

# The Rise and Fall of Babylon

by John F. Walvoord

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*The sermon explores the rise and fall of Babylon, from its early history to its ultimate destruction in the Day of the Lord, as predicted by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 11:3, Isaiah 13:17, Jeremiah 50:17, Daniel 2:37

**Topics:** "Babylon's Judgment", "End Times"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the early history of Babylon as mentioned in the Bible, tracing its origins from the time of Nimrod to its eventual rise as a center of religious significance and rebellion against God. The prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel concerning Babylon's judgment and destruction are explored, highlighting the anticipation of Babylon's fall and the ultimate end of its power. The fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C. is detailed, showcasing the sudden downfall of the once mighty empire and the continued influence of Babylonian culture and ideologies in subsequent kingdoms.

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## Transcript

The early history of Babylon is shrouded in mystery. First mentioned in the Bible is the record of Genesis 10:8-10 which names Nimrod, the grandson of Ham, as the founder of the city in the dim prehistoric past. Its name was derived from a later experience revealed in Genesis 11 where the inhabitants of the land of Shinar, the southern portion of Mesopotamia, are recorded as building a tower designed to reach the heavens. This may have been the beginning of a practice of building towers with religious significance. Such a tower is known as a ziggurat, designating an artificial mound of brick and soil elevated above the surrounding terrain.

The Biblical description of the tower is in keeping with the characteristics of the area. Lacking stones, they made brick and used slime or bitumen native to the area in the construction of the tower. According to Scripture, the inhabitants had said,

Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth (Genesis 11:3, 4).

The Scriptures record that the Lord judged the people and confounded their language with the result that the city and the tower were left unfinished (Genesis 11:5-8). The place according to Genesis 11:9 was "called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the

Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth." It seems probable that the name given to the city in Genesis 10:10 actually supplanted the original name at this time, and this incident contributes to the long history of Babylon as a center of religious significance, and as a source of false religion and rebellion against the true God.

Although the city of Babylon does not rise to prominence until 1830 b.c., the area in which it is located, called Babylonia, had a long history. Early civilization near the site of ancient Ur in lower Babylonia dates from the fourth millennium b.c. and successive civilizations have been traced from 2800 b.c. The period of the early dynasties (2800-2360 b.c.) recorded an advanced civilization including great temples, canals, and other construction. The old Akkadian period (2360-2180 b.c.) included the extensive empire of Sargon from Persia to the Mediterranean. This was followed by the Neo-Sumerian period (2070-1960 b.c.), in which time Abraham was born. The land was sacked by the Elamites and Amorites in the period 1960-1830 b.c.

The history of Babylonia proper, known as the Old Babylonia period (1830-1550 b.c.), included the brilliant reign of Hammurabi (1728-1686 b.c.) whose famous Code was discovered in 1901. Babylonia was next invaded by the Kassites in the period 1550-1169 b.c. This was followed by Dynasty II of Isin (1169-1039 b.c.), whose kings were native Babylonians. In the period from 1100 to 625 b.c. the land suffered various invasions including that of Assyria. In 729 b.c. Tiglath-pileser became king of Babylon and later in 689 b.c. attacked by Sennacherib, Babylon was destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt by Esarhaddon, and was finally wrested from Assyria around 625 b.c. when the Neo-Babylonian Empire was founded by Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar. With the help of the Medes, Nineveh was destroyed in 612 b.c. Necho of Egypt was defeated in 605 b.c. The stage was now set for the brilliant reign of Nebuchadnezzar which included the earlier conquering of Jerusalem in 606 b.c., the ultimate captivity of its inhabitants, and the destruction of the city itself.

