

# **Followers of the Way**

## **Mid-week Bible study notes from Philip**

### **Daniel: session 1**

In studying the book of Daniel, we're in good company. After the execution of Charles I in 1649, a group called The Fifth Monarchy Men emerged. They took their name from the fact that Daniel sees the coming of four great carnal kingdoms, followed by a fifth kingdom representing the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. Major-General Thomas Harrison, one of the signatories of Charles I's death warrant, was a Fifth Monarchist. He was executed after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, but – seeing the approach of 1666 as significant because of the number of the Beast in Revelation 13:18 – other Fifth Monarchs led an uprising (Venner's Revolt) in 1661, after which the movement was suppressed. So, Daniel's prophesies have aroused strong passions!

Our purpose in studying the book isn't just to increase our knowledge, but to grow in understanding so we can pray and war more effectively for the Kingdom – remembering that our fight is not against flesh and blood but against "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12). Before we get into the text, we need to orient ourselves in time, place and personalities.

We begin in 605 BC, "the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah" (Daniel 1:1). This was when Nebuchadnezzar was made co-regent with his father Nabipolassar, and put in command of Babylon's army. Striking west, that same year he defeated Egypt at the battle of Carchemish, took Jerusalem and deported a number of high-ranking Jews (among them, the young men we read about in Daniel 1:6-7). Nebuchadnezzar was an outstanding general, and a mighty king. He ruled for 44 out of the 70 years of the New Babylonian Empire's existence, dying in 562 BC. Daniel outlasted this king and several of his successors. He was still alive (albeit a very old man) when Babylon was conquered by Cyrus, king of the Medes and Persians – a man Isaiah had prophesied about by name before he was even born (see Isaiah 45:1 and 45:13).

Judah was a troublesome province. There was a revolt in 597 BC, which caused Nebuchadnezzar to take more captives away to Babylon. Amongst these were the Prophet Ezekiel and King Jehoiachin. Captives were taken twice more, in 586 BC (after a two-year siege of Jerusalem that ended with the Temple being destroyed and the city's walls being demolished) and again in 581 BC. The destruction of the Temple in 586 BC took place on the ninth day of the month of Av (aka Tisha B'Av). This date – regarded as the saddest in the Jewish calendar – has marked many other terrible events in Jewish history, such as the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in AD 70, expulsion of Jews from England in 1290, formal approval for Himmler's Final Solution in 1941 and deportations of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka in 1942.

As noted, in all there were four occasions on which Jewish captives were taken, and through these deportations Nebuchadnezzar effectively decapitated the state of Judah. More or less everyone who had education or occupied positions of power or responsibility was removed, leaving the remaining people leaderless – a ruthless but effective way of controlling subject populations.

The prophet Jeremiah was alive to see the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and to write about the aftermath of Babylonian invasion in Lamentations. He died around 570 BC, and Ezekiel at more or less the same time. So, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel overlap. One of the distinctive things about Daniel was that, for the whole of the period covered by his writings, he was at the very heart of the

Babylonian state. He had positions of power and influence under several kings, and was held in high regard by the people he worked with. He was a man who was in the world, but not of it.

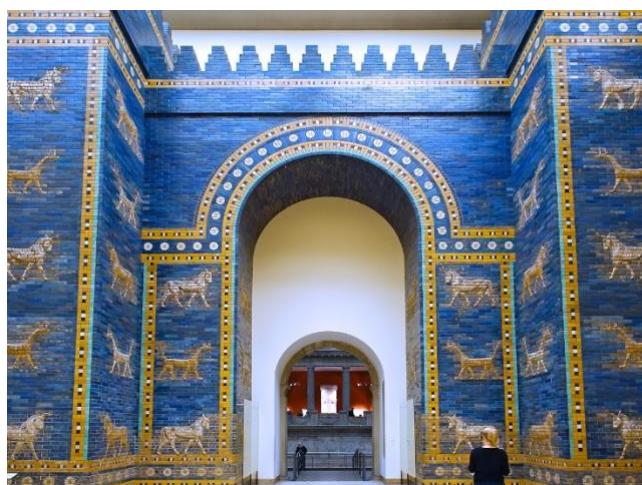
Daniel is written in Hebrew, except for 2:4 to 7:28. This is in Aramaic, the diplomatic and commercial language of the day. It's exactly what we might expect from a Jew living among Babylonians, quoting from copies of texts that were themselves written in Aramaic.

