

Chapter 5

Babylon

(626 - 539 B.C.)

Of all the civilizations that shaped the context of biblical history, it may be that Babylon represents the most important, both from a historical, and also from a symbolic standpoint. Babylon not only played a major role in much of the Old Testament historical and prophetic events, but it also stood for the power of an idolatrous Gentile world. Beginning with the Tower of Babel, the forces of pagan might found their expression in Babylon. It is no accident that the entire Bible culminates in a vision of a great “Babylon” that finally came under the judgment of God.

Our previous discussions have covered the general history of Babylon up to the period often called the Neo-Babylonian Empire (626 - 539). The history began with Sumer and Akkad, after which the great empire of Hammurabi dominated until it fell to the Hittites in 1595. The Kassite period (1580 - 1180), and the era in which Babylon came un-

der the domination of Assyria (900 - 612), were discussed in the chapter on Assyria. Here we will restrict our attention to that time in which Babylon reached the pinnacle of its power, picking up the story with Nabopolassar, the founder of the dynasty that dominated this remarkable period.



Courtesy: Josep Renalias

Nabopolassar (626 - 605):

Things had remained fairly quiet in Babylon since the problems involving Mero-dach-Baladan had been put down in about 700, with the exception of the minor skirmish related to Shamash-shum-ukin's rebellion against his brother Ashurbanipal in 653. All through those years, the Babylonians had generally been content to view themselves as a province of Assyria, but when Ashurbanipal died in 627, along with his Babylonian puppet Kandalanu, things began to destabilize throughout Mesopotamia. Ashurbanipal's son, Saracus, seized the Babylonian throne, hoping to succeed Kandalanu, but this claim was immediately challenged by Nabopolassar. Of native Sumerian descent, he had already been recognized as king of the Sea-Land, and when he attacked Babylon, Saracus was forced to flee to Nineveh, abandoning the city to the Chaldaean, a loss that came as a shock to the Assyrians, who had come to view Babylon as something of their "spiritual" capital. Once back in Assyria, Saracus challenged his brother Ashur-etil-ilani for the Assyrian throne, provoking a civil war that lasted for about three years.



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The reign of Nabopolassar launched the eleventh and last dynasty of Babylon, and represented success by Nabopolassar where Merodach-Baladan had failed. He established the native Chaldaeans, not only as successors to the Assyrians, but for a time as the dominant political power in all the Near East. His rise was hardly effortless, however, as political upheaval in both Babylonia and Assyria lasted for years, and the final outcome remained uncertain with constant disruption and struggle inspired by both pro- and anti-Assyrian forces vying for supremacy. The problem was so severe that at times no king was recognized, but Nabopolassar nevertheless gradually secured his position, while at the same time maintaining control of Sumer and Akkad.

In Assyria, things were equally unstable, with internal conflicts bordering at times on civil war. This conflict continued until 623, when Saracus finally defeated and killed Ashur-etil-ilani, and became the sole ruler of Assyria. He then intensified his war on Nabopolassar, pursuing for some seven years an effort to win back his lost domains. This Babylonian war probably distracted Saracus from noticing a new threat rising in the east, centered in the Median king Cyaxeres, son of Phraortes.

Cyaxeres and the Medes had been languishing under the Scythians for some 28 years, but he was finally able to dislodge the barbarian hordes in about 625.¹ As soon as Cyaxeres had reclaimed uncontested rule, he began to organize a fighting force that incorporated not only Medes, but also the Persians to the south, and the Bactrians to the east. Thus, while Saracus depleted his energies battling with Nabopolassar, Cyaxeres built up his forces, waiting for the optimum moment to launch his attack on the mighty Assyrian empire, hoping thereby to liberate Media and avenge the death of his father.

Josiah and Jeremiah

While Mesopotamia was thus engaged, Judah gradually recovered from the unhappy effects of Manasseh's evil reign. The "reforming" king Josiah had ascended the throne in 640 when he was only eight years old, but in 632, when he was in his mid-teens, he was jolted by his cousin, the prophet Zephaniah, whose "scorched-earth" message must have awakened in the young king alarm over the moral state of his kingdom. Josiah's greatest reforming efforts, however, did not begin in earnest until about 627, the year that Ashurbanipal died, when the prophet Jeremiah was commissioned as a young man to be one of the greatest prophets to the people of God.²

Five years later, under the influence of Jeremiah, Josiah commanded that the temple be completely refurbished. While cleaning out the rubbish that had accumulated during Manasseh's reign, a "book" was discovered by Hilkiah the high priest. Some controversy surrounds the question of what "book" was found, that is, whether it was the entire Torah, or simply the Book of Deuteronomy. Be that as it may, the book was read to Josiah, and when he heard it, he "tore his clothes" in grief. Recognizing the extent of Judah's disobedience, he feared there might be no hope that the people of God could avoid the judgments described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. He inquired of the prophetess, Huldah, asking if there was any way the promised judgments could be averted. Her answer was "no," but she did encourage Josiah by acknowledging his heartfelt grief over the sin of the people, and promising that the inevitable judgments would not come during his reign.³



**The figure of Jeremiah on the
Sistine Chapel ceiling,
by Michelangelo.**

1. According to Herotodus (1:106), Cyaxeres induced the Scythian chieftains to over drink at a feast, and then slew them *en masse*.
2. Jeremiah 1
3. 2 Kings 22:3-20; 2 Chr. 34:8-28

Josiah then launched the most extensive set of reforms ever championed by a king in Jerusalem. He renewed the covenant with the LORD before all the people, publicly reading the entire book of the law. He rid the temple of its vestiges of paganism, and tore down the high places, pulverizing the pagan idols in the Valley of Hinnom, and driving out their priests, burning the bones of those who had died. He then led the people of God in the greatest Passover celebration ever observed, reinstating the standards of worship, providing burnt offerings for the people, and calling all Israelites to a great covenant renewal.¹



The Valley of Hinnom as it appears today

Courtesy: Deror avi

Jeremiah was called as a prophet in Josiah's 13th year (627), and was told by God that he would both "destroy and tear down" but also "build and plant." Many believe that the first twenty chapters of Jeremiah merely distill the message he proclaimed during the years of Josiah's reign, encouraging Josiah's reforming efforts with messages of both warning and hope. He contrasted God's faithfulness to the people's unfaithfulness, as he accused them of "playing the harlot" with their idolatry (Jer. 2). Warning of an imminent invasion from the north, he expressed his deep sorrow for the doomed nation (Jer. 3, 4), but asked how God could not judge them, given the persisting idolatry that was shot through their culture (Jer. 5).

In spite of Jeremiah's warnings and Josiah's reforms, the people generally refused to listen. They comforted themselves with assurances of "peace, peace, when there is no peace" (Jer. 6), believing that their worship in "the temple of the LORD" would excuse their sinful practices, even though similar practices had brought judgment on Samaria (Jer. 7). Jeremiah announced God's judgment on obscene religious practices, and the failure of the religious leaders to call the people to account (Jer. 8 - 13). A severe famine created the opportunity for Jeremiah to warn the people that the harsh times were from God, to warn them, but they nevertheless listened to the false prophets who only prophesied that "good times" were coming (Jer. 14 - 16). He traced the persisting rebellion of the people to the "wicked heart" of each person as he refused to hear the word of the LORD (Jer. 17 - 19).

1. 2 Chr. 35:1-19

The prophecy of Jeremiah won him persecution at the hands of Pashur, the high priest, who had Jeremiah placed in stocks and beaten. Although Jeremiah pronounced a prophetic judgment against Pashur, he also cried out his complaint that the LORD had “induced,” (lit., *raped*) the prophet, calling him to a ministry that would result in the great abuse he sustained for so many years (Jer. 20).

The Return of the Medes

By 616, Nabopolassar had successfully defended his domains against the attacks of Saracus for some seven years, and Assyria now found itself facing mounting disarray throughout the remains of its empire. At the same time, Cyaxeres had reorganized the armies of Media and Persia, while the Elamites, who came to be called Susianans, had also recovered some degree of independence. Josiah was implementing religious reforms that reached even to Samaria, which had been an Assyrian possession, and the Phoenicians had also severed their ties with Nineveh.

Assyria had never been so vulnerable, and Nabopolassar decided the time was ripe to turn the tables and take the offensive against his northern adversary. In May, he led his armies up the Euphrates to Haran, and from there he marched east, finally laying siege to Assur, although he did not succeed in taking the ancient Assyrian capital. Saracus, now on the defensive for the first time, sought and obtained an alliance with the aging Psammetichus of Egypt, who was himself alarmed both at the aggression of the Babylonians, and also at the progress of the Medes. Saracus’s appeal to Egypt shows how desperate Assyria’s situation had become, because it had been less than 50 years since Ashurbanipal had sacked Thebes, leaving Egypt with bitter memories that rendered it an unlikely ally to Assyria. Psammetichus nevertheless agreed to help, apparently recognizing that the Babylonian threat might eventually reach even his own doorstep, and that it would be wise to rebuff the aggressors early. The prospect of Egyptian participation apparently caused Nabopolassar to withdraw from Assyria, although as it turned out, the Egyptians did not actually appear on the scene until it was much too late to do any good.

The following year, Nabopolassar launched another bold attack upon Assyria, focusing again on Assur, but he was again forced to withdraw to the south, this time taking refuge in Tikrit where he found himself besieged by the Assyrian army. Nabopolassar might have met with disaster, but for the unexpected intervention of Cyaxeres, who had been watching for an opportunity to invade, and took the conflict with Babylon as affording such an opportunity. He rallied forces from the Medes, and also from the Persians and Susianans, who had also long harbored hostility against the Assyrians, and who were more than willing to join Cyaxeres in his enterprise.