#### The Prophecies Of Isaiah Concerning Babylon

Apart from a reference to a "Babylonish garment" in Joshua 7:21, there is no Biblical reference to Babylon after Genesis 11 until the great prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel unfolded God's plan for the ancient city. Most of the Biblical prophecies relating to Babylon are in relation to the captivity and God's revelation to Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel concerning the ultimate end of the captivity both for Israel and for Babylon. Most remarkable, however, are the prophecies of Isaiah delivered a century before Babylon had risen to power and recorded at a time when Babylon was still in obscurity with no indication of its coming greatness. Outstanding chapters in Isaiah's predictions are 13, 14, and 47 with scattered references elsewhere (21:9, 39:1, 3, 6, 7; 43:14; 48:14, 20).

The predictions of Isaiah have to do with Babylon's ultimate destruction in the Day of the Lord. The near and the far view are often mingled as in chapter 13. The destruction of Babylon is pictured in Isaiah 13:1-11 as part of God's program to punish the entire world (cp. 13:11). The historic conquering of Babylon by the Medes and the Persians is mentioned specifically in Isaiah 13:17-19.

Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, which shall not regard silver; and as for gold, they shall not delight in it. Their bows also shall dash the young men to pieces; and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.

The prophet seems to refer to the far view, that is, the destruction of Babylon in relation to the second coming of Christ in 13:20-22. Here it is declared:

It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there. But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces: and her time is near to come, and her days shall not be prolonged.

As far as the historic fulfillment is concerned, it is obvious from both Scripture and history that these verses have not been literally fulfilled. The city of Babylon continued to flourish after the Medes conquered it, and though its glory dwindled, especially after the control of the Medes and Persians ended in 323 b.c., the city continued in some form or substance until a.d. 1000 and did not experience a sudden termination such as is anticipated in this prophecy.

Interpretation has been made more difficult by the varied meanings of Babylon itself. Sometimes the term (in the Hebrew Babel) refers to the city whose history continued and was flourishing even during the Apostolic period when it became a center of Jewish learning after the destruction of Jerusalem. Sometimes the term is used in reference to the political power of Babylon which obviously fell in one night when the Medes and the Persians took control of Babylon. Sometimes it is used in a religious sense, for Babylon has been the fountain of many of the pagan religions which have competed with Judaism and Christian faith ever since. The interpretation of Isaiah 13:20-22 is inevitably determined by the meaning assigned to Revelation 17, 18.

Many interpreters agree that Babylon in its religious and political sense will be revived at the end of the age. Debated is the conclusion that the city itself will have a physical revival to become the capital of the world at the end of the age. Such a rebuilding of the ancient city would make possible a literal fulfillment of the prophecy of complete and sudden destruction as predicted in Isaiah 13:19-22.

Isaiah 14 seems to confirm that the ultimate destruction in view is one related to the second advent of Christ and the Day of the Lord. The satanic power behind Babylon addressed as "Lucifer, son of the morning" (14:12) is portrayed both in his original rebellion against God and in his ultimate judgment. The destruction of Babylon is related to the judgment upon "all the kings of the nations" (14:18).

Another massive prophecy against Babylon is found in Isaiah 47. Here a prediction of Babylon's utter humiliation is given, and the foreview seems to relate primarily to the capture of Babylon by the Medes and the Persians. The sad pronouncement is made at the conclusion of the passage, "None shall save thee" (Isaiah 47:15). The major attention given to Babylon in Isaiah's prophecies confirm Babylon's importance in prophecy relating to the nations.

#### The Prophecies Of Jeremiah Concerning Babylon

The prophet Jeremiah like Isaiah devotes two long chapters to the prediction of Babylon's ultimate judgment and destruction (Jeremiah 50, 51). If the prophecies of Isaiah are remarkable for their anticipation of Babylon's rise to power and the captivity of Judah a hundred years before it actually occurred, the prophecies of Jeremiah are notable because they were delivered at the peak of Babylon's power when it seemed most unlikely that the great nation would fall. Babylon is pictured as being punished because of its cruel treatment of Israel (50:17, 18; 51:24, 49).

