

# Daniel 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 24 June 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Daniel chapter 3. King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was 60 cubits, and its breadth 6 cubits. He set it up on the plain of Jura in the province of Babylon.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent together the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Then the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And the herald proclaimed aloud, You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Therefore, at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, O King, live forever.

You, O King, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O King, pay no attention to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. Then Nebuchadnezzar, in furious rage, commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready, when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace.

[ 2 : 3 3 ] And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our god whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning, fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning, fiery furnace.

Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning, fiery furnace. Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning, fiery furnace. Then king Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counsellors, Did we not cast three men bound into the fire? They answered and said to the king, True, O king. He answered and said, But I see four men unbound walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.

Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning, fiery furnace. He declared, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out and come here. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counsellors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own god. Therefore I make a decree, any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way. Then the king promoted Shadrach,

Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon. Daniel chapter 3 should be read as the continuation of what began in Daniel chapter 2. In Daniel chapter 2, King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a great and terrifying statue made of four different metals, going down from gold, to silver, to bronze, to iron, and then in the toes and feet mixed with clay. Daniel revealed the dream and its interpretation, four successive kingdoms or empires that would eventually be brought down by a stone cut from a mountain without hands, which would grow into a mountain that filled the whole earth. Nebuchadnezzar himself and the Babylonian empire that he represented were the golden head. The empire of Medo-Persia that followed him was the silver arms and chest, the bronze waist and thighs were grease, and the iron legs and feet were Rome. With the advent of Christ, this towering statue of cumulative empires would be brought down, it would be crushed, and in its place would grow a mountain to fill the earth, a new altar that would gather together all the nations and peoples of the world, and also in the great elevation of this cosmic mountain, it would connect heaven and earth. This dream was clearly threatening for King Nebuchadnezzar.

It represented a possible fate for his kingdom that he wanted to avert. The fact that Nebuchadnezzar, shortly after receiving this dream, sets up a towering image purely of gold is not at all accidental.

[ 6 : 31 ] He is responding to the threat of the dream, trying to present an image that represents his universal and continued sovereignty. Nebuchadnezzar wants to gather all humanity around his sovereignty with this golden image. As we saw in chapter 2, this has Babelic connotations. In chapter 1, they are brought to the land of Shinar, which is the land where the Tower of Babel was built. Babylon, of course, is related to Babel. And Nebuchadnezzar, in the chapters devoted to him, is always associated with these grand towering images. The great statue of chapter 2, the great image in chapter 3, and then in chapter 4, the great towering tree. Each of these images represent not only an ascent to or descent from heaven, but also a hubristic attempt to gather all things, all peoples, around these great images, or towers. Nebuchadnezzar's ambition is clearly the ambition of the tower builders in chapter 11 of Genesis. Chapter 3 continues the Aramaic section of the book of Daniel, which runs from chapter 2, verse 4, to the end of chapter 7. These chapters have a chiastic, or book-ended structure. Chapter 2 corresponds with chapter 7, chapter 4 with chapter 5, and our present chapter 3 corresponds with chapter 6.

In chapter 3, the three friends of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, are tested in their willingness to resist the king's idolatrous decree. Daniel faces a similar test in chapter 6, where he gets thrown into the lion's den. Just as his friends are miraculously preserved in the fiery furnace in chapter 3, he will be preserved in the lion's den in chapter 6. In both cases, they exemplify faithfulness to the Lord in the midst of an idolatrous administration. As a response to the threatening dream of chapter 2, the building of this great image is a sign of the insecurity of Nebuchadnezzar.

It's an attempt to shore up his sovereignty. In chapter 2, we saw some of the tensions that probably existed between Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans within his administration. In this chapter, through the establishment of this grand public spectacle, Nebuchadnezzar seems to be attempting to bring some coherence to his fracturing administration. In this respect, we can also see the shadow of Babel behind. They do not want to be scattered upon the face of the earth, and so they build this great tower. Nebuchadnezzar is building his great statue or image for a similar purpose. The image itself is of a remarkable height, 90 foot or 27 meters tall. In the text itself, it's described as being 60 cubits tall and 6 cubits broad. As the Babylonians used a sexagesimal number system, the choice of these particular dimensions may not have been accidental. While this would not be the largest image in the ancient world, it would be one of the tallest. The same language that is used of the image in chapter 2 is also used of this image. However, as James Jordan argues, the proportions seem wrong for a human figure. We would expect, if it were a human figure, for its breadth to be at least double what it is relative to the height. We might perhaps speculate that it was set upon a grand pillar or pedestal, or perhaps it is something like a great gold-plated obelisk with the image of a person inscribed upon it. Collective worship, in this instance, seems to be serving a grander political project. The construction of the image, as already noted, is in part Nebuchadnezzar's response to his sense of insecurity at the strength of the Babylonian administration. This great image, as a focal point for religious worship, is an attempt to gather together the whole of Babylon, both vertically, with the entire hierarchical structure of Babylonian government represented, and horizontally, with all peoples, nations and languages brought together and united in this common act. Several groups of government officials are mentioned. Satraps, prefects, governors, councillors, treasurers, justices, magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces. Paul Tanner identifies the different groups as follows. The satraps would be the rulers over the major provinces.