Babylon took over areas that had previously been ruled by the Assyrians, and added conquests of their own. Their heartlands were along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.



*The Babylonian Empire*

Jewish captives taken to Babylon retraced a large part of Abraham's journey from Ur to Canaan. The main ceremonial entrance to the city (from about 575 BC) was the Ishtar Gate. The number of animals and demons depicted on this gate is the same as the number value of the Hebrew word *Sheol* (meaning underworld, sometimes rendered as hell). Jesus, of course, says that the gates of hell will not prevail against His church.



The Ishtar Gate was the eighth gate to the inner city of Babylon, built around 575 BC on the orders of King Nebuchadnezzar II. It was on the north side of the city and formed part of a grand walled processional way leading into the centre of the city. The walls were finished in glazed bricks, inlaid with carvings of animals and Babylonian deities. It is now in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, along with the throne of Zeus (seat of Satan) from Pergamon).

*The Ishtar Gate, Babylon*

In Babylon Jews had to come to terms with the end of the sacrificial system that had accompanied worship at the temple in Jerusalem. It was here that their faith started to be reconfigured around synagogues. Here, too, where they were finally broken of the desire to follow pagan gods.

Babylon was the wonder city of the ancient world. The Greek historians Herodotus and Antipater describe its size and magnificence, built on a grid plan, most houses said to be three or four storeys

high, with the river Euphrates running through its centre. Its impressive defences included moats and concentric rings of huge walls, supposedly so wide that in places it was possible to turn a chariot on the walkway along the top of them. And, of course, the city housed one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world: the Hanging Gardens built by Nebuchadnezzar for his wife Amytis, homesick for the mountains of her native Media. So, we shouldn't be surprised if moral depravity and demon-worship exist in our day alongside great technical and artistic achievement. Babel is what the world calls civilisation.

Babylonians were skilled in astronomy and mathematics, giving us hours divided into sixty minutes and minutes divided into sixty seconds. But they mixed genuine science with the occult practices of their many "magicians and enchanters" (Daniel 1:20). One of their major deities was Ishtar (Astarte, Ashteroth), a storm goddess also associated with fertility. Her worship involved ritual prostitution.

Babylon was built on the site of ancient Babel, scene of a concerted human rebellion against God and an attempt to bring in a politico-religious system contrary to God's purposes. Babylon was the oppressor of God's Old Testament people, and it appears in Revelation 17 as the embodiment of the evil forces that are opposed to God. It's the once and future manifestation of Satan working out his plans through the systems of the world (world government, one-world religion, oppressive economic and financial control, etc). Daniel can tell us a lot about how to live in our present-day incarnation of Babylon. It shows us things in the physical we need to confront in the spiritual. And it reveals future things that we now see unfolding in the nations.

Chapter 1 tells us about the character of Daniel and his companions. Though young (maybe just into their teens), they belonged to the royal family or nobility. Physically and mentally, they were the pick of the crop. (See Daniel 1:3-4).

As Moses was trained in all the knowledge of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22), so Daniel and his friends had three years' training in "the language and literature of the Babylonians" (Daniel 1:4). Most probably, that literature would have included scientific and technical texts.

They were intended from the start for positions of responsibility in "the king's service" (Daniel 1:5). The Babylonians intended to co-opt these young men into their way of thinking, as conquerors often do with the elites of subject peoples. Giving them new names was intended to give a new identity and a new religious-political allegiance. (See Daniel 1:7).

None of these young men allowed themselves to be defined by what other people tried to put on them. Though "Daniel resolved not to defile himself" (Daniel 1:8), the others must have made that same resolution, as they all refused to take Babylonian food and drink. (See Daniel 1:11-14). Compare what Paul says about food sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8.

