



NEBUCHADREZZAR II OF BABYLON

# THE BUILDER

The Bible depicts Nebuchadnezzar II and his city as doomed, but to his own people,



**MIGHT AND MANE**

A snarling lion from the sixth century B.C. once lined Babylon's broad Processional Way that led from the Ishtar Gate, built by Nebuchadnezzar II. Louvre Museum, Paris. Below: A stela from the sixth century B.C. depicts Nebuchadnezzar II, along with details of the monuments he restored and built.

**LION:** FRANCK RAUX/RMN-GRAND PALAIS

**STELA:** THE SCHÖYEN COLLECTION, OSLO AND LONDON

BARBARA BÖCK

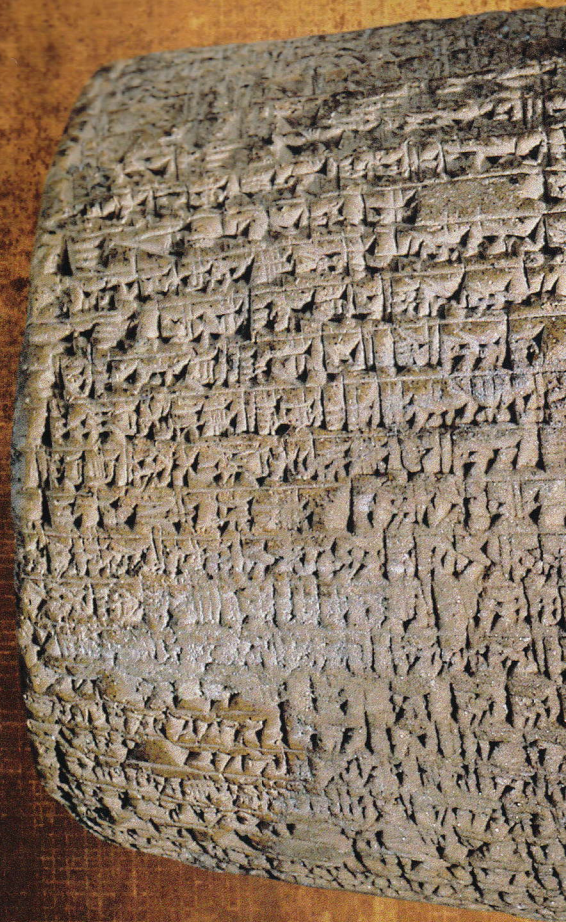
# KING

he restored Babylon to glory.



## PAST PASSION

**T**HE CHALDEANS were fascinated by their place in history. Nebuchadnezzar II's urban renewal projects were inspired by Babylon's past glory, and he made sure he left a record for future kings—such as the cylinder inscription (right), detailing three palaces he built. Nabonidus, last of the Chaldean kings before Babylon fell to Cyrus the Great in 539 B.C., was a weak leader but a talented archaeologist. It is said he unearthed inscriptions from the great Hammurabi, who had ruled Babylon some 1,200 years previously.



### PALATIAL

Photographed in the 1920s, the ruins in Babylon of a palace of Nebuchadnezzar (above) were found during the first major digs at the site in the 1880s and '90s.

AKG/ALBUM

**N**ebuchadnezzar: A name rich with color, strength, and prestige belongs to one of the few Babylonian kings known by name today. Conqueror of kingdoms and restorer of Babylon, he left behind a legacy like no other. Born in the seventh century B.C., he came to power as Babylonia was regaining its power in the region. He built on this momentum and took Babylonia to new heights, leaving behind Babylon's beautiful Ishtar Gate and the grand Processional Way. His capture of

Judah and exile of Jerusalem's Hebrews would have a profound impact on Judaism's sacred texts, many of which were composed in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar's empire would not long survive him. A short 22 years after his death, Babylonia fell to Cyrus the Great, king of Persia.

