

# The Golden Image of Nebuchadnezzar

by John F. Walvoord

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*The golden image of Nebuchadnezzar was a symbol of the power and authority of the Babylonian Empire, and its worship was intended to demonstrate loyalty and solidarity with the king and his rule.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 43:2, Daniel 3:17-30

**Topics:** "Faith And Obedience", "Divine Deliverance"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the account of the golden image in Daniel 3, highlighting the unwavering faith and miraculous deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego who refused to worship the image set up by Nebuchadnezzar. Despite facing the threat of a fiery furnace, these three men trusted in God's deliverance, even if it meant facing death. Nebuchadnezzar, astonished by the miraculous sight of a fourth person in the furnace, acknowledges the power of the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, issuing a decree to honor their God and promoting the three men in the province of Babylon.

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## Transcript

The account of the golden image which was erected on the plain of Dura records Nebuchadnezzar's reaction to the revelation of chapter 2 in which he was symbolized by the head of gold. The astounding courage and deliverance of Daniel's companions, who refused to worship the image, has inspired the people of God in similar times of trial. The chapter as a whole, however, is often regarded as merely providing historical insight into the characteristics of this period. Works devoted to study of the prophecies of Daniel often omit consideration of chapter 3 entirely as do S. P. Tregelles<sup>172</sup> and Robert D. Culver.<sup>173</sup> Others, such as Geoffrey R. King, interpret the chapter as not only history but parable and prophecy.<sup>174</sup> The introduction of the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 3 immediately following Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great image depicting Gentile times, even if its parabolic implications are ignored, obviously is intended to convey not only spiritual truth in general, but characteristics of the times of the Gentiles. Its study, accordingly, not only provides spiritual insights but contributes to the overall presentation of prophecy in Daniel.

### The Image of Gold

3:1-7 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. 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. 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. Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages, 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: And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. 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.

The erection of the golden image by Nebuchadnezzar is clearly subsequent to the events of chapter 2 since Daniel 3:12, referring to the appointment of Daniel's companions over the affairs of the province of Babylon, and Daniel 3:30 imply that the event was subsequent to Daniel 2:49. The exact date of the erection of the image, however, is debated. The Septuagint and Theodotion connect the event with the destruction of Jerusalem, which, according to 2 Kings 25:8-10 and Jeremiah 52:12, places this event in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. There is no certainty, however, that there is a relationship between the destruction of Jerusalem and the erection of the image, although the general narrative and the fact that Daniel apparently is away would imply considerable passage of time. It may well be, however, that twenty years elapsed between chapter 2 and chapter 3.<sup>175</sup>

The image of gold is described as being sixty cubits (90 ft.) high and six cubits (9 ft.) broad, a very impressive sight erected in the plain of Dura. The Hebrew word for image implies, as Leupold says, "An image in the very broadest sense," probably in human form although the proportions are far too narrow for a normal figure.<sup>176</sup> Scripture does not solve this problem, but most commentators agree that images of this kind in antiquity frequently varied from ordinary human proportions. The image may have been on a pedestal with only the upper part of the image resembling human form. The obvious intent was to impress by the size of the image rather than by its particular features. Leupold cites numerous ancient images such as that of Zeus in a temple at Babylon; the golden images on the top of the Belus temple, one of which was forty cubits high; and the Colossus at Rhodes which was seventy cubits high.<sup>177</sup> While an image of this size was unusual, it was by no means unique; and there is no reason to question the historical accuracy of its dimensions.

Although Nebuchadnezzar had tremendous wealth and could conceivably have erected this image of solid gold, it is probable that it was made of wood overlaid with gold as was customary. Montgomery observes, "Its construction of gold has also given rise to extensive argument, with charge of absurdity on one side, e. g., JDMich [J. D. Michaelis], with defence based on the fabulous riches of the East on the other. But Herodotus' statements about the golden idols in Babylon afford sufficient background. (Cf. Pliny's account of an all-gold image of Anaitis, which was looted by Antony, Hist. nat., xxxiii, 24.) The gold consisted in overlaid plates, for which we possess not only abundant Classical evidence ... but also that of the Bible."<sup>178</sup> The "golden altar" (Ex 39:38) was actually wood overlaid with gold (Ex 37:25-26). Idols overlaid with gold are mentioned in Isaiah 40:19 and Isaiah 41:7. Jeremiah describes the same process (Jer 10:3-9). The appearance of the image, however, was much the same as if it were solid gold.