Daniel was the kind of employee every boss loves. He was always looking for a work-around and he brought solutions, not problems. The chief official he first approached was sympathetic but scared (Daniel 1:8-10), so instead Daniel approached "the guard the chief official had appointed" (Daniel 1:11), who agreed to Daniel's proposal and "tested them for ten days" (Daniel 1:14).

The guard may have acted out of greed or self-interest as he “took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead” (Daniel 1:16), maybe selling this stuff or taking it for himself. God can use even the basest human motivations for His purposes!

## Daniel: session 2

2:1-3 It's unclear whether Nebuchadnezzar couldn't remember the details of his dream, whether he was testing the wise men in some way, or whether demanding to be told what he'd dreamt was just another example of tyrannical behaviour. At all events, it doesn't seem too much of an exaggeration for the astrologers to say, “No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer.” (Daniel 2:10).

2:4 The astrologers answered the king in Aramaic. Here Daniel's account switches from Hebrew to Aramaic. Daniel's position in the Babylonian state (especially as he rose to high office) would have given him access to information he may have drawn on to write what follows. Many cuneiform tablets have been found, showing what detailed records the Babylonian bureaucracy kept.

2:5 The interchange from here onwards is between the king and the astrologers as they (rather than the magicians, enchanters and sorcerers) were the ones who'd normally be expected to interpret dreams.

2:8 In distrusting the astrologers' motives, Nebuchadnezzar combines the astuteness and suspicious nature of a mob boss.

2:9 “You have conspired to tell me wicked and misleading things, hoping the situation will change.” This suggests there is history behind the king's mistrust, perhaps grounded in false predictions given on other occasions.



The walls of the Processional Way that ran through the Ishtar Gate were lined with glazed tiles depicting lions, dragons, bulls and flowers, symbols of the goddess Ishtar. The gate itself depicted only gods and goddesses, including Ishtar, Adad and Marduk. The gate was 50 feet high, with foundations extending 45 feet underground. The Processional Way was over a mile long.

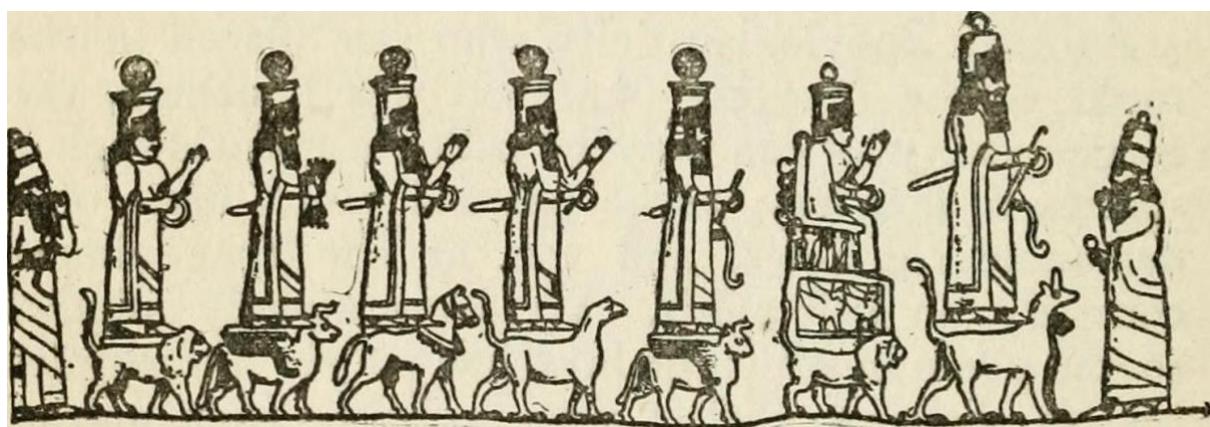
*Detail from the Ishtar Gate*

2:11 The astrologers say, “the gods do not live among men”, but the LORD shows this is false when the fourth figure appears in the fiery furnace. This is a prefiguring of how Jesus, God made man for our salvation, the living Word of God, “became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14).

2:12 Nebuchadnezzar shows the typical overreaction of the tyrant. If there’s any fault, it lies with the astrologers, yet he orders “the execution of all the wise men of Babylon.” This is literally overkill.

