

# The Book of Daniel

## Chapter Three



Chapter three will continue the narrative of the events that transpired during Nebuchadnezzar's reign in Babylon. Consistent with the theme of Daniel, we will again see God demonstrate His sovereignty over the affairs of men.

### 3:1 – The King builds a statue

*“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.”*

### The Image of Gold

As Chapter two closed, we saw King Nebuchadnezzar bow before Daniel and confess that the Lord God was a God of gods and a Lord of kings. Unfortunately, Nebuchadnezzar's praise, while sincere, wasn't from a changed heart. We know this because we see him return to his old ways in Chapters three and four. His pride has ballooned and manifests its corruptness by the creation of this golden idol in the plain of Dura.

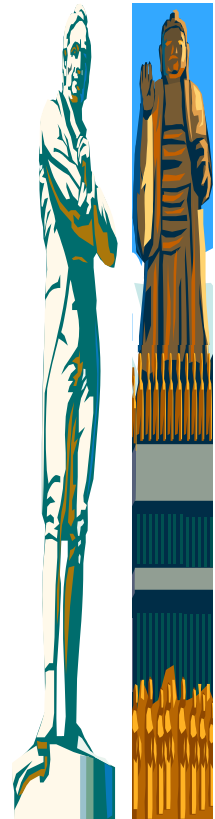
Remembering the vision from Chapter two, what might prompt Nebuchadnezzar to make this image?

**Nebuchadnezzar's vision was of a statue made of four different metals, three of which represented empires that would succeed his Babylonian empire. Creating this image of gold may be his attempt to thwart the prophecy of God and represent the perpetuation of his empire.**

What did this image look like? We honestly have no idea. Dimensionally, the image would be proportional to the images on the right had side of this page. If the image was a human figure, it was either very grotesque (like the first image on the right), or it could have been normally proportioned and placed at the top of a large pedestal (like the second image on the right).



Either way, the image was very large, approximately 90 to 98<sup>1</sup> feet tall and 9 to 10 feet wide. To put it in perspective, the image was about the height of a nine story building. This was quite a feat for that day and age. However, other ancient cultures produced colossi<sup>2</sup>, like the Colossus of Rhodes, which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Colossus of Rhodes was covered in bronze and was 105 to 112 feet high. It stood at the port on the Mediterranean island of Rhodes. The picture to the left is an artistic rendering of what that statue may have looked like. Notice that it is on a pedestal. For a more modern perspective, consider the Statue of Liberty in New York City. It stands 152 feet tall, on a pedestal 150 feet high.



Nebuchadnezzar's image was built on the plain of Dura. There is not a good consensus among scholars where this was, but most agree that it was either inside the city of Babylon proper or within five miles of the city center. We don't know exactly how much time has transpired since the close of Chapter two, but we will get some clues in the following verses that may help us make an educated guess about when this event occurred.

<sup>1</sup> Depending on the conversion used. An 18-inch cubit would make this statue 90 feet tall. A half-meter Babylonian cubit (about 19.6 inches), would make the image 98 feet tall.

<sup>2</sup> Colossi is the plural form of colossus, which is a larger than life size statue.

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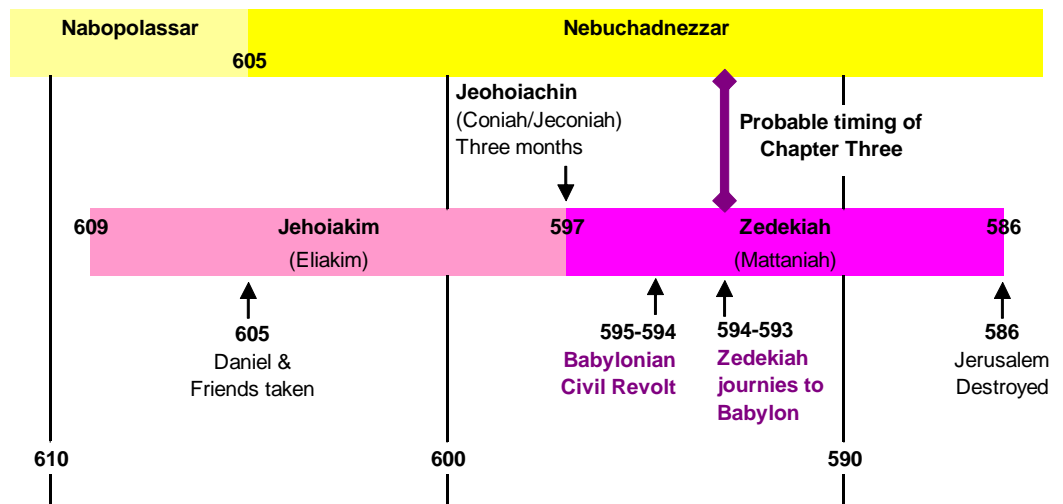
## 3:2-7 – The King commands worship