Greek Catholic icon depicting the prophet Jeremiah praying and begging towards the skies to save Jerusalem.

Courtesy: Wikipedia (Jojojoe)

Cyaxeres envisioned a two-fold attack on Assyria, with the Susianans approaching from the south while the Medes marched from the east. Saracus, who was still occupied with Nabopolassar, recognized that this attack by the Medes could be catastrophic, and having yet to receive help from Egypt, he turned in desperation to Nabopolassar himself for assistance! Offering to share the spoils of victory over Cyaxeres, he made a treaty with the Babylonian in which Nabopolassar “agreed” to handle the attack by the Susianans, while Saracus would meet the Median assault from the east. Not surprisingly, as soon as he was free from Saracus’s pressure, Nabopolassar broke his agreement with Assyria, and joined the Medes and Susianans.

In his first two encounters with the Medes, Saracus was successful, but in their third attack, the Medians struck at night, and routed the Assyrian army, forcing it to retreat to Nineveh. After taking the town of Arrapha, Cyaxeres made an attempt on Nineveh itself. The defenses of the great city held, and instead of forcing the issue, Cyaxeres left Nineveh and marched south to Assur, where he captured, sacked, and looted the old Assyrian capital. Nabopolassar, hoping to get in on the kill, marched north, but failed to arrive until after Assur had fallen. The two kings

met for the first time under the walls of Assur and there they established an agreement of mutual friendship and peace which would last for many years. The alliance was sealed by the marriage of Nabopolassar’s son, Nebuchadnezzar, with Cyaxeres’s granddaughter, Amytis. Years later when he was king, Nebuchadnezzar built the famous “hanging gardens” of Babylon for his Median wife.



A 16th century artist's depiction of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

With the Babylonians and Medes fighting hand in hand, Assyria was doomed, but Saracus seemed to have had no clue of its peril. In fact, in 613 he actually took the offensive, marching south against the Babylonians who were occupied at that moment with a local tribal revolt. The attack by Saracus was unsuccessful, and the following year, a coalition of Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians laid siege to Nineveh. Although the besiegers made little progress at first, an untimely flood of the Tigris breached Nineveh’s defenses allowing the besiegers to launch a full scale attack which the great city could not withstand.

By the end of 612, Assyria's three main cities, Assur, its religious center, Nineveh, its administrative center, and Nimrud, its military center, had been destroyed. Saracus was dead, but one of his officers, Ashur-uballit, rallied what was left of the Assyrian army and fled to Haran, shutting himself up in the city with a modest force from Egypt that had at last arrived to help out. The vast Assyrian dominions were meantime divided between the Medes and Babylonians. Nabopolassar took Susiana, Mesopotamia, the valley of the Euphrates all the way to Carchemish, and the whole of Syria and Palestine. Cyaxeres inherited the remainder, including the northern regions of Armenia and all of Asia Minor. As we will see in the next chapter, Cyaxeres pressed his campaign over the next ten years, especially pushing westward across Anatolia. With respect to Babylonia, however, he cultivated a friendly relationship that lasted for many years.

The nominal Assyrian kingdom set up by Ashur-uballit in Haran fell to the Babylonians in 610, after which Nabopolassar established a garrison there and launched several campaigns into the surrounding hill country. The beleaguered Ashur-uballit fled again, this time to Carchemish, where he continued to wait and hope for further help from the Egyptians. A modest Babylonian army under crown prince Nebuchadnezzar pursued Ashur-uballit to Carchemish and put him under siege.

As it turned out, Egypt was finally prepared to act. Necho II (610 - 595), the second of the Saite (26th) Dynasty, had succeeded his father Psammetichus in the same year that Haran fell. The new Pharaoh was aware of Assyria's dire circumstances, and was probably impatient with his father's inaction in the face of Assyria's cry for help. Of course, Necho was less interested in rescuing Assyria than in exploiting an opportunity to expand his own domains. He was a young and ambitious ruler with a sweeping vision for a greatly enhanced role for Egypt in the Near East. Necho also recognized that Babylon represented the greatest threat to his planned expansion, especially after the fall of Assyria. He thus took Assyria's call for help as his opportunity to realize some of his own expansive plans. Cloaking his real motives in the mantle of a rescue mission, Necho hoped to seize much of Assyria's possessions. He planned to sweep into Syria and recover domains long lost to the land of the pharaohs.

Necho marched north in 609, first taking Ashdod, the doorway to Palestine. From there he headed for Carchemish where Ashur-uballit was still holding out against the Babylonian siege. Planning to attack the Babylonians, and liberate Carchemish along with the remnants of the Assyrian army, Necho met an unexpected adversary in the person of King Josiah of Judah. The reasons for Josiah's attack on the Egyptian army are not certain. Josiah had undoubtedly been deeply influenced by Jeremiah, who had consistently declared that God would use the Babylonians to chastise all the surrounding nations, including Judah itself. Josiah may have thought he was "fighting for the angels," as he defended the Babylonians from an attack. Knowing that Babylon would be God's instrument of judgment, he saw the Egyptians as the opponents of God's plan. Josiah was probably well-intentioned, but misguided, and it cost him dearly.



A small kneeling bronze statuette of Necho II now residing in the Brooklyn Museum

Courtesy: Keith Schengili-Roberts

When Necho learned that Josiah was planning to meet him in battle, he sent word to the Jewish King urging him to return home. He essentially told Josiah to mind his own business, that Necho's dispute involved the Babylonians and not Judah (II Chr. 35:20 – 27). Josiah would have been wise to take Necho's advice. As it turned out, he was mortally wounded in the plain of Megiddo in 609, and died shortly thereafter. The loss to Judah was incalculable, so much so that the word "Megiddo" came to be proverbial in Israel, not unlike the word "Waterloo" in more modern times.

Josiah died at age 40, the last good king to reign in Jerusalem. The whole nation mourned its fallen leader, including Jeremiah, who composed a lament in celebration of the great reforming king. Josiah had two sons, Eliakim and Jehoahaz, and for reasons that are not explained, the people placed Jehoahaz, the younger of them, on the throne (II Chr. 36:1-3).

Necho proceeded north after the battle of Megiddo, reaching Carchemish in the late summer, and he proceeded to attack and drive off Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. He took control of Carchemish, leaving there an Egyptian garrison, but he was not able or willing to reinstate the Assyrian ruler, and Ashur-uballit quietly disappeared from the pages of history, along with the empire he had represented. Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon where he regrouped and began preparing for a much larger attack on the Egyptians at a later time.

Necho returned to Egypt, flush from his victories over both Josiah and Nebuchadnezzar, but on the way he stopped at Jerusalem to finish business in the state of Judah. Jehoahaz had no stomach to resist the armies of Egypt, and immediately surrendered to Necho, who deposed the Jewish king and took him prisoner to Egypt where he eventually died, just as Jeremiah had predicted (Jer. 22: 11, 12). Necho replaced Jehoahaz with his older brother, Eliakim, changing his name to Jehoiakim (608 - 597), who agreed to pay heavy tribute to Necho, and taxed the land accordingly. As Necho left Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah warned that in spite of Egypt's victory at Carchemish and momentary glory, its successes would be transient, and that Babylon would soon return and reverse the fortunes of Necho and his armies (Jer. 46).



King Josiah on a 17th century painting by unknown artist in the choir of Sankta Maria kyrka in Åhus, Sweden.

Sometime around 608 the prophet Habakkuk brought his complaining message, a prayer of protest and objection, to God. He asked how long God would permit the rampant violence and plundering against the people of God to persist. The reply of God was hardly comforting. Things would actually get worse, as God was raising up the Babylonians to sweep across the world bringing judgment on His rebellious people. To this Habakkuk raised his second question. How could God use the Babylonians as a means to judge those more righteous than they? The response to this question assured Habakkuk that, although God would use the unrighteous Babylonians to accomplish his purpose, those conquerors would themselves certainly not escape God's judgment for their bloodthirsty ways. Habakkuk concluded his prophecy with a great prayer-psalm, recorded in the third chapter of his prophecy, in which he celebrated God's power and rule over the nations, His majesty and holiness, and the assurance that although there may be times of discipline and chastisement, God's promises will never fail.

In May 605, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Carchemish with a much larger Babylonian force and attacked the Egyptian garrison which, reinforced by Greek mercenaries, put up strong resistance with heavy slaughter on both sides. Finally, however, the Egyptians were overwhelmed and massacred or captured (Jer. 46:12), and thus the Battle of Carchemish became the defining moment for the sweeping victories to be won by the man who would be the greatest king of Babylon. With the fall of Carchemish, the whole of Syria-Palestine now lay open to Nebuchadnezzar, who pursued the Egyptians through the entire region, taking control of all of it without a fight. Included among his conquests was Jerusalem itself, where Jehoiakim surrendered without resistance and became a Babylonian vassal.

Nebuchadnezzar pressed his campaign against Egypt all the way to Pelusium, and would have swept into Egypt, challenging Necho on his home turf, except for the unexpected death of Nabopolassar on August 16, 605. Wasting no time, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon in just twenty three days, although he stopped briefly in Jerusalem and took King Jehoiakim prisoner, along with a number of other Jewish nobility, and certain articles from the temple, all of which he intended to display as "trophies" proving his military prowess, thus to discourage any who might challenge his succession. Among the nobility taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar were four young Jewish men named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Dan. 1).