### Babylon Rising

Nebuchadnezzar's feats were built on those of his father, Nabopolassar, founder of the Chaldean empire. Governor of the region of Chaldea, Nabopolassar seized the throne of Babylonia around 625 B.C.,



605 B.C.

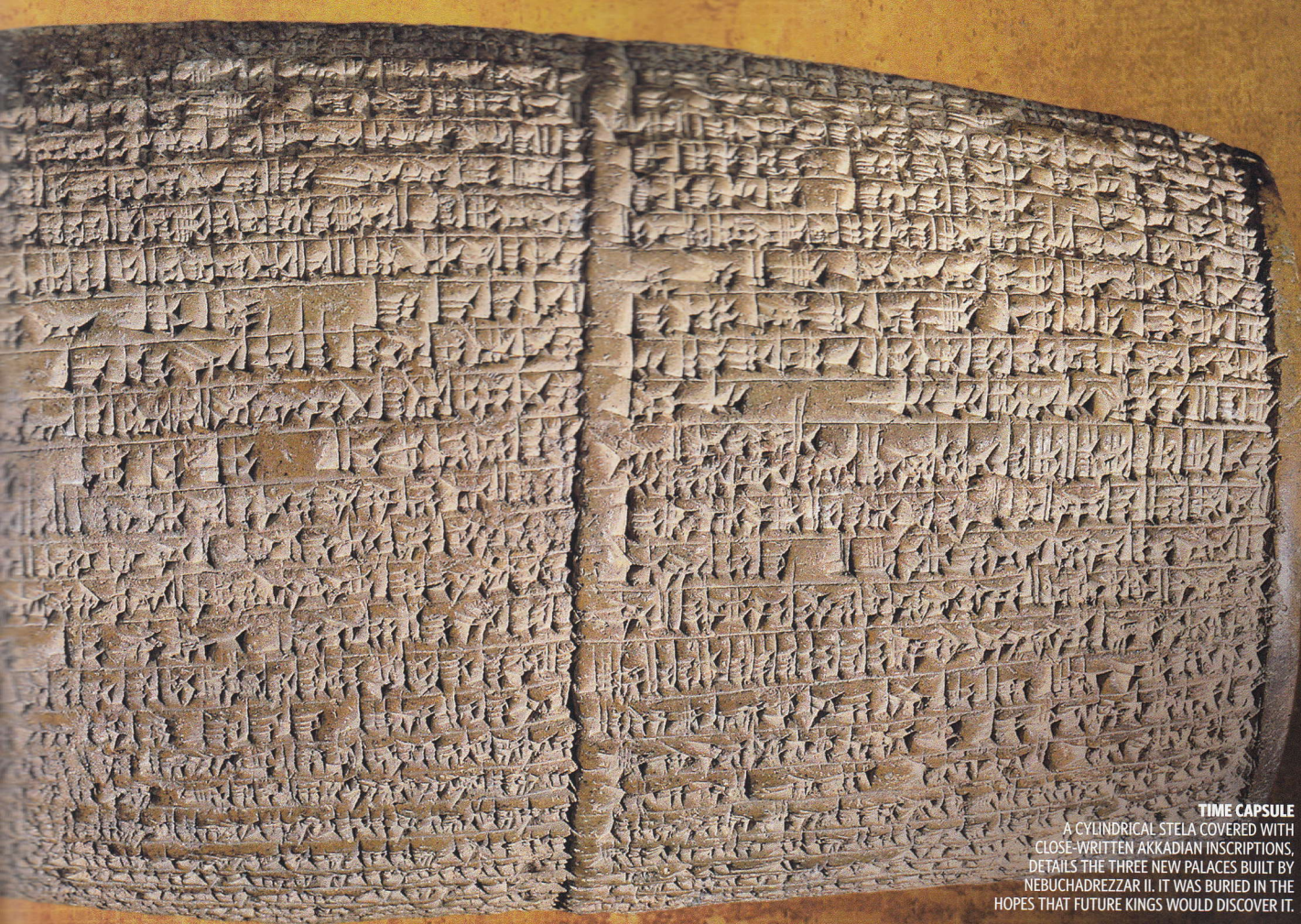
After defeating Egypt and Assyria at Carchemish, Nebuchadnezzar learns his father, Nabopolassar, founder of the Chaldean Empire, has died. Returning to Babylon, he is proclaimed its new ruler.

587 B.C.

Following a series of revolts against Babylonian rule by Judah, Nebuchadnezzar II completely destroys Jerusalem's Temple. Its nobles are sent into exile to Babylon, where the king is carrying out an extensive rebuilding program.

