

## BABYLON AND THE WORD OF GOD

At the time of Jeremiah Judah was a small state between the powers of Assyria and Babylon on the one side and Egypt on the other. A major turning point during this period was the defeat of the Egyptians by the Babylonians at Carchemish near the Euphrates in 605 BC. Some parties in Jerusalem continued to look to an alliance with Egypt for safety. Jeremiah foretold the destruction of Jerusalem for its false worship, social injustice, and refusal to repent. He urged the kings of Jerusalem to submit to Babylon. God was using this great idol-worshipping city of Babylon as a tool to carry out His will. Babylon was the war club and weapon of the LORD (Jr 51:20).

Already in 597 BC the Babylonians took Jehoiachin and three thousand Jews to exile in Babylon. The Babylonians besieged Jerusalem again in 589, captured it after a siege of eighteen months, and completely destroyed the city and the temple.

Isaiah had already foretold the destruction of Babylon (Isa 14:1–23; 21:1–10; 46:1–2; 47:1–5). Jeremiah also foretold it. When the Babylonians had blinded King Zedekiah, and were taking him to Babylon, Jeremiah sought out the officer who had charge of Zedekiah's luggage. We would probably call him the royal butler. Jeremiah gave him a scroll that contained his prophecies about Babylon (Jr 50-51), with unusual instructions. When the butler reached Babylon, he was to read the scroll aloud, then tie a stone to it, and throw it into the Euphrates. The document foretold war against Babylon. God would use the Medes to conquer the city. The city would fall and be shattered. The scroll included the prophecy, "Babylon will become piles of rubble, a haunt of jackals, an object of horror and a place at which people hiss, without any inhabitants" (Jr 51:37).

That was an amazing prediction. Babylonia was one of the richest lands in western Asia. Babylon was the largest city in what is sometimes called "the civilised world." It was built on both sides of the Euphrates (though the river has since shifted its course. This was no accident, according to the prophecy in Jeremiah, "A drought will come against its water, and it will dry up" (Jr 51:38). A series of three massive walls, on which chariots could drive, encircled the city. Another massive wall protected the city from north, all the way from the Euphrates to the Tigris, and, according to Greek writers, was about thirty metres high. The city had a network of canals inside the city area and outside it, very large palaces, and terraced gardens, which were regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It had many temples, including one on top of a reconstructed tower of Babel.

The recent war against Iraq has revived some interest in Babylon. Many ancient cities, like Damascus and Jerusalem, still exist today. However, Babylon is an extensive field of ruins. There have been recent archaeological excavations, and the presence of American soldiers is reviving interest in the site. Many clay tablets survive from the earlier Babylonian period before and after Hammurabi, and from the Neo-Babylonian Empire before and after Nebuchadnezzar. The site of the ruins of Babylon is about two hundred kilometres directly south of Baghdad, near the town of al-Hillah.

King Nebuchadnezzar is remembered for his expansion and restoration of Babylon. Three palaces were built during his time. The Southern Palace, his chief palace, may have been the site of Belshazzar's feast (Daniel 5). The inner city was divided by a magnificent Processional Way. At one end stood the Ishtar Gate, decorated with glazed bricks. The most famous architectural ruin in Babylon was the tower to the god Marduk, who was called by a name that meant "the lord of the foundation of heaven and earth."

In Semitic names it is more important to look at the consonants than the vowels. Names of Babylonian gods, Nabu (or Nebo), Bel, and Marduk, come up in biblical names. Nabu was part of the name "Nebuchadnezzar." Daniel was given the alternative name "Belteshazzar" after the Babylonian god Bel. The "ach" in "Shadrach" and "Meshach" probably referred to the moon-goddess Aku. One of Daniel's friends, Abednego, was probably named "Abednebo" (servant of Nabu), and pious Jews deliberately corrupted it, as in Israel they had corrupted Baal-Zebul (lord of the dwelling) of Ekron to Baal-Zebub (lord of the dunghill). "Abd" in Semitic languages means "servant of." Obadiah means "servant of the LORD" (Compare "Abdullah", meaning "servant of Allah). Mordecai, the uncle of Esther, was named after Marduk. Many Jews in Babylon had Babylonian names as well as Jewish names.

Jeremiah prophesied, "A sword will come against the Chaldeans", declares the LORD, "against those who are living Babylon, and against its officials and its wise men! A sword will come against the oracle-priests, and they will become foolish. A sword will come against its soldiers, and they will be shattered. A sword will come against its horses, against its chariots, and against all the foreigners within its ranks. They will become women. A sword will come against all its treasures, and they will be plundered. A drought will come against its water, and it will dry up. For Babylonia is a land of images. They will act like madmen because of the frightful images. Therefore desert animals will live there with jackals. Ostriches will live in it. People will never live there any more. People will not settle there throughout all generations. As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbouring towns", declares the LORD, "no one will live there. No human being will live in it as a foreigner" (Jr 51:35-40).

Cyrus, the king of the Medes and Persians, defeated the Babylonians under Nabonidus in northern Babylonia. Cyrus entered Babylon without a battle in October 539 BC. Nabonidus' son and viceroy, Belshazzar, was governing the city, and he was slain (Dan. 5:30). Under Cyrus the chief buildings were spared and the temples and their statues were restored.

Isaiah had already foretold the name of the king, Cyrus, who would arrange for the captives from Judea to return to their own land (Isa 44:28). As Jeremiah predicted (Jr 29:10), the Babylonian captivity ended after seventy years when a number of Jews returned (539 BC). Some did not return for another hundred years, and some never returned.

Babylon continued as a city for quite some time. Xerxes destroyed the city (478 BC). When Alexander defeated the Persians, he made Babylon one of his capitals. Although Alexander planned to restore it, he met his death there before work had gone very far. The Greek-speaking kings of Syria chose Seleucia on the river Tigris as the capital of the area after they captured Babylon in 312 BC. Then the city once again fell into disrepair. According to cuneiform texts, the temple of Bel continued in existence at least until AD 75. After 150 BC Babylon was incorporated into the kingdom of the Parthians, and for some time the Romans took over northern parts of Babylonia. After the second century AD the city deteriorated into a pile of ruins, as Jeremiah had foretold. It is worth recalling that the four kingdoms referred to in the Book of Daniel were those of Babylonia, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans.

In the Book of Revelation "Babylon" is used symbolically for Rome and for the enemies of the church of all times (Rv 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). It is a symbol for the centre of opposition to God and His people. Where the fall of Babylon is foretold in Revelation, it means the final victory of Jesus Christ and His church.

All this should remind us of the power of God's Word. This same Word has the power to convert and give new spiritual life through faith in Jesus Christ. It always throbs with the power of the Holy Spirit. When people come to faith it is not the result of our own human effort or skill in applying the Word. We believe according to God's mighty power (Eph 1:19-20). God's Word is still His means, by which He draws people to Him in faith. Like rain and snow, it does not return without producing results according to God's good pleasure. No one should ignore either its promises or its threats, either Law or Gospel. Sadly, many people ignore and resist God's powerful Word, but God's threats and His promises will inexorably work out. He gives His threats so that people may fear His wrath and live according to His will. He gives His promises so that people may trust and love Him.