The use of the golden metal for the image may have been derived from Nebuchadnezzar's previous experience with the image of chapter 2 where Daniel informed him that he, Nebuchadnezzar, was the head of gold. Although Nebuchadnezzar did not do this intentionally, the dimensions of six cubits wide and

sixty cubits high introduces the number six which is prominent in the Bible as the number of man (cf. Rev 13:18). The intended significance of the image from Nebuchadnezzar's point of view is, however, debatable. It may have been in honor of the god of Babylon, either Bel or Marduk, but in this case it would have been natural to mention the name of the god. Nebuchadnezzar may have regarded the image as representing himself as the embodiment of divine power, and the worship of the image would then be a recognition of his personal power. In view of his pride as dealt with in chapter 4, this becomes a plausible explanation.

The image was set up "in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon." The expression Dura, as Leupold states, "is a rather common name in Mesopotamia, being a name that is applicable to any place which is enclosed by a wall," and a number of locations bear this title as Keil points out.<sup>179</sup> Both Keil and Young mention two possible locations which seem to be eliminated by being too far from Babylon. As Young states, "The name Dura has occurred in classical sources; Polybius 5:48, Amm. Mar. 23:5, 8; 24:1, 5 mention a Dura at the mouth of the Chaboras where it empties into the Euphrates, but this can hardly be reckoned as being in the province of Babylon, and another Dura is mentioned as being beyond the Tigris not far from Appollonia, Polybius 5:52 and Amm. Mar. 25:6, 9. This also would be too distant."<sup>180</sup>

The consensus of conservative scholarship is that the most probable location is a mound located six miles southeast of Babylon consisting of a large square of brick construction which would have ideally served as a base for such an image as Nebuchadnezzar erected. Montgomery earlier had come to the same conclusion based on the findings of Oppert<sup>181</sup> Its proximity to Babylon would make it convenient and yet its location in a valley plain would make its height impressive. The fact that a specific name is given to the location, which implies an intimate knowledge of Babylon in the sixth century B.C., as Young points out, "is in reality an evidence of genuineness in that it seems to presuppose some knowledge of Babylonian geography."<sup>182</sup>

The image having been erected, Nebuchadnezzar, according to the Scripture record, gathered the principal officials of his empire for its dedication. As there are parallels in similar situations in the ancient world, such as Sargon's feast upon the completion of a palace erected at Dur Sharrukin,<sup>183</sup> scholars, both liberal and conservative, have agreed that this ceremony is in keeping with the times. Such a display of officials was on the one hand a gratifying demonstration of the power of Nebuchadnezzar's empire and on the other hand was significant as recognizing the deities who in their thinking were responsible for their victories. The worship of the image was intended to be an expression of political solidarity and loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar rather than an intended act of religious persecution. It was in effect a saluting of the flag, although, because of the interrelationship of religious with national loyalties, it may also have had religious connotation.

The list of the officials gathered for the event has occasioned comment because some of them are Persian rather than Babylonian terms. The speculation as to why Persian terms should be used is much ado about nothing. It would be natural for Daniel, who may have written or at least edited this passage after the Persian government had come to power, to bring the various offices up-to-date by using current expressions. The fact that Daniel was so familiar with these offices is another evidence that he lived in the sixth century B.C.. The official titles used in Daniel 3:2-3 help to date the book in the sixth century and refute the second century date given by the critics. The Septuagint versions (Old Greek and The-odotion)<sup>184</sup> are hopelessly inexact and are merely guesswork in their rendering of 'drgzr, "counsellor"; gdbr, "treasurer"; dtbr, "law-officer"; t(y)pt, "magistrate, police chief." Kitchen points out,

If the first important Greek translation of Daniel was made some time within c. 100 BC-AD 100, roughly speaking, and the translator could not (or took no trouble to) reproduce the proper meanings of these terms, then one conclusion imposes itself: their meaning was already lost and forgotten or, at least, drastically changed long before he set to work. Now if Daniel (in particular, the Aramaic chapters 2-7) was wholly a product of c. 165 BC, then a century or so in a continuous tradition is surely embarrassingly inadequate as a sufficient interval for that loss (or change) of meaning to occur, by Near Eastern standards. Therefore, it is desirable on this ground to seek the original of such verses (and hence of the narratives of which they are an integral part) much earlier than this date, preferably within memory of the Persian rule--i. e. c. 539 (max.) to c. 280 BC (allowing about fifty years' lapse from the fall of Persia to Macedon).<sup>185</sup>

