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4.1 - Babylon

(Work in progress.)



It is no accident that the regional superpower responsible for ending the Davidic rule in Israel was the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The rise of Neo-Babylonia at the time of the book of Daniel represents the reappearance of the earlier rebellious city of Babel, the *Babylon of Old*.¹ The rebellion which characterized Babel and the oppression of Israel under *Nebuchadnezzar* of Neo-Babylonia are only a taste of the rebellion and persecution which Scripture ascribes to *Babylon of the Future*.

(Some of the material in this section is drawn from another work by the author which discusses the significance of Babylon in relation to the *book of Revelation*.³)

4.1.1 - Babylon of Old

The earliest mention of Babylon and the region it occupies, the land of Shinar, is found not long after the global flood:

Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD." **And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.** From that land he went to Assyria and built **Nineveh**⁴, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen between Nineveh and Calah (that is the principal city). (Gen. 10:8-12 cf. 1Chr. 1:10) [emphasis added]

It was Nimrod who established a kingdom at Babel. In fact, this is the first mention of the concept of *kingdom* in Scripture. In a very real sense, *Nimrod was the first king*. And in order to be a king, one needs to have *subjects* and a *realm*. This implies centralization which ran counter to God's command following the flood: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 9:1, 7 cf. Gen. 1:22, 28). Reading between the lines, we can already see the seeds of rebellion.

Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly."⁵ They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens;⁶ let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there and confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Gen. 11:1-9)

Aside from the evident prideful motive of the construction, "let us make a name for ourselves," archaeology has shown that one of the purposes of the tower was to facilitate pagan religious ceremonies.⁷ Although Scripture is not overtly negative concerning Nimrod himself, his leadership in establishing the first kingdom and initiating a building project which resulted in a severe judgment from God (the introduction of languages) clearly indicates his sinful ambitions.

Babylon has from its inception symbolized evil and rebellion against God. It was founded by Nimrod (Gen. 10:9), a proud, powerful, God-rejecting ruler. Babel (Babylon) was the site of the first organized system of idolatrous false religion (Gen. 11:1-4). The Tower of Babel, the expression of that false religion, was a ziggurat; an edifice designed to facilitate idolatrous worship. God judged the people's idolatry and rebellion by confusing their language and scattering them over the globe (Gen. 11:5-9). Thus the seeds of idolatry and false religion spread around the world from Babylon, to take root wherever these proud rebels and their descendants settled.⁸

Babylon in Iraq



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There is also abundant tradition concerning the rebellion of Nimrod:

Now it was Nimrod who excited them to such an affront and contempt of God. He was the grandson of Ham, the son of Noah,— a bold man, and of great strength of hand. He persuaded them not to ascribe it to God as if it was through his means they were happy, but to believe that it was their own courage which procured that happiness. He also gradually changed the government into tyranny, —seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God, but to bring them into a constant dependence upon his power. He also said he would be revenged on God, if he should have a mind to drown the world again; for that he would build a tower too high for the waters to be able to reach! and that he would avenge himself on God for destroying their forefathers!⁹

According to the Sages, Nimrod was the primary force behind this rebellion. The *Midrashim* explain his sinister motive. He planned to build a tower ascending to Heaven and, from it, wage war against God.¹⁰

The Targum of Jonathan says, “From the foundation of the world none was ever found like Nimrod, powerful in hunting, and in rebellions against the Lord.” The Jerusalem Targum says, “He is powerful in hunting and in wickedness before the Lord, for he was a hunter of the sons of men, and he said to them, ‘Depart from the judgment of the Lord, and adhere to the judgment of Nimrod!’ Therefore as it is said, ‘As Nimrod is the strong one, strong in hunting, and in wickedness before the Lord.’ ” The Chaldee paraphrase of I Chronicles 1:10 says, “Cush begat Nimrod, who began to prevail in wickedness, for he shed innocent blood, and rebelled against Jehovah.”¹¹

In the founding of Babel was the foundation for what would later flower as Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar and figure so highly in the events of Scripture, especially the books of Daniel and Revelation.

