

What is the significance of the Babylonian Empire in biblical history?

Babylon rose from a Mesopotamian city on the Euphrates River to become a powerful city-state and later the capital city and namesake of one of the greatest empires in history. The city was located on the eastern side of the Fertile Crescent about 55 miles south of modern Baghdad. Babylon's history intersected the biblical timeline early and often. The influence of Babylonia on Israel and on world history is profound.

The Founding of Babylon

The Bible's first mention of Babylon comes in Genesis 10. This chapter is referred to as the table of nations as it traces the descendants of Noah's three sons. In the genealogy of Ham, "Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth" (Genesis 10:8). Nimrod founded a kingdom that included a place called "Babylon" in Shinar (Genesis 10:10).

The Tower of Babel

The Tower of Babel is found in Genesis 11. In English it is easy enough to make the connection between "Babel" and "Babylon," but in Hebrew it is the same word. This chapter cements Babylon's reputation as a city of rebellion against God. From then on, the biblical writers consistently use Babylon as a symbol of evil and defiance (see 1 Peter 5:13 and Revelation 17:5).

Babylon's Early Growth

Near the time of Abraham, Babylon became an independent city-state ruled by the Amorites. The first Babylonian dynasty included Hammurabi, the sixth king, known for his code of laws. Hammurabi expanded the kingdom, and the area around Babylon became known

as Babylonia. During the second dynasty, Babylon was in communication with Egypt and entered a 600-year struggle with Assyria. After a time of subjugation to the Elamite Empire, a fourth dynasty of Babylonian kings thrived under Nebuchadnezzar I. Then Babylon fell under the shadow of Assyria.

Babylon's Ascendency

By 851 B.C., Babylon was only nominally independent, requiring Assyrian "protection" and facing many internal upheavals. Finally, the Assyrian Tiglath-pileser III took the throne. The Assyrians and Merodach-baladan, a Chaldean, traded power more than once. During one of his times of advantage, Merodach-baladan sent emissaries to threaten Hezekiah, king of Judah (2 Kings 20:12-19; Isaiah 39). When the Chaldean chief Nabopolassar took control of Babylon in 626 B.C., he proceeded to sack Nineveh, the capital of Assyria.

Nebuchadnezzar II's Conquest of Judah

Under the Chaldean dynasty, and, arguably, throughout the rest of history, no king surpassed the glory and absolute power of Nebuchadnezzar II's reign. As the crown prince (son of Nabopolassar), he defeated Pharaoh Necho II, who had come to the aid of the Assyrian army, winning for Babylonia the former Assyrian lands, including Israel. After being crowned king, Nebuchadnezzar forced King Jehoiakim of Judah to "become his vassal for three years. But then [Jehoiakim] changed his mind and rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar" (2 Kings 24:1). The king of Babylon, who did not take kindly to being rebelled against, captured Jerusalem and took the king and other leaders, military men and artisans as prisoners to Babylon (2 Kings 24:12-16). This deportation marked the beginning of the Babylonian exile of the Jews.

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Zedekiah to rule Judah. However, Zedekiah, against the prophet Jeremiah's counsel, joined the Egyptians in a revolt in 589 B.C. This resulted in Nebuchadnezzar's return. The remaining Jews were deported, Jerusalem was burned, and the temple was destroyed in August of 587 or 586 BC (Jeremiah 52:1-30).

The Prophet Daniel and the Fall of Babylon

Babylon is the setting for the ministry of the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel, who were both deportees from Judah. Daniel became a leader and royal adviser to the Babylonian and Persian Empires. He had been captured after the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. (Jeremiah 46:2-12). The book of Daniel records Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2) and foretells the fall of Babylon to the Medes and the Persians (Daniel 5). Earlier, the prophet Isaiah had also foretold the fall of Babylon (Isaiah 46:1-2).

Conclusion

In the Bible, Babylon is mentioned from Genesis to Revelation, as it rises from its rebellious beginnings to become a symbol of the Antichrist's evil world system. When God's people required discipline, God used the Babylonian Empire to accomplish it, but He limited Judah's captivity to 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11). Then, God promised to "punish the king of Babylon and his nation" (Jeremiah 25:12) "for all the wrong they have done in Zion" (Jeremiah 51:24). Ultimately, all evil will be judged, as symbolized by Babylon's demise in Revelation 18:21: "The great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again."