The exact functions of each office are not given, but seven classes of officials are designated. The official titles and their modern meanings are as follows:

KJV

Aramaic (singular form)

Meaning

princes

áa†hashdarpan

satrap

governors

sýgan

prefect

captains

peha,

governor

judges

áa†darga,,zar

counsellor

treasurers

gýda,,bar

treasurer

counsellors

dÿta,,bar

law official, judge

sheriffs

tipta,,y

magistrate

Keil probably gives the best explanation of the various terms. The princes are administrators, guardians or watchers, and the chief representatives of the king, corresponding to the Greek expression satrap. The governors were commanders or military chiefs. The captains seemed to refer to presidents or governors of civil government. The judges were counsellors of the government or chief arbitrators. The treasurers were superintendents of the public treasury. The counsellors were lawyers or guardians of the law. The sheriffs were judges in a stricter sense of the term, that is, magistrates who gave a just sentence. The rulers were lesser officials who were governors of the provinces subordinate to the chief governor.<sup>186</sup> The list of officers stated in verse 2 is repeated in verse 3 and some of them are repeated in verse 27. They had been summoned by messengers sent by Nebuchadnezzar to participate in this important event.

According to verse 3, they were assembled before the image awaiting the call to universal worship signalled by the cry of the herald. The word for herald ( ka,,ro,z), because it closely resembles the Greek word ke,,rux, introduces the interesting problem of Greek words in Daniel. Several of the instruments listed in verse 5 also seem to be of Greek origin. This has been claimed as confirmation that Daniel wrote during the period of Greek dominance of Western Asia.

Archer and others have challenged whether these words are actually Greek words, pointing out that karoz (herald, classified as a Greek word by Brown, Driver, and Briggs Lexicon, has in recent works like Koehler-Baumgartner's Hebrew Lexicon been traced to the old Persian khrausa, meaning "caller."<sup>187</sup>

Conservative biblical scholarship has fully answered the objection of critics which would tend to reflect upon the accuracy and historicity of the book of Daniel.<sup>188</sup> Robert Dick Wilson, for instance, has pointed out that the argument actually boomerangs as, if Daniel was written in a Greek period, there would be many more Greek words than the few that occur here and there.<sup>189</sup> The fact is that there is nothing strange about some amount of Greek influence in Babylonian culture in view of the contacts between them and the Greeks. Greek traders were common in Egypt and western Asia from the seventh century B.C. onward.<sup>190</sup> The Greek mercenaries, who served as soldiers for various countries, are found more than one hundred years before Daniel, as for instance in the Assyrian army of Esarhaddon (682 b.c.) and even in the Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>191</sup> Not only did the Greeks affect the Semitic world but also influences of Assyria and Babylonia appear in the Greek language as well.<sup>192</sup>

Recent studies on the musical instruments mentioned in Daniel 3 conducted by T. C. Mitchell and R. Joyce have given support to the authenticity of these instruments in the sixth century b.c.<sup>193</sup> Further studies by Yamauchi support the conclusion that Greek words in Daniel are not to be unexpected and in fact refer to the interchange of cultures in the ancient world.<sup>194</sup>

Not much help is given by attempting to find synonyms for these instruments as actually we do not have any information as to their precise character. T. C. Mitchell and R. Joyce provide a table for all six instruments with their corresponding translations in nine different translations. Actually, none of the

alternate terms improve much on that which is provided in Daniel 3:5 and repeated in verses 7, 10, and 15. These instruments probably provided as full an orchestra as could be arranged in Babylon.