2:13 Presumably “men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death” on the grounds that, as they had reached the “end of the time set by the king” (Daniel 1:18) for being schooled in “knowledge and understanding of all kinds of [Babylonian] literature and learning” (Daniel 1:17), they were now considered wise men themselves.

2:14 Daniel spoke to the commander of the king’s guard “with wisdom and tact”, just as he had earlier spoken to the chief official and guard (Daniel 1:9-14).



*Ashur, Ishtar, Sin, Enlil, Shamash, Adad and Ishtar of Arbela are flanked by two star-worshippers*

2:16 Astoundingly, Daniel was able to gain access to Nebuchadnezzar to ask for a stay of execution, and this was granted. God must have caused Daniel to have special favour in high places, as the king had earlier accused the astrologers of playing for time and been unwilling to listen to their pleas for him to reconsider his orders. Once again, Daniel worked cleverly within the setting in which he found

himself. He may have been helped by the fact that Nebuchadnezzar was extremely superstitious and (by Babylonian standards) pious, building many temples. At first, he'd hesitated to attack the temple

in Jerusalem, believing God wouldn't allow it to be destroyed. He only did so when assured by an oracle that the gods were on his side: see Ezekiel 21:21-23.

2:17 Since "Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends", the inference is that either they were all living in the same place or the friends were waiting for Daniel at his home. No doubt they were fervently praying all the while.

2:18 We infer that further concerted prayer was offered by all four Jews.

2:19 The mystery is revealed to Daniel in a vision (not a dream) that very same night. There was no delay in answering the four friends' prayer, in contrast to the later episode when "the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me [the visiting angel] twenty-one days." (Daniel 10:13)

2:21 God changes times and seasons, as this is His prerogative. Later, we hear of the enemies of God seeking to change "the set times and the laws" (Daniel 7:25). God also "sets up kings and deposes them" (Daniel 2:21). He will do precisely this with Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4.

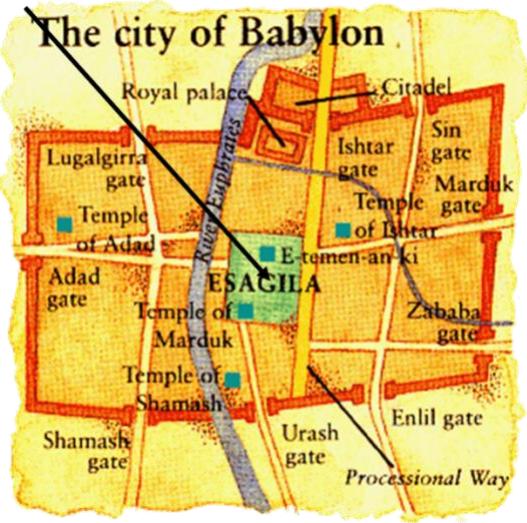
[See Lynda's notes for further details]

## Daniel: session 3

[Daniel 2:24-49]

2:24 Daniel went to Arioch, who we're told earlier was "commander of the king's guard, who had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon." (Daniel 2:14). In Hebrew, Arioch means, "lion-like" – a fitting name for a military man. (A different Arioch, who was king of Elasar and took part in the battle of the Vale of Siddim, features in Genesis 14:1 and 14:9.) It's possible this Arioch was a fellow Hebrew (though this military role would have been an unusual position for a foreigner to hold), or that we simply have here the Hebrew version of his Babylonian name. At all events, he was helpful to Daniel and "took [him] to the king at once" (Daniel 2:25).

2:26 repeats what 1:7 already told us, namely how the Babylonians renamed Daniel as Belteshazzar. Names are always important in the Bible and there must be a reason for repeating that information at this point. Daniel means, "God is my judge", whereas Belteshazzar means, "Bel, protect the king" (Bel, meaning "lord" was a Babylonian god, an amalgam of the chief god Marduk, with Enlil the god of wind, earth, air and storms and Dumuzid, the god of death. Marduk became associated with the planet Jupiter). So, as events bring Daniel into the presence of the king, we see brought into sharp focus the contrast between two mutually antagonistic world views, religious and ethical systems, spiritual allegiances and power dynamics. Though God has allowed Israel to be taken into captivity to further His plans and purposes for His people, He still remains jealous for His Name while they're in Babylon. So, through Daniel and his friends, He repeatedly shows His superiority over the false gods and occult practices of the pagans.



