposing](#) side must have entailed the [creation](#) of various pieces to justify the priority of the cult at Alexandria, thus laying exclusive claim to any relics of the three.

[See also: Biblical Subjects in Coptic Art.]

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