TRACK FIVE

Deep Dive

A closer study of Daniel 3 for teachers, preachers, and anyone who wants to dig in: history, language, structure, interpretation, and Christ.

How to read this section. Statements of fact are drawn from the biblical text or from well-established historical sources. Where scholars disagree, the major views held by orthodox Christian interpreters are set side by side and labeled. Scripture is quoted from the World English Bible (WEB). Aramaic words are given in Hebrew script with a simple transliteration.

1. Historical and Cultural Background

BABYLON AND NEBUCHADNEZZAR

Nebuchadnezzar II ruled the Neo-Babylonian Empire from 605 to 562 BC.[1] In 605 BC he defeated Egypt at Carchemish and took control of the lands west of the Euphrates, including Judah. Daniel 1:1-2 dates the first exile, in which Daniel and his friends were taken, to "the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim" and describes how the Lord gave Jehoiakim into his hand "with some of the vessels of the house of God". Babylon itself was one of the greatest cities of its day, famous for its walls, the Ishtar Gate, and the great temple of Marduk. Nebuchadnezzar's own building inscriptions boast of his work, in the spirit of Daniel 4:30: "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built...?"

WHEN DID DANIEL 3 HAPPEN?

The Aramaic text of Daniel 3 gives no date. The Old Greek (Septuagint) translation adds "in his eighteenth year," which would place the image around the time Jerusalem fell (587/586 BC).[2] That addition is not part of the Aramaic text, so it's best treated as an early tradition, not a firm date. The story clearly follows Daniel 2, since the three men already hold the office given to them in 2:49.

THE PLAIN OF DURA AND THE IMAGE

"Dura" has not been located with certainty. The name is related to the Akkadian word *dūru*, "wall" or "walled place," and several places in Mesopotamia bore similar names.[3] The image was sixty cubits high and six wide (3:1). At about 18 inches to the cubit, that is roughly 90 by 9 feet. Its tall, narrow proportions have led many commentators to suggest that it stood on a pedestal or was an obelisk-like pillar, and that it was gold-plated rather than solid gold (compare Isaiah 40:19). *(These are interpretations; the text says only "an image of gold".)* The text never says whether it depicted the king, a god, or something else. What matters to the narrator is that bowing to it was an act of worship (3:12, 14, 18).

THE FURNACE

The Aramaic *'attûn* (אַתּוּן) is a furnace or kiln. Many commentators suggest a brick kiln, common in Babylon's building projects, with an opening above through which the men "fell down" (3:23) and a door at ground level through which the king could see inside and call to them (3:26). *(This is a reconstruction drawn from the details of the text.)*

OFFICIALS AND INSTRUMENTS

The lists in 3:2-3 name a long series of officials. Several of the titles are Persian loanwords, beginning with the word usually translated "satraps" (WEB "local governors"). The instruments in 3:5 include three Greek loanwords, the zither, the harp, and the pipe in the WEB.[4] These loanwords play a part in the scholarly debate about when the book reached its final form (see "Dating the book" below).

WHY IS THIS CHAPTER IN ARAMAIC?

Daniel is written in two languages. Daniel 1:1-2:4a and chapters 8-12 are in Hebrew. From the middle of 2:4, where the Chaldeans answer the king "in the Syrian language" (WEB; that is, Aramaic), through 7:28, the book is in Aramaic, the international language of the Babylonian and Persian empires. Daniel 3 belongs to this Aramaic section, which addresses the nations and their kings directly.

DATING THE BOOK

Christians hold different views on when the book of Daniel was written. The traditional view holds that the book records the experiences and visions of Daniel in the sixth century BC and was written by him or soon after. This view is defended by commentators such as Edward J. Young, Joyce Baldwin, and Stephen Miller. Many modern scholars date the book's final

form to about 165 BC, during the persecution under Antiochus IV. Some evangelical scholars, such as John Goldingay, discuss a later date while affirming the book's authority. This guide follows the narrative's own setting. The message of Daniel 3 for worship and faithfulness stands either way.