Esagila was the most important temple complex in ancient Babylon, dedicated to the god Marduk, the main deity of that city. The temple area lay south of the huge ziggurat called E-temen-an-ki (meaning, House of the Foundation of Heaven on Earth). Also dedicated to Marduk, this has been suggested as a location of the Tower of Babel. It measured 660 feet (200 m) on its longest side, and its three vast courtyards were surrounded by intricate chambers.

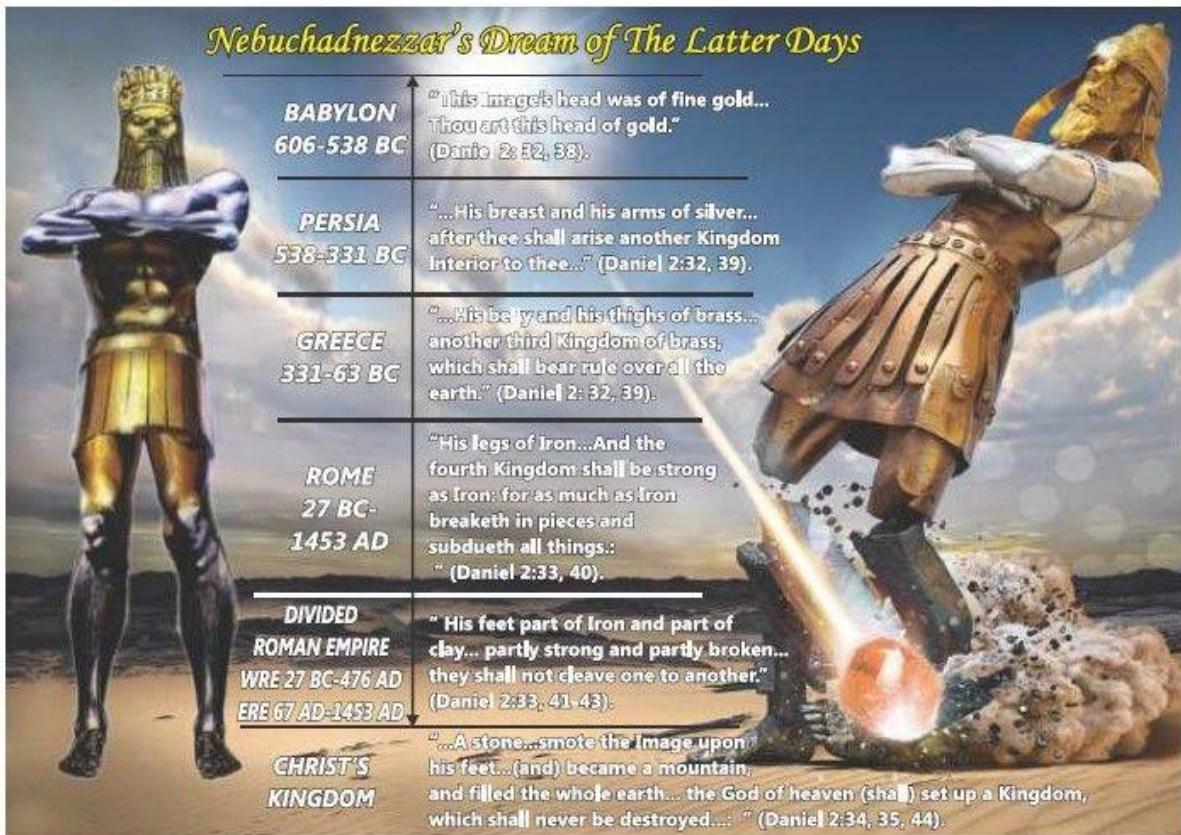
The gates into Babylon were named after gods. **Shamash**, the sun god. **Urash**, meaning earth or secret, the earth goddess. **Enlil**, god of storms and the air, **Marduk** the chief god, **Ishtar** goddess of sexual love, **Adad** god of storms and rain, **Sin** the moon god, **Zababa** god of war and **Lugalgirra** the god who guards doorways and thus possibly the entrance to the underworld.

