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The Challenge to the Magi

2: 1-13

The challenge to the magi DIG: Why was the king troubled? What did the king ask of the magi? What was the difference between the magi, the enchanters, and the sorcerers? Why didn't Nebuchadnezzar trust the magi with the important interpretation of his dream? What was Nebuchadnezzar's basic problem?

REFLECT: What is one of the most memorable or unusual dreams you have ever had? Who (or what) drives you up the wall with demands? How do you decide when to give in and when to say no? How does Nebuchadnezzar remind you of people who live their life apart from God? How can we find peace?

ADONAI begins to reveal to Dani'el the initial revelation regarding the Times of the Gentiles (see [Ao](#) - The Times of the Gentiles). **He provides an initial overview of the four empires that will govern this period. As the book progresses, God's revelation becomes increasingly specific, reaching their climax in Chapter 12.**

As we turn from **Chapter 1** to **Chapter 2**, the atmosphere in **Nebuchadnezzar's palace** changes dramatically. **Chapter 1** closes with recognition and security for **Dani'el and his three friends**, but **Chapter 2** introduces rejection and danger. Because they possessed almost unlimited power and authority, Oriental despots were notoriously temperamental and unpredictable, and here **Nebuchadnezzar** reveals this side of **his** character (**3:19-20**). However, the hero and major character in **Chapter 2** is not **king Nebuchadnezzar**, but **ADONAI Elohim** who **reveals deep and hidden things (2:22a)**. As you read this chapter, you will witness **the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob** in complete control of every situation, and accomplishing **His** purposes even through superstitious pagan Gentiles. Note the divine activities that protected **His servants** and brought glory to **His Name**.⁴¹

The date (2:1a): The first **thirteen verses** of **Dani'el 2** emphasize the unique challenge **Nebuchadnezzar** gave **his wise men** (an umbrella term used to designate the cadre of professional **advisors** serving in the **Babylonian** royal court), and **verse 1** sets the stage for that challenge. **And in the second year of his reign (2:1a)**. The conjunction **and** is important here (**to see link click [Aq](#) - Nebuchadnezzar's First Dream**). A close reading

of **Dani’el** reveals that **his** training lasted for **three years**; yet here, **Dani’el** is among the “condemned” **wise men** as though **he** had already graduated and received **his** appointment as a member of the royal **advisers (2:14)**. This apparent contradiction can be reconciled when we recognize that **Nebuchadnezzar’s second year** would begin in March/April 603 BC. Hebrew usage, which reckoned fractions of a year as a full year, would have actually been **the king’s** third year. The first year would have been **Nebuchadnezzar’s** year of accession to the throne; the second year would have been **the king’s** first year of **his reign**; and the third year would have actually been **the second year** of **Nebuchadnezzar’s reign (2:1a)**. This introduction simply serves to set the stage for the narrative to follow. Specifically, the scene unfolds in the royal court of **Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon**. The setting of the date was the way the ancients recorded their history and served to mark **the king’s dream** as an actual event.⁴²

According to a proverbial **Babylonian** saying, “Woe and anxiety create only bad dreams.” Humanly speaking, what was troubling **the king** so much to cause **him** bad dreams and sleeplessness? Each year, in the early part of **his reign**, **Nebuchadnezzar’s** soldiers went to the far ends of **his** empire to ensure that the conquered peoples paid their taxes. In 604 BC, the Philistine city of **Ashkelon** had put up stiff resistance to **his** taxation policy. In 603 BC an extra-large army, siege towers and heavy equipment are mentioned in the chronicles of **the king**, and **Babylonian** troops were in the field for several months. **The king** probably worried that other conquered peoples would also rebel against **his** taxation policy.



The dream (2:1b-3): Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; but **his mind was troubled and he could not sleep (2:1b)**. However, **the king** had a group of men in **his** royal court for just such an emergency as this. **So the king summoned the magi** (Hebrew: *chartom*, refers to a magician or wise man, often associated with the practice of interpreting dreams, or performing magic), **enchanters** (Hebrew: *ashshaph*, refers to a class or wise men who were often consulted for their ability to interpret dreams, signs, and omens, and as such, were key figures in the king's advisory team), **and sorcerers** (Hebrew: *kashaph*, refers to the use of drugs, potions, or spells and is associated with "sorcery" or "witchcraft") **to tell him what he had dreamed**. It must have brought fear and wonder to **his** heart when **he** saw a massive metallic image smashed to pieces by a mysterious **stone** that then grew into a **mountain** (see [Aw](#) - **The Kings Dream**).