Another negative connotation concerning Babel may be seen in the proverb taken up by Isaiah concerning the king of Babylon:

Take up this proverb against the king of Babylon . . . How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! *How* you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.’ Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit. Those who see you will gaze at you, *and* consider you, ‘saying: Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms?’ (Isa. 14:4, 12-16)

The connection between Satan (here *Lucifer*) and Babylon is seen in this proverb which begins with the human king in view, but soon goes far beyond what could be said of the human king to identify the spiritual power motivating the king (cf. Eze. 28:12). Since Satan has been active in the affairs of the world since the creation of mankind, it is no surprise to find his influence in the realm of corrupt kings and kingdoms extending back in history. Portions of the proverb, “Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms”, appear to speak of the ultimate king of Babylon at the time of the end.¹³

Prior to the introduction of languages by God, the majority of mankind refused to disperse across the globe, but gathered in the region of Shinar instead. The result of the introduction of languages was the scattering of different language groups over the face of the earth (Gen. 11:9). This initial centralization, followed by the global distribution, *is the primary*

Babylon in 2009



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mechanism by which Babylon became the central influence in all cultures and civilizations that followed. This is how she came to sit on “peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues” (Rev. 17:15+).

In the record of Babel, as minimal as it is, we see the *first human king and kingdom* in direct rebellion to the command of God, to disperse across the earth, resulting in judgment. In *Babylon of the Future*, we will see the *last human king and kingdom* in ultimate rebellion to the commands of God resulting in the final judgment of all human kingdoms to be replaced by the *Millennial Kingdom* ruled by Messiah (Jer. 51:25; Dan. 2:34-35+, 45+).

4.1.2 - Neo-Babylonia

After the dispersion from Babel, two countries eventually formed in the region: Sumer in the southeast and Akkad in the northwest. It wasn't until about 1850 B.C. that Babylon became a regional power, especially under Hammurabi (c. 1792-1750 B.C.), the sixth king of the first dynasty of Babylon.¹⁴ After the death of Hammurabi, the empire's fortunes went through a series of ups and downs, during which a second dynasty of kings ruled. Thereafter, Babylon was fought over among the Assyrians and Aramean and *Chaldean* tribesmen. Assyria prevailed over the region until the rise of *Nabopolassar*, the father of Nebuchadnezzar, who overthrew Assyrian dominion and made the city of Babylon his capital. Thus began the rise of the Neo-Babylonian empire, which figures in the events of the book of Daniel.

Significantly, it appears that the capital of the Neo-Babylonian Empire was established upon the original ancient foundation of Babel.¹⁵ Cultural memory held the site of Babylon to be a place of divine judgment.¹⁶ Babylon was known especially for its many religious sites promoting numerous gods.¹⁷

Josephus records that building improvements made by Nebuchadnezzar carried forward the original efforts of Nimrod.¹⁸ Nebuchadnezzar rebuilt the main ziggurat¹⁹ which dominated the city. Archaeology indicates that it was the site of an earlier original ziggurat which may have been associated with Babel.²⁰ Whether this ziggurat is related to the tower described in Genesis 11:4 is not known for certain.²¹ It was certainly an imposing tower, upwards of nearly 300 feet (90m) in height.²² Even so, the connection between Babylon and the ancient site of Babel seems to have been established. This would align with the Scriptural representation of Babylon in the book of Daniel as the first of a sequence of ungodly Gentile kingdoms stretching through history from the time of Daniel until the second coming of Christ (Dan. 2+, 7+). The Neo-Babylonian kingdom at the time of Daniel retains the character of the original Babel under Nimrod: humanistic pride in rebellion to God.

It is no accident that the dreams given to Nebuchadnezzar provide further details concerning a future individual associated with the final Gentile rule on earth who is also the embodiment of pride and rebellion against God (Dan. 7:8+, 20-21+; 11:36-37+).

4.1.3 - Babylon of the Future

A comparison of the various passages given by Jeremiah which predict the destruction of Babylon with the historical facts concerning the overthrow of Babylon by the Medes and Persians recorded in [chapter 5](#) of Daniel and recorded by secular history immediately places the student of the Bible on the horns of a dilemma, because Babylon was captured without a battle:

Ugbaru, the governor of Gutium, and the Persian army entered the city without a battle. This appears to have been effected by the stratagem of diverting the river Euphrates, thus drying up the moat defenses and enabling the enemy to enter the city by marching up the dried-up river bed. This may also imply some collaboration with sympathizers inside the walls. That night Belshazzar was killed (Dan. 5:30+). For the remainder of the month Persian troops occupied Esagila, though without bearing arms or interrupting the religious ceremonies.²⁴

Either Jeremiah greatly exaggerated the facts of Babylon's overthrow by Darius the Mede or Jeremiah's words had a double reference because Jeremiah's words go far beyond anything that actually occurred when Babylon was captured by Medo-Persia.

