

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were among those captured from Judah to serve the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1:1–6). They were given Babylonian names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 1:7). After God intervened to reveal the king's dream, through Daniel (Daniel 2:17–20), the Hebrews were given promotions (Daniel 2:46–49).

Chapter 3 contains the famous story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and their rescue from a blazing furnace. This is part of the Old Testament recorded in Aramaic rather than Hebrew (Daniel 2:4—7:28), emphasizing its relevance to the non-Jewish nations of the world. The passage is filled with obvious repetition. This seems to be a poetic reference to the bureaucratic, overbearing nature of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. Daniel exactly repeats the roster of government officials (Daniel 3:2–3), gives the same list of instruments four times (Daniel 3:5, 7, 10, 15), describes the execution device as a "burning fiery furnace" eight times (Daniel 3:6, 11, 15, 17, 20, 21, 23, 26) and refers to the three Hebrew men with the exact phrase "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" thirteen times (Daniel 3:12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 26, 28, 29, 30).

In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he saw a golden head representing himself as the leader of Babylon (Daniel 2:36–38). This may have inspired him to commission the object at the center of this chapter's events. He commands the building of a large golden idol. This might have been a statue, or an obelisk, or some other shape. The king calls representatives from government offices all over Babylon to participate in the idol's introduction (Daniel 3:1–2).

The king commands all those in attendance to bow and worship this image upon hearing a certain musical cue. The list of instruments seems to imply a wide variety of styles. Likewise, the assembled officials represent their varied territories and people. Babylon's conquering influence extended over many regions and cultures. That control demanded obedience, so the king threatens a gruesome death to anyone who disobeys this order (Daniel 3:3–7).

Loyalty and submission were likely the main purpose of this golden idol. In Babylonian society, there were many gods. The idea of worshipping more than one deity was considered normal. By creating this image, Nebuchadnezzar was probably proclaiming Babylon and its gods as supreme over all others. For most people in that era, submitting to his command would have been well within their religious convictions.

Those advisors who survived Nebuchadnezzar's wrath over his dream (Daniel 2:8–16) might have been jealous of the Hebrews who were rewarded. A group from the "Chaldeans," or astrologers, accuse Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego of disobeying the king's command. This is described as "malicious" by a phrase implying spite and ill intent. The complaint is not inspired by loyalty to the king, but by pure hatred for the Jews. It's entirely possible the accusers had no idea whether their accusation was true, but merely hoped to harass the three men or see if the king's short temper would take over (Daniel 3:8–12).

Despite being furious, he asks the three Hebrew men if the charges are true. At the same time, he provides a way for them to prove their loyalty through obedience. Most likely, the king intended to command the musical signal at once so they could bow before the idol. He also gloats about his own power, suggesting that no being, even a divine one, could save them if they refused (Daniel

3:13–15). They have not worshipped the idol, and they will not worship it, even if it means their own death. Instead of fear of Nebuchadnezzar, they express trust in their God. Their Lord can save them, but even if they die, they will continue to obey Him instead of a pagan king (Daniel 3:16–18).

Nebuchadnezzar was already angry. Now, his rage boils over into a royal temper tantrum. He issues a series of irrational commands, all in a spiteful attempt to prove his power over those who dared defy him. The "furnace" in question was probably a lime kiln: an earthen structure with a partially open top and a hole on one side. This is to be superheated, though a normal kiln would be more than hot enough to kill. The three men are to be thrown in immediately, not waiting to have their ceremonial clothes removed. They are to be tied up, despite that being unnecessary. The orders are so absurd, and so urgent, that the soldiers pushing the three men into the furnace are themselves killed (Daniel 3:19–23).

In amazement, the king calls out to the three Hebrew men, asking them to exit the furnace. When they emerge, they have been perfectly and completely protected from the flames. Every facet of Nebuchadnezzar's attempt is a complete failure. He ordered the Jewish captives to die by fire, in their clothes, and tied up. They survived, not even singed, came out untied, and without so much as the smell of smoke on their clothes—and the only deaths were of the Babylonian soldiers who pushed them in. This inspires Nebuchadnezzar to make an astonishing claim: the men were right to disobey his command! Rather than driven to further rage, he is awed into respect at the power of the Hebrew God (Daniel 3:26–28).

Of course, Nebuchadnezzar is not fully embracing the Lord of Israel as the One True God. He still believes in other deities but accepts that the Hebrew God is powerful enough to protect His worshippers. The king's basic personality is also unchanged. As before, he declares his opinion and threatens anyone who disagrees with violent consequences. He then rewards Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in some way. That might have meant even greater power and responsibility, or simply his continued favor (Daniel 3:29–30).

This incident emphasizes the absolute power of God, above and beyond any human ruler. It also celebrates faith in the face of danger.