

ENVY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

# BABYLON

Ruled by Hammurabi, restored by Nebuchadrezzar,  
conquered by Cyrus—this city in the heart of  
Mesopotamia was both desired and despised,  
placing it at the center stage of the dawn of history.

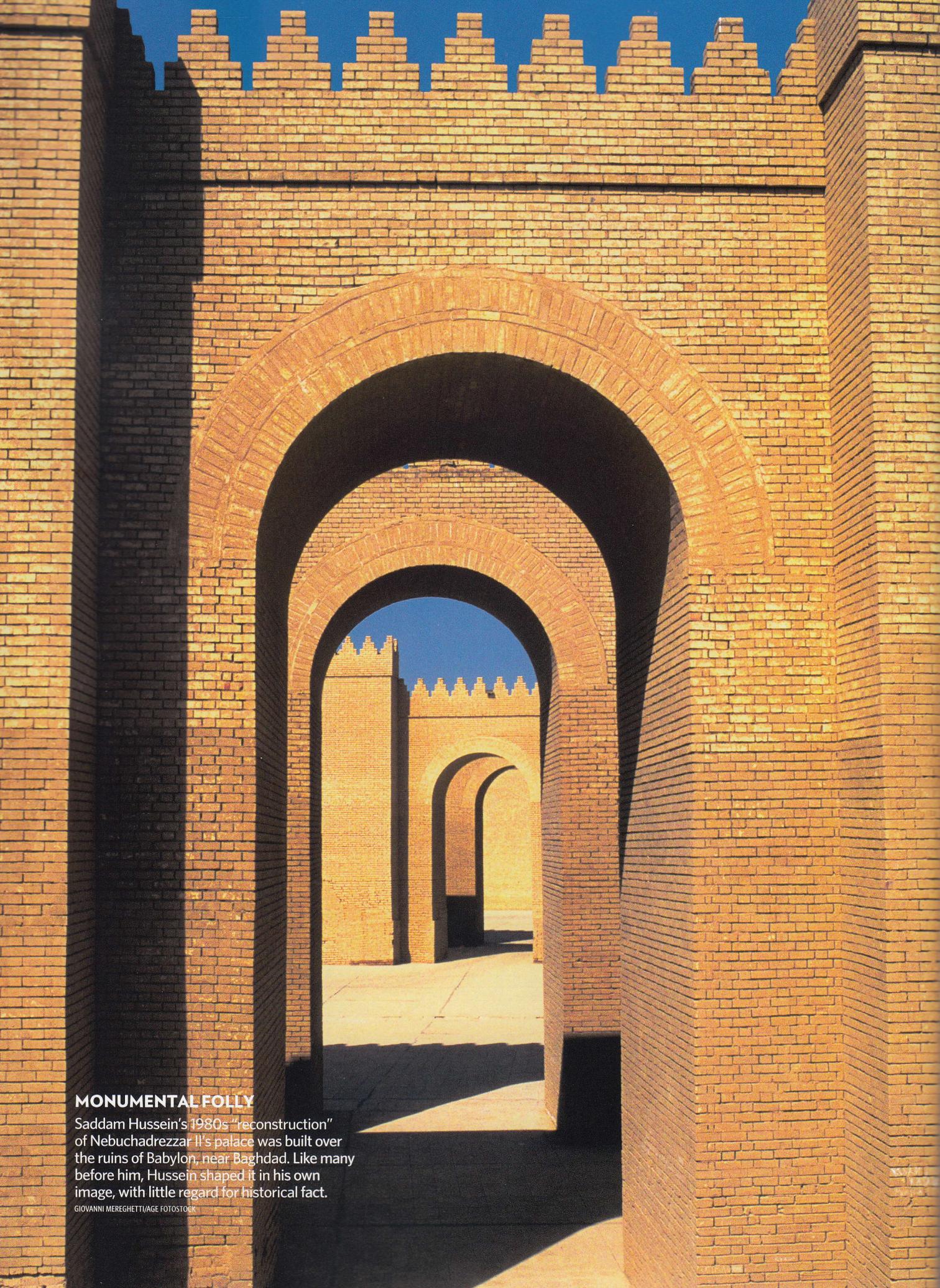
JUAN LUIS MONTERO FENOLLÓS



## LEGENDS AND LORE

Babylon was famous for its Hanging Gardens, which some believe may have actually been in the Assyrian capital, Nineveh, where this relief, now held in the British Museum, London, was found. Opposite: This 8th-century miniature, by the Spanish monk Beatus of Liébana, depicts the Bible story of Babylonian King Nebuchadrezzar eating grass as divine punishment.

RELIEF: WERNER FORMAN/GETRES  
MINIATURE: GRANGER COLLECTION/AGE FOTOSTOCK



## MONUMENTAL FOLLY

Saddam Hussein's 1980s "reconstruction" of Nebuchadnezzar II's palace was built over the ruins of Babylon, near Baghdad. Like many before him, Hussein shaped it in his own image, with little regard for historical fact.

GIOVANNI MEREGHETTI/AGE FOTOSTOCK

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**M**esopotamia—“the land between two rivers”—gave birth to many of the world’s first great cities. The splendid city of Babylon, located between the waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris some 60 miles south of Baghdad, was one of them. Unlike the many towns that fell and disappeared, Babylon was resilient, rising from its own ashes time and again, even as new conquerors invaded and took over. The pleasure its occupiers enjoyed came at a price, however, since the highly desired Babylon would always be seen as a prize for the taking.

Babylon has resonated in Judeo-Christian culture for centuries. The books of the Old Testament recount the exile of the Jews to Babylon following the sack of Jerusalem, by whose waters they “sat down and wept.” By the time of the New Testament, the city had become a potent symbol: the corrupt earthly twin city to the pure, heavenly New Jerusalem.