Jeremiah predicted that Babylon's destruction would be complete and permanent, never more to be inhabited, like Sodom and Gomorrah (Jer. 50:39-40). Her destruction would be so complete that no stone from her would ever be reused (Jer. 51:26) and no one would pass through the site of her destruction (Jer. 51:43).²⁵ Isaiah, prophesying in advance of Jeremiah, predicted a similar fate (Isa. 13:19-20; 14:22-23).

Ishtar Gate, Pergamon Museum

Are these passages merely examples of “apocalyptic genre” containing hyperbole for literary effect? Or does the revelation given to Jeremiah, Isaiah, and other prophets reflect multiple references—the near referent being the overthrow of Babylon by Medo-Persia in Daniel’s day and the far-referent being a much more cataclysmic overthrow of a reconstituted Babylon at the time of the end?

A key which helps unlock this puzzle is found in the Book of Revelation given through the Apostle John which parallels the predictions of Jeremiah and positions their fulfillment as *future to the time of John* (Jer. 51:48 cf. Rev. 18:20+ and Jer. 51:7, 13 cf. Rev. 17:1-2+, 15+). This proves that the words spoken by Jeremiah and others *were not completely fulfilled in the overthrow of Neo-Babylonia by Medo-Persia in 539 B.C.* Therefore, we can know that the extreme aspects of the passages are not mere hyperbole, but await future fulfillment.²⁶

We shall see in our study of Daniel that the book of Revelation describes a “Babylon” future to John’s day which dovetails very closely with the visions and dreams given Daniel. It is *this* Babylon that becomes the subject of the final judgments given by Jeremiah, Isaiah, and others. Many different views have been offered concerning the identity of Babylon in the book of Revelation (the World, the apostate Church, Rome, and even Jerusalem). Without going into details here, it is our view that Babylon in the book of Revelation, while recognizing her global corrupting influence, is a literal city on the site marked “Babylon” depicted on the [map above](#) (Rev. 17:18+; 18:21+ cf. Jer. 51:59-64). For additional background see the discussion of this topic in our [commentary](#) and [course](#) on the book of Revelation.²⁷

A contributing factor to the final judgment which falls upon Babylon is the belief among the Gentile nations that it is acceptable to oppose Israel because she has sinned (Jer. 50:7; 51:5). Although God uses Gentile nations to judge His elect nation, woe to the nation He uses as His tool (Zec. 1:15)! Thus, the final restoration of Israel and its capital Jerusalem involves a final judgment of the Gentile nations for their mistreatment of the elect nation (Joel 3:2; Rom. 11:28).

In summary, Babylonia of Daniel’s day represents what was originally Babel under Nimrod and what will eventually be Babylon at the time of the end and [Antichrist](#). The sin of Babylon is what today would be considered the heart of humanism: the attempt by man to use his God-given talent and abilities *independently of God*. Independence from God is the basis of all sin, first illustrated in geopolitical terms in the founding of Babel by Nimrod. Thereafter, much of what transpires in Scripture can be thought of as “a tale of two cities,” Babel/Babylon representing the *city of man* versus Jerusalem representing the *city of God*.

Babylon of the Future will be the culmination of humanism in its fully flowered arrogance and imagined independence from God: “We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of survival and fulfillment of the human race. As nontheists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity.”²⁸

See commentary on [Daniel 5:31](#).



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Notes

¹ “The name Babel has no connection with the Heb. *bālal*, ‘He confused.’ Its meaning is in fact patent in its Assyrian form, *Bāb-ilī*, ‘gate of god.’ The final syllable, ‘*il*’ in Hebrew, is common to all Semitic languages, and means ‘god’; while *bāb* is well-known in Assyrian, Arabic, Aramaic, and late Hebrew.”—D. F. Payne, “Babel, Tower of,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979, 1915), 1:382.