The cornet was obviously a horn instrument, the word coming originally from the horn of a beast which was sometimes used to make a musical instrument. The flute was probably made of reeds with a sound similar to a fife. The harp was some sort of a stringed instrument. The sackbut may have been a triangular board to which strings were attached. The psaltery, sometimes also considered a harp, was another stringed instrument with twenty strings. The dulcimer is a wind instrument. To these were added other instruments described as "all kinds of music."<sup>195</sup>

At the sound of the music, all those gathered were to "fall down and worship the golden image," that is, they were to fall prostrate to the ground and do homage. This has been taken by some to prove that the image was a deity or idol. But Keil and others are probably correct that they were simply recognizing a symbol of the power of the empire which included recognition of heathen gods but was not the specific object of their homage.<sup>196</sup> As Keil puts it, "A refusal to yield homage to the gods of the kingdom, they regarded as an act of hostility against the kingdom and its monarch, while every one might at the same time honour his own national god. This acknowledgment, that the gods of the kingdom were the more powerful, every heathen could grant; and thus, Nebuchadnezzar demanded nothing in a religious point of view which every one of his subjects could not yield. To him, therefore, the refusal of the Jews could not but appear as opposition to the greatness of his kingdom."<sup>197</sup> There is, therefore, no direct parallel between this and the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes which liberals cite as the background for this story in Daniel. Antiochus was attempting to destroy the Jewish religion, but this was not Nebuchadnezzar's objective. A fair analysis of the situation in Daniel 3 is that the issue was more political than religious, but it was obnoxious religiously to Daniel's three companions.

The herald made plain that anyone who did not obey the command to fall down and worship would be cast immediately into the burning fiery furnace. Montgomery suggests that the furnace "must have been similar to our common lime-kiln, with a perpendicular shaft from the top and an opening at the bottom for extracting the fused lime; cf. illustration of such an Oriental tannur or ta, bu, n in Benzinger, *Hebr. Archaeologie*, 65, and Haupt's description, *AJSL* 23, 245. Hav. notes Chardin's remarks on the existence of similar ovens in Persia for execution of criminals (*Voyage en Perse*, ed. Langles, 6, c. 18, end, p. 303)."<sup>198</sup> This would explain both the way in which the victims were put into the furnace and the circumstances which permitted the king to see what was happening inside the furnace.<sup>199</sup>

The expression the same hour has in it the thought of "immediately" but cannot be pushed to the extent of concluding that the furnace was already burning. The threat of being executed by being burned alive was sufficient to cause the entire group to fall down and worship when the music sounded. Apparently, the only exceptions were the three companions of Daniel. It is useless to speculate how this related to Daniel himself. Either Daniel considered this a political act which did not violate his conscience, or Daniel did not worship and his high office prevented his enemies from accusing him, or more probably, Daniel for some reason was absent. The stage was now set for the trial of the three faithful Jews.

#### Daniel's Companions Accused by the Chaldeans

3:8-12 Wherefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and accused the Jews. They spake and said to the king Nebuchadnezzar, O king, live for ever. 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: And whoso falleth not down and worshipping, that he should be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

Although the historic account previously given by Daniel does not include that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego had not bowed down to the golden image, the Chaldeans, who were the court astrologers, approach the king and bring their accusation. Undoubtedly there was resentment against these Jews who had been placed by Nebuchadnezzar in charge of the province of Babylon because they were of another race and of a captive people. It was quite clear to the Chaldeans also that the Jews did not worship the gods of Babylon and were actually a foreign element in the government. They saw in the fact that the Jews had not worshiped the image an occasion to bring accusation against them. The expression accused is a translation of an Aramaic expression common to Semitic languages which literally means, "they ate their pieces," hence, to devour piecemeal. This connotes slander or malicious accusation which devours the accused piece by piece.

The Chaldeans approached the king with the customary courtesies addressing Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live for ever." They remind the king of the details of his decree and the penalty for disobedience. With the stage thus set for the accusation, the Chaldeans make three charges against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. First, they show no regard for the king. Second, they do not serve the gods of the king. Third, they do not worship the golden image which Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

The form of the accusation is almost a rebuke to the king himself. It is clear that the Chaldeans had deep-seated resentment against the Jews and felt the king had made a serious mistake in trusting these foreigners with such high offices. They remind the king that these men are Jews, different in race and culture from the Babylonians. The king had set them over the affairs of the province of Babylon, the most important province in the empire and the key to political security for the entire realm. The personal loyalty of such officers should be beyond question; but, as the Chaldeans point out, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego had not shown any regard for the king himself.

The second accusation that they do not serve Nebuchadnezzar's gods is more than merely a religious difference. The whole concept of political loyalty, of which the worship of the image was an expression, is bound up in the idea that Nebuchadnezzar's gods have favored him and given him victory. To challenge Nebuchadnezzar's gods, therefore, is to challenge Nebuchadnezzar himself and to raise a question as to the political integrity of the three men accused. As proof of their suspicions, they charge Daniel's three companions with not worshiping the golden image. The arguments were calculated to arouse the anger of Nebuchadnezzar and to bring about the downfall of these three men with the possibility that the Chaldeans themselves might be given greater authority in political affairs.