Outside the biblical tradition, Babylon intrigued Greek and Roman writers, who added to the rich store of legends that have come down to the present day. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote about Babylon in the fifth century B.C. A number of inconsistencies in his account have led many scholars to believe that he never traveled there and that his text may be closer to hearsay than historical fact. Popular tales of Babylon’s fantastic structures, like the Tower of Babel and the Hanging Gardens, may also be products of legends and confusion. Yet to historians and archaeologists, Babylon is a real bricks-and-mortar place at the center of the vibrant Mesopotamian culture that it dominated for so many centuries.

### City of Cities

The site of Babylon was first identified in the 1800s in what is now Iraq. Later excavations, undertaken by the German archaeologist Robert Koldewey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, established that the city had been built and rebuilt several times, most notably on a lavish scale by its king, Nebuchadnezzar II (reigned 605–561 B.C.). Koldewey’s finds revealed an ancient locus of culture and political power. These excavations unearthed what was to become one of the most magnificent Babylonian landmarks built by Nebuchadnezzar II: the dazzling blue Ishtar Gate, now reconstructed and on display at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.

Babylon first rose to prominence in the late Bronze Age, around the beginning of the second millennium B.C., when it was occupied by people known as the Amorites. A series of strong Amorite kings—including King Hammurabi, famous for compiling the world’s first legal code—enabled Babylon to eclipse the Sumerian capital, Ur, as the region’s most powerful city. Although Babylon declined after Hammurabi’s death, its

## TRANSFERS OF POWER

### 19th-16th centuries B.C.

The Amorites, including King Hammurabi, reign. The Hittites later conquer the city.

### 16th-11th centuries B.C.

The Kassites conquer Babylon. Later, Chaldeans and Aramaeans struggle to control the city.

### 11th-7th centuries B.C.

A period of Assyrian rule is ended by the Chaldeans, who will flourish under Nebuchadnezzar II.

