

### Daniel 3:24-26

#### “Nebuchadnezzar Witnesses the Fiery Furnace”

“Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste; he said to his high officials, ‘Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?’ They replied to the king, ‘Certainly, O king.’ He said, ‘Look! I see four men loosed *and walking about* in the midst of the fire without harm, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of *the gods!*’ Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he responded and said, ‘Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God, and come here!’ Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego came out of the midst of the fire.”

Bible readers should be familiar with the scene of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar erecting a mighty statue of gold to be worshipped, and how those who refused would be cast into a great fiery furnace (Daniel 3:1-7). Among the Jews in the Babylonian Empire, who refused to worship this image, were the faithful Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. They were brought before Nebuchadnezzar, informing him how they would not be unfaithful to the God of Israel (Daniel 3:8-18). Nebuchadnezzar had the furnace heated up seven times more than usual, and these three Jews were cast into the fire (Daniel 3:19-22)—the fire being so hot that their executioners were killed by the heat radiating from the fire (Daniel 3:23)!

When Nebuchadnezzar witnesses the three faithful Jews cast into the fire, he is perplexed (Daniel 3:24). Nebuchadnezzar no doubt assumed that these three would be killed immediately and subsequently pulverized by the flames. Instead he wonders as to why there were *four* in midst of the inferno, walking around unbound (Daniel 3:25). Nebuchadnezzar has Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego come out of the furnace, recognizing that their God has indeed saved them (Daniel 3:26-30), designating these three in the narrative with the Aramaic *avdohi di-Elaha* (*illaya*) [*illa'ah*] (עֲלֵיָאָהָא דִּי-אַלְהָאָהָא (עֲלֵיָאָהָא)), “servants of the Supreme God” (Daniel 3:26, ATS). **All readers of Daniel 3:24-26 recognize how the God of Israel has supernaturally acted to save these three who were faithful to Him.**

As he witnessed *four*, rather than *three*, individuals present in the midst of the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar’s exclaim of the fourth person necessarily should gain our attention: *o’rei’veih di* (*revi’aya*) [*revi’a’ah*] *dameih l’var-elahin* (דְּמֵיִה לְבַר-אַלְהֵיִן) (רְבִיעָאָהָא) (רְבִיעָאָהָא). The Kohlenberger interlinear renders this as, “and-appearance-of-him who the-fourth looking-like like-son-of gods.”<sup>154</sup> A diversity of approaches is witnessed in English Bibles regarding how *bar-elahin* is to be translated, including: “the Son of God” (KJV/NKJV), “a son of the gods” (RSV/ESV, NIV, NASU), “the appearance of a god” (NRSV), “a divine being” (NJPS), “of an angel” (Keter Crown Bible). There is theological dispute as to whether approach *bar-elahin* as “Son of God” or “a son of the gods,” although grammatically both are possible.

Who is the *bar-elahin* of Daniel 3:25, who was seen by Nebuchadnezzar? That it was a supernatural being is obvious enough. The Talmud records an ancient Jewish view that it was the Archangel Gabriel (b.*Pesachim* 118 a,b).<sup>155</sup> The Amplified Bible, while rendering *bar-elahin* as “a son of the gods,” notably places a reference to the *Carmen Christi* hymn of Philippians 2:5-8 in brackets [ ] at the conclusion of the verse: “He answered, Behold, I see four men loose, walking in

<sup>154</sup> Kohlenberger, 4:449.

<sup>155</sup> “Expounded R. Simeon the Shilonite, ‘When wicked Nebuchadnezzar threw Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah into the fiery furnace, Yurqami, prince of hail, stood before the Holy One, blessed be He. He said to him, “Lord of the world, let me go down and cool it off and save those righteous men from the fiery furnace.” Said to him Gabriel, “That is not how the power of the Holy One, blessed be He, is, for you are the prince of hail, and everybody knows that water puts out fire. Rather, I am the prince of fire. Let me go down and cool it off inside, but heat it from the outside, and so I will do a double miracle.” Said to him the Holy One, blessed be He, “Go on down.” At that moment Gabriel commenced with the sentence, “And the truth of the Lord endures forever”” (b.*Pesachim* 118 a,b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt! And the form of the fourth is like a son of the gods! [Phil. 2:5-8].”

The most significant question to be posed from King Nebuchadnezzar’s statement of Daniel 3:25, is obviously whether the supernatural figure whom he labeled as *bar-elahin* might have been some pre-existent manifestation of Yeshua the Messiah. There are liberal commentators on the Book of Daniel (who notably date the text as a pseudegraph composed during the Maccabean crisis of the Second Century B.C.E.),<sup>156</sup> who will disregard any Christological or Messianic association with the supernatural figure present among the three Jews in the fire.<sup>157</sup> At the same time, there are various conservatives, who would affirm genuine Danielic involvement in the composition of the Book of Daniel during the Sixth Century B.C.E., who would argue for the rendering “a son of the gods” because of the perspective of the pagan Nebuchadnezzar. The NET Bible renders Daniel 3:25 with, “And the appearance of the fourth is like that of a god!”, and includes the explanation,

