



SHADY & 'MAD NEB'

A RETELLING OF THE STORY OF THE FIERY FURNACE

PART OF THE 'ONLY A BOY' SERIES

It was a very sad day for Jerusalem, the capital of Judah and to make matters worse, it was raining.

About the time I was born, old King Josiah had been killed in a battle against Pharaoh Neco of Egypt, who then made Josiah's son our new king. Several years later, fierce armies from Babylon invaded the land and besieged Jerusalem, my home city. It wasn't long before our young king surrendered. The foreigners raided and burned his palace and stripped our Temple of all its gold and silver treasures. Rain drizzled and soaked the camels that were loaded down with piles of stolen goods – our property!

I will never forget the stench! Wet, sweaty camels really stink! Then, the Babylonians took many of us away to become their slaves, including my friends and me. In fact, a lot of young boys mainly from the royal family and aristocracy, were rounded up and taken for retraining to serve in King Nebuchadnezzar's courts.

I guess they thought we were the smart ones. Ashpenaz, the man in charge of his Palace staff, was told to teach us their customs. We were to be taught about their history, language, magic and fortune-telling and religion, much of which was against our beliefs. We were to be fed a special diet supplied by the Royal kitchens and to be 'in training' for three years.

It was the start of a very odd story! Even now, looking back, it is hard to explain some of the really weird stuff that went on. You couldn't dream it up.

To begin with, we had been taken away from our homes, from our parents (those who had not been killed) and from our way of life. Our only comfort came from the friends who had been captured with us. We were put into the care of 'trainers' who were told to look after us, but they were strangers and they didn't speak much Hebrew. They didn't love us and we didn't trust them. It made us all very frightened.

Around us people spoke to us or laughed at us, shouting and giving orders in a language that we couldn't understand. They wanted to wipe out our Jewishness, to scrub out our memories of home and make us think and act like them. I was only a boy when it happened, called Hananiah. My friends, Daniel, Mishael and Azariah were also from Jerusalem and we were all just twelve years old.

The year was 1115 BC.

The first thing they did, was give us new names. Daniel was to be called Belteshazzar, Mishael would become Meshach, Azariah was changed to Abednego and I got stuck with Shadrach. Shadrach! What a horrid mouthful! What was wrong with Hananiah anyway?

We cried!

My mum would have been badly upset and we each hated our new names. To help us get over it, we made up nicknames for each other – Bazza, Shacky, Edna and Shady (me). We didn't want to become nobodies in a strange land and by calling each other funny nicknames that we had chosen for ourselves, we kept a sense of who we were. Besides, it also served to confuse our new masters.

The training was a mixture of visits to various places, some classroom study, fitness sessions and work in the Palace stables. Some of it was OK – I didn't mind visiting places – but other parts were just awful. The nights were the worst. Often I lay crying in my bed, unable to sleep. I wanted to be back in Jerusalem, among people I knew and certainly away from these horrible foreigners. We all slept together in a long dormitory, in beds next to each other, so I knew I wasn't alone in being afraid and upset.

People didn't want to admit that they were scared, but we couldn't keep up an act for too long. We felt lonely, even with a few friends around us and had to learn to rely on each other to feel loved.

As I have already said, along with the training, they wanted to feed us their posh Palace food, but Bazza kicked up a real fuss about it. You see, it was forbidden for Jews to eat what they were serving up and we wanted to stay obedient to our laws. We knew that it would have been prayed over in front of their gods at their temple. So we refused to have anything to do with it (although quite what praying in front of a statue of a golden ram would do for the food was anybody's guess!).

Ashpenaz explained that he was under strict orders to 'feed us up', to improve our health. Bazza argued with him, saying that healthy eating would be much better for us, rather than rich food, sugars and fats washed down with a lot of sweet wine. Besides, we were all a bit young for alcohol. Fortunately, Ashpenaz had developed a soft spot for Bazza, so they struck a deal. He would allow a ten day trial, after which he would judge whether we looked better than all the others, or not.



Some of the other boys had become so desperate to 'fit in' that they had rebelled against the old Jewish ways. Their parents were no longer there to keep them in order and they told us we were mad to stick to the old customs. They ate all the rich food they could get and drank far too much red wine, as they mixed in with the boys from other countries and religions who had also been captured.

I'm glad we had decided to stick together, because I'm not sure I would have been strong enough on my own. We often talked together, encouraging each other. That helped us deal with the griping from the other boys and we teamed up to make sure that we excelled at our tasks. That also made us feel better.

Sure enough, ten days later, Ashpenaz had to agree that we looked great, so he let us continue with our chosen diet from then on.

For the next three years we continued with our training. Then one day, the King said it was exam time!