### 7th-6th centuries B.C.

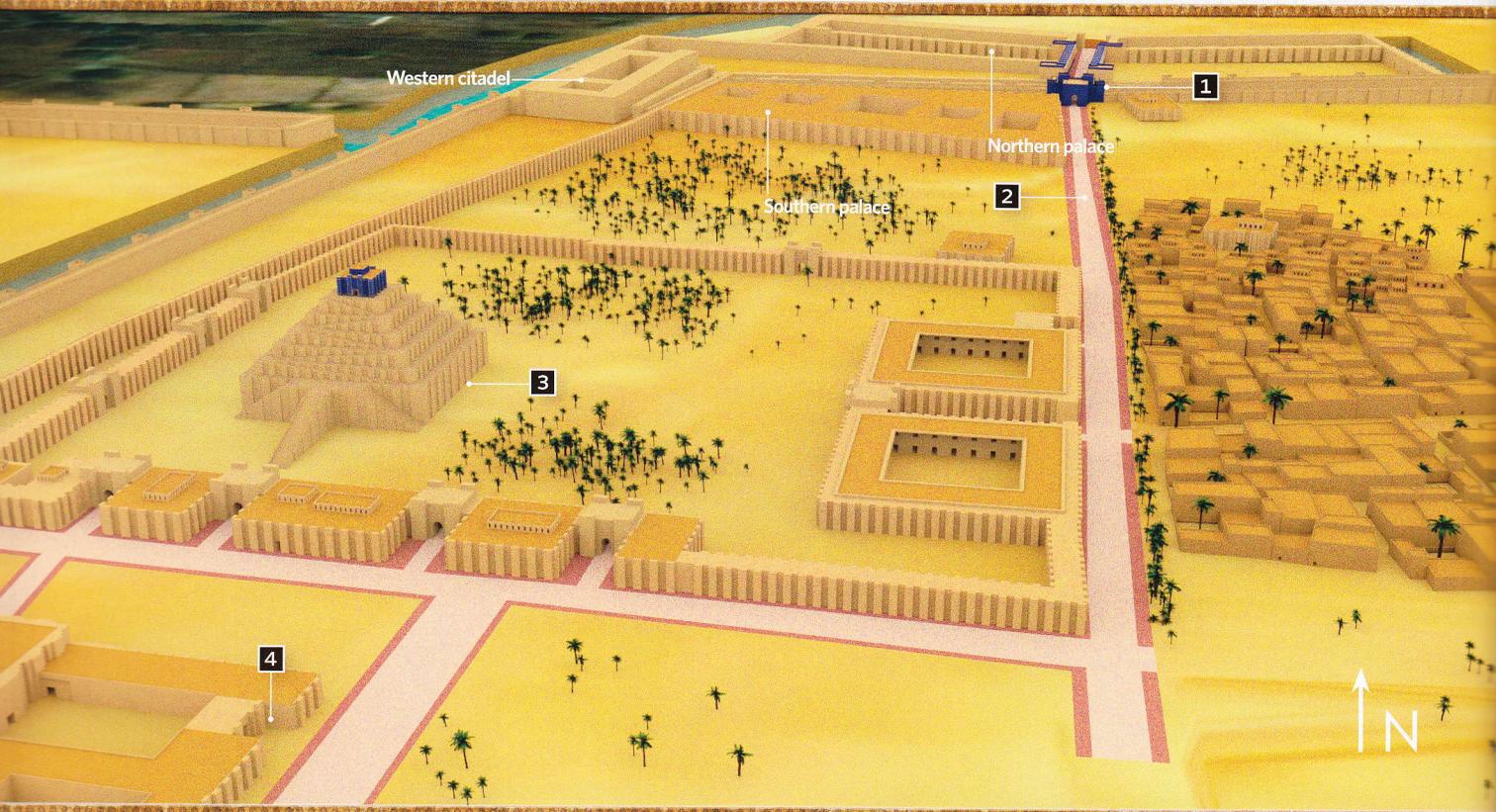
Babylon’s golden age under Chaldean rule is ended by the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 539 B.C.

### To the 7th century A.D.

Macedonians, Seleucids, and Sasanians control Babylon until the arrival of Islam.

