

## Chapter 3 - The Golden Statue

### The Image of Gold

*3 Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits. He set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.*

Although speculative, the “*plain of Dura*” is most likely the area just outside of Babylon near the famous tower that gave the city its name. This would seem most fitting considering the events about to take place, but in reality, this location has been lost to history. The implication of this chapter is that Nebuchadnezzar, so emboldened by his position in the previous chapter, established a statue entirely of Gold; 60 cubits high and 6 wide.

An ancient cubit was an inexact measurement, famously the length between a man's elbow and the tip of his longest finger. On average, this was between 50 to 60 cm or 19 to 24 inches long, but by the Egyptian period this had been standardised to around 52 cm or 20 inches. Using this as a reference, the statue was about 3,120 cm (31.2 metres) or 1,040 inches (100 feet) tall and 312 cm (3.12 metres) or 120 inches (10 feet) wide. Broadly, this is as tall as the Statue of Liberty in New York, but only 1/3rd as wide.

Tradition holds that this statue was in the form of a human man made of solid gold, but that is not held up in either the text or in the reality of physics. More likely, it was hollow and was either made of copper, which looks like gold when polished, or was painted as most ancient statues were. Frankly, none of these differences make any impact on the events of the story.

*2 And King Nebuchadnezzar sent word to gather together the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 3 So the satraps, the administrators, the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates, and all*

### Chapter 3 - The Golden Statue The Image of Gold

*the officials of the provinces gathered together for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.*

An often-asked question is why Nebuchadnezzar would create such a statue to himself and have the empire's populace worship it. Nebuchadnezzar had, by this time, completely overtaken a large portion of the world and was now assembling all the leaders of that empire. This was a display of dominance over his officials and advisors; Nebuchadnezzar was showing them who is boss. This was not unusual; Emperors at this time, as in more recent times like Napoleon, were often considered demigods, endowed with divinity on earth. Roman emperor worship was commonplace shortly after Augustus reorganised the Republic and other great kings like Rameses II were considered divine because of their long life, let alone their supposed descent from the Gods. The events here, therefore, are not exceptionally remarkable; Nebuchadnezzar is taking the opportunity to demonstrate his authority over the Empire and have the people recognise that there is no point rising up against a God.

*4 Then a herald cried aloud: "To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, 5 that at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; 6 and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace."*

*7 So at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the horn, flute, harp, and lyre, in symphony with all kinds of music, all the people, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the gold image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.*

The command was issued and the populace. What is not clear here is if this is the entire empire or simply those in the city. This will become important later. But what is clear is that everyone who was present there were instructed, on pain of being burned alive, to worship the image.

## Chapter 3 - The Golden Statue Daniel's Friends Disobey the King

The type of execution here; the fiery furnace, is not as unusual as one might think, except when one considers that there was not really an equivalent to Vulcan or Hephaestus in the Babylonian pantheon. Enki was the god of creation and Nabû of wisdom which both had management over building elements like working with Gold, but there was no, explicit god to work with metals. The punishment here cannot, therefore, be referenced to being sacrificed to a God as tribute for violating their law, unless we consider that Nebuchadnezzar himself is attempting to promote his position as a demigod. Daniel gives credit to “*Nebuchadnezzar the king*” for making “*an image of gold*” and that is plausibly the way that Nebuchadnezzar himself wished to have the statue viewed and worshipping this was worshipping Nebuchadnezzar himself on the throne.

### **Daniel's Friends Disobey the King**

*8 Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and accused the Jews. 9 They spoke and said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! 10 You, O king, have made a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, shall fall down and worship the gold image; 11 and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. 12 There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up."*

Jewish law, as is clear, bans the worship of idols. In God's law, it explicitly states in Exodus 20 that “*4 You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; 5 you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.*” What is noteworthy here is that only three Jews are mentioned, but that does not, necessarily, mean that they were the only three. These three may represent the Jews that they oversee and that they are named because they are the leaders, or they may

### Chapter 3 - The Golden Statue Daniel's Friends Disobey the King

be the only Jews discovered at that time. Irrespective they are singled out at this time to demonstrate that there is opposition to Nebuchadnezzar, and they are stated as Jews.

