

# Babylon & Persia

*From the Captivity to Cyrus*



By Isaac Humphrey

## Summary

*The history of Israel and Judah in the later years before their captivity is directly inter-mixed with the story of 4 great ancient empires, the last of which appeared almost out of nowhere and took all. This article will give the context and background of the fall of Jerusalem and the 70 years of captivity, from the fall of Assyria to that of the short-lived Babylonian empire.*

## The Army from the North

*"Thus saith the LORD, Behold, a people cometh from the north country, and a great nation shall be raised from the sides of the earth. They shall lay hold on bow and spear; they are cruel, and have no mercy; their voice roareth like the sea; and they ride upon horses, set in array as men for war against thee, O daughter of Zion.*

*We have heard the fame thereof: our hands wax feeble..."*

(Jeremiah 6:22-24)

He came from the north, from an ancient and highly advanced civilization. He came from the north with a victorious army sweeping all before him. A thousand years or more had passed since his civilization had been an empire: it was now again. But those thousand years had not diminished the cultural and scientific advancements of that civilization. They had systems of finance and long-standing legal traditions; they had years of astronomy, mathematics, and even geometry; they had an elaborate system of canals to water their arid farmland. They knew about Pythagorean theorem before Pythagoras did<sup>1</sup>. Their astronomy found its way into our modern geometry, and we have 360 degrees in a circle because of them<sup>2</sup>. But this clever civilization was not always on top of the political situation, and had to suffer centuries of military domination by foreign powers. Even when the city gains independence from foreign domination, the new rulers are not natives, but neighbors<sup>3</sup>.

The city was Babylon, and the civilization was Babylonian; the man from the north Nebuchadnezzar II. He was come up against Jerusalem, against the king of Judah. He would besiege Jerusalem twice, replace two of Judah's kings, and ultimately deport most of the nation - which would have a profound impact on the Jews and the rest of Bible history. In the first part of this article, we are going to look at the chain of events that brings Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylon into the prominence of history and the attention of the Bible.

## **Background**

During the long period of kings from Saul to Hezekiah, Israel's history is mostly impacted by internal politics and dealings with neighboring nations. The powerful Egypt (which was only about as far away as Syria) did briefly appear from time to time, but its hegemony was never lasting, nor did it create a lasting impact.

Israel's history was dramatically changed when it became tangled with the large and growing empire of Assyria, which in the mid eighth century BC erased and deported the northern kingdom of Israel and almost exterminated Judah as well. Judah remained subject to Assyria until the days of Josiah when Assyria began to collapse.

At its height, the Assyrian empire (or Neo-Assyrian empire) was the greatest that the world had seen to that date<sup>4</sup>. It ruled the western middle east from the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates south to Egypt; and from Cyprus in the west to Babylon and Susa in the east.

Babylon was not a willing subject. That city had tried revolt on several occasions but found that the might of Assyria was too strong for them.

But then, Assyria began to collapse. In the 7th century they reached both their height of extent and then their depths of destruction. It started with Egypt. After several unsuccessful attempts, Egypt gained their independence; it was not stark or sudden, but rather a realization on the Assyrian side of the futility of keeping Egypt down, and on the Egyptian side that it would be to their advantage become the allies of Assyria<sup>5</sup>.

Assyria also seemed to lose their hold on Judah as we see Josiah acting and thinking like an independent monarch.

The worst and fatal blow, however, came from the final rebellion of Babylon in 626.

Under the leadership of Nabopolassar, the Chaldeans (which are the dominant element in Babylon and give their name to its empire) not only asserted their independence, but also partnered with the Medes to attack their former overlords and grow an empire of their own at Assyria's expense.<sup>6</sup>

A word needs to be said about the Medes. They had been Assyria's neighbors to the north and east with a territory stretching out in a long band to the Persian Gulf and towards India. They were more than happy to expand their empire to the west and support Babylon in their rebellion. Babylon and Media, with other allies, aimed a joint blow at the heart of Assyria - Nineveh fell in 612.

The stage was now set for a division of Assyria's former empire and the growth of former subjects to be empires in their own right. Egypt appeared to be faithful allies to Assyria and always fought on their side - but their 'faithfulness' happened to gain them large portions of Assyria's former territories.<sup>7</sup>

Now comes the next installment in the series of 'showdowns' that occur for the next several decades as the middle east moves towards a new equilibrium under another long-lasting master.

## **Egypt vs. Babylon**

In the year 609, Egypt decided to come to aid the last of the Assyrians and also expand their own sphere of influence. The king of Egypt at this time was Pharaoh Necho II

and the king of Babylon (who inherited the place of “king of Assyria” in Jewish minds<sup>8</sup>) was Nabopolassar. Nabopolassar, however, was old and the leader of the Babylonian armies was the crown prince, Nebuchadnezzar II.