#### Daniel's Companions Refuse to Worship the Image

3:13-18 Then Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. Then they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar spake and said unto them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? 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? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. 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. 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.

The argument and accusation of the Chaldeans had a telling effect upon Nebuchadnezzar, who regarded the disobedience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego not only a threat to his political security but also a personal affront. However, in view of the fact that they probably had held their offices for some years and had evidently been efficient in the conduct of their duties, Nebuchadnezzar in spite of his anger gave them a second chance which lesser men might not have been offered. Highly enraged, he commanded to bring the men before him. He asked them two questions: first, "Do not ye serve my gods?" and second, "Do not ye... worship the golden image which I have set up?" The fact that he distinguished between serving his gods and worshiping the image, though they are interrelated, seems to confirm the idea that the worship is primarily political, although the fact that they do not worship his gods is a condemning circumstance. He gives them the opportunity to obey the command to worship, restating in full the description of the music and the obligation to fall down and worship. He makes clear the alternative that they "shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace." The repetition of the entire edict no doubt was done with a flourish; and, although he was probably well aware of the jealousy of the Chaldeans and took this into account, he makes it clear that there is no alternative but to worship the image.

The question Nebuchadnezzar asked in verse 14, translated "Is it true" in the King James Version and Revised Standard Version, is translated "Is it of purpose?" in the American Standard Version. Scholars differ on the proper reading here and resulting translation, but Montgomery and Rosenthal support the King James Version translation, "Is it true."<sup>200</sup>

It is an amazing fact that Nebuchadnezzar adds the challenging question, "Who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" He is quite conscious of the demonstration of the superiority of the God of the Hebrews over Babylonian gods in interpreting his dream in chapter 2, but he cannot bring himself to believe that the God of the Jews would be able in these circumstances to deliver these three men from his hand. The fact is that Nebuchadnezzar feels supreme in his power and does not expect any god to interfere. Rabshakeh made the same arrogant and blasphemous claim when threatening King Hezekiah (Is 36:13-20)--the claim to the possession of a human power so great that there is no divine power to which the victim can turn for help.

The reply of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego to the king might ordinarily call for a long discourse explaining why they could not worship the image. They seem to recognize, however, that all this would be of no avail and that the issue is clearly whether their God is able to deliver them or not. Accordingly, they confront the king with their confidence in God to such an extent that they say, "we are not careful to answer thee in this matter." Such an answer by itself might be considered arrogant and disrespectful to the king; but coupled with the explanation, it is clear that they feel their case is not in their hands anyway. The Aramaic word hashhin translated "careful," may be considered a technical word for "need." Hence, the statement may be translated, "there is no need for us to answer thee in this matter."<sup>201</sup> A further difficulty is occasioned by the expression O Nebuchadnezzar which in the Massoretic is in the vocative. Young translates the entire sentence as omitting whatever formal address they made with the record here simply saying that they "said to the king Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need with respect to this matter to

make defense before thee."202 Montgomery holds that no discourtesy was intended, "The discourteous vocative of the Mass. pointing was not only impossible in etiquette but also in the spirit of the writer."203

Although the full salutation to Nebuchadnezzar seems to have been omitted, Daniel gives the gist of their reply and in so doing answered the question raised by the king in verse 14 when he asked, "Is it true?" Actually there was no doubt about what they had done, but their purpose in not conforming was in question. Was it really true that their purpose in nonconformity was to dishonor the gods of Babylon and to disobey Nebuchadnezzar. Their explanation leaves no question as to the answer. They state positively that their God is able to deliver them from a fiery furnace. The article should be omitted before "burning fiery furnace" in verse 17, with the resultant meaning that He could deliver them from any fiery furnace, not just the one immediately at hand. They not only affirm that their God is able but that He will deliver them.

