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MINISTRIES

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Peoples of the Bible: The Babylonians

The Israelites are the people most prominently featured in the Scriptures, but other peoples are mentioned as well. In this series, we examine what the Scriptures and history tell us about these other peoples. Who were they, where did they live, what was their culture like, and what did God have to say about them? In this teaching, we will focus on one particular people: the Babylonians.

Who Were the Babylonians?

The ancestry of the first Babylonians is uncertain, but they may have come from Noah’s grandson Cush; the first time the city of Babylon is mentioned, it is part of the kingdom of Nimrod, who was a Cushite (Genesis 10:8-10). Babylon was a city located on the Euphrates river; it was in the same location as the modern city of Hillah in south-central Iraq. “Babylon” in Hebrew is pronounced *bavel*, and is sometimes translated “Babel.” *Bavel* comes from a root word that means to mix or confuse, and the city was given this name because that was where God confused the languages of the world (Genesis 11:6-9). Speaking of languages, the Babylonians’ native language was Akkadian, but they also adopted Aramaic as their language for trade and international communications. Akkadian was written using wedge-shaped symbols called *cuneiform* and was designed to be written on clay tablets. Aramaic, on the other hand, used the same alphabet as the Hebrew and Phoenician languages, and its letters were more suitable for writing with ink.

Babylon ruled at least two major empires over its history. One was known as the Old Babylonian empire, which was headed up by the king Hammurabi from 1792 B.C. to 1750 B.C. (Nemet-Nejat 31). The second and even greater empire was called the Neo-Babylonian empire, this one began under the king Nabo-Polassar around 625 B.C. and lasted until 539 B.C., when it was overthrown by king Cyrus of Persia (Nemet-Nejat 43-44). Throughout its history, even during the times when it did not rule the world, Babylon maintained a persistent influence upon the religion and culture of Mesopotamia.

What Were the Babylonians Known For?

The Babylonians were renowned for their advanced understanding of mathematics and astronomy

(Strabo *Geography* 2.3; Cicero, *Divination* 1.2). Babylonian students learned things we are familiar with in mathematics even today, such as determining the hypotenuse of a right triangle, and solving quadratic equations (A. E. Berriman, “The Babylonian Quadratic Equation.” *The Mathematical Gazette*, vol. 40, no. 333, 1956, pp. 185–92). They also kept meticulous records of the motion of the stars and planets, and developed sophisticated systems of predicting their movements (see, e.g., the *Babylonian Astronomical Diaries*).

Another thing the Babylonians were renowned for was their impressive architecture, especially during the time of king Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar built and remodeled many temples and roads. He also expanded, reinforced and beautified Babylon’s gates, including the famous 50-foot tall “Ishtar Gate” (Marzahn, Joachim (1981). *Babylon und das Neujahrsfest*. Berlin: Vorderasiatisches Museum. pp. 29–30). This gate, made of blue bricks and decorated with images of fantastic animals, greeted everyone who entered Babylon by the king’s road. He is also credited with building Babylon’s “Hanging Gardens,” which were considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world (Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.19; W.R. Paton, *Greek Anthology, Volume 3* 9.58; see also John Walvoord, *Daniel* [Chicago: Moody Publishers 2012] pp. 133-135). He also built a “golden image” outside the city that was ninety feet tall (Daniel 3:1). Anyone entering Babylon during Nebuchadnezzar’s reign would have been awestruck by the grand architecture that pervaded the city.

How Did the Babylonians Worship?

The Babylonians built temples which housed graven images of their gods. They worshiped dozens of gods, but two of their most prominent ones were *Marduk*, the god of the city of Babylon and ruler over the rest of the gods, and *Ishtar*, goddess of war and sex. The gods in Mesopotamia were often worshiped on top of mountains, or “high places” (see Numbers 33:52; 1 Kings 3:2-3; 2 Chronicles 28:25; Psalm 78:58). However, in places like Babylon, which were mostly flat, they would build their own mountains out of bricks. These “brick mountains” were called *ziggurats*, and they functioned as temples where idols were worshiped (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.181). The famous “tower of Babel” (Genesis 11:3-5, 9) was likely one of these ziggurats.