“The phrase *like that of a god* is in Aramaic ‘like that of a son of the gods.’ Many patristic writers understood this phrase in a christological sense (i.e., ‘the Son of God’). But it should be remembered that these are words spoken by a pagan who is seeking to explain things from his own polytheistic frame of reference; for him the phrase ‘like a son of the gods’ is equivalent to ‘like a divine being.’”<sup>158</sup>

A significant value judgment, to be made by readers of the Holy Scriptures, is whether pagan figures like King Nebuchadnezzar can issue a profound truth, and not be too individually conscious of it. Caiphas the high priest is credited in John 11:49-51 as actually prophesying the death of Yeshua, when he was surely not a prophet nor filled with the Spirit of God, at least as customarily understood. It is difficult to dispute that when King Nebuchadnezzar saw the fourth figure in the fiery furnace, that what he intended by *bar-elahin* was “a son of the gods.” But, the word of a pagan King Nebuchadnezzar cannot stand on its own, as it has to be brought into the wider, ongoing salvation historical activity of the God of Israel as witnessed and recorded in both the Tanach and Apostolic Writings. That Nebuchadnezzar spoke to realities beyond that which he could comprehend as a pagan, is something recognized by various evangelical Christian commentators of the Book of Daniel, to be sure. Edward J. Young is one who concludes,

“Through the opening at the bottom of the furnace the king saw a fourth Person, and, although speaking from the viewpoint of one steeped in Babylonian superstition, he recognizes the presence of a supernatural Being, one of the race of the gods. The heathen king, of course, could not recognize the true identity of the One before him. Some have thought that it was an angel who appeared in the furnace, but more likely we have to do with a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Son of God.”<sup>159</sup>

Stephen R. Miller, noting how a widely employed English Bible translation like the NIV has “a son of the gods,” concludes that this is to be the preferred rendering, because this is how King Nebuchadnezzar as a pagan would have understood *bar-elahin*. At the same time, Miller goes on to conclude that the fourth figure, present in the fiery furnace, was likely a pre-Incarnate Yeshua the Messiah:

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<sup>156</sup> This is summarized in the entry for the Book of Daniel in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>157</sup> W. Sibley Towner, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Daniel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), pp 55-56.

<sup>158</sup> *The NET Bible, New English Translation*, 1650.

<sup>159</sup> Edward J. Young, “Daniel,” in *NBCR*, 692.

## Approaching the Nature of Yeshua from the Tanach

“The KJV renders this phrase as ‘the Son of God,’ an apparent allusion to the second person of the Trinity. Either the NIV or KJV translation is possible grammatically. In biblical Aramaic the plural noun *’elāhīm* may be assumed to have the same force as *’elōhīm* in biblical Hebrew, which can be rendered as a plural, ‘gods,’ or as a singular, ‘God,’ when denoting the true God, the plural form being an attempt to express the divine fullness and majesty. In this context, however, the translation of the NIV and most modern versions is to be preferred, since Nebuchadnezzar was polytheistic and had no conception of the Christian Trinity. Thus the pagan king only meant that the fourth figure in the figure was divine.

“From the Christian perspective, we know that the preincarnate Christ did appear to individuals in the Old Testament. Most likely the fourth man in the fire was the angel of the Lord, God himself in the person of his Son Jesus Christ, a view held by many expositors...”<sup>160</sup>

Most English translations today are going to render *bar-elāhin* as “a son of the gods,” to emphasize the place of Nebuchadnezzar, who witnessed a fourth, supernatural figure, in the fiery furnace. Those who think that a wider consideration of data should be factored in, and/or that Nebuchadnezzar could speak of realities unknown to and greater than himself, might think it more appropriate for *bar-elāhin* to be rendered as “Son of God,” drawing attention to a probable Christophany in Daniel 3:25.

The further word of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3:28 is, “Blessed is the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who hath sent His messenger [*di-shelach malakhei*, מַלְאָכָה], and hath delivered His servants who trusted on Him” (YLT). It is hardly unreasonable to propose that the messenger or angel, seen by Nebuchadnezzar, is the significant figure of the *malalkh YHWH* or “messenger/angel of the LORD” witnessed throughout the Tanach (previously discussed). Miller concurs, “‘Angel’ (or heavenly ‘messenger’) could denote an angel or God himself (cf. Gen 18:1-2, 10ff).”<sup>161</sup>

### Daniel 7:9-14

#### “The Exalted Son of Man Whom All Creation Must Worship”

“I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took *His* seat; His vesture *was* like white snow and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne *was* ablaze with flames, its wheels *were* a burning fire. A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him; thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; the court sat, and the books were opened. Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words which the horn was speaking; I kept looking until the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and given to the burning fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time. I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and *men of every* language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.”

Far too frequently, many Christian Bible readers—and even a number of people within our Messianic faith community—come to the conclusion that when Yeshua the Messiah refers to Himself as the “Son of Man,” that Yeshua is referring to Himself as a human. While it is to be observed that there are places in the Hebrew Scriptures where the terminology “son of man” (*ben-adam*, בֶּן־אָדָם; Psalm 8:5) can be used as an essential synonym of “human being,” the title “Son of Man,” employed by the Messiah, has a significant background in Daniel 7:9-14. Not only

<sup>160</sup> Stephen R. Miller, *New American Commentary: Daniel* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1994), pp 123-124.

<sup>161</sup> Miller, 125.