² Image courtesy of the *Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection*, University of Texas at Austin. [www.lib.utexas.edu/maps]

³ Anthony C. Garland, *A Testimony of Jesus Christ : A Commentary on the Book of Revelation, Vol. 2 (Rev. 15-22)* (Camano Island, WA: SpiritAndTruth.org, 2004), 4.1.

- ⁴ Translations differ as to whether Nimrod established Nineveh: “From that land Asshur went forth and built Nineveh. . . .” [*Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1997, c1985), Gen. 10:11-12], [Scherman, ed., *Tanach* (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2001), Gen. 10:11]. If “the land of Nimrod” means “Assyria” in Micah 5:5-6, then that would lend support for the view that Nimrod established Nineveh.
- ⁵ “The reference to brick and bitumen is strikingly accurate, for Babylonia did not possess the stone that was so commonplace a building material in Palestine. Baked mud bricks and bitumen were widely used in the vast Tigris-Euphrates plain.”—Payne, *Babel, Tower of*, 1:382.
- ⁶ “The narrative does not state that the builders were trying to reach heaven thereby: the Hebrew idiom signifies merely that the tower was to be very high.”—Ibid.
- ⁷ Interestingly, the dimensions of the base of the tower, given in the Esagil Tablet, contain repetitions of the triple-six which Scripture associates with Antichrist as the “number of man” (1K. 10:14; Dan. 3:1+; 2Chr. 9:13; Rev. 13:16-18+; 14:9-11+; 15:2+; 16:2+; 19:20+; 20:4+). “The main feature of the complex, the ziggurat, is described by the Esagil Tablet, which indicates dimensions in terms of the suklam-cubit, as used by the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon: ‘60.60.60 [is] the length, 60.60.60 is the breadth.’”—T. G. Pinches, “Babel, Tower of, Archeological Evidences,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979, 1915), 1:383. “Babylonian towers were always rectangular, built in stages, and provided with an inclined ascent continued along each side to the top. Since religious ceremonies were performed thereon, they were generally surmounted by a chapel in which sacred objects or images were kept.”—Payne, *Babel, Tower of*, 1:383.
- ⁸ John MacArthur, *Revelation 12-22 : The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2000), Rev. 14:8.
- ⁹ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus : Complete and Unabridged*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996, c1987), s.v. “Antiquities I, iv 1.”
- ¹⁰ Scherman, *Tanach*, Gen. 11:1-9n.
- ¹¹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 294.
- ¹² *A hill-top view of the Ancient city of Babylon taken in 2009*. Image courtesy of Mike Feeney. Image is in the public domain.
- ¹³ “Isaiah thus makes the Babylonian monarch speak according to the ideas of his people . . . and at the same time reflects the satanic spirit of self-deification to appear in fullest development in the last king of Babylon, the Antichrist (Rev. 13:8+).”—Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), Isa. 14:13.
- ¹⁴ Theodore Pappas, ed., *Britannica 2002 Deluxe Editon CDROM*, s.v. “Babylon.”
- ¹⁵ “According to the Babylonian Chronicle and omens relating back to Sargon of Agade (c. 2350 B.C.) . . . Sargon . . . claims to have set up ‘the likeness of Babylon’ . . . the name, and thus the reality, was held to have been in use earlier. His action was considered evil, possibly as defiling a revered sacred site, and for it his dynasty was thought to have been brought to an end. . . . All who controlled [Babylon] accorded it respect as the ancient foundation—‘the eternal city’ . . .”—Donald J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985, 2004), 43-44.
- ¹⁶ “When Šar-kali-šarri, . . . rebuilt the temple of Anunitum and Ilaba there he referred to Babylon by its Sumerian designation . . . ‘Gate of God’. Whether this denoted the place of entry into the deity’s presence or even the gate as the place of divine judgment or both is uncertain.”—Ibid., 44.
- ¹⁷ The cultic emphasis at Babylon is evident from names recorded in the *Topography of Babylon*, a scholastic composition recovered from the time of Nebuchadnezzar I, which include, “43 cult-centres . . . of the great gods of Babylon; 300 chapels or ‘holy places’ . . . of the Igigi and 600 chapels of the A (nunnaki); 180 open-air shrines . . . of Ishtar . . . 180 ‘stations’ . . . of Lugalgirra and Meslamtea; 12 ‘stations’ of the Pleiades . . . 6 ‘stations’ of Pisces . . .”—Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 48-49. “In addition to Ezida, Babylonian texts refer to at least fifty other temples by name, Nebuchadnezzar himself claiming to have built fifteen of them within the city.”—Donald J. Wiseman, “Babylon,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979, 1915), 1:389.