Statue of Habakkuk by Donatello, in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo of Florence.

Nebuchadnezzar (605 - 562)

Nebuchadnezzar (Nabu-kudurri-usur), one of the most famous rulers in ancient history, was a man of exceptional talent, both militarily and organizationally, and to this day his surviving monuments are without rival in Mesopotamia. The Babylon described by Herodotus was largely the work of Nebuchadnezzar's architects, and there are, of course, many biblical references to the great king, although his campaigns against Jerusalem were only a small part of his wide involvement in the Middle East.

Nebuchadnezzar's unchallenged coronation took place on September 23, 605. He then restored Jehoiakim as his vassal in Jerusalem, although he retained many of the other nobility in Babylon, choosing a few of the brightest and best to be enrolled in the Babylonian educational system. Ordering that they be fed with the finest of Babylonian food, and given every other accommodation, he was undoubtedly intending to seduce these young exiles with the splendor of Babylon, and ingratiate them to Nebuchadnezzar, with the ultimate objective of reinstating them in their native lands as loyal Babylonian bureaucrats.



Clay barrel cylinder describing one of Nebuchadnezzar II's building projects (Neo-Babylonian Period) on display at the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose, California. RC 1780

Courtesy: Wikipedia (BrokenSphere)



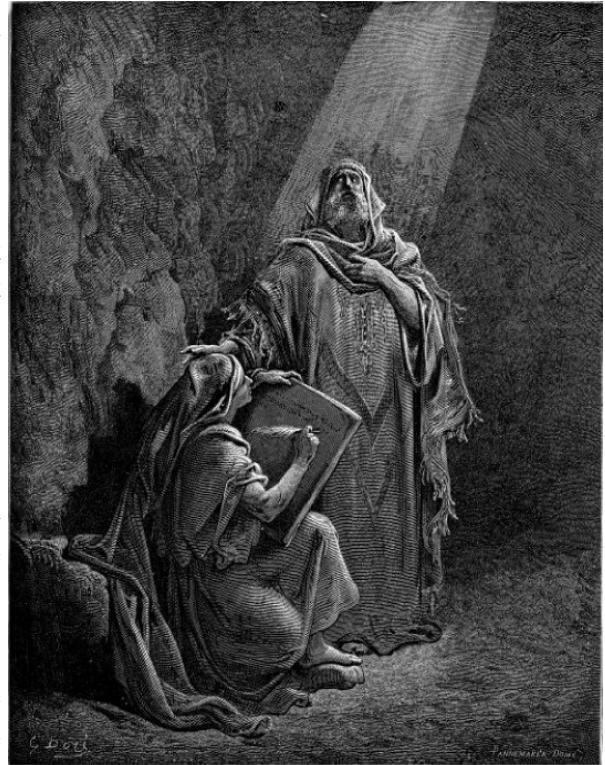
Ishtar Gate built under Nebuchadnezzar II

Courtesy: Richard Peter

The book of Daniel details the story of one young noble, whose Jewish name was changed to Belteshazzar ("may Bel protect his life"), along with Hananiah, who became Shadrach ("the command of Aku"), Mishael who was named Meshach ("who is what Aku is"), and Azariah, who was called Abed-Nego ("servant of Nebo"). These four declined the king's food, not because it violated kosher, but because it would take the sharp edge off of their consciousness that they were in exile as part of God's judgment. They thus requested to eat the food of exile, and after a ten-day test, that request was granted on a permanent basis. They nevertheless entered their three-year course of study, distinguishing themselves as among the finest of the students in the Babylonian schools (Dan. 1).

Jehoiakim resumed his duties as king in the late fall of 605, and early the following year, Jeremiah reminded the king that since the 13th year of Josiah, about 20 years, he had been preaching God's word of warning, but that his message had largely gone unheeded and that time had therefore run out. God was determined to bring a great judgment on Jerusalem, a judgment that would last for seventy years, during which the people of God, as well as the surrounding nations, would serve the king of Babylon, "drinking the wine" of God's fury for their wickedness and disobedience.¹

Because Jeremiah insisted that Jerusalem would be utterly destroyed, just as Samaria had been years earlier, the prophet was seized by the priests and officials, who cried out for his blood. Some of the princes of Jerusalem rescued him, however, giving him an opportunity to defend himself, at which time he persuaded the people and the princes that he should not be put to death, recalling that the prophet Micah had made similar predictions during the reign of Hezekiah, but had not been punished for it (Jer. 26).



Baruch Writing Jeremiah's Prophecies

Jeremiah's bold proclamation did land him in prison, however, but while thus confined, he reduced to writing and ordered to have publicly read the substance of the message he had proclaimed for the past twenty two years. He dictated the message to his assistant, Baruch, directing him to read it publicly in the vicinity of the temple. Baruch was dismayed at being placed in this position, complaining, "Woe is me now! For the LORD has added grief to my sorrow. I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest." Jeremiah encouraged Baruch, assuring him that though he brought a hard message to the people, he would nevertheless be preserved and protected wherever he went (Jer. 45).

In the spring of 604, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Syria for a renewed campaign which really amounted to little more than an unopposed display of military might. The Babylonian ruler first dealt with a rebellious Philistine king from Ashkelon, killing him and destroying his city. He also brought under control Damascus, Tyre, Sidon and Jerusalem. Such campaigns would become more or less an annual event, intended both to collect tribute and to punish recalcitrant towns or territories. In this regard, Nebuchadnezzar was emulating the highly successful policy he had learned from the Assyrians.

1. Jer. 25. See also Jeremiah's object lesson of the Rechabites, chapter 35, and Jeremiah's prophecies against the lands of Egypt (46), the Philistines (47), Moab (48), Edom, Syria, and Arabia (49).

While Nebuchadnezzar was thus engaged, Jeremiah was released from prison. In December of the same year, during a religious festival, Baruch stood up as instructed by Jeremiah, and read the book he had dictated. The nobility learned of Baruch's activity, and summoned him to come and read the entire book to them privately. They were terrified when they heard Jeremiah's warnings of judgment, and taking the scroll from Baruch, warned both him and Jeremiah to hide. The princes then brought Jeremiah's scroll to Jehoiakim, and one of their number read the scroll to the king while he was relaxing by the fire in his winter quarters. Jehoiakim listened to a few paragraphs, and then arro-

gantly sliced off the portion of the scroll just read and tossed it into the fire. The princes objected strenuously, but Jehoiakim was unmoved by their pleas. He probably felt quite secure as the vassal of the great Babylonian king, and had no interest in submitting to the demands of the obstinate prophet. After this incident, God commanded Jeremiah to produce another scroll like the first, only this one included specific pronouncements of judgment against Jehoiakim for his unrepentant attitude. The second scroll was produced, even longer than the first, and is probably substantially represented by the first twenty chapters of the book of Jeremiah (cf., Jer. 36:11-32).



16th Century engraving of Jehoiakim

Nebuchadnezzar suffered a troubling dream in the year 603, a vision that he believed must be significant. He called for the famous Babylonian "wise men" and demanded that they disclose both the dream and its meaning, although they were, of course, unable to do so. Nebuchadnezzar may actually have been testing them to determine whether his well-paid soothsayers were as valuable as they claimed, and their inability to perform provoked Nebuchadnezzar's unmitigated wrath. Faced with such evident incompetence, Nebuchadnezzar ordered that they, and all the wise men in the realm, be summarily executed. At the time, Daniel and his three friends were completing their third year of study in the schools of Babylonian wisdom, and thus Nebuchadnezzar's command exposed them to the same fate. When Daniel learned of the king's decree, he requested time to seek from God an understanding of the dream and its meaning, and after spending a night in prayer, Daniel approached the king and explained it all:

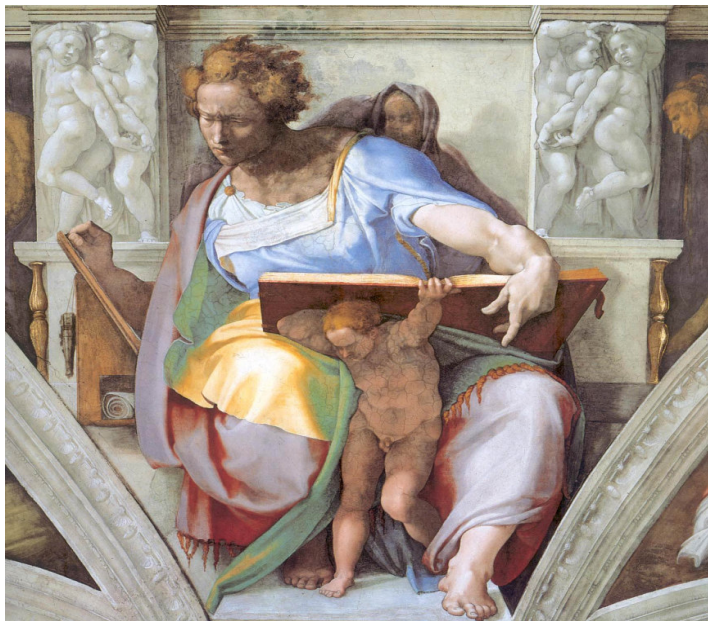
You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image's head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.



An image of Daniel interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream, as described in Daniel 2.

(Dan 2:31-35, NKJV).