The prefects would be the high officials immediately subordinate to them. The governors would be the administrators of smaller regions. The councillors would be the advisors in the king's court. The treasurers, those who supervise the treasury. The justices would be the legal officials, and the magistrates, who would be like sheriffs in some instances. Daniel chapter 3 makes a lot of use of repetition. It has these grand lists of these officials, also later of musical instruments.

The clothes of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and even the names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, are repeated on several different occasions, often redundantly. This has a sort of comedic or satirical effect. Nebuchadnezzar is vying to express his great power and sovereignty, but it is all proven futile and impotent in the end. Nebuchadnezzar appoints a grand orchestra of exotic musical instruments that will lead the worship event. They're perhaps related to the different nations. The musical instruments are an assemblage of instruments of diverse cultural origins, with their names also coming from different languages. Their precise identity is debated by biblical scholars. In verses 3 to 7 we see some of the most extensive use of comedic repetition. Phrases like the image that Nebuchadnezzar has set up are repeated many times, and the narrator never avails himself of the many opportunities that he has to trim down the great weight of the text. The prose, weighted as it is by this abundance of repetitive elements, expresses something of the comedic pomposity of the king, and also of the mindlessness of what is taking place. In terms of the background of Babel, the musical instruments seem to be serving as a language intended to unite all peoples, nations, and languages. Such common worship of the great image is an attempt to provide a solvent for all these different nations that have been brought together in this great composite of peoples that is quite fragile within. Any who refuse to participate in the worship of the image are threatened with the burning fiery furnace, a fire that would have been maybe even as hot as 1000 degrees centigrade. The presence of the fiery furnace nearby probably suggests that it had some role in the construction of the image in the first place, perhaps producing the metal with which it was plated, or perhaps it was used for preparing lime. It had an entrance at the top through which the Jews would later be thrown, and it also has an entrance at the side from which the king would later see them. Foreign nations were often connected with images of fire and furnaces.

[ 13 : 00 ] We might think, for instance, of the brick kilns of the original Babel, the invention of which encouraged the ambition to make this great tower in the first place. Egypt is described as an iron furnace in places like Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 20, but the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day. The same image of Egypt and the captivity there is used in 1 Kings chapter 8 verse 51 and Jeremiah chapter 11 verse 4. In Ezekiel chapter 22 verses 17 to 22, the image of a furnace is also used of the house of Israel in the book of Ezekiel chapter 22 verses 17 to 22. The Lord there speaks of purging away the dross of a nation that has become thoroughly corrupt. And the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to me. All of them are bronze and tin and iron and lead in the furnace. They are dross of silver. Therefore thus says the Lord God, because you have all become dross, therefore behold, I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. As one gathers silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into a furnace to blow the fire on it in order to melt it. So I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you. I will gather you and blow on you with the fire of my wrath, and you shall be melted in the midst of it.

As silver is melted in a furnace, so you shall be melted in the midst of it, and you shall know that I am the Lord. I have poured out my wrath upon you. Later Jewish Midrash of Genesis chapter 11 and 12 would use this image of the fiery furnace taken from the book of Daniel and apply it to the story of Abraham, Abraham being rescued from the fiery furnace of Nimrod, who was the great empire builder and the one who led the project of the Tower of Babel. While this is clearly not a historical account as the biblical narrative itself is, it recognizes appropriately a symmetry between these later events and those events back in the story of Babel and the call of Abraham. Abraham is called against the backdrop of Babel. He is rescued, as it were, from the judgment of Babel, and he will be used as a response to the threat of Babel. The conflict between the Jews in this chapter and Nebuchadnezzar, who's a renewed Babel builder, must be read against that backdrop in Genesis.

Nebuchadnezzar is the heir of Nimrod. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are the heirs of Abraham. In the image of chapter 2, we saw the struggle to create a unified structure out of these diverse materials. The image was of composite materials, of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay. It was also of alloyed materials, like the bronze, and beyond the alloyed materials, of admixed materials, materials that did not come together in one single new material, in the case of the iron mixed with the clay. As images of a series of empires, this showed the inability of these great empire builders to form a united people. No matter how much the great empire builders attempted to bring these peoples together, the material of their kingdoms remained divided by customs, ethnicity, language, and religion. The Fari furnace is a means of preparing and purifying metals, a means by which this united metal kingdom could be built. Those parts that were not purified in the process, becoming part of the final structure, would be burned away or removed as dross. Representing these great empires, whether the original Babel of Nimrod, or the nation of Egypt under Pharaoh, or Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar, as if great furnaces, might be a way of illustrating their attempt to bring people together, through both purging unassimilable elements away, and purifying what remains as a single metal. Any people who resist the great imperial ambition of Nebuchadnezzar would find themselves burned away as dross within this fiery furnace. Only the pure gold of Babylon would remain.