# BIGGER AND BETTER

Babylon reached its zenith under Nebuchadrezzar II, when its outer wall—built to the northeast of the city center, shown below—contained a total urban area of over three square miles. The king wanted its monuments to dazzle with a size and grandeur never seen before.



## 1 Ishtar Gate

The city's main entrance was decorated with blue brick and creatures called *mushussu*, an Akkadian dragon with a body made out of other animals.

## 2 Processional Way

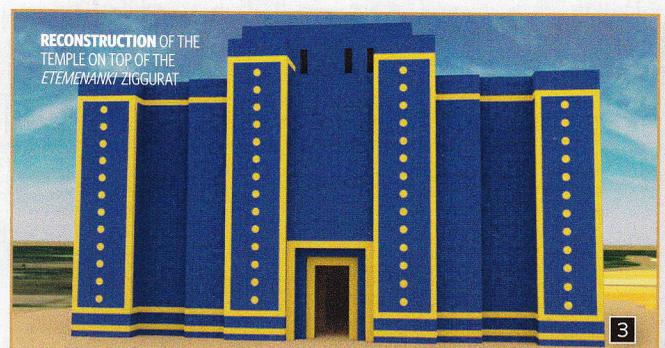
This road led from the palaces to the temples. A statue of Marduk was paraded along it during the Babylonian New Year.

## 3 Etemenanki

Completed by Nebuchadrezzar II, this ziggurat was consecrated to Marduk. A temple topped its six terraces.

## 4 Esagila

Babylon's principal deity Marduk, his wife Zarpanitu, and his son Nabu were all worshipped together at this temple complex.



importance as the capital of southern Mesopotamia, now known as Babylonia, would linger for millennia.

For the rest of the second millennium B.C., constant struggles popped up over control of Babylon. It was successively occupied by Hittites and Kassites; later, Chaldean tribesmen fought for dominance with another tribe, the Aramaeans from Syria (a tribe that had also sparred with Israel). By 1000 B.C., the Assyrians, who had established a powerful empire in northern Mesopotamia, gained the upper hand. But despite periods of stable rule, Babylon would always fall to someone else. Given this pattern of constant conquest—Cyrus the Great in the sixth century B.C., and Alexander the Great two hundred years later—it is perhaps more helpful to see the city not as one Babylon, but as several Babylons, the product of traditions built over thousands of years.

The Babylonians themselves were keenly aware of the great antiquity of their civilization. One of Nebuchadnezzar's successors, Nabonidus, is now known to modern historians as "the archaeologist king." A learned man, he restored the region's ancient architectural and cultural traditions, especially those from the Akkadian Empire, which had dominated Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C.—a period that, from the perspective of his own era, would have already seemed in the distant past.

### Babylon's Golden Age

Babylon enjoyed its heyday during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., when it was believed to be the largest city in the world. A new dynasty founded by a tribe known as the Chaldeans had wrested control from the Assyrians in the early 600s B.C. The second ruler of the Chaldean line became notorious for both cruelty and opulence: Nebuchadnezzar II, the king who sacked Jerusalem and sent the captive Jews to the capital of his new and increasingly powerful regional empire.

A successful military man, Nebuchadnezzar used the wealth he garnered from other lands to rebuild and glorify Babylon. He completed and strengthened the city's defenses, including digging a moat and building new city walls. Beautification projects were on the agenda as well. The grand Processional Way was paved

with limestone, temples were renovated and rebuilt, and the glorious Ishtar Gate was erected. Constructed of glazed cobalt blue bricks and embellished with bulls and dragons, the city gate features an inscription, attributed to Nebuchadnezzar, that says: "I placed wild bulls and ferocious dragons in the gateways and thus adorned them with luxurious splendor so that people might gaze on them in wonder."

Babylonian citizens saw their city as a paradise—the center of the world and symbol of cosmic harmony that had come into existence when its supreme divinity, the god Marduk, defeated the forces of chaos. The spread of the cult of Marduk across Mesopotamia was proof of Babylon's prestige. No ancient city was so desired and feared, so admired and denigrated.