The three men, however, also face the alternative that God might not deliver them. The expression, "But if not," should be understood as referring to the deliverance not to the ability of God. They take into consideration that sometimes it is not in the purpose of God to deliver faithful ones from martyrdom. Even if God does not deliver them, however, this will not change their decision in which they refuse to worship the gods of Babylon as well as the golden image. Leupold aptly says, "The quiet, modest, yet withal very positive attitude of faith that these three men display is one of the noblest examples in the Scriptures of faith fully resigned to the will of God. These men ask for no miracle; they expect none. Theirs is the faith that says: 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him,' Job 13:15."204

#### Daniel's Companions Cast into the Furnace

3:19-23 Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated. And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. 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. 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 Abed-nego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

The answer of the three men to Nebuchadnezzar left no doubt as to their determined purpose not to serve the gods of Babylon and worship the image. After all, this was forbidden in Exodus 20:4-6. Nebuchadnezzar takes their determination not only as proof of the full accusation made by the Chaldeans but also as evidence of disloyalty to him personally. His anger knows no bounds as stated in the expression "full of fury" or "filled with anger." He is as angry as he possibly could be under any circumstance, his face is distorted, his pride has been severely punctured, and he gives the foolish order to heat the furnace seven times hotter than usual, as if this would increase the torment. Actually, a slow fire would have been far more torture as Geoffrey King puts it, "And then he lost his temper! That is always the mark of a little man. His furnace was hot, but he himself got hotter! And when a man gets full of fury, he gets full of folly. There is no fool on earth like a man who has lost his temper. And Nebuchadnezzar did a stupid thing. He ought to have cooled the furnace seven times less if he had wanted to hurt them; but instead of that in his fury he heated it seven times more."205

Instead of giving Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego another opportunity to refuse to bow before the image as Nebuchadnezzar had originally proposed, he now immediately commands their execution. The strongest men in the army are selected, who bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego as a preliminary to casting them in the burning fiery furnace. The Scriptures relate that they are bound in their coats, hose, and hats as well as other garments. Normally criminals are stripped before execution; but in view of the form of the execution and the haste of the whole operation, there was no particular point in stripping off their clothes. This later becomes a further testimony to the delivering power of God.

While the men were prepared for execution, the furnace is heated until it is extremely hot. This would not necessarily take very long, but it must have added a high note of tension to the entire situation as the multitude waited probably in dead silence. When the furnace, reached its proper heat, the king demanded immediate execution of his orders. In casting the three men into the furnace, the strong men who did it were killed by the flame which reached out to take their lives. As the decree had indicated that they should be thrown into the midst of the furnace, so it was executed.

The Septuagint inserts the "Prayer of Azariah" and the "Song of the Three Youths" with some additional explanation. Conservative scholarship is agreed that this is not part of the scriptural text, although it is possible that these men, godly as they were, might have expressed prayer in a similar way if time permitted. Verse 23 of the text has also been challenged by Charles who claims it is an interpolation and needless duplication of verse 21, and that part of the passage has been lost.<sup>206</sup> Actually the narrative reads very well as it is, and the objections are without proper ground. Even in ordinary narrative important facts are sometimes repeated more than once. Nebuchadnezzar had now accomplished his purpose, his decree had been fulfilled, and he could leave to the furnace the task of consuming these men who had challenged his authority and his gods.

#### The Miraculous Deliverance from the Furnace

3:24-27 Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, 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. 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. Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, came forth of the midst of the fire. 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.

Nebuchadnezzar apparently was seated in such a way as to be able to observe the interior of the furnace from a safe distance. What he saw, however, brought him to complete astonishment. He could not believe his eyes and in his excitement stood up and asked his counsellors whether the three men had not been cast bound into the midst of the fire. The occasion of his question was what he saw. Instead of three men, he saw four; instead of being bound, they were free; instead of writhing in anguish in the flames, they were walking about in the fire and making no attempt to come out; further, it was quite apparent that they were not hurt; most astounding of all, he had the impression that "the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." It is probable that, at these pronouncements, Nebuchadnezzar's counsellors also rose to look into the furnace; and led by Nebuchadnezzar, they came as close as they could to see the miraculous deliverance.

Most contemporary scholars translate the phrase the Son of God, as "a son of the gods." While it is entirely possible that the fourth person in the fiery furnace was indeed the Son of God, it would be doubtful whether Nebuchadnezzar would comprehend this, unless he had prophetic insight. The Aramaic form *elahin* is plural and whenever used in the Aramaic section of Daniel seems to be a plural in number, as the singular is used when the true God is meant. The textual problem of Daniel 6:20 where Darius refers to the true God is decided in favor of the singular by Kittel<sup>207</sup> rather than the plural. On the basis of this consistent use, the translation "a son of the gods" is preferable and in keeping with Nebuchadnezzar's comprehension at this point in his experience. The presence of a fourth person in the furnace nevertheless added to Nebuchadnezzar's astonishment at the miracle he was witnessing.