## THE GREAT KING OF BABYLON

**LOOK OF A VILLAIN** NEBUCHADREZZAR COSTUME DESIGN FOR VERDI'S OPERA *NABUCCO*, 1842. MUSEO TEATRALE, MILAN  
DEA/ALBUM



**TIME CAPSULE**  
A CYLINDRICAL STELA COVERED WITH CLOSE-WRITTEN AKKADIAN INSCRIPTIONS, DETAILS THE THREE NEW PALACES BUILT BY NEBUCHADREZZAR II. IT WAS BURIED IN THE HOPES THAT FUTURE KINGS WOULD DISCOVER IT.

ERICH LESSING/ALBUM

which until then had been controlled by the waning Assyrian Empire.

Nabopolassar forged a coalition with the Medes to the east and fought against the Assyrians for the next decade. In 612 B.C. they sacked Assyria's then capital Nineveh and toppled their rule. Babylonia had long been in the shadow of the Assyrians, and now it was time for their civilization to rise.

Dubbed the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean Empire by historians, Nabopolassar's new kingdom faced strong threats, especially from Egypt, allies of the fading Assyrians. After the Battle of Megiddo in 609 B.C., Pharaoh Necho II took

control of Judah, a small kingdom that would later play a large part in Nebuchadnezzar's story.

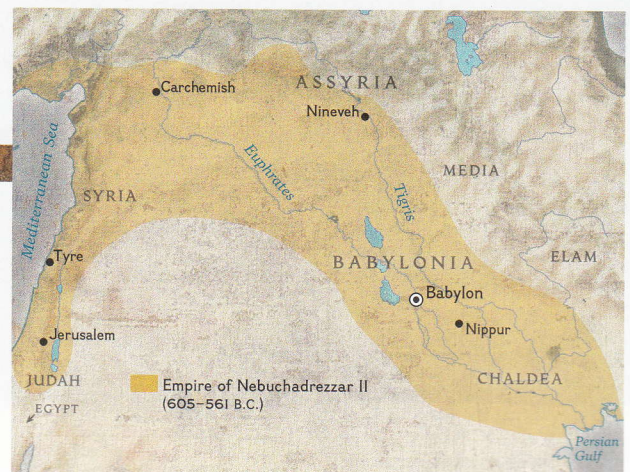
For the first years of Nabopolassar's reign, Egypt and Assyria continued to harass the new empire. His eldest son and crown prince Nebuchadnezzar became involved in the military as a young man. Sources say he began his career in his late teens or early twenties and became a military administrator around 610 B.C.

In several years, Nebuchadnezzar rose to commander. At first he led armies with his father, but took on sole command when Nabopolassar returned

## LANDS OF THE CHALDEANS

A map of Nebuchadnezzar II's empire (below) shows its extension from the Mediterranean, through the valleys between the Tigris and Euphrates, and down to the Persian Gulf.

MERCHE HERNÁNDEZ



575 B.C.

The Ishtar Gate is built, the principal of Babylon's eight great entrances. Nebuchadnezzar also completes restoration of the Etemenanki ziggurat, damaged during an Assyrian invasion a century before.

561 B.C.

After a 44-year reign, Nebuchadnezzar II dies in Babylon. Only 22 years after his death, following a period of decadence, Babylon falls in 539 B.C. to the Persian king, Cyrus the Great.