Once Daniel had described the dream, he gave Nebuchadnezzar its meaning. He explained that the head of gold was Nebuchadnezzar himself, as ruler of Babylon. The silver chest and arms represented the next great Gentile kingdom, the Medo-Persian empire. The belly and thighs of



The Prophet Daniel from the Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel

bronze referred to Greece. Finally the legs of iron pointed, naturally, to Rome. The feet of iron mixed with clay aptly described Rome as constituted by semi-autonomous provinces united in the Roman "republic." The little rock was, of course, Messiah, who is often pictured as a rock or stone ("the stone the builders rejected," etc.). "In the days of those kings," i.e., Rome, God would establish His kingdom in Messiah, to whom "all authority in heaven and earth" had been given. That kingdom, having removed the Gentile powers, would grow to fill the whole earth. Nebuchadnezzar was so astonished at Daniel's powers that he raised him to high status, gave him lavish gifts, and at Daniel's request, elevated his three friends as well (Dan. 2).

The following year (602), Nebuchadnezzar set up an image in a Babylonian plain, which may actually have resembled the vision of his dream. In a misguided impression of his own importance, Nebuchadnezzar demanded that all people worship the image, a demand that was repugnant to the Jewish captives. Their refusal to submit led Nebuchadnezzar to throw them into a great furnace, but God protected them, resulting in their promotion and advancement in the government of Babylon (Dan. 3).



Early Christian painting of the biblical story of "*The Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace*". From the Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome, Italy.
Late 3rd century / Early 4th century.

Nebuchadnezzar returned to the field of battle in 601, picking up the campaign against Egypt that had been interrupted by his father's death and his own accession four years earlier. Necho had anticipated the attack, however, and during the intervening years had prepared for the challenge, so that when they met, the two forces battled to a draw. Jehoiakim foolishly inferred from the turn of events that Nebuchadnezzar was not as invincible as he had thought, and began to orchestrate his own revolt against the great Babylonian. Hoping to muster support among some of his neighbors, Jehoiakim appealed to the Phoenicians, Moabites, Edomites, and Egyptians for a united rebellion, while Jeremiah all the while warned that the plans would end in catastrophe. Jehoiakim was too proud to take the prophet seriously, and in 599 he and the others united to cut off tribute payments, thereby launching a series of events that would eventually lead to the complete destruction of Jerusalem.

Nebuchadnezzar returned to deal with the rebels in 598, defeating the Egyptian-Edomite-Moabite-Phoenician coalition, although Jehoiakim himself died mysteriously at that time, possibly by suicide. His son and successor, Jehoiachin, briefly held out against a siege by Nebuchadnezzar, but the young king soon lost nerve and surrendered, after which he and the entire royal family were taken in chains to the palace in Babylon (2 Kings 24:8-12). Many thousands of others were also taken into captivity, among them a young priest named Ezekiel, who was later transported to the region of Nippur. Nebuchadnezzar looted the national treasury, hauling off enormous booty from Solomon's temple and the royal palace. He made Jehoiachin's 21 year old uncle, Zedekiah, vassal ruler of Judah over the surviving population (2 Kings 24:13-20).

Necho of Egypt died in 595, and was replaced by his son Psammetichus II (Psammis), who was officially neutral, but inclined to begin fomenting resistance to Babylonian authority in Syria. Psammetichus made contact with Zedekiah, and even though Zedekiah had been appointed by Nebuchadnezzar, he was persuaded to join Psammetichus in his contemplated revolt. Nebuchadnezzar was at the time preoccupied with an uprising in Babylon, allowing the two some time to make preparations for their rebellion.

As Zedekiah and Psammetichus were engaged in their planning, Jeremiah received a command from God to construct a yoke, and put it around his neck, serving as an object lesson to warn the people of Judah and the surrounding nations that they would all find themselves under the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, and that they should therefore submit voluntarily to his rule. If they did so, their lives would be spared, but if not, devastation would follow. Specific messages were addressed to Ammon, Edom, Syria, Kedar and Hazor (Arab nations to the East), and even Elam (Jer. 49). Jeremiah especially warned Zedekiah not to trust the lying words of the false prophets, nor to become involved in anti-Babylonian activities. “Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon,” he wailed, “and serve him and his people, and live...wherefore should this city be laid waste?” (Jer. 27:12,17).

Zedekiah did not want to hear Jeremiah’s warnings, preferring the prophet’s rival, Hananiah, a raging nationalist, who claimed to announce the word of the LORD with wild delusions of grandeur. “I have broken the yoke of the King of Babylon” (Jer.28:2), he cried, promising that within two years, God would bring back the people and articles that had been hauled off by Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah responded with a sarcastic “Amen!” but then somberly pronounced God’s judgment on Hananiah for his false prophecy. Hananiah died just two months later (Jer. 28).

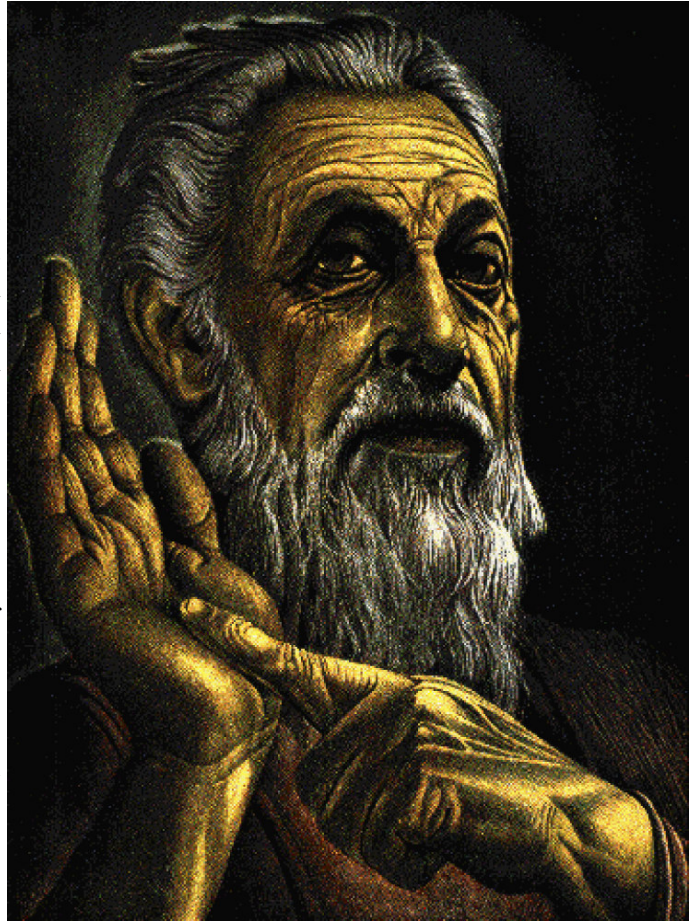


Detail of the prophet Jeremiah

© Raimond Spekking / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-3.0 & GDFL

In spite of Jeremiah's instruction that the people should submit to Babylon, he spared no severity in his rebuke and pronouncement of judgment against the same Babylonians, who would themselves fall to the advancing armies of a force from the north (Persia). His lengthy diatribe was sent by the messenger Seraiah to Babylon as a message of doom to the great city, and a message of hope to the captives there. As a final dramatic act, Seraiah was instructed to cast the scroll into the Euphrates River announcing that thus Babylon would be thrown down. The same image is, of course, used in the book of Revelation (ch. 18) to describe the Great Babylon that would also be thrown down under the judgment of Messiah (cf. Jer. 50, 51). In spite of these warnings, Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles in 590 encouraging them to settle down and make the best of their circumstances in the land of Babylon (Jer. 29).

Ezekiel



Ezekiel

(Courtesy: CC-Art.com)

God commissioned the young priest Ezekiel to be a prophet to the exiles in 593, when he was thirty years old. He showed Ezekiel a great theophany of God's throne on "wheels," indicating that the authority of God was not confined to Jerusalem, but extended through the whole world, including Babylon (Eze. 1). God commanded Ezekiel to preach to the exiles, assuring him that whether they listened or not, the people would "know that a prophet has been among them" (Eze. 2). Ezekiel ate the scroll, the message, which was sweet to the taste, but also filled with bitterness (Eze. 3:1-11).

Ezekiel was transported to the River Chebar in Babylon where he sat among the exiles for seven days, completely astonished, not saying a word. In fact, from then on, Ezekiel was mute, except for rare occasions when God enabled him to preach (Eze. 3:12-27). As a silent object lesson, Ezekiel built a model of Jerusalem, depicting himself as God besieging the city, and for many days he ate the harsh food of famine to illustrate the catastrophe that would soon befall Israel's capital (Eze. 4). In yet another object lesson, Ezekiel shaved off his hair, and divided it into three parts, burning a third, striking a third with a sword, and casting a third to the wind, while also reserving a small part and keeping it safe. All of this symbolized the fate of the people for their wickedness, indicating that they would either die by fire or sword, or be taken into captivity, although a remnant would be preserved (Eze. 5 - 7).