Everyone was nervous, especially Ashpenaz, whose legs were shaking. He was to be judged on how well everyone performed. As for us, we had to prove how we could be useful to King Neb. Preparing for the exam was stressful, because we were to be assessed as individuals, not as part of the group. I really wanted the encouragement of my Mum and Dad, but they had been killed. I knew that they would want me to do well – to get on in life – so I asked God to help me.

Interestingly, the four of us came out joint top of the class and were taken off to the Palace to study to be advisors in the court. Bazza was put in charge and we worked under him. That was great – we could stay together. I'm sure God made Bazza a bit special, because he was superb at everything he did. Yet although he was busy, one thing he always made time for was prayer. He said it was talking with God, listening and learning what to do. I wasn't good at that, but I did try – well, sometimes.

We were moved from the dormitory and given our own rooms. That was fantastic! My room was quite big with a large window and a stone balcony which overlooked the courtyard, just inside the Palace gates. From there, I could see all the King's visitors coming and going, with their colourful camel trains packed with gifts. I had a huge, carved wooden bed with red, warm, llama skin blankets and peacock feather pillows and the floor was covered in sewn together goatskins.

We could easily spend time together, because our balconies were next to each other. Life was getting better and better and although we were still in a foreign land, we knew that God was caring for us. However, being a court advisor wasn't always easy, because the King was a bit crazy. At times he seemed really insecure, always looking over his shoulder and he was prone to strange ideas and imaginings.

One night, he had a dream. He obviously thought it was very important, because all the advisors, magicians and fortune-tellers were summoned to the palace, to explain what it meant. The chief magician, Ali Qdabra, asked him what the dream was about, but the King couldn't remember. To make matters worse, he said that if no-one could tell him the correct meaning, he would have us all torn limb from limb and our homes would be flattened as well. (See what I mean about being a bit mad? It obviously hadn't dawned on him that we lived at his Palace.) The fortune-tellers suddenly looked very upset and said that it was impossible to do what the king wanted. They were fearful over what might happen to them.

I was confused by their uncertainty.

Surely, they of all people should be able to see what their future held – maybe not! Maybe they weren't very good fortune tellers.

Immediately, Bazza told the King that God could tell him the meaning. We would all pray about it then let him know what God said. That way, he said, the King would be pleased and it would save us and all his 'not-so' wise men as well.

Apparently, the dream was about a huge statue of a man, made up of various metals (gold, silver, bronze...) and with feet made of clay. A massive rock smashed into the clay feet and the whole thing collapsed in ruin. It was all a bit of a mess. Anyway, Bazza said that the various metals represented a number of world empires, starting with King Neb's, but that the rock was God's kingdom which would outlast all the others. He told the King that it was God who had given him his power, so he should not become proud. I wondered how the king would react, but suddenly he shouted out 'Belteshazzar's God is the real God – a teller of dreams and fortunes!'

Sadly, though, he obviously didn't listen to the warning of the dream.

A few weeks later, the King commissioned metalworkers and sculptors to build a huge statue of a golden man, nearly 30metres high. When it was complete, he invited everyone to come to an inauguration ceremony, to celebrate. Palace parties were normally good fun and there was always lots of food and drink, laughter, loud music and dancing. This time, however, while everyone was having a great time and looking at the golden man, suddenly the King's spokesman made a loud announcement. "When the band plays, all people must bow down and worship the new statue."

"What?"

The party mood was abruptly shattered and my mind raced with wild thoughts...

'It was idolatry to worship anything or anyone but God. We were not allowed!!'

'Perhaps we would be exempt as advisors.'

'But what if we weren't?'

'What should I say? How could I refuse without annoying the King?'

'Why did the King want to make people bow down anyway?'

'Was he so insecure that he needed to exert power over his people in this way?'

I shot a glance in the direction of Shacky, who was deep in discussion with Edna, the two of them wide-eyed with surprise. We couldn't see Bazza, but the next announcement shot fear up my spine.

'Anyone who does not bow down will be thrown alive into a fiery furnace!'

'No! No! Who had advised King Neb that this was a good idea? It was complete madness!'

Shacky and Edna raced over to see me, hearts hammering like fast-beating drums, their voices both speaking at once.

It was a straight choice.

Obey God and face the fire, or obey King Neb and risk God's anger.

It was a challenge to what we believed was right, and although we were really scared, we knew what we had to do. We wouldn't bow down to any statue. We stood together holding hands and made up a motto 'Stand or Die!' and we hoped that God would rescue us – somehow!

Sure enough, very soon the band played and everyone fell to their knees. Some people even put their faces into the dust, but when some of the foreign advisors looked up (with dust all over their mouths) they saw that we were still standing up and they snitched on us to the King. King Neb was furious. 'Arrest them!' he yelled, pointing at us. Then he told us that we had to bow down, or else!