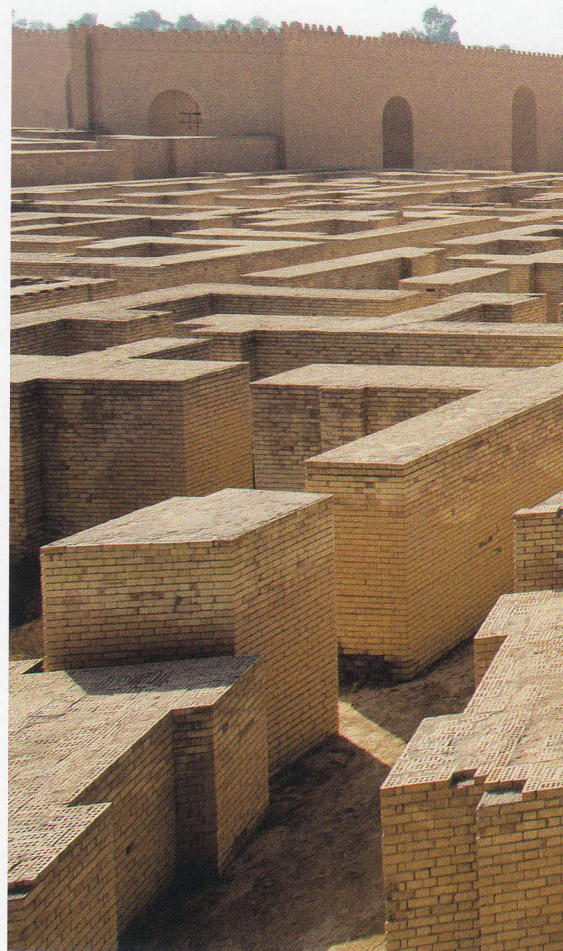


## DEPORTATION AND DESTRUCTION

**P** **SALM 137 IN THE BIBLE** curses Babylon and the Edomites, allies of Nebuchadnezzar II, and exhorts the Jews: "Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!'" Razing a city following its conquest was standard practice in ancient Mesopotamia. Exactly the same fate had befallen Babylon when the Assyrians took it a century before the siege of Jerusalem. When the Chaldeans revolted, the Assyrian king Sennacherib laid siege to Babylon in 690 B.C. and defeated the rebels. "The corpses of men with no one to bury them filled the squares of Babylon," an inscription relates. Sennacherib exacted a more terrible punishment on the survivors: Babylon's temples were destroyed, their ruins flooded, and even the city's topsoil was hauled away. Like the Jews of Jerusalem, the Chaldean nobility of Babylon were also taken from the city into exile.

**CHALDEAN PRISONERS** ARE CAPTURED BY ASSYRIANS ON A SEVENTH-CENTURY B.C. STONE RELIEF (ABOVE) FROM THE PALACE OF SENNACHERIB, NINEVEH.