But in the Hebrew tradition, Nebuchadnezzar was a tyrant, and Babylon a torment. The king had conquered Jerusalem in the early sixth century B.C. and exiled the Hebrews to Babylon. The Bible says that he also stole sacred objects from the Jewish temple and took them back to Babylon to place in the temple of Marduk.

To punish his disrespect, the Bible recounts in the Book of Daniel how Nebuchadnezzar's line will fall. In the story, Belshazzar, the successor to the throne, holds a feast served on the sacred vessels looted from Jerusalem. During the festivities a ghostly hand appears, and strange writing appears on the wall, forming the mysterious words: *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*. The exile Daniel is brought in by the terrified king to interpret the writing on the wall. Daniel reads it as: "God has numbered the days of your kingdom ... [it] is given to the Medes and Persians."

Daniel's prediction did come to pass: In 539 B.C., Babylon fell to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, and the Jews returned home from exile. The city would be conquered two centuries later by Alexander the Great in 331. Although Alexander had planned to make Babylon the capital of his empire, he died before that came to pass. The great city would eventually be abandoned by his successors, and the splendors of Babylon would pass into the realm of legend.



### PROTECTED BY MARDUK

Calling down curses on anyone who defaces it, this ninth-century stela from Babylon is dedicated to a priest of Marduk by his son. British Museum, London