As Necho travelled north from Egypt, he had to pass through Palestine and near the kingdom of Judah.

Judah is ruled by a God-fearing king named Josiah whose active reign saw the restoration of the pure religion from Sinai and the temple of God. Josiah also kept the Passover; not just a regular Passover, but such a Passover as had never been held since the days of Samuel and the Judges. Josiah thought and acted as an independent monarch, and perhaps he saw a threat to Judah’s independence in the powerful forces of Necho sweeping up to Assyria. Necho appears to be focused on the one goal of fighting Babylon, and did not want to stop and mess with petty monarchs along the road. But Josiah wanted to mess with him. Josiah attacked Necho in the valley of Megiddo and lost both his life and Judah’s independence.

Necho pressed northwards to aid the last survivors of the Assyrian empire at Harran, but the resistance failed and Harran was taken. A few Assyrians joined the Egyptians at Carchemish on the Euphrates river. Necho was intent on maintaining Egyptian control of Palestine and Syria.

After Josiah’s death, his son Jehoahaz was placed on the throne by an independent Judah; but Necho decided Judah was his and replaced Jehoahaz on the throne with another son of Josiah. He also demanded tribute from his new vassal state.

The new appointee, who changed his name from Eliakim to Jehoiakim, was faced with the problem of paying the tribute. He came up with what appears to be a property or perhaps an income tax system, and extracted enough silver and gold to pay Egypt.

4 years after Harran, Necho was met by his arch-rival Prince Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon at Carchemish for another struggle. There an epic battle took place in which Egypt was soundly defeated. The remaining Egyptians retreated homewards, and were followed by the victorious Nebuchadnezzar. This meant that Judah was free from Egypt but now subject to the new invader - Babylon.

Jehoiakim owed his position to Egypt, and though he was forced to obey Babylon he and the people of Israel thought of Egypt in a positive light. Egypt’s recent killing of Josiah, conquest of their land, and tribute tax did not alienate the Judeans. They looked on Egypt as a deliverer from the yoke of Babylon. Was Egypt’s yoke lighter? Were they just practicing playing off one power against another? Did they view Egypt as the weaker overlord? It is hard to know. One thing is certain - Babylon would always be an enemy.

Nebuchadnezzar probably had every intention of following up on his victory at Carchemish by a wholesale conquest of Palestine and Egypt, thus almost doubling his empire in one blow. But at the critical moment, while staring across the border into Egypt itself, he had to suspend his project and hurry back home. He had just become king of Babylon.

## **Nebuchadnezzar and Jehoiakim**

Nebuchadnezzar now had Palestine and the crown, but his ambition was to glorify and expand both. His eye was on Egypt and he was determined to finish them off while they were still weak.

Jehoiakim was content to serve his new master for a few years, but was not loyal. He only waited for an opportune time to declare his independence or seek a weaker master. That moment came around 601 when Nebuchadnezzar tried again to take Egypt. The Egyptians may have been defeated when fighting far from home on the Euphrates, but they were successful when defending their homeland.

Nebuchadnezzar retreated to think things over, and Jehoiakim got the idea to revolt. Thinking Egypt would come to his aid, he stopped paying tribute. This brought down his royal master from the north, but not immediately. It took him a few years, but though retribution was delayed it was sure.

Jehoiakim's administration was harsh and oppressive: during his reign he set himself against all prophets of God who predicted the downfall of Judah because of their wickedness. The "princes" (or rulers) of Jehoiakim's day were remnants of Josiah's righteous administration and were sympathetic to the Prophet Jeremiah and his message from God. They were thoroughly dominated by the king and only exercised a minimal influence on the people.

## **The Sieges of Jerusalem**

It was 598<sup>9</sup>, Nebuchadnezzar had finally come to re-subjugate Jerusalem. No help came from Egypt, who, after Carchemish, would never again be a serious threat to Babylon. Sometime during the invasion or siege, Jehoiakim dies, and his son Jehoiachin is placed on the throne at the tender age of 18. He virtually checkmated before his reign began, and three months after he surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. The conqueror did not destroy the city, but plundered it and carried off captives - including the new king, his family, all the skilled craftsmen, and his best fighting men. Nebuchadnezzar set up another son of Josiah to be king, who changed his name from Mattaniah to Zedekiah. Jehoiachin spends most of his adult life rotting in prison, but is eventually released and treated kindly after Nebuchadnezzar dies.