2. Literary Structure

DANIEL 3 WITHIN DANIEL 2-7

The Aramaic chapters are arranged in a mirror pattern (a chiasm) that many scholars have noted since Adrien Lenglet's 1972 study:[5]

A	DANIEL 2	Four kingdoms, and the kingdom of God
B	DANIEL 3	**Faithful servants delivered from the furnace**
C	DANIEL 4	A proud king (Nebuchadnezzar) humbled
C′	DANIEL 5	A proud king (Belshazzar) judged
B′	DANIEL 6	A faithful servant delivered from the lions
A′	DANIEL 7	Four kingdoms, and the kingdom of God

Daniel 3 is thus paired with Daniel 6. Both stories show a faithful Jew who refuses to compromise in worship, a death sentence, God's deliverance, and a pagan king who praises Israel's God.

THE SHAPE OF CHAPTER 3

3:1-7	The image, the assembly, and the command to worship
3:8-12	The accusation against "certain Jews"
3:13-18	The confrontation, and the three men's confession
3:19-23	The furnace heated seven times hotter
3:24-27	Four men walking in the fire
3:28-30	The king's praise, decree, and promotion of the men

REPETITION AS A LITERARY DEVICE

The narrator repeats the list of officials (3:2, 3), the list of instruments (3:5, 7, 10, 15), and the phrase "the image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up" again and again. Many commentators read this heavy repetition as deliberate, even gently satirical, portraying the empire's machinery of worship as grand, mechanical, and empty beside the simple words of three men. *(This is a literary interpretation.)*

3. Commentary

3:1-7, THE IMAGE AND THE COMMAND. The king gathers every level of his government for the dedication of his image. Whatever the image portrayed, the point was loyalty to the king and his gods made visible in one act. The penalty, "cast into the middle of a burning fiery furnace the same hour" (3:6), shows how seriously he took it. At the signal, "all the peoples, the nations, and the languages fell down and worshiped" (3:7). The phrase is repeated through Daniel, and it sets up the question of whose kingdom the nations will finally acknowledge (compare 7:14).

3:8-12, THE ACCUSATION. Some of the Chaldeans ("certain Chaldeans" in 3:8) accuse "certain Jews" (3:12), whom the king himself had promoted. The charge has three parts: they have not respected the king, they don't serve his gods, and they don't worship the image. The narrative never shows them disloyal: they hold royal office (2:49; 3:12), and their answer is respectful (3:16-18). Their refusal concerns worship. *(The text does not separately rule on the first charge; this is an interpretation.)*

3:13-15, THE KING'S CHALLENGE. In rage, Nebuchadnezzar gives them a second chance, and then asks the chapter's central question: "Who is that god who will deliver you out of my hands?" (3:15) The verb "deliver" (*šēzib*, שֵׁיזִב) recurs in 3:17 and 3:28, and the story answers his question.

3:16-18, THE CONFESSION. Their opening words are not rudeness: "...we have no need to answer you in this matter." (3:16) The words mean that the matter is settled and needs no defense. Verse 17 opens with an Aramaic phrase (*hēn ʾītay*) that translations render differently: "If it happens" (WEB), "If this be so" (ESV), or "If our God... is able" (NRSV).[6] The best-supported reading of the whole statement is not doubt about God's power, which they affirm outright, but humility about God's will. Then come the famous words, *wĕhēn lāʾ* (וְהֵן לָא), "But if not..." (3:18). Their obedience doesn't depend on the outcome.

3:19-23, THE FURNACE. The king's face is "changed" with fury (3:19). The furnace is heated "seven times more than it was usually heated", probably an idiom for "as hot as possible." The men are bound fully clothed (3:21), a detail that sets up the miracle in 3:27. The flames kill the soldiers who carry them up (3:22). The three "fell down bound into the middle of the burning fiery furnace" (3:23).

3:24-25, FOUR MEN WALKING. Startled, the king asks, "Didn't we cast three men bound into the middle of the fire?" (3:24) Now he sees four men "loose, walking in the middle of the fire" and unharmed, and the fourth looks "like a son of the gods" (3:25). The men who went in bound now walk free, and they are not alone. On the identity of the fourth, see section 5.

3:26-27, OUT OF THE FIRE. The king calls them "servants of the Most High God" (*'ĕlāhā' 'illā'āh*, אֱלָהָא עִלָּאָה). The officials who had gathered to bow to the image now gather to inspect the three men (3:27). The fire had no power over their bodies: not a hair singed, their clothes unchanged. "The smell of fire wasn't even on them." The deliverance is total.