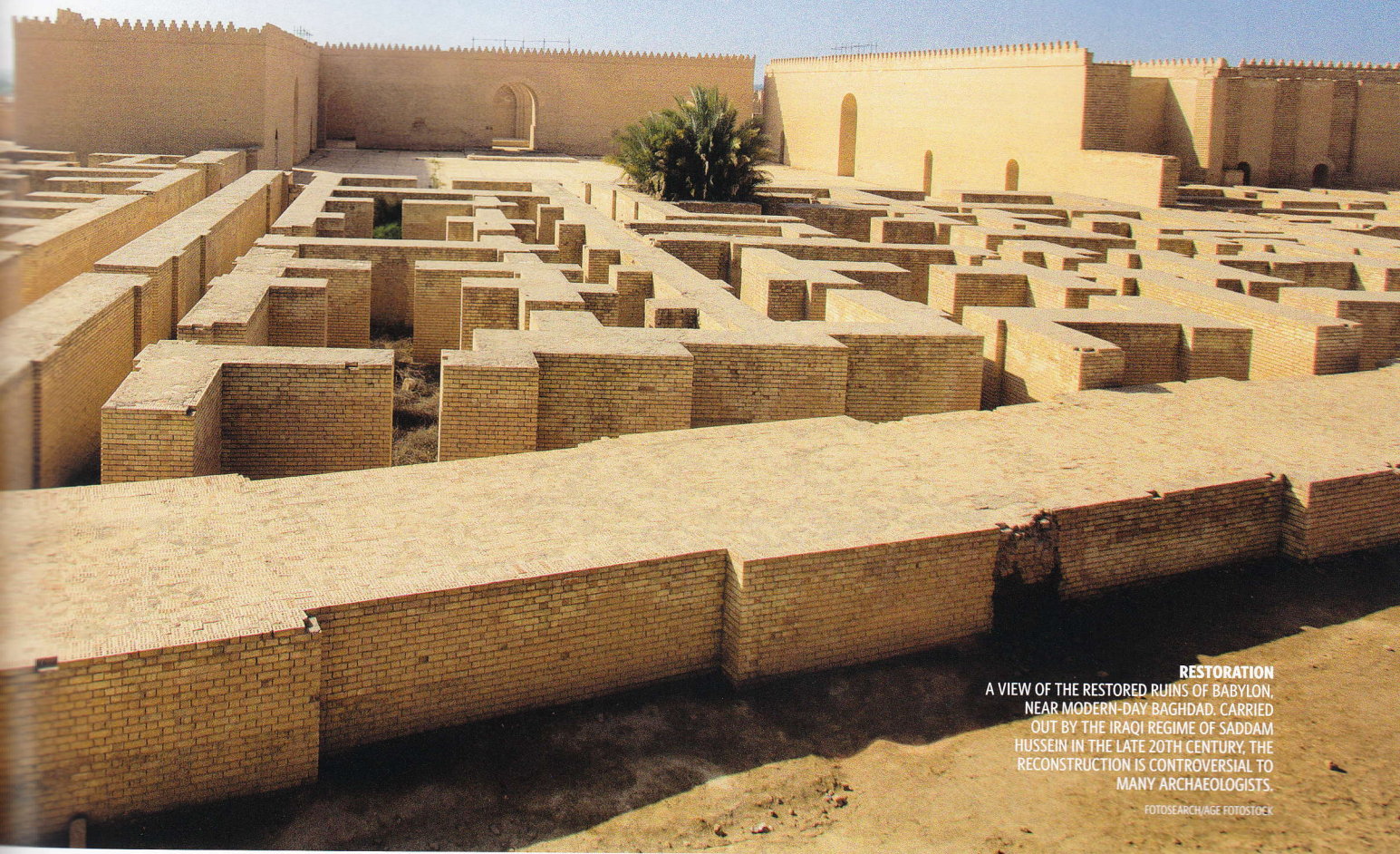
UIG/ALBUM



to Babylon. In 605 B.C. the crown prince soundly defeated Egypt and the remnants of the Assyrians at Carchemish in Syria. Returning to Babylon with Syria secured for the empire, Nebuchadnezzar learned that his father had died. Within three weeks, Nebuchadnezzar was proclaimed king of Babylonia.

### Building Up Babylon

In Akkadian, the new sovereign's name, Nabukudurri-usur, means "Nabu [the Mesopotamian god of wisdom and writing], watch over my heir." He was named after Nebuchadnezzar I, Babylon's warrior king of the 12th century B.C., and pursued a path of expansionism. By the end of Nebuchadnezzar II's 44-year reign, the empire had grown immensely. It stretched from Palestine and Syria, occupied the fertile valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris, and swept down to the Persian Gulf. Cities were sacked, nobles were imprisoned, and peoples were exiled to Babylon. As the following inscription, now in the British Museum, may suggest, keeping the "peace" was a considerable burden on Nebuchadnezzar:



**RESTORATION**  
A VIEW OF THE RESTORED RUINS OF BABYLON, NEAR MODERN-DAY BAGHDAD. CARRIED OUT BY THE IRAQI REGIME OF SADDAM HUSSEIN IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY, THE RECONSTRUCTION IS CONTROVERSIAL TO MANY ARCHAEOLOGISTS.

FOTORESEARCH/AGE FOTOSTOCK

*Far-off lands, distant mountains, from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea, steep trails, unopened paths, where motion was impeded, where there was no foothold, difficult roads, journeys without water, I traversed, and the unruly I overthrew; I bound as captives my enemies; the land I set in order and the people I made to prosper.*

Vassal states would pay heavy annual tribute to Babylonia and feed its growing treasuries with: “silver, gold, costly precious stones, bronze, palm-wood, cedar-wood, all kinds of precious things, to my city Babylon I brought.”

Nebuchadnezzar II was by necessity a warrior, but by disposition he was a builder. The funds collected from his states helped finance his civic improvements. Nebuchadnezzar focused much of his building energies on restoring Babylon to its former glory. Years of war with the Assyrians the century before had led to the destruction of Babylon in 689 B.C. By restoring Babylon to glory, Nebuchadnezzar II was following in the

## GLORY TO MARDUK AND NABU

A sixth-century B.C. seal (below) shows a priest praying before symbols of Marduk, patron of Babylon, and Nabu, god of writing and learning. Nebuchadnezzar’s name invokes the latter.

ERICH LESSING/ALBUM



footsteps of his namesake, the first Nebuchadnezzar, who, centuries before, had exalted Babylon over other cities, such as Nippur.