The statement that they are Jews has two purposes. Firstly, it brings the readers mind back to the events of the last Chapter where Nebuchadnezzar was humbled before God by demonstration of his superior authority. Secondly, it demonstrates that there is a populace in Babylon that may be at risk of uprising or who are, at that moment, showing their displeasure. Their being named and singled out is the easiest way that they could be made an example of.

*<sup>13</sup> Then Nebuchadnezzar, in rage and fury, gave the command to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. So they brought these men before the king. <sup>14</sup> Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up? <sup>15</sup> Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?"*

Nebuchadnezzar gives them another chance and in doing so, he is once again demonstrating the divinity he is trying to achieve. He asks, "*who is the god who will deliver you from **my** hands?*" Nebuchadnezzar was, at this moment, unquestionably the most powerful individual on the planet and he alone had power over punishment on earth. He will use this to demonstrate his power over the Gods also.

*<sup>16</sup> Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. <sup>18</sup> But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."*

These men were tremendously arrogant, bordering on rude, in their answer. "*[W]e have no need to answer you*" is an exceptionally bold statement from what was,

## Chapter 3 - The Golden Statue Saved in Fiery Trial

effectively, a slave. That really was enough to have them executed on the spot, and if Nebuchadnezzar had decided to do that, it would have been a very different situation. But he was making a point. He was trying to position himself and his posterity as the divine creators of this great Empire, and the symbol that he had chosen for that, a golden statue, was made in a furnace. We could read the symbolism into his Empire being forged from the variety of cultures that made up the various states or that he was the fire that kept his Empire active, but this is speculation.

What is clear is that Nebuchadnezzar is trying to make himself a God and that these individuals are opposing that position. They are not discrete about it either, rather they are very bold with their defiance. “[O]ur God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand... we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.” They are bold and assertive in stipulating that they will be following their own tradition and their own Gods.

Of course. there is much to be said of the trust they are putting in the YHWH that they serve. They use the language of Moses when they say that “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us”. He delivered them from Egypt, this pathetic king is nothing. Their faith is strong enough to stand against Kings and Emperors like their ancestors did.

### **Saved in Fiery Trial**

*<sup>19</sup> Then Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury, and the expression on his face changed toward Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. He spoke and commanded that they heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated. <sup>20</sup> And he commanded certain mighty men of valor who were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, and cast them into the burning fiery furnace. <sup>21</sup> Then these men were bound in their coats, their trousers, their turbans, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. <sup>22</sup> Therefore, because the king's command was urgent, and the furnace exceedingly hot, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. <sup>23</sup> And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.*

### Chapter 3 - The Golden Statue Saved in Fiery Trial

Nebuchadnezzar had to follow through, and so he did. Much has been made of the furnace being made 7 times hotter, but this is understandable when smelting metals. Normally the furnace would have been used to heat the metal and make it soft, but he is simply making it hotter so that they could make it liquid. Daniel does not comment on this being at all difficult because the mechanisms were setup to smelt the gold into the statue in the first place.

What is interesting is that Nebuchadnezzar pays the due respect to the position of these three men by having them arrested by “*certain mighty men of valor who were in his army*”. He does not simply send troops, but selected troops, his elite guards to bind them. The urgency referred to in the text indicates that he has simply turned to the guards that were near him and sent them to arrest the three. What’s more, they were simply tied up as they were; there was no time for them to be whipped or for any type of public trial, they “*were bound in their coats, their trousers, their turbans, and their other garments*”.