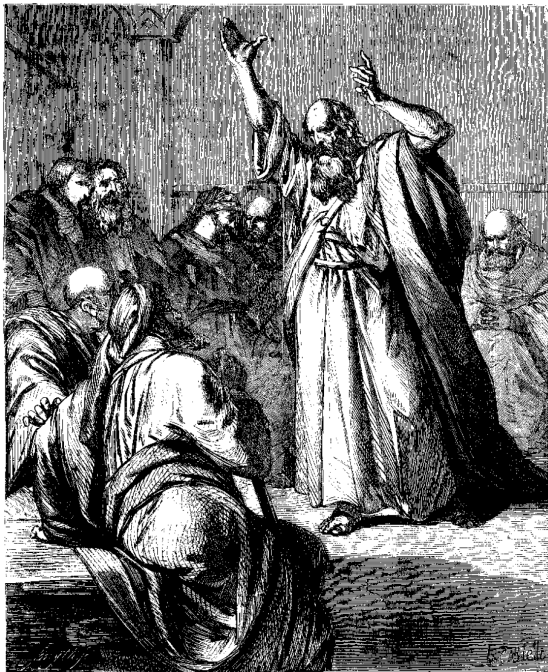
In September of 592, Ezekiel was carried to Jerusalem in a vision, and saw in the temple abominable and idolatrous practices (Eze. 8), while angels traversed the city, marking the faithful (cf. Rev. 7) and slaying the rest (Eze. 9). All the while the glory of God was withdrawing from the temple (Eze. 10), and judgment was falling on the wicked and misguided leaders (Eze. 11), especially Zedekiah, who would finally be blinded by Nebuchadnezzar (Eze. 12:1-16). Ezekiel warned that the fulfillment of these predictions lay in the near future, and in fact at the time the fall of Jerusalem was only six years away (Eze. 12:17-28). Prophecies of “peace” when there was no peace, would bring punishment to false prophets (Eze. 13).



The Glory Withdraws from the Temple

(Courtesy: CC-Art.com)

When certain elders requested a “word” from the LORD, Ezekiel decried the hypocrisy that kept them from ever hearing God’s message, and caused them to accept only the message of false prophets (Eze. 14:1-11). They were so wicked, he growled, that even men as righteous as Noah, Daniel, and Job, would only be able to deliver themselves, but not the land (Eze. 14:12-23), that Israel’s inhabitants were like a dead vine, of no use except as cheap fuel (Eze. 15). Ezekiel declared that God had cared for his people as a loving father nurtures an infant, but that Jerusalem had “played the harlot,” repudiating the mercy lavished on them (Eze. 16).



Ezekiel prophesying to the elders who had visited him (Ezek.14.1)

(Courtesy: CC-Art.com)

Ezekiel especially denounced Zedekiah’s negotiations with Egypt, offering his famous parable of a great eagle, representing Nebuchadnezzar, which carried off a twig from a great cedar, representing Jehoiachin, and replaced the cedar with a lowly vine, representing Zedekiah. The vine, however, favored a different “eagle,” the king of Egypt, and therefore Nebuchadnezzar would return to punish Jerusalem, leading to the city’s final collapse (Eze. 17).

The fall of Jerusalem

About this time, a new Egyptian king named Apries (Biblical Hophra, 589 - 562) replaced Psammetichus II, bringing ambition that greatly outstripped his reason. Apries and Zedekiah soon formed a treaty by which Zedekiah agreed to revolt against Nebuchadnezzar, with the understanding that Egypt would come to Judah's aid when the Babylonians attacked. The plan was foolhardy in the extreme, reflecting both the naïve ambition of Apries and the shortsighted confidence of Zedekiah. They proceeded with the plan, however, disregarding the relentless warnings of Jeremiah.

Zedekiah gathered an army for the defense of Jerusalem, (Jer. 37:1-10), and all the political and religious leaders followed him. To inspire morale among the lower classes, Zedekiah liberated the Hebrew slaves, but slave owners reacted so negatively that Zedekiah later revoked his emancipation. Jeremiah used the incident to renew his warning: "You have not obeyed Me in proclaiming liberty, everyone to his brother and every one to his neighbor. Behold, I proclaim liberty to you...to the sword, to pestilence and to famine!" (Jer. 34:8-22).

His words were no exaggeration, as Nebuchadnezzar not surprisingly reacted strongly to the rebellion and dispatched a powerful army that arrived in late 589, quickly overwhelming the defensive cities of Judah, and laying siege to Jerusalem itself. Zedekiah finally recognized his foolishness and asked Jeremiah to pray, but he also sent word to Apries demanding his help as they had agreed.



Sphinx of Apries (Louvre)

Courtesy: Guillaume Blanchard

Apries marched out toward Jerusalem with a large army, and when Nebuchadnezzar learned of the advance, he temporarily abandoned the siege, and met the Egyptians in battle. This time the Egyptians were routed, fleeing back to their land, and abandoning their erstwhile vassals, while Lachish and a number of other towns were recovered by the Babylonians. Zedekiah mistakenly thought the withdrawal of the Babylonians meant that God had intervened in answer to Jeremiah's prayer, but the prophet deflated his optimism, warning that the Babylonians would certainly return, and that the predicted fall of Jerusalem would be realized (Jer. 37:1-10).

Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem and put the city under siege again on January 20, 588 (2 Kings 25:1-2; Jer. 39:4). On the same day, Ezekiel announced his prophecy of the "cooking pot," in which Jerusalem was compared to a vessel that was placed in a hot fire to cleanse it, but was actually destroyed by its flames (Eze. 24:1-14). Ezekiel himself endured even further pain when his wife suddenly died and God forbid him even to engage in the customary mourning rites. Just so, the people of Jerusalem would be deprived the opportunity to mourn the fall of their city (Eze. 24:15-27). As the siege intensified, Ezekiel also pronounced woe oracles against surrounding nations that were rejoicing in the calamity of Jerusalem, including Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia (Eze. 25:1-17).

As things grew more grim, Zedekiah once again asked Jeremiah to pray in the hopes that God might yet effect a great deliverance as he had done for Hezekiah. Jeremiah simply responded that God would not deliver Jerusalem, and that the people should surrender and be saved (Jer. 21:1-10), after which Jeremiah reminded Zedekiah of the long history of warnings he had given over the past years (Jer. 21 - 24). The princes of Jerusalem were so outraged they demanded Jeremiah's death, so Zedekiah reluctantly handed him over to them. Rather than execute him, however, they placed Jeremiah in a deep cistern where he sunk up to his neck in the mire, and left him there for about 30 days.



Jeremiah let down into a cistern

(Courtesy: CC-Art.com)

One of the king's servants, an Ethiopian named Ebed-Melech, finally interceded on Jeremiah's behalf, and he was gently lifted out of the mire, and put back in the Court Prison. Zedekiah again asked Jeremiah what he should do, and the prophet repeated that he should simply surrender, giving him assurances that if he did so, no harm would come to him. Zedekiah was afraid to surrender, however, and simply returned Jeremiah to the Court Prison (Jer. 38).

In early 587, Ezekiel delivered a lengthy prophetic message predicting the fall of Tyre to the Babylonians some fifteen years later (Eze. 26). In language anticipating the fall of the “Great City” of Revelation 18, Ezekiel declared, “All who handle the oar, the mariners, all the pilots of the sea will come down from their ships and stand on the shore. They will make their voice heard because of you; they will cry bitterly and cast dust on their heads; they will roll about in ashes; they will shave themselves completely bald because of you, gird themselves with sackcloth, and weep for you with bitterness of heart and bitter wailing. In their wailing for you they will take up a lamentation, and lament for you: ‘What city is like Tyre, destroyed in the midst of the sea?’” (Eze. 27:29-32). At about the same time, Ezekiel also issued a series of prophetic warnings



Fishing Harbor of Tyre as it appears today

Courtesy: Wikipedia (Heretiq)



The blind and chained Zedekiah being led away to Babylon (a miniature from a 14th century French Bible)

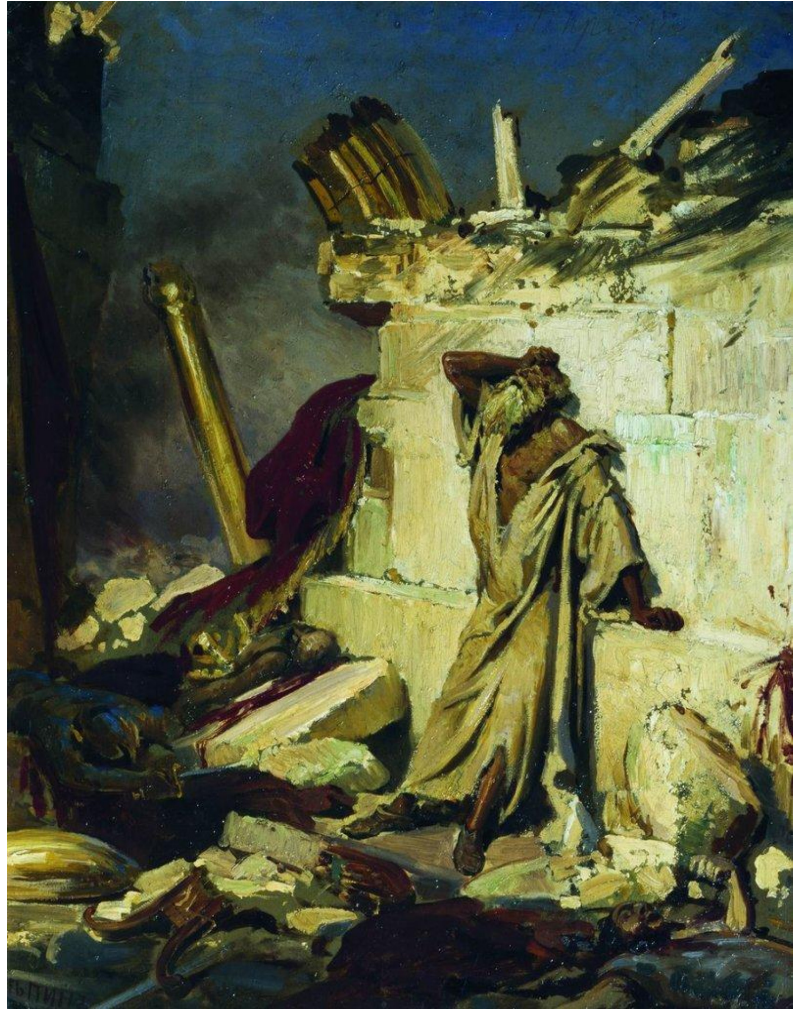
(Courtesy: CC-Art.com)

to the nation of Egypt, in which he announced judgment against the land for being an unreliable friend to Judah, especially during the attack that was presently under way (Eze. 29 - 31).