Continuing the work begun by Nabopolassar, the king built a great moat, defensive walls, and canals. He refurbished temples and sanctuaries, paved the Processional Way, and embellished his own legendary palace. Toward the end of his reign, around 575 B.C., he built what is probably Babylon’s iconic ancient landmark: the Ishtar Gate, decorated with cobalt glazed brick reliefs.

In so doing, both Nebuchadnezzars exalted the god Marduk, Babylon’s patron deity, over other gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon. Inscriptions exalt Nebuchadnezzar II as the “favorite of the god Marduk,” the king of the universe, who has “no enemy from the horizon to the sky,” creating a bond of greatness linking, god, king, and the city of Babylon.

If the favor of the god was regarded as crucial to the city, a more mundane resource—water—was also central to Babylon’s preeminence. The biblical Psalm 137, in which the Hebrew captives sit and

## COMING UPON NEBUCHADREZZAR'S BABYLON

In Nebuchadnezzar's time, a traveler approaching Babylon would first spy the mighty Etemenanki ("house of the foundation of heaven on earth"). Topped by the sanctuary of Marduk, Babylon's patron god, the six-story pyramid is believed to have inspired the biblical Tower of Babel. A very ancient structure, it was damaged in 689 B.C. by Sennacherib's sack of the city. Restoration was completed by Nebuchadnezzar II, who boasted: "I made it the wonder of the people of the world. I raised its top to the heaven." Moving closer, the traveler would see the strong, defensive walls, befitting what had become, in a short time, the most important city in the ancient world. After crossing the canals, the Ishtar Gate would come into view. Built over an existing structure by Nebuchadnezzar II in around 575 B.C., the 38-foot-high double gate led to the stately Processional Way, a walkway that linked the palace and the temple districts. A statue of Marduk was paraded along this boulevard during the Babylonian New Year.

*"I pulled down the gates [and] had them remade of bricks with blue stone on which wonderful bulls and dragons were depicted . . . so that Mankind might gaze on them in wonder."*

—Nebuchadnezzar II,  
Inscription on the Ishtar Gate



Temple of Nabu-sha-hare,  
god of wisdom

Processional Way

◀ ISHTAR GATE  
(RECONSTRUCTION)  
SOL 90/ALBUM

BABYLON FROM ABOVE ▶  
THE MONUMENTS BUILT BY  
NEBUCHADREZZAR II LIE  
THROUGHOUT THE CITY.  
BYZANTIUM, 1200 PROJECT



Etemenanki, topped with a temple dedicated to the god Marduk

Western bastion

Ishtar Gate  
The city's principal entrance

Southern palace

Northern palace





**A RELIEF** FROM A FOURTH-CENTURY A.D. SARCOPHAGUS LID, DEPICTING A JEWISH EXILE IN BABYLON REFUSING TO WORSHIP THE GODS OF NEBUCHADREZZAR II (SEATED)  
RMN-GRAND PALAIS

**NEBUCHADREZZAR II IN THE BIBLE**

# DREAM INTERPRETATION

**T**he Book of Daniel recounts Nebuchadnezzar's treatment of the Jewish captives in Babylon, and how their worship of Jehovah was tested. The relief to the left depicts the story in the third chapter of Daniel, in which Nebuchadnezzar sets up a statue and orders the people to worship it. They

refuse, and the king orders them thrown into a fiery furnace. They emerge unscathed. Astonished, the king decrees toleration of their faith. A similar tale occurs earlier in the Book of Daniel, when the king is plagued by troublesome dreams. He threatens to execute anyone who cannot guess the content of the dream and explain it to him. Daniel prays to God, who guides him. Brought into

Nebuchadnezzar's presence (right), he reveals to the king that his dream was about a statue made of different materials, an allegory for the empires that will rise after his: "No wise man . . . can show to the king the mystery that the king is asking, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries," Daniel says. "He has disclosed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen at the end of days."