Nebuchadnezzar left Jerusalem deprived of much of its physical treasure and human treasure. He doubtless thought that Jerusalem was now secure and would no longer pose a threat to his rule over Palestine. Perhaps he discerned that Zedekiah was a weak and unambitious and thought that he would not try anything rash.

The new administration was composed of deeply patriotic rulers who were fully committed to fighting against Babylonian dominance. Zedekiah's weak character bent to whatever strong force was closest to him, and so he went along with the patriots, who on their side completely dominated him. It was not just that he went along with their council, it was that he recognized their superiority to him and submitted to their will - never daring to contradict them and keeping the secret any action that might displease them (acting as if he were a common spy rather than a king). They seem to be the opposite of their counterparts in Jehoiakim's administration. They viewed Jeremiah's

prophecy as a danger to their patriotic defense measures and threw the author into prison. They were confident that Egypt would be their salvation and put trust in the new Pharaoh - Pharaoh Hophra. The rulers of Judah may have been patriotic, but they were not so about the true identity of their nation - the chosen people of God. They abandoned his laws and refused to listen to his prophets. They cared about their own power and independence, but not really their nation or its special relationship with God. Resistance to Babylon started early in the reign of Zedekiah, but did not develop until over half-way through Zedekiah's reign. Egypt was sent to for aid and support, but was too slow in moving.

The rebels gained their way and once again the Babylonian armies descended on the rebellious Jerusalem. They besieged Jerusalem for the better part of two years. During this time the Egyptians made an attempt to aid the Israelite rebels who had depended on their support. They succeeded in temporarily relieving the siege of Jerusalem, but failed to defeat the Babylonians who soon returned to their former occupation.

Eleven years had passed since Jehoiachin was taken and Zedekiah installed. Now they once again reduced Jerusalem, making a breach in the walls, and capturing its king. This time, however, there would be no leniency. Jerusalem was totally destroyed - walls broken, temple completely plundered and then razed. No new king was appointed to replace Zedekiah and the kingdom of Judah was no longer a tributary nation but a province under the administration of a Babylonian-appointed governor. It was the end of the kingdom of Judah and the beginning of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews.

## **Nebuchadnezzar and his Successors**

Nebuchadnezzar was a great builder as well as a man of war. He is reported to have built hanging gardens for his wife - watered by an irrigation system in the columns and ran by slaves. Nebuchadnezzar also turned his attention to fortification and finished walls, created forts, added walls, restored temples, repaved streets, and revamped Babylon's essential and important network of canals. *"Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?"* (Daniel 4:30).

Nebuchadnezzar reigned about 43 years and was Babylon's greatest ruler. His successors could not match his greatness and ultimately could not hold the empire together.

Nebuchadnezzar's son Evil-Merodach (Amil-Marduk) succeeded him but only reigned two years before being assassinated by his brother-in-law Neriglissor. That usurper reigned for a few years and managed to do something constructive - rebuilding the palace. He managed to pass the throne to his son Labashi-Marduk. Labashi-Marduk was promptly killed by a father-son duo who were destined to kill not only Labashi-Marduk but the whole Babylonian empire. These two were Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar.



## **Nabonidus and Belshazzar**

When Nabonidus had seated himself on the throne, he now had the power and resources to focus on his main interest - antiquarian theology and religion. He was at once an archaeologist and a restorer. He wanted to know about the past and revive it. He was the patron of half-forgotten deities and their priests and temples. Nabonidus did not gain the universal gratitude of these priests, because he happened to have a habit of receiving visions and making changes to the idol's headdress or something similar. One group of priests Nabonidus completely alienated were those of Marduk - the national deity of Babylon - also gained the ill-will of Babylon in the process. This was because he ignored Marduk to favor his collection of obscure deities. Matters did not mend when Nabonidus ignored the annual New Year's Festival 9 years in a row because of absenting himself from Babylon.<sup>10</sup> The king was a key figure in the ceremonies of that occasion and his absence meant that the festival could not happen.

After around 7 years of rule in Babylon, Nabonidus leaves and appoints his son Belshazzar as regent in his absence.

Nabonidus had conquered the Arabian kingdom of Tema, and decided that it would be his new capital. He started work on (a new temple?) and had provisions sent from Babylon. Each year for the next 10 years the Babylonian chronicler mournfully noted "Nabonidus the king was in Tema... The king... to Babylon did not come. Bel [Marduk] did not come out. The Akitu [New Year's] festival did not take place."