- ¹⁸ “The great improvements that Nebuchadnezzar made in the buildings at Babylon, do no way contradict those ancient and authentic testimonies which ascribe its first building to Nimrod, and its first rebuilding to Semiramis.”—Josephus, *The Works of Josephus : Complete and Unabridged*, s.v. “Apion 1 20.”
- ¹⁹ Interestingly, there is a connection between the term ziggurat and the flood upholding the suggestion by Josephus that the height of the tower was intended partly as a response to the flood. “These structures had, with the Babylonians, a special name: ziqqurratu, apparently meaning ‘peak,’ or the highest point of a mountain. This word was applied to the mountain height upon which Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah, offered sacrifices on coming forth from the ark (or ship) when the waters of the great Flood had sufficiently subsided.”—Pinches, *Babel, Tower of, Archeological Evidences*, 1:383.
- ²⁰ “In the days of Nebuchadnezzar the restored ancient temple-tower (ziggurat) named Etemenanki (‘The Building which is the Foundation of Heaven and Earth’) dominated the city. His father, Nabopolassar, claims that . . . he received a divine call to restore the sacred edifice which had weakened and fallen. He was to make a new and firmer foundation ‘on the heart of the nether-world’ (i.e., on a sunken platform) and to make its summit rival or equal the heavens. . . . the lower stages and ascent stairs found by Koldewey in his deep sounding represent an earlier ziggurat, perhaps that of the Old Babylonian period. No bricks of the normal standard Nebuchadnezzar size . . . and none of his ziggurat-inscriptions were found in situ.”—Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 68.
- ²¹ “There is no reason to doubt the identification of this site with the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-11), the building of which had been terminated.”—Wiseman, *Babylon*, 1:388.
- ²² “The so-called ‘Esagil tablet’, now in the Musée du Louvre . . . remains the best source for the dimensions of the temple-tower with its height equal to its base (i.e., 15 x 15 (x 15) GAR = c. 90 x 90 (x 90) m).”—Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 71. “Extrapolation from archaeological data supports the height suggested by the literary evidence, 295 to 300 ft. (90 to 92 m).”—Pinches, *Babel, Tower of, Archeological Evidences*, 1:384. “The sanctuary of Marduk (Bēl) on top . . . gave a total height of 85 m. (280 ft.).”—Wiseman, *Babylon*, 1:388.
- ²³ *The Ishtar Gate was the eighth gate to the inner city of Babylon. It was constructed in about 575 B.C. by order of King Nebuchadnezzar II on the north side of the city. Dedicated to the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, the gate was constructed using glazed brick with alternating rows of bas-relief mušhuššu (dragons) and aurochs. A reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate and Processional Way was built at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin out of material excavated by Robert Koldewey and finished in the 1930s*. Image courtesy of Bontenbal. Image is in the public domain.
- ²⁴ Wiseman, *Babylon*, 1:389-390.
- ²⁵ “Dated cuneiform texts up to A.D. 110 show that the site was still occupied.”—Ibid., 1:390.
- ²⁶ This also explains why there is such a battle, even among Christians, over the date when the book of Revelation was written. Some Christians want to find complete fulfillment of the predictions against Babylon in the events of early Rome requiring that John wrote prior to the events of the reign of Nero—commonly seen as the fulfillment. If the traditional date of the book (95/96 A.D.) is upheld, then it is impossible to find fulfillment in early Rome and fulfillment must await future developments—the view which we hold and which we believe is the only one that does justice to predictions in the book of Daniel.
- ²⁷ Garland, *A Testimony of Jesus Christ : A Commentary on the Book of Revelation, Vol. 2 (Rev. 15-22)*, 4.1.
- ²⁸ *Humanist Manifesto II*, American Humanist Association, [http://www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II] accessed 20130101.



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