2:27 Daniel says God “reveals mysteries” and is “the revealer of mysteries” (Daniel 2:29). This phrase is picked up later by Nebuchadnezzar, who calls God “a revealer of mysteries” (Daniel 2:47). But for the pagan, polytheistic Babylonian king, God is only “a” (not “the”) revealer of mysteries.

The extent of the occult practices taking place at the heart of the Babylonian state are shown by the fact that there are not only the “magicians and enchanters” of Daniel 1:20 at work, but also wise men and diviners.

2:31-32 Nebuchadnezzar’s dream was of “an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance, [with its] head ... made of pure gold.” Nebuchadnezzar’s character was like “the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people” (Habakkuk 1:6). Cruel and tyrannical (see his threats against the wise men in Daniel 2:12-13), he drew self-centred and perverse conclusions from the dream whose meaning God revealed to him through Daniel. In Daniel 3:1, we see him setting up a statue entirely of gold for people to worship, no doubt inspired by hearing that the golden head of the statue in the dream represented him (Daniel 2:38).

2:32-34 The gold part of the statue is specifically identified with Nebuchadnezzar, as when Daniel interprets the dream for the king, he says, “You are that head of gold.” (Daniel 2:38). Bible scholars generally agree that the silver represents the empire of the Medes and Persians, the bronze Greece and the iron Rome.



2:39 Daniel's interpretation says the third (bronze) kingdom "will rule over the whole earth." Even if we treat this as meaning "the whole of the then known world" that doesn't really make sense as far as the physical realm is concerned. Though Alexander the Great reputedly wept because he had no more worlds to conquer, there were in fact parts of the known world that he didn't rule. (He took only the smallest sliver of north-western India, for example.) Spiritually, however, this description fits precisely with what we now experience in the spiritual dimension, with the apparent triumph of a secular-humanist world view based on Greek thinking that now predominates across the globe. This is why God says, "I will rouse your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece." (Zechariah 9:13).

2:34 The statue in the dream is destroyed by a "rock cut out, but not by human hands." To seek the meaning of terms used in the Bible, it's often helpful to see how they're used when they first appear in Scripture. (We might call it, the law of first mentions.) The first mention of the word rock is by Jacob, who by this stage God has renamed Israel. Prophesying over his son Joseph, he says, "But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you" (Genesis 49:23-25).

Throughout the Old Testament, God is often likened to a rock: see for example 1 Samuel 2:2, 2 Samuel 22:32, 22:47 and 23:3, Psalm 19:14, Isaiah 30:29, Habakkuk 1:12 and many more. Note in particular the rock God commanded Moses to strike to provide water for the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 17:6) and the "place near me where you can stand on a rock [as] ... my glory passes by" (Exodus 33:21-22). In the New Testament, Paul gave the word rock a Messianic significance, saying the Israelites in their desert wanderings "all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ." (1 Corinthians 10:3-4). (Also compare 1 Peter 2:1-8.)

2:35 In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, "the wind swept them [the statue's broken parts] away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth." We still experience spiritual residues of these four kingdoms – occultic practices, philosophy, false gods, scientific and pseudo-scientific theories etc. The rock has smashed into the statue but is still in the process of "[becoming] a huge mountain and [filling] the whole earth." Note the violence of this process as kingdoms clash (God's against Satan's): the rock "struck" and smashed" (Daniel 2:34) The kingdom God sets up that "will never be destroyed" will "crush all those [other] kingdoms" (Daniel 2:44). Jesus says, "the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it." (Matthew 11:12). He "did not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matthew 10:34).

2:37-38 The sovereignty of God is clearly displayed. "The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all."

2:43 In the kingdom of "iron mixed with baked clay ... the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay." This perfectly describes the eastern (Greek) and western (Roman) halves of the Roman Empire, with the former splitting off to become the separate empire of Byzantium.

2:46 Nebuchadnezzar treats Daniel like a god: he "fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honour and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him." His pagan mind was totally unable to grasp the significance of what Daniel had told him about "the God of heaven" (Daniel 2:44) and "the great God" (Daniel 2:45).