While the king was enjoying himself in his new oasis capital - ignoring the state of his true capital and the empire - a new threat from an obscure quarter was quickly coming onto the international scene

## **Cyrus and the Rise of Persia**

When Cyrus II ascended the throne of Persia in 539 he was the ruler of a small vassal state in the far eastern desert. He was the vassal of the Median empire whose ruler was his grandfather Astyges.

Cyrus united the Persian tribes under his rule and set to gain his independence. He allied with Babylon against Media: because, after their alliance against Assyria, these two neighboring powers had become jealous of one another (and Nabonidus wanted to take Harran from Media so he could restore his father's temple).

This act of Cyrus' was, of course, a declaration of rebellion and Astyges stepped in to put down this rebellion. He sent his general Harpagus to quell the revolt. But Harpagus had been mistreated by Astyges and so turned traitor and joined Cyrus.

Astyges went with a second army to see to matters in person, but that army mutinied and he was betrayed a second time. With his grandfather out of the way, Cyrus suddenly became king of Media as well as Persia and this huge new territorial acquisition placed him in hostile contact with the Babylonians and the Lydians (which bordered the Greeks and included some of their colonies).

At first, Cyrus went west to attack the kingdom of Lydia. The Lydian king, Croesus, was

to have help from Babylon, Egypt, and Sparta; but Cyrus was much too fast and soon Lydia was added to his possessions. He did not go westward to Thrace and Greece, but instead went to the far east and expanded his territory in that direction. All the while, Babylonia is uncomfortably watching nations to the north, east, and west being taken one by one. Finally, Nabonidus wakes up and decides to take action.

## **The Fall of Babylon**

As Cyrus had been moving back and forth from far east to far west - with lightning speed - he took a little time to whittle away Babylonian territory. When a veteran of Nebuchadnezzar's wars, who was also governor of an eastern Babylonian district, gave Cyrus his territory and joined his side, Nabonidus' first action he took was to transport his collection of gods out of that district. Then Cyrus returned from his eastern conquests and set his face on Babylon. As his victorious armies marched into Babylonian districts, a stream of deities flowed out to a safe refuge in Babylon.

Nabonidus finally turned his attention to the attitude of Babylon and sought to appease them by celebrating the long-forgotten New Year's Festival.

But Babylon was not appeased, Cyrus was never stopped. All battles and resistance failed, and in October of 539 Cyrus entered Babylon. There was no siege, no trial of the immense walls and fortifications of Nebuchadnezzar. These fortifications mattered not when the hearts of the defenders were not with their king. Belshazzar was killed and Nabonidus made prisoner. Thus fell the great Babylon that Nebuchadnezzar built for his glory and honor. It fell without much of a fight due to a weak and out-of-touch statesman on the throne.

## **Epilogue: Cyrus the Great, Cyrus the Good**

When Cyrus entered Babylon, he was welcome. In the minds of the Babylonians he was not as much an invader as a deliverer, and Cyrus did his best to keep that goodwill. He paid attention to Marduk and declared himself approved to rule by that deity.

Cyrus was not intent on gaining the goodwill of the Babylonians only, but on all other people's in his vast new realm. He sent Nabonidus' collection of deities back to their respective temples and ordered the continued restoration of these.

Cyrus also focused on gaining the goodwill and serving the needs of one displaced population within his empire - the Jews.

He ordered the restoration of the Temple at Jerusalem and allowed Jews to return to their homeland after 70 years of captivity. Multiple waves of exiles returned and set to work rebuilding the temple and restoring Jerusalem.

Under Zedekiah - Jerusalem's wall was breached, under Nehemiah it would be restored.

## Footnotes & References

1. [https://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/HistTopics/Babylonian\\_Pythagoras/](https://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/HistTopics/Babylonian_Pythagoras/)
2. <https://www.historytoday.com/history-matters/full-circle>
3. There are two different ethnic groups in Babylon: the native Babylonians, and the nearby Chaldeans. Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar were or were friendly to the Chaldeans and their empire is known as the Chaldean empire. See "History of Babylonia and Assyria" by Robert Rogers Pages 74-76.
4. "...At the time, it was the largest empire the world had ever seen." This is a quote from a scholar found on <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/features/preserving-the-history-of-the-assyrian-empire-once-the-largest-in-the-world>. It seems to be a generally accepted opinion.
5. <https://bible.org/seriespage/16-israeljudah-and-assyria>
6. Israel and the Nations, F.F. Bruce, pg 82
7. "History of Babylonia and Assyria" by Robert Rogers pg. 76
8. The Pulpit Commentary on 2 Kings 23:29
9. Israel and the Nations, F.F. Bruce, pg 88
10. <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/mesopotamian-chronicles-content/abc-7-nabonidus-chronicle/>