We refused. So he ordered the Captain of the guard to make the flames of the furnace seven times hotter than usual. The man who looked after the furnaces answered the Captain saying that he didn't think they would take it, but then added that he would do his best. The heat was intense.

'Is that your final answer?' King Neb barked at us in his bullying fashion. I said that God could protect us if he wanted to, but in any event we would not bow to his statue, even if it got us killed. We would trust our lives to God. "Burn them! Burn them!" he roared at his soldiers, his face spluttering red, his rage causing his eyes to bulge outwards like a huge frog. Immediately, we were marched off towards the furnace, where our hands and feet were tied up. But as the huge iron door was opened, flames shot out and killed the soldiers beside us as they were throwing us in.

Oddly, I remember thinking 'Toast Soldiers!' as I fell headlong into the fire. It was one of those quirky, random thoughts that sometimes flashes through my head. I shut my eyes tight, gritted my teeth and braced myself for whatever came next. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion.

We hit the floor in the middle of the roaring, churning, white-hot inferno but incredibly felt nothing. 'Is this what being dead feels like?' I thought, somehow aware that I was still able to think clearly and wondering if I was in Heaven. It was the oddest thing I had ever experienced - brightness and roaring fire, but no feeling!

The ropes they had tied us with had instantly turned to ash. So, being free to move again, I pinched my leg hard to see if I could still feel anything.

It hurt!

That was impossible. How could I feel my leg, but not the heat of the fire?

As I looked towards where Edna had landed, I saw that he too seemed to be looking around.

Suddenly we saw a shining figure with us in the fire, walking about. We weren't the only ones.

King Neb had seen it too and had suddenly felt quite faint. He staggered over to one side and was using a small pillar to prop himself up, so as not to fall over completely. I saw him talking with his palace secretary, after which he signalled for us to come out. He certainly wasn't planning to send any of his soldiers in to get us, because he had just lost a whole group of them, putting us in - burnt to a pile of cinders! When we emerged, we didn't even smell of smoke. It was a huge miracle and it was hard to believe that we were still alive. The King was white-faced with amazement and shock! We were shaken up, but completely grateful to God for saving us.

People couldn't understand what they had just seen. No-one ever came out of the furnace alive, yet not even our eyebrows were singed. The foreign advisers who had snitched on us were completely tongue-tied and suddenly very afraid. The King dribbled down his beard then blurted out something about our God being the true God, but he was shaking, wobbly on his feet and mostly talking gibberish. All I knew was that God had protected us. I didn't know exactly who the figure was - we weren't introduced - but it was as if God himself was in the fire with us.

After that episode, we were left well alone. Everyone was wary of us and treated us kindly.

Time passed, but it wasn't very long before King Neb had another of his mad dreams. So as usual, Bazza was wheeled in to interpret it for him. The meaning was awesome and disturbing all at once. Bazza summoned up all his courage and then told the King that God had chosen to deal with his inflated pride in a phenomenal way.

The King was to be driven out of his Palace into the open countryside. He would end up living in the fields, crawling on the ground on all fours and eating grass like a cow. That was to last for seven years!

After that, he would be allowed back to his Palace, when he had learned to respect God and thank him for giving him his power.

It reminded me of a story I once heard about a Jewish farmer who was very proud of his massive harvests. He boasted about how brilliant he was and spoke of his plans to rip apart his small storehouse, replacing it with huge barns in which to store all his crops.

He told people he was going to put his feet up and retire early. Unfortunately, the very night he finished building the new barn, he died.

What a plonker! What good was all his boasting then? So much for all his plans! A proverb about counting chickens came to my mind.

At first, when I heard the interpretation of the King's dream, I thought that Bazza had completely lost the plot, but he was really serious. These were such strange days! King Neb looked at him as if he was totally bonkers, but about a year later, it all came to pass, just as Bazza had said it would. The King was driven out of his Palace and ended up wandering around in the fields in the long grass, looking for his mind – which he had obviously lost. He went completely insane and grew hair on his back, rummaging around like a wild animal and eating whatever he could find growing in the fields. People laughed whenever they saw him, making up jokes about their 'free range king'

I worked out that I would be about 22 years old when he returned, assuming everything went to plan. I couldn't really see how he could survive on grass and clover for seven years, but God had said that he would.

Amazingly, the seven years passed quickly and sure enough, King Neb regained control of his mind and also got back into power at the Palace. Incredible!

Everything had changed, however.

He wasn't 'Mad Neb' the dreamer of crazy dreams any longer. Instead he had grown much wiser and had learned to respect God. He had been taught very hard lessons during his time in the wilderness. Now he knew who God was and that had changed his proud view of himself. His life was now under God's control.

When he remembered the people who had opposed him, choosing to stand strong even during the mad times, people who would die rather than turn against God, it made him humble. He had become a very different person and I smiled, because I think that we may have played a small part in that.