

A BRIGHT STAR SHINES— BRIEFLY

BABYLON RISES, JUDAH FALLS

The Assyrian giant dominated the Near Eastern world for three centuries. But even at the height of its strength, the fierce Assyrians handled the kingdom of Babylon with **kid gloves**—much the way a younger brother might treat his talented, but moody, older sister. For example, when the Assyrian king Sennacherib destroyed Babylon, even the Assyrians saw it as a disaster. Sennacherib’s son spent huge amounts rebuilding the city almost as soon as he took the throne. And the Assyrian kings agreed not to call up the Babylonians to do labor. They didn’t want to be cursed by the Babylonian god, Marduk. A cuneiform document tells us that the Assyrian kings were afraid that if they “imposed forced labor on the people, . . . Marduk, prince of the gods . . .

“ A BABYLONIAN CHRONICLE, A RATION LIST FROM BABYLON, THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS, AND THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Soft gloves made from the skin of a lamb or a baby goat. To treat someone “with kid gloves” means to use a gentle, delicate, or gingerly manner.

“ Cuneiform document, Iraq, 7th century BCE



A striding lion roars fiercely. He is one of the many creatures—real and imaginary—that decorate the glazed brick walls of Babylon’s Processional Way.

B A B Y L O N ' S
R I S E**883–859 BCE**Ashurnasirpal II
of Assyria reigns**704–681 BCE**Sennacherib of Assyria
reigns**649–547 BCE**Adad-guppi, mother
of Nabonidus, lives**612 BCE**Nineveh is destroyed,
Assyrian Empire ends;
Neo-Babylonian
Empire begins**605–562 BCE**Nebuchadnezzar II
reigns**555–539 BCE**

Nabonidus reigns

Neos = new, in Greek.
So Neo-Babylonian means
the new Babylonian Empire—
to distinguish it from the
Old Babylonian Empire of
Hammurabi, more than a
thousand years earlier.

would turn the land over to the enemy” and the Assyrians would wind up doing forced labor themselves.

In the middle of the seventh century, the whole Near East began to churn with rebellion. Power changed hands and thrones were lost as tribes and kingdoms battled against one another. During these years, even Assyria faced enemies who threatened to topple the giant from its perch of power. Its empire grew weak.

The Assyrians and the Babylonians were both Mesopotamian peoples and were related to one another. They spoke the same language, worshiped the same gods, and shared much of the same history. One of the powerful Assyrian kings had even taken the name Sargon in honor of the great Mesopotamian king who had lived almost 1,700 years before him in the region that became Babylon. And yet, despite all that they shared, the two peoples eventually fought.

The sword of power changed hands when the Babylonians and some of their allies conquered the much-weakened Assyria. By 612 BCE, Babylon controlled what was left of the Assyrian Empire. Assyria’s three greatest cities had been destroyed—Ashur, home city of Assyria’s most powerful god; Calhu, where Ashurnasirpal II had built his grand palace; and Nineveh with its magnificent buildings and the world’s first library.

Nebuchadnezzar was the new “strong man” of the Near Eastern world. He probably had a long, curly beard, black hair to his shoulders, and he would have worn the long, embroidered robes and tall hat that proclaimed him a king. We have no pictures of him, but we can guess how he looked from the many images of other Mesopotamian kings since Sargon of Akkad. He was a warrior who spent most of his reign, from 605 to 562 BCE, leading his armies all across his empire, which stretched from Mesopotamia to Egypt. (Modern historians call Nebuchadnezzar’s empire the Neo-Babylonian Empire.) But, like the Assyrian kings who ruled before him, Nebuchadnezzar had a lot of trouble with the kingdoms of the Levant. The Assyrians had already demolished the kingdom of Israel, but Judah was still alive and kicking against its foreign rulers.

King Jehoiachin came to Judah’s throne when he was 18 years old. And that same winter, in March 597 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem, Judah’s capital. The Babylonian records describe the conquest in a matter-of-fact way:

In the seventh year, . . . the king of Akkad [Nebuchadnezzar II] mustered his army and marched to Syria. He encamped against the city of Judah and on the second day of the month Adar [March 16, 597 BCE], he captured the city and seized its king. He appointed a [new] king . . . and brought a huge bounty to Babylon.

The Hebrew Bible describes the same battle in more detail because, for the people of Judah, the Babylonian victory was a disaster: “The officers of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, advanced on Jerusalem . . . and Nebuchadnezzar himself came up to the city while his officers were besieging it. Jehoiachin, king of Judah, his mother, his attendants, his nobles, and his officials all surrendered.” According to the biblical record, Nebuchadnezzar’s soldiers used their swords to cut in pieces all the golden treasures from the temple and from the king’s house. They took the teenaged king captive, along with the whole royal family and 10,000 other Judeans. “Only the poorest people in the land were left” in Judah. The rest were exiled to Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar chose the next king of Judah—an Israelite who he thought would obey his commands. But this new king rebelled just nine years later, in 587 BCE. This time, according to the Hebrew Bible, Nebuchadnezzar “marched against Jerusalem with his whole army” and besieged the capital for two years. “The famine in the city had become so serious that there was no food for the people to eat. Then the city wall was broken through, and the whole army [of Judah] fled at night through the gate.” With its army gone, Judah was helpless. The Babylonians demolished Jerusalem, including the king’s palace and the holy temple.

When modern excavators dug up Nebuchadnezzar’s palace in Babylon, they found documents listing rations that the government gave to various people. On the list of recipients were Judah’s captured king and his family:

“ Babylonian Chronicle, Iraq,
6th century BCE

“ II Kings, Hebrew Bible

“ Nebuchadnezzar’s palace
was built later than
Hammurabi’s, so it’s higher
up—not waterlogged like the
great lawgiver’s palace, which
lies below the water table.