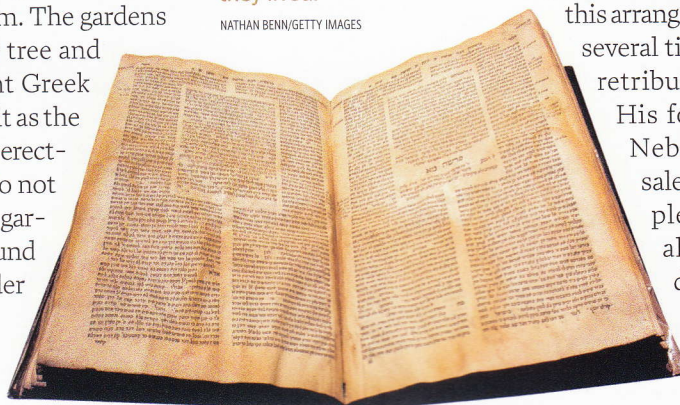
weep "by the waters of Babylon," may be a reference to Babylon's irrigation canals, the lifeblood of its economy and strength. Inscriptions present Nebuchadnezzar's canal system as a labor of Herculean proportions: "Alongside Babylon, great banks of earth I heaped up. Great floods of destroying water like the great waves of the sea I made flow around it."

This irrigation system may have fed one of Nebuchadnezzar's most famous and most mysterious accomplishments: the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, a wonder of the ancient world. Descriptions of this palatial complex say it had five courtyards, residences for the king and his consorts, and an ornate throne room. The gardens allegedly held species of every tree and plant from the empire. Ancient Greek historian Herodotus described it as the "most magnificent building ever erected on earth." Ancient sources do not provide an exact location for the gardens, nor have archaeologists found remains, leading some to wonder if they ever existed at all.

## PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

**Jewish communities in Babylonia and Palestine each created their own Talmud, a book of Jewish law, history, and scholarship. In its pages, shown in a 17th-century edition below, Jews would find an indispensable guide to their heritage no matter where they lived.**

NATHAN BENN/GETTY IMAGES



## Life in Exile

Nebuchadnezzar's name echoes down through time not only due to his restoration of Babylon but also for his place in Judeo-Christian Scripture. He plays a major role in several important episodes in the Old Testament, including the sacking of Jerusalem and the 70-year exile of the Jewish people to the city of Babylon.

After the defeat of the Egyptians and Assyrians at Carchemish in 605, the kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem fell under Babylonian control. Like other vassal states, Judah had to pay tribute to Babylonia. Unhappy with this arrangement, Judean kings rebelled several times, but Nebuchadnezzar's retribution was swift and brutal. His forces invaded; in 587 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar razed Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. Powerful Judeans were also captured and forcibly deported to Babylon three times: 597, 587, and 582 B.C.



In the Bible, the Prophet Jeremiah warns these Judean kings that God is unhappy because they have permitted the return of pagan worship. They must return to the ways of God, or risk his vengeance: God will use “Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, [God’s] servant,” to “bring [the Babylonians] against this land and its inhabitants, and . . . will utterly destroy them” (Jeremiah 25:9). The Judeans, however, fail to heed Jeremiah’s warnings, and the Babylonians descend.

Jeremiah was spared, but most of Judah’s survivors went into exile in Babylonia. The pain of separation from home runs through the books of the Bible devoted to this time, resulting in some of its most beautiful passages. In his allegory of the Exile, Ezekiel casts Nebuchadrezzar as a “great eagle, with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors.” The eagle-king is presented as an instrument of God, who carries away the Jews and plants them as a seedling in “fertile soil; a plant by abundant waters, he set it like a willow twig” (Ezekiel 17:3-5). The experience profoundly shaped Jewish religion and national identity.

Hebrew culture took root and flowered in Babylon as the exiles built a community centered on religious life. Despite later being allowed to return to rebuild Jerusalem, many Jews stayed in Babylon. For centuries, the Babylonian community was a strong center of the Jewish faith. The Babylonian Talmud, one of the central texts of Jewish religious law and theology, was produced there.

Nebuchadrezzar died in 561 B.C. He was succeeded by three, short-lived and weak rulers, the last of which, a child king, was murdered by Nabonidus. Despite this violent power grab, Nabonidus was a scholarly man uninterested in politics, and proved to be the last of the Chaldean rulers. In 539 B.C. Cyrus the Great of Persia used Babylon’s canals to breach the city and seize it. The long reign of the Persians began, the Jewish exile was ended, and Babylon began a new chapter under new rulers, still regarded as the greatest city in the ancient world. ■

## THE KING’S DREAMS

The captive Daniel interprets Nebuchadrezzar II’s dream (above) in a 17th-century oil painting by Mattia Preti (Il Cavaliere Calabrese). Private collection

BRIDGEMAN/ACI

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