3:28-30, THE KING'S RESPONSE. Nebuchadnezzar blesses their God, "who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him" (3:28). He credits the men with defying the king's word and yielding their bodies rather than worship any god but their own. His decree (3:29) protects their God from insult. It shows how far he has come, and also how far he still has to go: he still thinks in threats, and his own humbling comes in Daniel 4. The men are promoted (3:30). The God who "is able to deliver" (3:17) has done exactly that, "because there is no other god who is able to deliver like this" (3:29).

4. Key Words

WORD	TRANSLITERATION	MEANING AND USE
צְלֵם	*ṣĕlēm*	"image, statue" (3:1 and throughout). Related to the Hebrew *ṣelem* of Genesis 1:27: humans themselves bear God's image, so worshiping an image made by human hands as a god inverts the order of creation.†
סְגִד	*sĕgid*	"to bow down, prostrate oneself, worship" (3:5-7, 10-12, 14-15, 18, 28)
פְּלַח	*pĕlaḥ*	"to serve," especially in worship (3:12, 14, 17-18, 28). The men *serve* their God (3:17) and will not serve Babylon's gods.
אַתּוּן	*'attûn*	"furnace, kiln" (3:6, 11, 15, 17, 19-23, 26)
שֵׁיזִב	*šēzib*	"to rescue, deliver" (3:15, 17, 28). The king's question and God's answer turn on this word.
וְהֵן לָא	*wĕhēn lā'*	"but if not" (3:18)
בַּר־אֱלָהִין	*bar-'ĕlāhîn*	"a son of (the) gods" (3:25). The phrase most naturally means "a divine being," as a polytheist king would describe it. The KJV renders it "the Son of God."
מַלְאֲכֵהּ	*mal'ākēh*	"his angel, his messenger" (3:28)

† A theological connection drawn by many interpreters, not an argument made by Daniel 3 itself.

5. Interpretive Questions

WHO WAS THE FOURTH FIGURE IN THE FIRE? (3:25, 28)

The text gives us two descriptions, both from Nebuchadnezzar: "like a son of the gods" (3:25) and "his angel" (3:28).

- **View 1: An angel.** This takes the king's second statement as the text's own explanation. It fits Daniel 6:22, where Daniel says God "sent his angel" to shut the lions' mouths, and the wider biblical picture of angels as ministering spirits (Hebrews 1:14).
- **View 2: The Son of God before His incarnation.** Many Christian interpreters, from the early church onward, have seen a Christophany, a visible appearance of the eternal Son, like the "angel of Yahweh" elsewhere in the Old Testament who speaks as God (for example, Exodus 3:2-6). On this reading, Christ was literally with His servants in the fire.

What both views share. God was personally present with His people in their trial and delivered them by His own power. Neither view requires reading a confession of the Trinity into a pagan king's words. Faithful Christians hold both views, and this guide does not insist on one.

WERE THEY SURE GOD WOULD DELIVER THEM? (3:17-18)

Some readers hear uncertainty in "if" and "but if not." Others stress the confidence of "he will deliver us out of your hand" (3:17). Most commentators hold both together: complete confidence in God's power and

goodness, with humble submission to His will about the outcome. The words "he will deliver us out of your hand" may also look beyond the furnace. Whatever happens, the king will not have the last word over them.

WHAT ABOUT THE LONGER GREEK VERSION?

Ancient Greek translations of Daniel include sixty-eight additional verses after 3:23, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men. Catholic and Orthodox Bibles include them as part of Daniel, and Protestant Bibles omit them or print them with the Apocrypha. They are not part of the Aramaic text quoted in this guide.

6. Cross-References

- **Exodus 20:3-5**: no other gods, and no bowing down to idols to serve them, the command at stake.
- **Daniel 1:8-16**: Daniel resolved not to defile himself, and his three friends joined him in the test (1:11-16). Their stand in chapter 3 follows an earlier, smaller test of faithfulness.
- **Daniel 6**: the matching story in the chiasm, with Daniel and the lions.
- **Isaiah 43:2**: "When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, and flame will not scorch you." (WEB) In context, God's promise to be present with Israel through exile and trial (43:1-3), not a guarantee that His people will never be hurt.
- **Psalm 46:1**: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." (WEB)
- **Acts 5:29**: "We must obey God rather than men." (WEB)
- **Hebrews 11:33-38**: by faith some "quenched the power of fire..." and others suffered and died. Both were faithful.
- **1 Peter 1:6-7**: faith tested by fire, "more precious than gold that perishes".
- **Revelation 13:15**: an image, a demand for worship, and a death penalty. Daniel 3's pattern echoes at the end of the Bible.