After a two and one half year siege, and with famine rampant in the city, the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem. On July 15, 586, the city fell (Jer. 52:5-7; 2 Chr. 36:17-21), although Zedekiah escaped with some of his military, attempting to reach sanctuary in Egypt. He was apprehended in the plains of Jericho, however, and brought to Nebuchadnezzar's headquarters on the Orontes River in Syria. Showing little mercy, Nebuchadnezzar executed Zedekiah's sons before his eyes, and then blinded him (Jer. 52:8-11; 2 Kings 25:4-7).

On August 15, 586, the temple was burned and the walls of Jerusalem destroyed (2 Kings 25:8-10; Jer. 39:1-10; 52:12-16; *cf.* Psalm 74). The articles of worship in the temple were taken by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon (2 Kings 25:11-17; Jer. 52:17-23). The religious leaders were executed (2 Kings 25:18-21; Jer. 52:24-27). Zedekiah and the remaining people were taken to Babylon, leaving the poorest in the land to tend the fields and vineyards. Jeremiah was released from the Court Prison, and left in the care of Gedaliah, whom Nebuchadnezzar appointed as governor over Judah (Jer. 39:2-14).

In the months after the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah wrote his Lamentation, describing the city as a woman, forsaken, weeping, unable to recover from her disaster (Lam. 1). He affirmed that God himself brought the judgment, and that the destruction was the response of a holy God to the sinfulness and rebellion of the city (Lam. 2). He lamented his own anguish, while remembering God's mercies and faithfulness, as well as the ruthlessness of the enemies of God's people (Lam. 3). The agonizing severity of the famine in Jerusalem when she was under siege is reviewed by the prophet in detail (Lam. 4). At the same time, Jeremiah prayed for the day when Jerusalem would be restored and blessing would again be poured out on the land (Lam. 5).



Cry of prophet Jeremiah on the Ruins of Jerusalem. The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

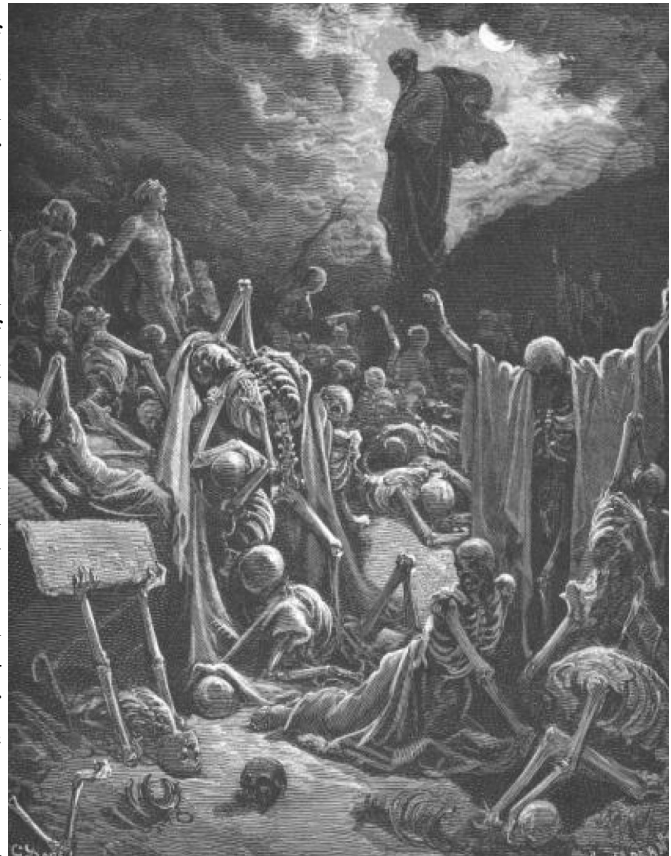
After the Babylonian armies had withdrawn, Gedaliah met with the surviving commanders of the armies of Judah, who were led by a man named Ishmael. He strongly encouraged them to submit to the rule of Babylon and not fear serving Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:22-24). Gedaliah was later warned that Ishmael intended to kill him, but he did not take the warning seriously (Jer. 40). In October of 585, however, Ishmael assassinated Gedaliah and some other officers that had been appointed by the Babylonians, then fleeing with certain hostages for Egypt (2 Kings 25:25-26). Another Jewish officer, Johanan, slew Ishmael and recovered the hostages, but fearing reprisals by the Babylonians, he prepared to take the people to Egypt himself (Jer. 41).

Before departing, Johanan and the others asked Jeremiah to inquire of the LORD whether they should flee or stay, and ten days later, Jeremiah told the people that they should stay in Judah, and should not worry about Nebuchadnezzar. In addition, Jeremiah warned them that if they did flee to Egypt, the very disaster they were trying to avoid would come upon them (Jer. 42).

In spite of Jeremiah's warning, Johanan and the others were determined to go to Egypt, letting their fear of Nebuchadnezzar outweigh their trust in God, and believing they would find refuge under Pharaoh Apries. They forced Jeremiah to accompany them, and fled to Tahpanhes, in the eastern Delta. When they arrived, Jeremiah gave another object lesson, burying some stones and announcing that Nebuchadnezzar would himself spread his tent over those stones, bringing Egypt fully within his control (Jer. 43). Jeremiah further warned that the people were persisting in the same idolatry that had brought disaster on Jerusalem, and that they, along with Pharaoh Apries, would fall just as had Zedekiah and Jerusalem (Jer. 44). Jeremiah's warnings fell largely on deaf ears.

News of the fall of Jerusalem did not reach the exiles in Babylon until early 585. On hearing of the catastrophe, Ezekiel reminded his hearers that he had been a "watchman" (Eze. 33:1-20), sounding the alarm of impending judgment, and that the cause of Judah's ruin had been the failure of God's people to repent at the warning (Eze. 33:21-33), as well as the failure of Judah's leaders to provide proper guidance (Eze. 34:1-10). Ezekiel nevertheless promised that God would eventually provide a greater Shepherd, a David, who would be a righteous and just leader, calling his people back from the dead as if it were a valley of dry bones (Eze. 37). Replacing hearts of stone with hearts of flesh, he would lead the people of God to the worship of their true covenant LORD (Eze. 35:16-38).

It was also at this time that Ezekiel predicted one of the greatest crises that would befall the people of God, the famous attack by "Gog and Magog" described in chapter 38, probably referring to the threat to the Jewish people under the Persian King Xerxes (486 – 464), which occurred about 100 years after Ezekiel's prophecy. The Jewish people were to be exterminated, but through the intervention of queen Esther, they were given the opportunity to defend themselves and effected a great slaughter on their enemies (Eze. 39).



Ezekiel's Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones

Nebuchadnezzar attacked the rebellious Phoenician cities in 585, singling out especially those that had participated in the revolt. The cities on the coast fell quickly, but the island city of Tyre held out for a full thirteen years. It was quite remarkable that the largest army of the day lay before a tiny island fortress but was unable to take it for so long. "Every head was made bald" (from wearing helmets), Ezekiel says, "and every shoulder was peeled (from carrying weapons and armaments); yet had he [Nebuchadnezzar] no wages, nor his army..." (Eze. 29:28). The Tyrians, getting their supplies by sea, countered each assault, defeated every attempt to build a dam and bore with incredible staunchness the hardships of a siege.

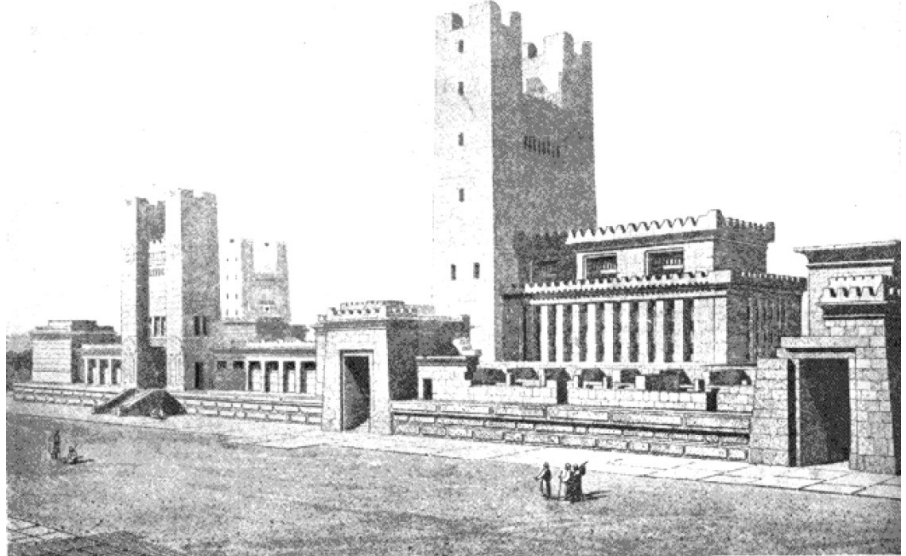


Nebuchadnezzar reduced to the condition of a beast (Daniel 4)

Aside from the protracted siege of Tyre, little information is available concerning the last twenty years or so of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. Sometime during this period, Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a great tree, cut down, and left as a stump in the fields. Daniel applied the dream to Nebuchadnezzar himself, who had built Babylon to fabulous proportions, but allowed his own pride to overcome his reason. Daniel warned him to repent, but a year later as Nebuchadnezzar was surveying all his vast accomplishments, the warning of the dream came upon him. Pronouncing judgment against him, Nebuchadnezzar was reduced to a beastlike condition, removed from his throne, and forced to live in exile for seven years. Only then did Nebuchadnezzar finally come to terms with the One who was sovereign over the affairs of men (Dan. 4).