The Babylonians practiced fortune-telling and magic. They believed that their gods could reveal the future if people performed the right rituals and made the right observations (see Daniel 2:2). These rituals and observations were called *divination*. One popular method of divination was to ask the gods a question and then examine the liver or intestines of a sacrificed animal (see Ezekiel 21:21). When certain shapes or colors were seen in these organs, they would be interpreted as answers to the question. Divination was also practiced by looking at the patterns of oil dripped into cups of water, watching the paths that birds took in flight, noting the date and nature of birth defects in people and animals, and observing the motion and color of the stars and planets (Nemet-Nejat 198-201). These signs were taken very seriously; many Babylonians would hold off on important projects if they observed bad omens in the stars or other signs of bad luck. On the other hand, if they observed a good omen, then they would hurry up and get their important projects going while the gods’ luck was on their side.

In addition to using divination to predict the future, the Babylonians also used magic to try to influence the gods to do what they wanted. Sorcerers would mix up magical substances and use them in rituals to provide healing, protection, and removal of curses. Necromancers would try to make contact with the dead to receive insight and omens from them (Nemet-Nejat 204-205). People wore amulets and small figurines as charms to bring good fortune and ward off demons (Nemet-Nejat 212). And, of course, offerings were brought to the temples to try to directly win the favor of whichever god was housed in that temple.

How Did the Babylonians Affect God's People?

Babylon exerted a strong cultural influence on the entire middle east, including Israel, for many centuries. God's people took on a number of Babylonian customs, including practicing divination (Ezekiel 13:17-23; 2 Kings 17:17), and giving offerings to the "queen of heaven," which was another title for the goddess Ishtar (Jeremiah 7:18; *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*). God's wrath came upon Israel because of these idolatrous customs (see Ezekiel 13:8-16; 2 Kings 17:6-12, 20).

While Babylon's cultural influence upon Israel was significant, the most direct way that Babylon affected God's people was when they militarily conquered Judah. In 605 B.C., Babylon sacked Jerusalem, and they took many of the Judean aristocracy captive, including Daniel (2 Kings 24:10-17; Daniel 1:1-6). Years later, the Judean King Zedekiah tried to break free from Babylon's control by allying with Egypt, but this effort completely backfired. In 586 B.C., the Babylonians captured Zedekiah and exiled even more Judeans, and they destroyed the temple in Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:1-12). The Jews would remain Babylonian captives until 539 B.C., when king Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and allowed them to return to Judea.

At first, the Babylonians treated the captive Jews relatively well (e.g., Daniel 1:5), but later the Jews faced severe persecution because of their religion (e.g., Daniel 3:4-6; Isaiah 14:5-6; 47:5-6; Jeremiah 50:33-34). This may be why the symbolic woman who is "[drunk with the blood of the saints](#)" in the book of Revelation is called "[Babylon the Great](#)" (Revelation 17:5-6). In the Scriptures, Babylon serves as a symbol of sacrilege and persecution, of a nation that exalts itself over God and over his people.

What Did God Say About the Babylonians?

YHWH condemned the Babylonians' religious practices. Of course, directly worshiping idols was off-limits, but divination and magic were also prohibited.

Leviticus 19:26

[You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it. You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes.](#)

Deuteronomy 18:10-11

[There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead.](#)

The Babylonians also featured heavily in Biblical prophecies. Isaiah and Jeremiah both foretold that Babylon would conquer the kingdom of Judah (Isaiah 39:6-7; Jeremiah 20). Here is what Isaiah said to king Hezekiah about a hundred years before these events occurred:

2 Kings 20:17

[Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD \[YHWH\]. And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.](#)

Likewise, God foretold through Jeremiah that Zedekiah's later rebellion would not succeed:

Jeremiah 21:3-7

Then Jeremiah said to them: “Thus you shall say to Zedekiah, ‘Thus says the LORD [YHWH], the God of Israel: Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls. And I will bring them together into the midst of this city. I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath. And I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. They shall die of a great pestilence. Afterward, declares the LORD [YHWH], I will give Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them or spare them or have compassion.’”