Practically all of the predictions of Jeremiah seem to relate to the fall of Babylon by the attack of the Medes and the Persians. Only occasionally does there seem to be a reference to a future ultimate destruction as in Jeremiah 51:62-64. The prophecies of Jeremiah predicting the fall of Babylon at the hands of the Medes and the Persians were graphically fulfilled approximately sixty-five years later, as recorded in Daniel 5.

Major attention is devoted to the captivity of Judah in the prophecies of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel. There is almost constant reference to the Babylonian captivity of Judah in Jeremiah beginning in chapter 20; numerous references are also found in Ezekiel. Much of Jeremiah's ministry was to his own generation as he predicted the downfall of Jerusalem and the victory of the Babylonian armies. Jeremiah is seen as the true prophet of God in contrast to the false prophets who had predicted victory over Babylon (cp. Jeremiah 28:1-17). Jeremiah's prophecies were largely ignored. The first copy of his book was destroyed by the king (36:23). Jeremiah himself suffered affliction and imprisonment (37:15-38:13). With the capture of Jerusalem, the prophecies of Jeremiah were fully vindicated.

Most important were Jeremiah's prophecies concerning the duration of the captivity, designated as seventy years in Jeremiah 25:11 and 29:10. It was this prophecy which was read by Daniel which led to his prayer for the return of the captives to Jerusalem (Daniel 9:2).

A prominent theme of Jeremiah's prophecies were predictions against Egypt in which he anticipated that Nebuchadnezzar would conquer Egypt. As a traditional enemy of Israel, Egypt was thus to experience God's judgment in the form of coming under the power of Babylon. Jeremiah devotes considerable Scripture to this theme, including 43:10-13; 44:30; 46:1-26. In chapter 44 Jeremiah sends a message to the Jews in Egypt in which he predicts that their attempt to escape the power of Babylon would only result in their own destruction.

#### The Prophecies Of Ezekiel Concerning Babylon

Ezekiel echoes the prophecies of Jeremiah relating to the Babylonian captivity (Ezekiel 17:12-24) and like Jeremiah predicts the conquering of Egypt (29:18, 19; 30:10-25; 32:1-32). Added is the prediction of the destruction of Tyre in Ezekiel 26:7- 28:19.

It is obvious from these many passages in the prophets that Babylon occupies a large place in the prophetic program of the Old Testament for the nations surrounding Israel. It is with this context that Daniel the prophet takes up the theme and relates God's dealings with Babylon to His ultimate purpose of bringing all nations into subjection unto the Son of God.

#### The Prophecies Of Daniel Concerning Babylon

Daniel's first recognition of Babylon prophetically was in his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Babylon was represented in the great image by the head of gold, and Daniel recognized the importance of Nebuchadnezzar:

Thou, O king, art a king of kings: for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. And wheresoever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven hath he given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all. Thou art this head of gold (Daniel 2:37, 38).

After the death of Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel's vision recorded in chapter 7 includes much added revelation. In his description of the first beast which represents Babylon, Daniel states, "The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings: I beheld till the wings thereof were plucked, and it was lifted up from the earth, and made stand upon the feet as a man, and a man's heart was given to it" (Daniel 7:4).

Babylon was indeed like the lion, the king of beasts, and had eagle's wings like the king of birds. That the wings would be plucked and the beast would stand as a man with a man's heart was the divine portrayal of Nebuchadnezzar's experience in Daniel 4 as well as an anticipation of the ultimate humiliation of the Babylonian rulers in Daniel 5. In Daniel's interpretation of the tree vision of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4, he had predicted Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation in which he suffered seven years of insanity before his reason returned. Nebuchadnezzar was ready then to give praise to God as he does in Daniel 4:2, 3, 34-37. The prophecies of Daniel were meticulously fulfilled.