Tyre succumbed to the Babylonian siege in 572. Its struggle had been valiant, but it finally had to compromise to survive. Josephus provides fragments of Phoenician annals suggesting that Nebuchadnezzar gained its formal surrender, took hostages, and only then did he lift the siege, handing the prisoners over to some of his officers, to be "escorted back to Babylon together with the heavy troops, and the rest of the siege equipment, while he himself returned to the Euphrates through the desert with a small troop of men...And now that he was lord of the whole realm which his father [Nabopolassar] had possessed, he gave orders that after their arrival the prisoners should be allowed to settle in suitable Babylonian provinces." There they did not fare too badly, being registered by the powerful bureaucracy and given generous benefits.

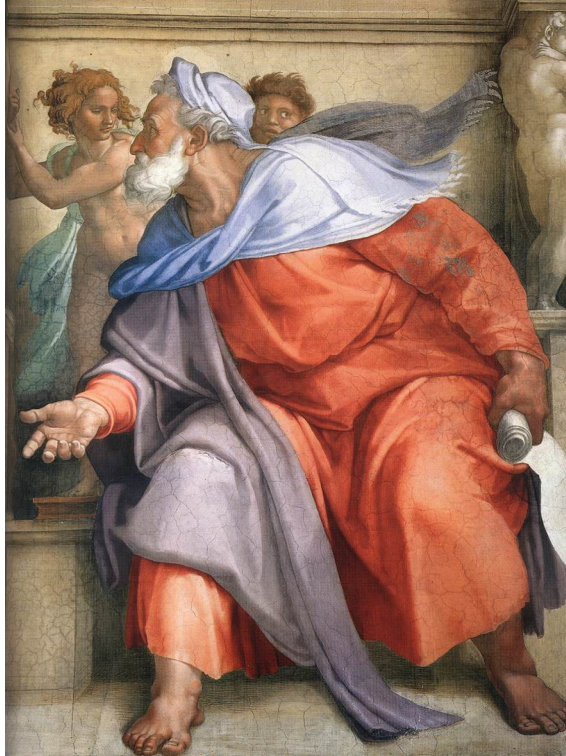
In the same year as the fall of Tyre, Ezekiel received his vision of the idealized temple in Jerusalem. This vision, which comprises chapters 40 through 48 of his prophecy, goes into great detail describing the gateways, the courts, the chambers, but all of it is to be understood as focusing on the new temple that God would build with the coming of Messiah, a temple of “living stones,” as the New Testament so clearly affirms. In Ezekiel’s vision, the glory of God was restored to the temple, and proper worship to the altar. The idealized character of the temple is confirmed in the image of



Ezekiel’s Vision of the Ideal Temple

(Courtesy: CC-Art.com)

waters flowing from underneath the structure, bringing healing to the world, an image reflected in descriptions of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 22, in which the water is bordered by trees on both sides, bearing crops throughout the year, and bringing medicinal healing in its leaves.



Ezekiel depicted on a Sistine Chapel fresco by Michelangelo in 1510.

In April of the following year, Ezekiel issued a final proclamation against Egypt, in which he announced that Nebuchadnezzar would be “compensated” for his strenuous but unrewarding siege of Tyre by booty from Egypt (Eze. 29:17-21), although there is little external evidence of such compensation. Apries sent his army to Cyrene in 570 to help the Libyans against the Greeks, but they were defeated, much to the disgust of his people, who accused the king of sending Egyptian soldiers to their deaths. General Amasis (570 – 526) led a successful coup against Apries, and seized the throne. A fragmentary tablet, now at the British Museum, alludes to a campaign by Nebuchadnezzar against pharaoh Amasis in 568 and mentions an Egyptian town. Aside from this scant evidence, there is little proof that the Babylonians ever set foot in the Nile valley.

Evil-Merodach (562 - 560):

As noted above, the last years of Nebuchadnezzar's reign are not well attested. He apparently died of an illness in the first days of October 562, bringing his son, Evil-Merodach (Amel-Marduk), to the throne. The new king ruled for only two years, leaving little information of his actions, although he seems to have been unpopular, having been reared in the court rather than the field, and lacking his father's courage and ability. Berossus says that he was restrained neither by law nor by decency, but he seems to have had a favorable attitude toward the Jews, possibly reflecting the influence of Daniel. He gave kind treatment to the exiled and aging Jehoiachin of Judah, who had been in prison for 37 years, releasing him from his bonds, and making him one of his counselors, thus giving evidence that God had not forgotten His promises with respect to the line of David.

Neriglissar (560 - 556):

According to Berossus, Evil-Merodach managed his affairs in a lawless fashion, and was thus largely responsible for the revolt against him at the hands of his brother-in-law, Neriglissar (Nergal-sharra-usur), who plotted his overthrow, killed him in a palace coup, and then ascended as the fourth king of Neo-Babylon. Neriglissar was a turbulent spirit who claimed a right to the throne because he had married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. He was certainly far more "Babylonian" than Evil-Merodach had been, having participated in the wars of Nebuchadnezzar, including the siege of Jerusalem. During the four years of his reign, he restored the temples in Babylon and Borsippa, and conducted a successful military campaign against Appuashu, King of Pirindu (West Cilicia). He put up the so-called "lesser" palace across from that of Nebuchadnezzar, a structure second only to the original palace that was lavishly decorated with the best art of the times.

Labashi-Marduk (556):

In spite of his accomplishments, Neriglissar reigned only three years, dying in 556 under circumstances that remain obscure. He was succeeded by his son, Labashi-Marduk, who was still a child when he ascended the throne, but who nevertheless exhibited such signs of wickedness that his friends plotted against him, and nine months later, tortured him to death. The conspirators then elevated one of their own, a man named Nabonidus (Nabo-naid), to the Babylonian throne.

Nabonidus (556 - 539):

Nabonidus was not a member of the royal family, but had legitimized his claim to the throne by marrying one of the daughters of Nebuchadnezzar. He most cherished the ambition to rebuild the temple of the moon-goddess Nanna-Sin in Haran, where his mother had been the high priestess before the city was destroyed by the Medes in 610. He hoped to reestablish the city as a center of Mesopotamian re-



**Nabonidus, king of Babylon;
slab in the British Museum**

Courtesy: Jona Lendering

ligious life, and also to secure the market-place and trade routes which were so important to the economy and security of Babylon. Haran, however, remained in the hands of the Medes, and Nabonidus knew he was not strong enough to attack them directly. Hoping to fortify his position, he enlisted the support of the young and brilliant prince of the Persian province of Anshan, Cyrus. Nabonidus bolstered his appeal to Cyrus by claiming that the god Marduk had directed him in a divine revelation to form an alliance with the Persian in order to rebuild the temple. Nabonidus claimed he received the following assurances from Marduk:

The Umman-manda [Medes] of whom you speak, they and their land and the kings who side with them no longer exist. In the coming third year I shall make Cyrus, King of Anshan, their young slave, expel them. With his few troops, he will disperse the widespread Umman-manda. He captured Ishtumegu (Astyages), King of Umman-manda and took him prisoner to his country. King Ishtumegu called up his troops and marched against Cyrus, King of Anshan, in order to meet him in battle. The army of Ishtumegu revolted against him and in fetters they delivered him to Cyrus.



Cyrus the Persian

The “Cyrus” referred to in the vision is known in history as Cyrus the Great, who is discussed at length in the next chapter. At the time, Cyrus ruled over a large but isolated district of Persia, paying tribute to his grandfather, the Median king Astyages. Hoping to drive a wedge between Cyrus and Astyages, Nabonidus urged Cyrus to join the Babylonians, and Cyrus agreed. Word of the planned revolt reached Astyages, however, and he immediately summoned his grandson to Ecbatana, the Median capital. Cyrus refused the summons, precipitating a brief and devastating war that ended in victory for the Persian, largely because so many Median troops defected to the popular young Persian. Virtually overnight, Cyrus found himself the master of both Persia and Media.

Nabonidus recovered Haran as he had hoped, and restored the temple of the Moon god, but then in 551 he inexplicably moved his residence 500 miles south, from Babylon to Tema, which is located in the Arabian Peninsula. He remained there for ten years, and to this day scholars debate what the king was doing all those years. His official explanation for his absence suggests that he voluntarily abandoned Babylon when it was in the throes of civil war and famine. Most historians find little evidence to support this explanation, but there is no doubt that during his absence Cyrus was busy expanding his holdings, meaning that it would only be a matter of time until the two powers would come into direct conflict.