God also foretold through Jeremiah that Judah would be exiled in Babylon for seventy years:

Jeremiah 25:11

This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

(see also Jeremiah 29:10)

Finally, God foretold that Babylon would be overthrown by the Medes and Persians. Here is what Daniel said the very night that it happened, in the famous incident of the writing on the wall:

Daniel 5:26-28

This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

For more on this event, we recommend our teaching: [The Exiled Prophet: Part 6: Writing on the Wall \(Daniel 5\)](#).

Isaiah and Jeremiah also prophesied Babylon’s fall well in advance of it actually happening (see Isaiah 13:17-19; Jeremiah 50:3). God said that Babylon’s destruction was vengeance on behalf of his temple, which the Babylonians destroyed:

Jeremiah 51:11

Sharpen the arrows! Take up the shields! The LORD [YHWH] has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD [YHWH], the vengeance for his temple.

After being destroyed by the Persians, Babylon never rose as an independent nation again. However, this was not the end of Babylon’s mention in prophecy. The name “Babylon” resurfaces again in the book of Revelation, where it is called “Babylon the Great” (see Revelation 14:8; 16:19; 17:3-6; 18:2-3, 21). Many scholars agree that this is not referring to the literal city of Babylon, but it is referring to another city, possibly Rome or Jerusalem, and is equating that city to the Babylon of prophecy (see Isaiah 47 & compare to Revelation 18) because of its idolatry, pride, and persecution of God’s people.

Who Were Some Significant Babylonians in the Bible?

By far the most significant Babylonian mentioned in the Bible is King Nebuchadnezzar. As we mentioned earlier, Nebuchadnezzar was the king who conquered Judah, exiled the Jewish people, and destroyed the temple. He also built up and glorified the city of Babylon to its most impressive state. Under Nebuchadnezzar's reign, the Babylonian empire dominated the middle east, possessing all of the land conquered by the former Assyrian empire, but also expanding westward into the city of Tyre and southward into Egypt. God sent Nebuchadnezzar a dream in which the king was a huge tree whose "top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth" (Daniel 4:11, 22), and this was indeed a fitting characterization of him. For a time, he was for all intents and purposes the king of the world.

How Did the Babylonians Influence History?

The Babylonians had a strong influence on law, custom, and worship throughout Mesopotamia. For example, during the Old Babylonian empire, King Hammurabi wrote a law code that standardized the laws throughout the land. Hammurabi's laws prohibited theft, perjury, kidnapping, neglectful property damage, dishonest money changing, adultery, certain kinds of incest, dishonoring one's parents, violent assault, medical malpractice, and many other crimes that we would recognize today. They also established a minimum wage for various occupations within the empire. The stated purpose of Hammurabi's law was to "bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak." (*The Code of Hammurabi*, translated by L.W. King. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/>). The Babylonians succeeded to a degree in accomplishing these ends, providing law and order along with some level of economic prosperity to many of their subjects.

The impact of the Babylonians on modern culture also cannot be underestimated. Some of their concepts and practices have persisted throughout history, even to this day. Modern practices such as astrology, wearing lucky charms, and consulting psychics all have roots going back at least as far as ancient Babylon (see *Enuma Anu Enlil*; Miriam Said, "Mesopotamian Magic in the First Millennium B.C." Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art December 2018, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/magic/hd_magic.htm). The nation of Babylon is long gone, but their ways of consulting the gods still persist.

What Can We Learn From the Babylonians?