### The Fall Of Babylon

The fall of the Babylonian Empire came suddenly when the Medes and the Persians overran the city of Babylon in a night attack in 539 b.c. Prior to this event, the Babylonian Empire had already fallen on evil days. When Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 b.c., he was succeeded by his son Amel-Marduk who was assassinated only two years later. In 560 b.c. Neriglissar took the throne. When he died in 556 B.C, after only four years of reign, he was succeeded by his son who was assassinated shortly after he came to the throne. Nabonidus then assumed power appointing his son Belshazzar as co-ruler. It was this Belshazzar who held the ungodly feast of Daniel 5 and perished at the hands of the Medes and Persians.

At the time of the downfall of the city of Babylon recorded in Daniel 5, the city was still a monument to the genius of Nebuchadnezzar. According to Herodotus, the city was approximately 14 miles square with the Euphrates River bisecting it north and south. Two sets of walls inner and outer protected the city and, according to standards of the day, rendered it safe from attack from without. If Herodotus can be believed, the walls were indeed formidable being 350 feet high and 87 feet thick. Walls also lined the river on either side and 150 gates of solid brass protected the entrances. On the wall were some 250 watchtowers, 100 feet higher than the wall itself. The outside wall had a deep water moat some 30 feet wide.

During the height of its power, provisions were stored in Babylon supposedly sufficient for twenty years of siege and designed to discourage anyone attacking it. Within the walls the city was laid out in square blocks with beautiful houses lining the streets usually three and four stories in height. The city also included great parks and gardens, some of which, such as the hanging gardens described by Diodorus, were outstanding wonders in the ancient world. The gardens were built on terraces and supported large trees. A great bridge some 660 feet long and 30 feet wide bridged the Euphrates River and connected the eastern and western halves of the city. Notable buildings were also found such as the palace of the king, the temple of Bel over eight stories in height, and many other buildings of less importance.

It was this city, proud of its supposed invulnerability, which had ignored the rapidly expanding power of the Medes and the Persians. Media as a separate kingdom had matched the rise of the Babylonian Empire. After the Medes had captured Asshur in 614 b.c. under alliance with the Chaldeans, they had also captured Nineveh. The downfall of the Assyrian Empire, marked by these events, paved the way for the rise in power of Media which was in alliance with Nebuchadnezzar during most of his reign. Persia was also, rising in power, however, and under Cyrus II Media was conquered by the Persians about 549 b.c. Media and Persia were united in a common government which lasted until Alexander the Great in 331 b.c.

Their armies had proceeded to conquer much of the territory around Babylon before the fateful night in 539 b.c. (Daniel 5).

Setting siege to the large city of Babylon, the Medes had dug a canal diverting the water that flowed under the city wall. At the very time of Belshazzar's impious feast, they were entering the city on the dry channel underneath the mighty walls. The drinking feast celebrated by the one thousand lords apparently was shared by other inhabitants so that the normal watch kept on the walls was not observed, allowing the invaders valuable time in conquering the city before their presence was fully known. At the very time the Medes were pouring into the city, the handwriting appeared on the wall (Daniel 5:5, 24-28). Daniel correctly interpreted the writing as spelling the doom of the Babylonian Empire and the beginning of the empire of the Medes and the Persians (Daniel 5:28, 31). Thus ended the fabulous reign of the Babylonian Empire, the symbol of Gentile glory and moral and religious wickedness.

#### Continued Influence Of Babylon

Although the fall of Babylon marked the end of political rule of Babylonian rulers, much of the Babylonian culture, its pagan religions, and its ideology were continued in the kingdoms which followed. Babylonian influence was perpetuated down through the centuries especially in ancient pagan religions. Babylon, the symbol of religious confusion, was to appear again in the apostate church of Revelation 17, and its political power was to be revived in the final form of the Roman Empire as depicted in Revelation 18. Even if literal Babylon is not rebuilt as a city in the last days and subjected to the sudden destruction described in Revelation 18, Babylon as an influence for evil politically and religiously will not be terminated until Jesus Christ comes in power and glory to reign.

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