7. How Daniel 3 Points to Christ

The faithful worshiper. Satan once offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world "if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus answered, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and you shall serve him only." (Matthew 4:9-10, WEB) Where Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood firm on the plain of Dura, Jesus stood perfectly faithful for us.

A Gospel Parallel. In Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." (Luke 22:42, WEB) The three men went into the fire and were preserved in it. Jesus was not spared the cross. He went into death bearing our sin (Isaiah 53:5; 2 Corinthians 5:21) and rose again on the third day.

God with us in the fire. Whatever view one holds of the fourth figure, Daniel 3 shows the God who comes near to His suffering people. That presence reaches its fullness in Jesus, Immanuel, who promises, "I am with you always..." (Matthew 28:20, WEB), and through whom nothing "will be able to separate us from God's love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39, WEB).

Bound in, free out. The men went into the fire bound and walked in it loose. Those who belong to Christ are not promised escape from every fire, but they are promised that the fire will not have the last word.

8. For Further Study

COMMENTARIES (ACCESSIBLE) - DALE RALPH DAVIS, *THE MESSAGE OF DANIEL*, THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY (IVP, 2013). - IAIN M. DUGUID, *DANIEL*, REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY (P&R, 2008). - TREMPER LONGMAN III, *DANIEL*, NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY (ZONDERVAN, 1999). - JOYCE G. BALDWIN, *DANIEL*, TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES (IVP, 1978).

COMMENTARIES (ADVANCED) - STEPHEN R. MILLER, *DANIEL*, NEW AMERICAN COMMENTARY 18 (B&H, 1994). - ERNEST C. LUCAS, *DANIEL*, APOLLOS OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARY 20 (APOLLOS, 2002). - JOHN E. GOLDINGAY, *DANIEL*, WORD BIBLICAL COMMENTARY 30 (WORD, 1989; REV. ED. ZONDERVAN, 2019). - EDWARD J. YOUNG, *THE PROPHECY OF DANIEL* (EERDMANS, 1949).

ARTICLES AND BACKGROUND - ADRIEN LENGLET, "LA STRUCTURE LITTÉRAIRE DE DANIEL 2-7," *BIBLICA* 53 (1972): 169-90. - J. PAUL TANNER, "THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF DANIEL," *BIBLIOTHECA SACRA* 160 (2003). - THE SEPTUAGINT TEXT OF DANIEL 3, IN THE UPDATED BRENTON TRANSLATION (EBIBLE.ORG).

NOTES

1. Regnal dates follow the standard chronology based on the Babylonian Chronicles; see A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (1975), or any of the commentaries listed.

2. The Old Greek text, also attested in the early papyrus 967, reads "In his eighteenth year Nebuchadnezzar the king made a golden image." Nebuchadnezzar's eighteenth year corresponds to about 587 BC (compare Jeremiah 52:29).

3. See the discussions in Miller and Goldingay. Akkadian *dūru* means "wall, fortification."

4. The Greek-derived words are *qaytĕrōs* (compare Greek *kitharis*), *pĕsantērîn* (*psaltērion*), and *sûmpōnyâ* (*symphōnia*). Greek musicians and instruments were known in the Near East before Alexander, so scholars weigh this evidence differently.

5. Adrien Lenglet, "La structure littéraire de Daniel 2-7," *Biblica* 53 (1972): 169-90; see also J. Paul Tanner, "The Literary Structure of the Book of Daniel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (2003).

6. The Aramaic is *hēn ʾîtay ʾĕlāhanāʾ dîʾānaḥnāʾ pālĕḥîn yākil lĕšēzābûtanāʾ*. Whether *ʾîtay* ("there is") goes with what precedes or with "able" accounts for the different translations.

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