*“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.”*

### A Call to Worship

The context of Nebuchadnezzar’s call to worship provides us with a better understanding of his motives behind this event. Commanding an empire was no easy task. After Nebuchadnezzar’s first invasion of Judah, Jehoiakim was left as a subservient king. A few years later, he reverted his allegiance to Egypt, another local power, and tried to get out from under the yoke of Babylonian rule. After his death, his son, Jeconiah, only ruled for three months when the Babylonians besieged the city again and took him captive. Nebuchadnezzar then put Zedekiah, the third son of Josiah, upon the throne as ruler in 597.

The kingdom of Judah wasn’t Nebuchadnezzar’s only problem. Other provinces within his empire rebelled and a war broke out between December 595 and January 594. According to the Babylonian Chronicle, Nebuchadnezzar himself was personally engaged in fighting. He successfully squelched the rebellion, but found himself trying to reunite a divided empire.



The Probable timing of Chapter Three

The call to worship we read about in this passage may have been part of the political aftermath of the rebellion. According to the passage, all princes, governors, captains, judges, treasurers, counselors, sheriffs, and rulers of the provinces were required to come to Babylon for the dedication and worship of this image. This collected every person of substantial power and influence in the empire.

What would be the purpose of gathering all of these dignitaries to worship the image?

**It would affirm their allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar and tighten his grip over the empire. By creating this image, he was trying to create a common religious identity to bind the empire together.**

Read Jeremiah 51:59-64 and describe an event that occurred during Zedekiah’s reign. What happened and do you believe it could correspond to the worship of the image?

**In this passage, we read of Zedekiah and a local prince taking a journey to Babylon. We don’t know the intent of the journey, but that Jeremiah gave a prophecy about the downfall of Babylon and had it shared with the Jews in captivity and then cast into the Euphrates River. Zedekiah and the prince would have naturally been on the list of individuals included in Nebuchadnezzar’s invitation.**

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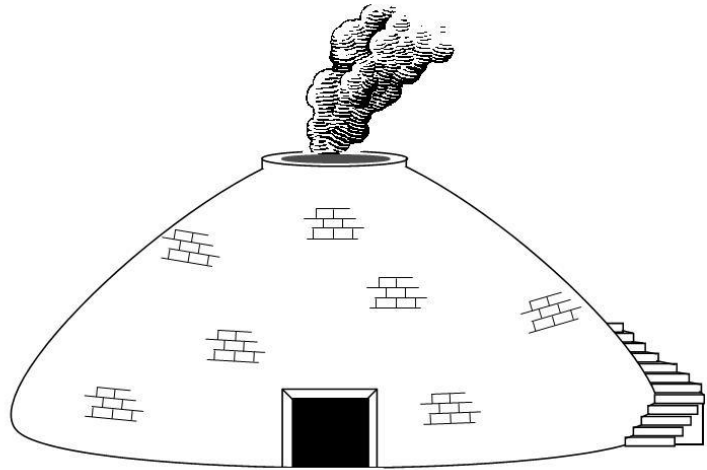
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Nebuchadnezzar used an orchestra as the sign for the people to bow down and worship the golden image. Why would he do this?

This was an attempt to heighten the formality, incite the emotions, and impress those who had gathered for the occasion. Music is a powerful medium with a powerful effect upon man.