At this point, however, **Nebuchadnezzar** introduced an unreasonable demand. Instead of telling **the magi the dream**, which **they** could then seek to interpret, **he** declared that **they** would not only have to tell **him** about **the dream** itself, but also its interpretation! **When they came in and stood before the king, he said to them, "I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means" (2:2-3)**. This request was not unusual in ancient times. It was for **the king** to tell **the wise men** the content of **his dream**, and then **they** would be able to provide the proper interpretation. However, the

interpretation of that **dream** was too important for **Nebuchadnezzar** to treat it as a routine matter. **He** wanted to be sure that **his wise men** would give **him** the correct meaning, for **he** must have felt that **his** future was involved in **the dream**. **He** didn't want to hear **misleading and wicked things (2:9)** that **they** made up just to please **him**. If indeed **they** had the ability to interpret **the dream**, then surely **they** also had the ability to tell him **the dream**! **He** wanted the truth. By issuing this impossible challenge, **the king** was unconsciously following the plan of **God** and opening the way for **Dani'el** to do what **the wise men** could not do.⁴³

Despite **Nebuchadnezzar's** power and position as **king** of **Babylon**, in **his** heart of hearts, **he** was like a lost child in the darkness. **His** panic was displayed in the way in which **he** dealt with **his wise men**. In a spiritual sense, **His** insecurity reminds us of those who live their lives apart from **God**. **Nebuchadnezzar** had everything a person could dream of possessing: power, fame, and influence. **He** was in the process of creating an empire that would memorialize **him** in the future and a city whose gardens would be known as one of the wonders of the ancient world. Why, then, should a mere **dream** fill **him** with such anxiety?

The answer is that **Nebuchadnezzar** was a man whose heart was set on goals that would, in the long run, prove to be mirages in the desert. **He** lived an exclusively pagan life; thus, **his** future was always tied to the change and decay of this **world**.

ADONAI, however, made humanity for **Himself**. "The human heart," in Augustine's memorable words, "is restless until it finds its rest in **God**." It doesn't matter whether we are rich or poor, among the haves or the have-nots. In either case, despite **the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things (Mark 4:19)**, **God** desires our peace. Those of us who have plenty are anxious because we want to guarantee that there will always be plenty, and those of us who lack what others have, are anxious until we have it too. So, as long as we think like **the world - the cravings of the sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what we say and do**, we can never be delivered from deep-seated insecurity, the profound sense of torment that haunts our lives if we allow it to. **The Word of God** reminds us that **world and its desires will pass away, but the one who does the will of God will live forever (First John 2:15-16)**.⁴⁴

From this point through the end of Chapter 7 the text is in Aramaic (see [Ac - Introduction of Dani'el from a Messianic Jewish Perspective: Languages](#)), **the diplomatic language of the empire. This is the longest passage using Aramaic in the TaNaKh. The rabbis teach that Hebrew is the sacred tongue, or language, of the**

Torah, and that Aramaic is the language of the common people.

The desperation of the magi (2:4:11): Then **the sorcerers** were horrified at **the king's** unreasonable demand and **answered him** in Aramaic, saying, **"May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it"** (2:4). After offering the customary **Babylonian** greeting to **the king**, **they** were confident of reaching an understanding of **the dream's** meaning because of **their** training in the mantic arts, and also since **they** had access to **"dream manuals"** that documented historical **dreams** and **their** result, explained the significance of **dream** patterns, and decoded the various **dream** symbols.⁴⁵

With the reply of the sorcerers there is a language change in this verse from Hebrew to Aramaic (a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew), and the text continues in Aramaic to the end of Chapter 7. This is the longest passage using Aramaic in the TaNaKh, the others being Ezra 4:8 to 6:18, and 7:12-26.