Of all the ancient religious and political systems that were built in opposition to God, Babylon's was arguably the most successful. Their gods became household names throughout the world for generations; their superstitions took root in the hearts of both commoners and kings; their laws provided the basis of justice for many peoples; and their prosperity helped to fill the bellies and the coffers of millions. Just as Nimrod, one of the early kings of Babylon, was a "mighty hunter before YHWH," the nation of Babylon itself stood in proud opposition to YHWH for its entire existence, and no doubt they saw their prosperity and prestige as justifications for their pride. "We must be doing things right," they likely thought, "Look how successful we have been!" Indeed, we see this sentiment expressed by Babylon's most successful king, Nebuchadnezzar:

Daniel 4:30

...Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?

Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar had tremendous glory, which was surely seen as a testament to the king's power and majesty. It was only reasonable to think that the king was doing things the right way. But God showed the serious flaw in that thinking. As it turns out, Babylon only succeeded because God allowed it, and he demonstrated that when he reduced Nebuchadnezzar to madness for seven years, and then later restored him to his right mind (see Daniel 4:28-36). God showed that Babylon's success was only by his permission, not by the king's power. This was not the first time that God taught this lesson to Babylon either; at the time of the tower of Babel, a similar thing occurred:

Genesis 11:4

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

The idolatrous Babylonians thought they could build a tower to heaven to make a name for themselves. In other words, they thought they could impose their system of worship upon the world in defiance of the one true God. So, God confused their language so they couldn't understand each other. God wanted them to know that he was the source of their sound mind and coherent speech. He wanted them to know that they were not the source of their own success and glory.

Today, we see this same Babylonian mentality at work in the world's most wealthy and glorious nations. The leaders of many countries seem to think that their power and success authorizes them to establish their own systems of worship, law, and lifestyle that are contrary to God. For example, according to God, the blood of an innocent man must not be shed, because "God made man in his own image" (Genesis 9:6). However, in many western nations, innocent blood can be shed as long as it is the "mother's choice." The leaders of these nations do not respect the image of God, because like Nebuchadnezzar, they think that they prosper by their own power and therefore they do not need God.

Another example we see in powerful nations is the neglect of the sabbath. God established the seventh day as a day of rest as part of the creation of the world (Genesis 2:1-3), but many wealthy nations do not rest on the sabbath day. They think that their prosperity comes entirely from their own labor, not from God's provision, and so they disregard God's command to rest and acknowledge the work that he has done. Again, this is all part of a mentality that was exemplified in Babylon. Like Babylon, these modern countries have been very successful, in spite of their rejection of God's ways, so how could they be wrong? After all, they have prospered greatly even though they've been rejecting God's commands. We might conclude, God forbid, that God's power really is limited, and that it's fine for us to be wicked as long as we can also prosper. We might think that we don't need God, and we can instead rely upon ourselves for our own provision and our own morality. We might think that we are ultimately in charge of the world, and we shape our own destiny.

However, through the story of Babylon, God shows us that he is in charge of everything. When the wicked prosper, it is not because they are over-powering or out-smarting God, but it is simply because God has allowed it to be for now. God has a plan that he is bringing to fruition, and the nation of Babylon was just one piece of that plan. As YHWH said through Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 27:6

Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him.

God placed the world into Babylon's hands, but only for a short time. Just as God gave them their glory, so he also took it away:

Jeremiah 50:24

I set a snare for you and you were taken, O Babylon, and you did not know it; you were found and caught, because you opposed the LORD [YHWH].

Babylon today is nothing more than ancient history. For all their pride and glory, they ultimately perished. So, today, we should not be fooled when we see wicked men and wicked nations prospering. They aren't triumphing over God when they achieve success while defying God's will. No matter how powerful and wealthy they appear to be, in reality, they have nothing. God can take their wealth and success away any time he wants, just like he did when he confused the Babylonians' language, or when he reduced King Nebuchadnezzar to madness, or when he wiped the entire nation of Babylon out of existence. Today, we would do well to learn from Babylon's mistakes. Rather than exalt ourselves in our pride, we should instead humble ourselves, and ascribe to God the power and authority that he alone possesses.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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