Nebuchadnezzar is demonstrating an impulsiveness that is not unusual in great leaders but is also a demonstration of the lack of self-control that will get him into great trouble in the next chapter. He demands the death of these men with such vigour and speed that it kills those who threw them into the furnace. These “*men of valor*” would have been missed, and his urgency that led to their deaths no doubt undermined his authority with them, to some degree. He was literally willing to throw away their lives for no gain. But, at the end of this matter, these rebellious subjects were in the fiery furnace.

*<sup>24</sup> Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?”*

*They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.”*

*<sup>25</sup> “Look!” he answered, “I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.”*

The furnace most certainly would have been of substantial size to have these four men walking around but not unusually so. Some of the fireplaces in castles still used

## Chapter 3 - The Golden Statue Nebuchadnezzar Praises God

today are large enough that a number of people can walk around, and the furnaces in powers stations are also, often much larger than this. The fact that this is a large furnace is not as much of a surprising point as others often draw out.

What is surprising is that Nebuchadnezzar seems to know what the “*Son of God*” looks like! He recognises him and is quick to point out that the fourth individual is someone he can identify in this manner. How is this possible? Are there visions that Nebuchadnezzar had that Daniel did not record? Did Jesus reveal himself to Nebuchadnezzar and why? We don’t have answers for these questions, but it is an interesting question to ask. Or, perhaps, Daniel himself was able to fill in the gap for Nebuchadnezzar, but this raises a question, where is Daniel?

Daniel himself is not mentioned in this chapter at all, and his absence is noteworthy. It is impossible to believe that he bowed down to the statue while his friends did not, but he would have suffered the same fate as his friends had he been present. It is possible that Nebuchadnezzar, knowing that Daniel would not have bowed down to the statue, sent him on some journey or errand but we also know that this was a meeting of all the senior leadership of the Empire, of which Daniel was an integral part. There are no answers to these questions either, but it is noteworthy.

### **Nebuchadnezzar Praises God**

*<sup>26</sup> Then Nebuchadnezzar went near the mouth of the burning fiery furnace and spoke, saying, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here.” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego came from the midst of the fire. <sup>27</sup> And the satraps, administrators, governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together, and they saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them.*

Nebuchadnezzar does the logical thing. When he recovers his wits, he calls out to the three men and instructs them to come out of the fire. One can imagine them stepping out and over to a servant to calmly ask for a glass of water with the classic joke like “it is a little warm in here”. Nebuchadnezzar’s leaders all are watching, and Nebuchadnezzar hasn’t just instructed them to come out, he’s referred to them as



### Chapter 3 - The Golden Statue Nebuchadnezzar Praises God

*“servants of the Most High God”*. But the Most High has protected them; they have not had a hair on their head affected although tradition does say that their bindings were burned off. Nebuchadnezzar is humiliated and must now find a way to recover his position.

*<sup>28</sup> Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who sent His Angel and delivered His servants who trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king’s word, and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God! <sup>29</sup> Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this.”*

*<sup>30</sup> Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the province of Babylon.*

And Nebuchadnezzar does recover. He recognises that an *“Angel”* was sent to protect them and demonstrate the power of His and their God to Nebuchadnezzar. He responds by making this a racial issue. The God of *“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego”* is to be protected from any other people or nation across the empire and the penalty for disrespect of the Jewish God is death. Nebuchadnezzar protects Jewish independence but does not withdraw the demand that his statue be worshiped. Nebuchadnezzar instead *“promote[s] Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego”* to higher office and positions himself as a demigod under the Jewish God. Nebuchadnezzar has no interest in stopping his move to be recognised as divine, instead he wishes to be able to point back to this moment and say something like “the God of the Jews taught me what he wished me to do, and I followed”.

The story of the Golden statue and fiery furnace is one of the more mundane stories of Daniel, but also one of the ones that helps us have faith in his story. Every aspect of it simply makes sense. We might never be able to prove it happening, but we can certainly acknowledge that it is a story with a high likelihood of being true, and that should help strengthen our faith.