2:48-49 Since there was no discernible spiritual impact on Nebuchadnezzar at this point, we might ask why God gave him this dream. It only seems to have sparked more megalomaniac behaviour on this part of the king as he orders a golden statue to be made. The likelihood is that it was precisely so Daniel and his friends could be brought to positions of influence, as described in these verses.

The Babylonian Empire was divided into provinces, of which the area around Babylon was one. Daniel was the "ruler of the entire province" with his three friends as administrators under him. Daniel had continual access to the king as he "remained at the royal court." (Daniel 2:49).

## Daniel: session 4

[Daniel 3]

According to the Septuagint, this incident occurred in the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign after Daniel and his friends had been in Babylon about twenty years. This was 586 BC, the same year Nebuchadnezzar burned Jerusalem. So, there's a message about God saving a remnant out of a fire inflicted by the things of this world. Later, Zechariah talks of "a burning stick plucked from the fire" (Zechariah 3:2).

3:1 We might think it's unlikely the Babylonians could build "an Image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide" (Daniel 3:1), but this was well within their technical capabilities. The image was "of gold", not of *solid* gold. Most probably, a metal skin was laid over a hollow frame. This construction technique is thought to have been used to make the Colossus of Rhodes.

3:1 There are several possible identifications for the "plain of Dura". The most likely lies southeast of Babylon, where there are mounds named Douair or Duair. Here the French *Expédition scientifique en Mesopotamie* (1851-1854) found what seemed to be the base of a great statue.

3:2 The Babylonian Empire was a vast and sophisticated state with many levels of government and administration: hence the "satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and ... other provincial officials". Though people then didn't have modern technologies, they were no less intelligent than we are, and faced similar issues to ours.

3:3 The phrasing of 3:2 and 3:3 might seem repetitive, but this is to emphasise the power, authority and total control of Nebuchadnezzar. He gave an order, and it was done.

3:4 The herald addressed "peoples, nations and men of every language". The setting up of the gold statue is a human challenge to God on many levels. Not only is it idolatrous, but in bringing together people of every language it attempted to reverse what God did at the time of the Tower of Babel by scattering people and confusing their language (Genesis 11:8-9). Again, we see Babylon standing as an archetype of human rebellion against God and Nebuchadnezzar as a forerunner of the Antichrist.

3:5 Musical instruments are used to create pomp and circumstance, and add a seductive lure to the worship of the golden image. The seducing power of evil is similarly present in our own age.

3:5-6 There's no freedom of conscience under the Babylonian system, and no appeal against orders issued by the state. The king's command is backed up by compulsion: "Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." (Daniel 3:6).

3:7 In this kind of society, the vast majority of people will conform. It takes exceptional people (or ordinary people with an exceptional God) to do otherwise.

3:8 The enemies of God are always looking for ways to attack His people: "some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews", perhaps still smarting from how they'd been shown up when they couldn't interpret the king's dream, but Daniel could (Daniel 2). Satan will use weaknesses like envy, pride and greed to further his purposes. Later, satraps try similar tactics to have Daniel thrown into the lions' den (Daniel 6).

3:12 Like Daniel, his three friends have been given new names by the Babylonians: see Daniel 1:7. **Hananiah** (God is my judge) became Shadrach (Command of Aku), **Mishael** (Who is what God is?) became Meshach (Who is what Aku is?) and **Azariah** (The Lord helps) became Abednego (Servant of Nabu). The new names refer to Aku, a Sumerian moon god, and Nabu, one of the major Babylonian deities. (Nebuchadnezzar's name meant, "Nabu, protect your servant".)

3:12 The astrologers make three charges against the friends: they "pay no attention to ... [the] king"; do not serve the Babylonian gods; and do not worship the image of gold. These address obedience to the civil power, plus inward and outward manifestations of spiritual allegiance.

3:13 Nebuchadnezzar, "furious with rage ... summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego" (Daniel 3:13). What follows shows the unbridled, unprincipled but ultimately futile exercise of human force, set alongside the saving power of God. It also shows tremendous courage, faith and integrity on the part of the three Jews.