But **the king** replied to **the sorcerers**: **This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble, cursed, and never to be used again.** But **Nebuchadnezzar** also wanted to encourage **them** by offering incentives: **If you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor.** The threat of punishment, or promise of reward, is common in "court contest" texts in the Bible. **So tell me the dream and interpret it for me (2:5-6).**

Nebuchadnezzar's request was so unreasonable that it failed to fully register with **the magi**, thus prompting **them** to repeat **their** request for a second time. **Once more they replied, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it. Then the king answered, "I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me the dream, there is only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me" (2:7-9).** No longer simply accusing **the magi** of buying time, **he** claimed that **they** were **plotting to lie to him**. In effect, **Nebuchadnezzar** told **his magi** that **they** were doomed if **they** did not reveal the contents of **his dream**. **The Babylonian king's** character was revealed in **his** reaction to **the magi's** request. It is worth noting that in the cameos of **Nebuchadnezzar's** life in **Dani'el** we learn as much about **the king** from **his** reactions as from **his** actions. This is true of all of us. **His** reactions are consistently characterized by a spirit of hostility as well as a sense of insecurity because

he had no peace within **himself**.⁴⁶

The sorcerers answered the king a third time, “There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magi or enchanter or sorcerer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not dwell with men” (2:10-11). The king was furious for two reasons. First, **their** accusation of unfairness questioned **the king’s** sense of justice and hence was seen as an act of insubordination. Second, **they** claimed that whoever revealed **the dream** needed to be in touch with **the gods**. But that was **their** job description – communication with the spiritual world. So, without realizing it, **the magi** confessed that **they** were charlatans . . . deserving of the death penalty for deceiving **the king**!⁴⁷

The decree (2:12-13): This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Dani’el and his friends to put them to death. Nebuchadnezzar’s decree was put in writing and, thus, became official. All of the Babylonian school of magi was about to be wiped out, including Dani’el and his three friends. From the king’s perspective, **they** were members of that school. Yet, there is no evidence in the book of Dani’el or elsewhere that **they** engaged in occult practices. All the Bible has to say about **the four Jewish exiles** is that **they** were loyal to the Torah.⁴⁸

Nebuchadnezzar had no peace because of **his** deep-rooted hostility toward ADONAI. When **the magi** casually mentioned to **him** that **they** were merely human and not **gods**, he flew into a rage. **He** was not prepared to allow **Ha’Shem** to show **Himself** to be the sovereign **LORD** of **his** life as either **a king** or **a man**. What haunted **him** about **his dream** was that (as we shall see) it was as if **God** were saying to **him**, “Nebuchadnezzar, your kingdom may be great, but it will decay and fade away. Only **My Kingdom** will be eternal. **It will crush** every other **kingdom**, and **it will itself endure forever** (see **Bg - The Fifth Empire: The Messianic Kingdom**). No wonder Nebuchadnezzar’s spirit grew anxious in reaction to **his dream**. **God**, not Nebuchadnezzar, was, and is, **Sovereign**. Nebuchadnezzar was one of those who **exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator . . . They** are guilty of **greed, jealousy, murder, dishonesty, arrogance, slander, and disobedience**.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the sovereignty of **God** allowed all this to happen for a reason. It allowed **Dani’el** to come forward and not only interpret **the king’s dream**, but also to give all the glory to ADONAI (see [Av - Dani’el’s Witness](#)).

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for **Your** wonderful, almighty, all-knowing with steadfast love for me! What a comfort it is when awful trials come upon me and I call out to **You**, **You** hear and respond with steadfast love and power. Trials may surprise me, but because **You** are omniscient, knowing all that happens even in the future, **You** already know about the trial and have the solution already planned and prepared! Then trials become small and **Your** glory becomes all there is to live for. **For Your lovingkindness is great up to the heavens, and Your truth to the skies. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let Your glory be over all the earth (Psalms 57:10-11)! May I focus on Your steadfast love, wisdom, always looking up to You in praise, even in the midst of trials. In Messiah Yeshua's holy Name and power of His resurrection. Amen***