In chapter 2, the tensions between King Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans in his court was quite apparent. Nebuchadnezzar did not trust them, was prepared to kill them all, and re-establish his court with a completely different composition. Daniel the Jew had saved all of their lives, but now these jealous officials seized their opportunity to use the king's words against the Jews that are rising among their ranks. While it initially appeared that the king's decree had achieved its desired effect, here the Chaldeans inform him that it has failed in some cases. There is a fly in the ointment. Carol Newsome observes, the Chaldeans' rhetoric is carefully crafted, although their words to the king are mostly a repetition of the herald's announcement in verses 4-6. They frame them in terms of the king's own will and authority. You, O king, issued a command. The accusation proper frames the situation by identifying the miscreants, not only by name, but also by ethnicity, certain Jews, and by the king's personal role in advancing them to office, whom you appointed, perhaps indirectly disclosing the sources of the Chaldeans' jealousy. In the Chaldeans' speech, the actual misdeed the Jews are alleged to have done is the very last element mentioned. The information is preceded by two comments that interpret the significance of the act for the king. The Chaldeans represent the Jews' refusal to prostrate themselves as disdain for the king's own authority. One can perhaps imagine Nebuchadnezzar's response to this as being in part frustration. His decree has been resisted by some that he himself appointed, and beyond this he can see that his decree is being used for petty court machinations by the Chaldeans, a faction that he already distrusts. He made his decree to establish his universal and comprehensive sovereignty, and now he already feels that it's being used against him. He's being maneuvered into a position by the refusal of the Jews to cooperate, and by the machinations of the Chaldeans to act in ways that he might prefer not to. The ideal and the expectation was that everyone would bow to the image without objection. Nebuchadnezzar is furious, perhaps in part because he feels a supposed ingratitude of the three Jews, who despite him raising them to positions of high office, have resisted his decree, but perhaps also he feels that his hand has been forced. The empire can't merely be subdued by means of imperial decree and grand spectacle, but he has to resort to force. He had made a great power play, but some had resisted it, and the result was to make him look weaker. It's very dangerous to overreach one's authority in the attempt to demonstrate it. Someone might always call your bluff. Nebuchadnezzar doesn't really want to kill the Jews. The ideal is that they simply submit, and so he's quite prepared to give them another chance. However, the Jews are not prepared to bow under any circumstances.

They serve the Lord over Nebuchadnezzar and his gods. Nebuchadnezzar is filled with anger, and in his fiery anger, he orders the fire of the furnace to be heated seven times hotter. The three men are bound, and are ordered to be thrown into the fiery furnace, even while wearing all of their official vestments.

[ 20 : 01 ] The furnace is so overheated that the men throwing Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into it are burned up themselves. However, looking at the three friends after they have been thrown into the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar sees a remarkable sight. He rises up suddenly and asks his counsellors whether there were only three men that had been bound and thrown into the fire. Within the fire, he sees four men, unbound, walking around and unhurt, and the fourth man has the appearance of a son of the gods. The text never makes exactly clear who this person is. Many Christians have seen it as a Christophany, an appearance of Christ before his incarnation. A natural connection might be with the story of the burning bush in Exodus chapter 3, where the angel of the Lord speaks from the midst of the burning bush that is on fire but not consumed. In Judges chapter 13, the angel of the Lord, who appears to Manoah and his wife, ascends in the flame of the altar. Just as the lion's den of chapter 6 seems to be an image of exile in Babylon, so the furnace, I think, should be read in a similar way.

In Daniel chapter 6 verse 22, Daniel says that the Lord sent his angel to shut the mouths of the lions and protect Daniel. Just as the angel of the covenant was present with Israel and Egypt, so the angel of the covenant is present with the Jewish exiles in Babylon. Whether represented in the den of lions or the fiery furnace, he preserves his people from harm. They will neither be burned away as dross or assimilated into the great metal empire of Babylon, nor will they be consumed by the lions that surround them. They will be preserved, and when the time comes, they will be brought out unharmed. It may even be possible that we are to see some connection between this and the Lord's burning throne in chapter 7, where once again there is a fire that does not consume the one within it.

Nebuchadnezzar, in his pride, had set up a grand public spectacle to represent his own sovereignty, and unwittingly had established a stage for the demonstration of the Lord's power.

Nebuchadnezzar calls the three friends out from the fire, addressing them as servants of the Most High God, recognizing in his address to them they serve a higher authority than his. The Lord's power is also demonstrated to the satraps, prefects, governors, king's counsellors, and the other figures who are present. What had been intended as a unifying spectacle demonstrating Nebuchadnezzar's sovereignty becomes a means of showing the Lord's. The chapter ends with Nebuchadnezzar blessing the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, even speaking of the three friends in a way that honours them for resisting his decree. The chapter began with the decree of the king, and it ends with a different decree, with a very different force to it. Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other God who is able to rescue in this way. In the preceding chapter, the great image of Nebuchadnezzar's dream was brought down. In some ways, we might see Nebuchadnezzar's decree here almost as an affirmation of the judgment upon the original image in the preceding chapter.

Chapter 2 ended with the exaltation of Daniel and the friends within the court of the king, and this chapter again with a promotion for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. A question to consider. Beyond its immediate historical reference, the book of Daniel speaks of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the imperial ambitions of proud human rulers.

[ 23 : 26 ] What lessons could a Christian political theology draw from this chapter and apply to current day situations?