Addressing the three faithful men in the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither." It was immediately apparent to Nebuchadnezzar, as well as the others who watched, that the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego was greater than the gods of Babylon. In using the expression "the most high God," Nebuchadnezzar was not disavowing his own deities but merely recognizing on the basis of the tremendous miracle which had been performed that the God of Israel was higher, hence "the most high God."

At the command of Nebuchadnezzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who could not obey the king in the matter of worshiping the image, do not hesitate to fulfill his command in this instance. The assembled multitude led by the king's most important officials acted as witnesses of the delivering power of God. Although obviously all the great throng could not get close enough to see precisely what had happened, Scripture records that "the princes, governors, and captains, and the king's counsellors" witnessed the event. There could be little question that a mighty miracle had been performed. The hair of the three Hebrews had not been singed, their garments in which they had been bound had not changed, and not even the smell of fire was retained. Leupold translates coats as "shoes" which would be most remarkable as they had walked on the hot ashes.<sup>208</sup> The fire had damaged their garments in no way; only the ropes which bound them, the symbols of Nebuchadnezzar's unbelief and wrath, were destroyed in the flames.

Just as the reign of Nebuchadnezzar is symbolic of the entire period of the times of the Gentiles, so the deliverance of Daniel's three companions is typical of the deliverance of Israel during the period of Gentile domination. Particularly at the end of the Gentile period Israel will be in fiery affliction, but as Isaiah prophesied, "But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (Is 43:1-2).

#### The Decree of Nebuchadnezzar

3:28-30 Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God. Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort. Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, in the province of Babylon.

Just as Nebuchadnezzar had acknowledged Daniel's God at the conclusion of chapter 2, so here Nebuchadnezzar admitting the power of the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego issues a decree in oriental style commemorating the event. First, he recognizes the delivering power of their God "who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him." That the heathen gods used messengers to accomplish their purpose was generally believed, and Nebuchadnezzar analyzes the event in this way. Although there is no clear proof that the fourth person in the furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego was actually deity or an angel--as all we have is Nebuchadnezzar's conclusion on the basis of what he saw--it may well be that the protector of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego was Christ Himself appearing in the form of an angel. The expression the Son of God (3:25) is a translation of the Aramaic *bar áela,,hin*, which means "a divine being." Nebuchadnezzar interprets this in verse 28 as a *maláak*, meaning, "an angel." The alternative that God sent a mighty angel to protect them is, of course, also plausible and in keeping with other Scripture.

Nebuchadnezzar not only recognizes the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego but now belatedly commends them for their trust in God even though it resulted in changing his word. He recognizes the superior obligation of the men not to worship any deity except their own. This was a remarkable admission for a king in Nebuchadnezzar's situation.

Having given this preamble, Nebuchadnezzar now makes his decree. In it, he does not deprecate his own gods but recognizes the fact of the power of the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. He calls upon all the people in his realm not to say anything amiss concerning this God at the threat of being cut to pieces and their houses made a dunghill. That the king has the power to do this was obvious to everyone. The basis of his decree is the simple statement, "because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort." It is clear at this point that though Nebuchadnezzar is greatly impressed, he has not yet been brought to the place where he is willing to put his trust in the God of Israel.

The chain of events which had brought about this miracle also consolidated the position of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego as principal officials in the province of Babylon. Whatever their former rank and authority, they are now promoted.. Although probably in the same office, they were relieved of any opposition and had the special favor of the king in what they did.

As pointed out in an extended discussion by Leupold, the nature of this trial and persecution was quite different from that of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C.; and scholars who attempt to draw parallels to support the idea of a pseudo-Daniel writing the book of Daniel in the second century have no real basis in fact. Nebuchadnezzar at least respected the God of Israel, something which was quite untrue in the case of Antiochus Epiphanes.<sup>209</sup> As recorded in the Word of God, it is characteristic of Gentile times that there will be tensions between obedience to God and obedience to men. This will reach its peak in the future great tribulation when once again the tension between obeying an earthly ruler and obeying God will result in many martyrs.