### The Fiery Furnace

The penalty for refusal was to be thrown into a "burning fiery furnace". According to archaeologists, nearly everything in Babylon was made of kiln-fired bricks in those days. There was a natural scarcity of wood and stone, so Nebuchadnezzar built his entire kingdom out of mud bricks, dried in the sun and fired and glazed with beautiful colors in brick kilns (furnaces). These kilns were located everywhere there was a building project going on, like the image that was just completed. Note that Nebuchadnezzar said that whoever refused to worship the image would be thrown into the furnace at the "same hour". This indicates that there was one close by. These furnaces were usually dome-shaped with a door at the bottom and a hole (or opening) in the top to let heat and smoke out. Many had steps that one could walk up to reach the opening at the top (see illustration). This is apparently the kind of furnace described here in Daniel 3.



### 3:8-12 – They wouldn't Bend

*"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 worshippeth, [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 Abednego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."*

If you remember from Chapter 2, the Chaldeans were one of the types of advisors available to King Nebuchadnezzar. They used astrology as a means of predicting the future. What might their motivation be for accusing Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? Do you see this substantiated in the passage?

Their motivation was likely self-promotion. By getting rid of the three Jews, they paved a way for themselves to the top of the food chain. In the passage, we see them remind Nebuchadnezzar of his commandment and the penalty defined before they make the accusation. They clearly wanted to see the three Jews die.

What were the three accusations against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?

- 1) They do not regard (respect) the king
- 2) They do not worship the king's gods
- 3) They did not worship the golden image as Nebuchadnezzar commanded.

Under the context of the political issues that may have initiated the building of the image, how would Nebuchadnezzar interpret refusal to bow?

Most likely, the purpose behind building the image was to tighten his grip on the empire and unite them under a common religion. If his three advisors over the province of Babylon refused to bow, it would signal a weakness in his control and the result would be disunity. He also took it as a blow to his enormous ego.

Where was Daniel in all of this?

The honest answer is that we do not know. We do not see him mentioned at all in this chapter. Most likely, he could be out of the area on official business of the empire.

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### 3:13-18 – They wouldn't Bow

*“Then Nebuchadnezzar in [his] rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Then they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar spake and said unto them, [Is it] true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? 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 Abednego, 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.”*

What do we learn about Nebuchadnezzar based upon his emotional response to the accusation?

Two words were used to describe his strong response: anger and fury. Clearly, he was very angry with their behavior. However, we see that at this point, he maintains enough sense of mind to verify the accusation. This men were in high position and had likely served him well during their administration.

What challenge does Nebuchadnezzar issue in his statement? How far has he come from Daniel 2:47?

It was their religious devotion that caused them to refuse to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's image and he was putting God to the test. While he was impressed with the knowledge of God in Daniel 2:47, he was not yet acquainted with His great power. None of the gods he worshipped had the power to prevent their death if he ordered their execution. He knew of God's omniscience. He was about to learn about His omnipotence.

What did they mean when they said, “we are not careful to answer thee in this matter.”?

They did not need time to think about what their response should be. God was emphatically clear in His two commandments, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” and “Thou shalt not make for thyself any graven image”. Bowing to this image would violate God's first two commandments. This was a no-brainer.

The three men present two options concerning God's response to their predicament: either He will save them or He will not. What principle do we learn from this? (See James 4:14-15) What do we learn about their character and faith?

These men knew that they were not to test God. Unless He has revealed His will to us, we are not to presume what He will do in any given circumstance. We know that a sparrow cannot fall from a tree without catching His attention. Psalms 116:15 teaches us that the death of His saints are precious in His sight. God was fully aware of what was transpiring. They certainly desired to be saved from the fiery furnace, however it was not their decision to make. They simply left it in the hands of the Lord. They had tremendous faith in His ability to save them, if it was His will. They had seen the Lord bless them when they were obedient to His dietary requirements in Chapter One. Either way, they were not going to violate His law. Their character is tried again and found to be blameless. Oh that we would be so strong in the face of temptation!

### 3:19-23 – They wouldn't Burn

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

How did Nebuchadnezzar respond to the statement of three Jews?

His anger boiled over and he became livid with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. At this point, he was so angry that he lost his sense of reason and started making rash and foolish decisions.

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What series of decisions does Nebuchadnezzar make in sentencing the three Jews and what are the consequences of those decisions?