66 Ration list, Iraq, 6th century BCE

THE HANGING GARDENS OF... WHERE?

Centuries after Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Greeks and Romans praised what they called the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The gardens probably didn't actually "hang." Most likely, they grew at the top of a building on artificial terraces. These lush, flourishing gardens high above the earth must have seemed like a miracle to ancient people.

There's only one problem: Nebuchadnezzar never mentioned the Hanging Gardens, and archaeologists have found no trace of them. But... there was exactly this type of terraced garden at the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. The Greeks and Romans were always confusing the Babylonians with the Assyrians. Perhaps they just got the city wrong—again. So the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, might really have been the Hanging Gardens of Nineveh.

- 10 portions of oil to Jehoiachin the son of the king of Judah
- 2½ portions of oil for the five sons of the king of Judah

Babylon was a huge and elaborate city in Nebuchadnezzar's time. The Euphrates flowed right through the middle of it, and a stone bridge connected the two halves of the city. A wide street, known as the Processional Way, led from Marduk's temple to a massive gate in the city wall, which was dedicated to the goddess Ishtar. The Processional Way and the Ishtar Gate were both decorated with bright blue, glazed bricks.

A Greek historian named Herodotus, writing a century



As this German archaeologist's map shows, Babylon was laid out as a huge rectangle, with major streets running north-south and east-west. The palace, Marduk's temple, and the Ishtar Gate were all in the city's eastern half.

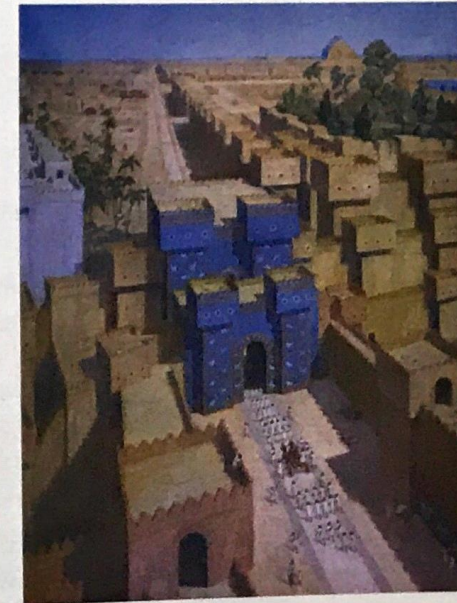
later, wrote that even in decline, Babylon "surpasses in splendor any city of the known world." The king spent a lot of the empire's wealth building up the cities of Babylonia, especially Babylon itself. Excavations there have shown that the city covered three square miles, which was far bigger than most ancient cities in that time. Jerusalem, for example, was only about seven hundred yards across.

The **ziggurat**, a tall, terraced temple dedicated to the Babylonian god Marduk, dominated the skyline for miles around. It was built of baked bricks in seven huge steps, each step smaller than the one below it, with a staircase leading all the way from the ground to the shrine at the top. Unfortunately, none of its multi-colored bricks have survived. They were all stolen or re-used in later buildings.

The thousands of people deported from Judah must have been overwhelmed when they first came to Babylon. It was an international place that included people from all across the empire and beyond—people who spoke many different languages and who worshiped many different gods. The Israelites who came from Judah wrote songs, called Psalms, during their captivity in Babylon. Many of them show how much the exiles missed their home, especially Zion (another name for Jerusalem).

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs...
[but] How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?

Ziggurat is our spelling of the Akkadian word *ziqquratu*, which means "temple tower" or sometimes "mountain peak." It comes from a verb *zaqaru*, which means "to build high."



This modern painting of Babylon shows a city crowded with buildings and a grand street, known as the Processional Way, leading from the city's Ishtar Gate to Marduk's great temple. Ancient records and archaeological evidence agree that the Euphrates River flowed right through the middle of Babylon.

66 Psalms, Hebrew Bible

DANIEL IN THE LIONS' DEN

In the second century BCE, long after Nebuchadnezzar's reign, a Jewish author wrote the Book of Daniel. This biblical story, set in Nebuchadnezzar's time, centers on an Israelite named Daniel, who lived in Babylon. Daniel had a gift for interpreting dreams, which both the Israelites and the Babylonians believed could carry messages from God or the gods. Daniel even interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. Some of the king's advisers were jealous of Daniel's influence with the king. So they tricked the king into passing a law that would have kept Daniel from worshipping God for 30 days. When Daniel was caught praying, he was thrown into a den of hungry lions. Daniel's enemies thought that they had won—but Daniel escaped without a scratch. Daniel explained to the king, "my God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not hurt me."



When Nebuchadnezzar built the dramatic Ishtar Gate into Babylon, he commanded his artists to cover its glazed surface with colorful sculptures, proclaiming the greatness of Babylon and its god Marduk.

The Israelites, whom we now call Jews because they were the people of Judah, may have thought that they'd never return to Judah. It was difficult to live in a new place. But they didn't give up their beliefs. Instead, during their exile in Babylon, new prophets arose telling them that God loved them. These prophets told them that their God was the only God—that the Babylonians' gods were just pieces of wood. They realized that they could worship God wherever they were. Jewish writers and editors began to collect, arrange, and edit the books of the Hebrew Bible. They wanted to make sure the people would remember their beliefs and history.

In spite of the sad tone of the psalms, the Jews seem to have adjusted to life in Babylon and even prospered there. When they eventually got the chance to return to Judah, decades later, some returned. But many chose to stay in Babylon. And today there are still a few Jews who say that their families lived in Iraq for more than 2,500 years.