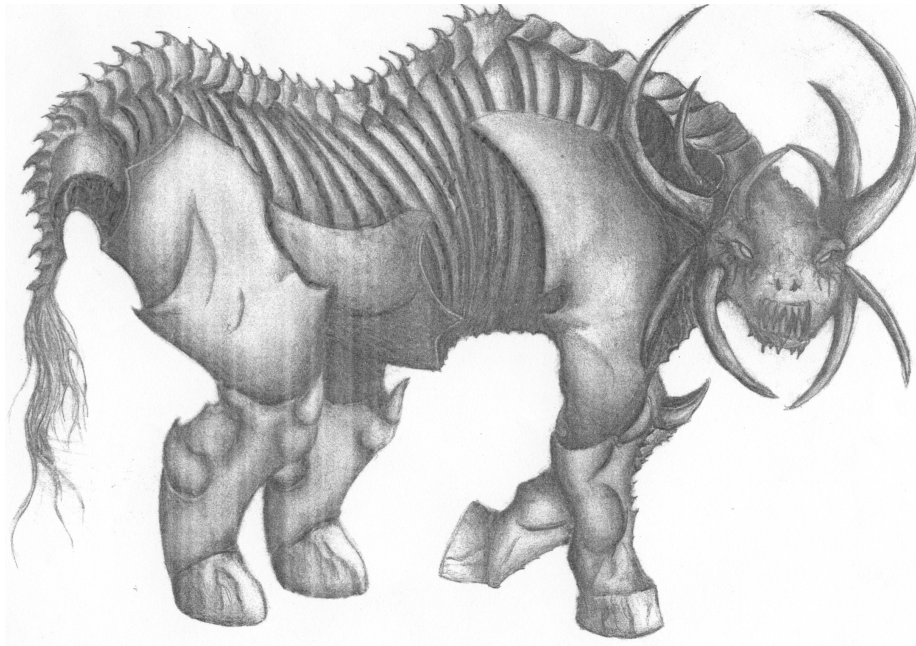
During his absence, Nabonidus left Babylon in the hands of his son, Belshazzar (Bel-shar-usur), a capable soldier but a poor politician whose authority was increasingly challenged by a pro-Persian party within the city. These Persian sympathizers supported Cyrus, who had become well-known for his policy of winning the goodwill of new subjects rather than terrifying them into obedience. To many, Cyrus appeared a liberator who treated his prisoners with mercy, while respecting and even encouraging local cults, traditions and customs. His extraordinary popularity swept through the Near East, and among the Babylonians many came to believe they would be better off as subjects of such a good prince.



Terracotta cylinder by Nabonidus concerning repairs on the temple of Sin, British Museum
Courtesy: Wikipedia (Jastrow)

During Belshazzar's first year as vice-regent, Daniel, who was now about 70 years of age, reported a remarkable vision which is found in chapter 7 of his prophecy. In the dream he saw four great "beasts" rising out of the sea, symbolizing four great Gentile powers that would dominate history until the time of Messiah. The first was a lion, representing Babylon, and then a bear,

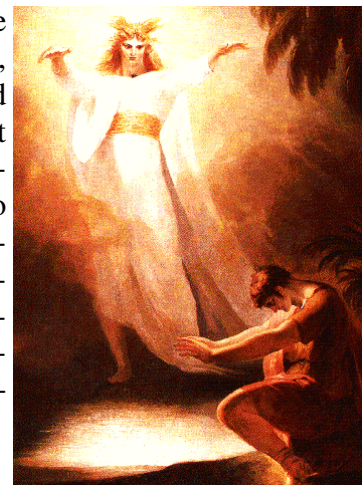
standing for Persia. The third beast was a leopard, symbolizing the swiftness of Greece under Alexander, and finally a terrifying iron beast, naturally pointing to Rome (cf. p. 5-13). The final beast had ten horns, probably referring to its ten provinces, and another horn, referring possibly to Herod, or the house of Herod, the usurpers of Messiah's office. In the vision this final beast and its "horn" came under the judgment of God, and God then gave his kingdom to his people as part of the work of Messiah.



The "Iron Beast" of Daniel 7.
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Two or three years after Daniel's vision, Belshazzar and his father received a desperate appeal from Croesus, the wealthy king of Lydia, who was facing an attack at the hands of Cyrus. Shortly after defeating Astyages, the Persian had embarked on a series of brilliant military campaigns that focused on Asia Minor where Croesus was the most prominent monarch. On his way, Cyrus had occupied Cilicia, then a vassal-state of Babylon, and thereby broke his alliance with Nabonidus forcing the Babylonians to the side of Lydia. Nabonidus agreed to support Croesus, thus joining the Egyptians and the legendary Spartans, who had also enlisted in Croesus's support. Having cast in his lot with Croesus, Nabonidus knew he would eventually face the Persian directly, and began constructing a great barricade along the Euphrates, along with other defensive measures.

Cyrus was preparing to attack Croesus in 548, and at the same time Daniel received yet another vision, this time of a powerful ram, symbolizing Persia under Cyrus, but indicating that Persia would eventually be defeated by another power, symbolized by a very swift goat from the west. This "goat" was Greece, of course, under Alexander. In the vision, the horn of the goat was broken, which referred to the early death of Alexander, but in its place, four other horns rose, referring to the division of Alexander's kingdom among his four generals. A descendent of one of these generals, Antiochus IV, would terrorize the land of Israel, referring to the dreadful persecution that provoked the Maccabean Revolt of 165 B.C. These events will be covered in detail in chapter 7.



**The Vision of Daniel, by W
Hamilton - Agnew**
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Nabonidus completed the construction of his great wall in 547. It was an immense structure, one hundred feet high and thirty feet thick, that stretched from the Euphrates to the Tigris. He also excavated many canals designed to impede the progress of an invading force. Nabonidus had adequate time to complete these projects because Cyrus was engaged at the time in his contest with Croesus. Even though Croesus had sought the assistance of Nabonidus and others in his anticipated conflict, he proceeded against Cyrus before they could send help, relying on an ambiguous promise from the Oracle of Delphi promising that if Croesus attacked the Persians, "a mighty kingdom would be destroyed." Neglecting to consider that the kingdom destroyed might be his own, Croesus plunged into battle with the Persians, but after failing in his initial assault, he fell back to Sardis. The capital fell to Cyrus 14 days later.

Once Cyrus had absorbed Lydia, the other Greek cities of Ionia fell one by one, and the whole of Asia Minor soon found itself under his rule. He then turned his campaign in the opposite direction, and soon the major kingdoms of the east fell into his hands. By 540, the Persian empire stretched from the Aegean to India, a distance of over four thousand miles. Confronted with such a giant, Nabonidus recognized he had little hope of defeating the Persians in open battle, but he nevertheless viewed their expansion with contempt, thinking he and the city of Babylon were perfectly secure. Nabonidus doubted that the Persians would ever make it to the capital because of the great wall he had built, and even if they did, that they would be able to take the city.

Cyrus marched on Babylon in 539, breaching the defensive wall, and defeating the Babylonian army in an initial battle. Nabonidus, who had at last returned from Arabia, ordered Belshazzar to deploy his troops along the Tigris, but the Persians had overwhelming numerical superiority. Moreover, Gobryas (Gubaru), governor of Gutium (Assyria), who ought to have protected the left bank of Belshazzar's army, went over to the enemy. The army retreated Babylon, and Cyrus put the great city under siege. When Nabonidus saw his fortunes changing, he fled south, leaving Belshazzar once again in charge. Cyrus kept the city under siege, but was unable to penetrate the great fortress, which was provisioned to survive for 10 years. Initially, Cyrus's prospects did not look very good.

Herodotus reports that Cyrus employed a strategy to take Babylon that Belshazzar had not foreseen. He diverted the flow of the Euphrates, and was thus able to march in under the walls and take the city by surprise. At the time, Belshazzar was celebrating a great feast, but his mood changed abruptly when he saw the "handwriting on the wall" (Dan. 5; cf. Isaiah 21). Belshazzar was slain that night, and the Persians took complete control of Babylon, after which Cyrus left the city under the rule of "Darius the Mede," who was probably Gobryas.

The Persian account of the fall of Babylon reads:

In the month of Tashritu (September-October), when Cyrus attacked the army of Akkad in Opis on the Tigris, the inhabitants of Akkad revolted, but he [Nabonidus] massacred the confused inhabitants. The fifteenth day, Sippar was seized without a battle. Nabonidus fled. The sixteenth day, Gubaru, the governor of Gutium, and the army of Cyrus entered Babylon without a battle. Afterwards, Nabonidus was arrested in Babylon when he returned [there]. Till the end of the month, the shield-carrying Gutians were staying within Esagila [the temple of Marduk], but nobody carried arms in Esagila and its buildings. The correct time [for a ceremony] was not missed. In the month of Arahsamnu (October-November), the third day, Cyrus entered Babylon. Great twigs were spread in front of him. The state of "peace" was imposed on all the city. Cyrus sent greetings to all Babylon...



Belshazzar's Feast, by Rembrandt

(Courtesy: CC-Art.com)

Cyrus dismantled the outer walls of Babylon, and then proceeded against Nabonidus. In the ensuing attack, Nabonidus saw he had no hope and surrendered. The Babylonian king was treated kindly by Cyrus, and given the governorship of Carmania. In Babylon, life continued much as it had been, now under the rule of Nabonidus's former general Gobryas. Nevertheless, with the fall of the great city to the Persians, the Neo-Babylonian Empire reached its dramatic last chapter, fulfilling the prediction of Isaiah given about 150 years earlier:

*Then he answered and said,
"Babylon is fallen , is fallen!
And all the carved images of her gods
He has broken to the ground."*

(Isaiah. 21:9).