- 1) **Heating the furnace seven times hotter than normal – Rather than making the death more painful, it would kill them much more quickly and diminish their agony.**
- 2) **Executing them quickly – They were bound in their own clothes. They didn't take the time to find ropes.**
- 3) **Having his strongest men throw them into the fire – He ended up losing his strongest men in the army because the fire was so hot. This was a senseless waste.**

## 3:24-27 – The Fourth Man in the Fire

*“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 Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come [hither]. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire. 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.”*

What Nebuchadnezzar saw inside the mouth of the fiery furnace was enough to drop his jaw. He not only saw the three Hebrews walking around unscathed in the midst of the fire, but he saw a fourth man in the fire. Many a song and Sunday School story have been told about the identity of this fourth individual. Many versions of the Bible identify Him/him as the Son of God. There are two opinions on the identity of this individual; we will briefly look at both:

### **The Identity of the Fourth Man: A Pre-Incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ**

There are several instances in the Old Testament where it is likely that Christ made a physical appearance prior to His birth to Mary. This is called a Christophany by scholars or more commonly, a pre-incarnate appearance. On face value, the King James, and many other English Bibles interpret this passage as an appearance of Jesus Christ, based on the translation, “the Son of God”. Let's look at some of the other appearances of Jesus in the Old Testament. Jot down some of your observations about each appearance.

- Genesis 18:1-15 – **The Lord visits Abraham. This could have been an appearance of the trinity.**
- Genesis 32:24-32 – **Jacob wrestles with an angel but later says that he has seen God face to face.**
- Joshua 5:13-15 – **The Captain of the Lord's army appears to Joshua and allows him to worship.**
- Daniel 10:4-9 – **Daniel see Christ in His glory. This matches the description from Revelation.**

### **The Identity of the Fourth Man: An Angel of God**

Why would we think that the fourth man in the fire was not actually Christ Himself, especially when most English Bibles indicates that it was Jesus? If we were to look at the original Hebrew text and translate it literally, we would read, “a son of the gods” instead of “the Son of God”. There are three differences: (1) there is no definite article (the) in the original Hebrew text; (2) Hebrew doesn't have capital letters so there is nothing written to indicate that this individual is actually God; and (3) the word “God” in the Hebrew is actually “gods”. This makes sense, considering that the statement comes from Nebuchadnezzar. The Chaldeans



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believed in *families* of gods: Bel, the supreme god, accompanied by the goddess Mylitta, being the father of the gods; thus the expression *he* meant: *one sprung from and sent by the gods*. In summary, Nebuchadnezzar recognized only that the fourth man was a divine being. Are there other reasons to believe that this might have been an angel?

- Daniel 3:28 – **Nebuchadnezzar identifies the fourth man as an angel (messenger) of God**
- Daniel 6:22 – **God sent an angel to Daniel when cast into the lion's den**
- Job 1:6 – **Angels are here referred to as "sons of God"**
- Job 38:7 – **The sons of God sang for joy at the creation**

### The Bottom Line

Does it really matter? This could be a very contentious and emotional issue for some people. The bottom line is that God saved them! He was the One who either appeared in the person of Christ or sent the angel to rescue the three Hebrews. It was His power that enabled them to survive. God performed an amazing miracle on that day. Either way you look at it, God is good!

Notice the extent of God's salvation of the three Hebrews. Were they touched by the flames? **They were not hurt, nor their clothes, nor was the smell of smoke or fire upon them. This was done before all the leaders of Babylon. What an awesome testimony for the Lord!**

Looking back at Nebuchadnezzar's hasty decisions, how does each one demonstrate the power of God in this miracle?

- 1) **Making the furnace seven times hotter made this miracle even more amazing**
- 2) **Executing them quickly made it clear that they could not have devised a plan or trick. This was a verified miracle. There was certainly smoke, but no mirrors.**
- 3) **The death of the strong men made it clear that the survival of the three Jews was a miracle. Even when man becomes foolish and rash, God's providence is not thwarted. He knows all and can obtain glory from the most foolish decisions of men.**

### 3:28-30 – The Aftermath

*"[Then] Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed [be] the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, 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 Abednego, 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 Abednego, in the province of Babylon."*

How has Nebuchadnezzar's perception of God grown since Daniel 2:47?

**He now recognized His power. Before he recognized the extent of His knowledge. Now Nebuchadnezzar sees His power and knows that even he is subject to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.**

### Items for Discussion:

How does this narrative intersect your life? Are there situations you face where you feel pressure to bow to the idols of men?