Taken as a whole, chapter 3 is a thrilling account of young men who remained true to God under severe trial. The common excuses for moral and spiritual compromise, especially the blaming of contemporary influences, are contradicted by the faithfulness of these men. In spite of separation from parents and of the corrupting influences of Babylonian religion, political pressure, and immorality, they did not waver in their hour of testing. Critics are probably right that Daniel intended this chapter to remind Israel of the evils of idolatry and the necessity of obeying God rather than men. But the main thrust of the passage is not an invented moral story which actually never happened, as critics infer, but rather a display of a God who is

faithful to His people even in captivity and is ever ready to deliver those who put their trust in Him. The contrast of the God of Israel to the idols of Babylon is a reminder that the god of this world, behind Gentile dominion, is doomed to judgment at the hands of the sovereign God. This is illustrated in the fall of Babylon and of the succeeding empires of Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. The downfall of these nations is a foreshadowing of the end of the times of the Gentiles when the Lion of the tribe of Judah returns to reign.

Chapter 3, the first of four chapters dealing with individuals, is an obvious preparation for chapter 4, which relates Nebuchadnezzar's conversion. In the deliverance of the three faithful companions of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar is confronted by the superior power of God which can nullify Nebuchadnezzar's commandment to execute the three men. This is a preparation for the lesson he was to learn in chapter 4 that all of his power was delegated by God and could be withdrawn at His will. In this chapter we see for the last time Daniel's three companions, and no further reference is made to their subsequent experiences.

172 S. P. Tregelles, Remarks on the Prophetic Visions in the Book of Daniel.

173 R. D. Culver, Daniel and the Latter Days.

174 G. R. King, Daniel, p. 78.

175 For a full discussion see C. F. Keil, Biblical Commentary on the Book of Daniel, pp. 114-15.

176 H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Daniel, pp. 136-37.

177 Ibid., p. 137; cf. E. J. Young, The Prophecy of Daniel, pp. 83-85; and Keil, pp. 118-19.

178 J. A. Montgomery, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel, p. 195.

179 Cf. Leupold, p. 137; and Keil, p. 119.

180 Young, p. 85.

181 Montgomery cites Oppert, Expédition scientifique en Mésopotamie, 1:238 ff., expressing the belief "that a massive square of brick construction found in situ, 14 metres square by 6 high, is the pedestal of Neb.'s image" (Montgomery, p. 197).

182 Ibid.

183 Ibid., p. 86.

184 Montgomery, pp. 199-200.

185 K. A. Kitchen, "The Aramaic of Daniel," in Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel, p. 43. For entire discussion see pp. 35-50.

186 Keil, pp. 120-21.

187 G. L. Archer, Jr., A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, p. 375.

- 188 Concerning Greek loan words, see Kitchen, pp. 44-50. Of particular interest is the presence of a Greek money term, stater, in the Aramaic papyri from Egypt in documents of c. 400 B.C.
- 189 R. D. Wilson, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, p. 296. Cf. Leupold, p. 143; also the discussion on "The Greek Words in Daniel" in Edwin M. Yamauchi's, *Greece and Babylon*, pp. 17-24.
- 190 William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 259.
- 191 Leupold, p. 143.
- 192 *Ibid.*
- 193 T. C. Mitchell and R. Joyce, "The Musical Instruments in Nebuchadnezzar's Orchestra," in *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel*, pp. 19-27.
- 194 Yamauchi, pp. 17-24.
- 195 For a complete description of these instruments see Leupold, pp. 144-45; Mitchell and Joyce, pp. 19-27; and Keil, pp. 122-24.
- 196 Keil, p. 124; cf. Leupold, p. 145.
- 197 Keil, p. 124.
- 198 Montgomery, p. 202.
- 199 Cf. the account of a young slave being thrown into a furnace, cited by Emil G. Kraeling, *Rand McNally Bible Atlas*, p. 323.
- 200 Montgomery, pp. 205-7; F. Rosenthal, *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, p. 40.
- 201 Cf. Montgomery, pp. 208-9; and Rosenthal, pp. 24, 84.
- 202 Young, p. 90.
- 203 Montgomery, p. 208.
- 204 Leupold, p. 153.
- 205 King, p. 85.
- 206 R. H. Charles, *The Book of Daniel*, p. 35.
- 207 Rudolph Kittel, *Biblia Hebraica*, 2:1270.
- 208 Leupold, p. 159.
- 209 *Ibid.*, pp. 163-64.

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