3:15 Society would have us believe there's nothing wrong with false worship: "If you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good." The king concluded his threats by saying, "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" Note the repetition of the phrase in 3:5 to show the hypnotic effect of music. Nebuchadnezzar had failed to learn from what happened in Daniel 2.

3:16 We risk being objects of scorn, ridicule and persecution if we don't follow the crowd. We need to know when to draw a line in the sand. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had faithfully served the Babylonian state for years, to such good effect that they'd been promoted to positions of trust and influence. They'd been able to work in ways that still honoured God. But when asked to go beyond what was right, they had the insight, wisdom and courage to know it was a bridge too far and refuse.

3:17-18 The three men acknowledged the possibility that, though God could save them from "this hour" (John 12:27), He might not do so: "the God we serve is able to save us ... But even if he does not ... we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold that you have set up." (Daniel 3:17-18). Alongside this they had the certainty that, come what may, "he will rescue us" (Daniel 3:17).



3:19 The king ordered the furnace to be "heated seven times hotter than usual" (Daniel 3:19). It was probably a blast furnace used to smelt iron ore or fire bricks. Stone was rare in Babylon, so brick was widely used. Brick is normally fired to 1000 C, but Babylonian brick kilns could easily have worked at 1300 C, the temperature needed to produce the coloured glazed bricks used for the Ishtar Gate. The king was probably calling for the furnace to be heated to this higher temperature.

3:20 Burning people alive echoes pagan methods of sacrifice: "They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal – something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind." (Jeremiah 19:5). God says, "Let no-one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire" (Deuteronomy 18:10).

3:21-22 Nebuchadnezzar was so careless of human life that he caused some of his own soldiers to die in the flames. The fiery furnace is an image of hell, a place of flame and torment. So, no surprise it "killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego" (Daniel 3:22) but didn't harm the three Jews. Evil may create hellish conditions for us, but can't consign us to eternal damnation. We're saved from hell by the blood and sacrifice of Jesus, who went through the fire precisely so we shouldn't have to do so.

3:23 Trial by fire is awful to contemplate. Fire can burn, scald, scar and kill, but also cleanses, purifies and cauterises. It provides heat and light, transforms wood into charcoal, and raw ingredients into tasty cooked food. God is often revealed in fire: to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), to the Israelites in a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21), to Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:38) and to the first Christians at Pentecost (Acts 2:3). We're told, "our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29), that

Jesus will baptise “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11) and that we should “not put out the Spirit’s fire” (1 Thessalonians 5:19).



3:24-25 Similarly, God is revealed in the fiery furnace. Nebuchadnezzar identifies the fourth figure in the flames as looking “like a son of the gods.” (Daniel 3:25) and later talks about an “angel” (Daniel 3:28). Many say this fourth figure is Christ. That’s highly likely, as the divine presence not only keeps the three companions alive and frees them from their shackles, but undergoes the same trial they go through. At all events, God was powerfully present.

3:26 Though shaken by what he’d seen, at first Nebuchadnezzar only acknowledged Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as “servants of the Most High God”.

3:27 But this changed when the king was confronted with the miraculous evidence of the three men not only being unharmed, but “not a hair of their heads [was] singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.”

3:28 Then, even a pagan king had to recognise that the LORD had been at work and give Him praise. The result was glory for God and honour for his faithful servants. Yet still, there was no real change of heart on the part of the king, who still talks about “their God” rather than putting his own faith in the LORD, even though he admitted, “no other god can save in this way.” (Daniel 3:29). God was greatly at work, though, and in Daniel 4 we finally see Nebuchadnezzar learn humility.

3:29 To the end of this episode, the king remained a vicious tyrant with only the faintest glimmer of spiritual understanding. He showed no remorse over the dead soldiers and gave no apology to three men he’d treated with appalling brutality. The decree he issued to forbid anything being said against Israel’s God is harsh and leaves no room for conscience. Yet despite himself (like Balaam in Numbers 22-24), a man who tried to raise himself above God ended up raising His name on high.

3:30 Once again, the result was further promotion for God’s people. Though this is the last we hear of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the supposition must be that they continued to offer help and support to Daniel during many of the events described in later chapters.