ERICH LESSING/ALBUM

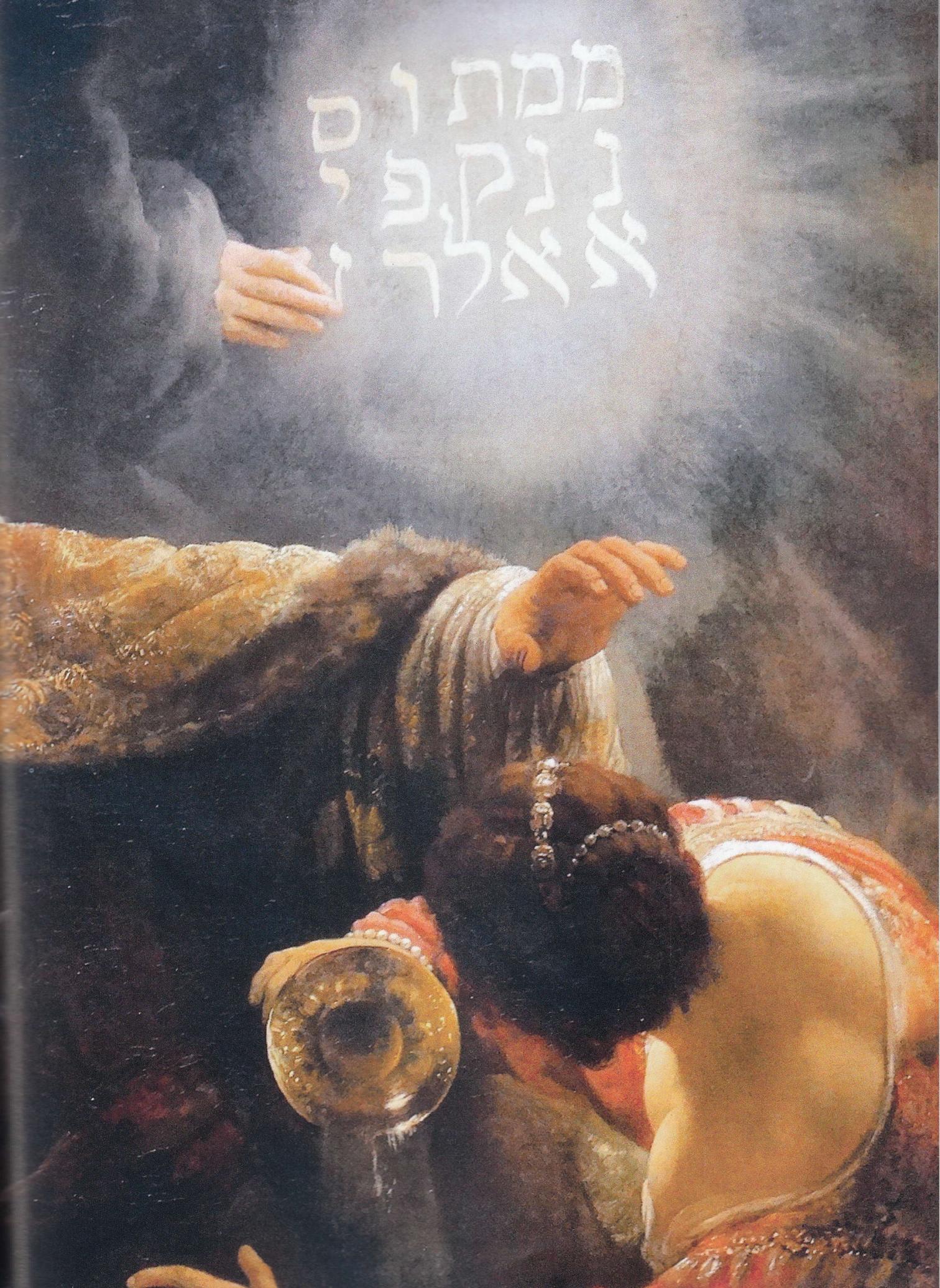
## SPELLING DOOM

The king turns in terror and a woman spills one of the sacred goblets looted from Jerusalem, as a ghostly hand foretells the fall of Babylon. The story from the Book of Daniel is brought to vivid life in Rembrandt's magnificent 1636-38 painting, "Belshazzar's Feast," held by the National Gallery, London.

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## THE BEAUTIFUL BLUE GATE

The most famous of the eight gates Nebuchadrezzar II built around Babylon, this gate was dedicated to Ishtar, goddess of love and war, and was the crowning glory of the king's homage to Babylon's ancient Akkadian past. Pergamon Museum, Berlin

BPK/SCALA, FLORENCE



## Confusions and Truths

One of the most famous stories about Babylon is that of the Tower of Babel, a story that some biblical scholars believe may be based on a mistranslation, or ingenious pun. The Book of Genesis tells how the survivors of the Great Flood wanted to build a tower that would reach the heavens, but God smites the builders for their arrogance and disperses them over the Earth, where they are forced to speak many different languages.

The story originates in a Hebrew belief that the name Babel was formed from the Hebrew word meaning confusion, or mixing up (and from which the English word “babble” is derived). Ironically, this interpretation was itself a confusing of languages. In Akkadian, the root of the words Babylon and Babel does not mean to mix; it means “gateway of the gods.”

Archaeologists believe that the tower referenced in the Bible story may be the Etemenanki, a giant ziggurat in Babylon dedicated to Marduk. Its name means, suggestively, the “temple of the foundation of heaven and earth,” which dovetails with the names mentioned in the story. When it was surveyed in 1913, the Etemenanki revealed that the tower that supposedly reached right up to the heavens would have been, in reality, nearer 200 feet in height.

Another colorful story to come out of the ancient city is that of the fabulous Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. There are many theories surrounding the gardens, from their exact location to the identities of their builders. Some suggest the gardens formed a part of the royal palace in Babylon itself, while others believe they were built in another city altogether. One origin story claims that Nebuchadnezzar had them built for his wife, Amytis.

In the course of Koldewey’s excavations of the ancient city, his team identified a mysterious structure in one corner of Babylon’s southern palace. It was made of 14 long rooms with vaulted ceilings laid out in two rows. A complex of wells and channels were found at the site. Even amid the academic atmosphere of this project, a certain willingness to believe in Babylon’s fantastic stories lingered. Was this the infrastructure that supplied the legendary Hanging Gardens of

Babylon? The scholarly consensus has a rather more prosaic theory as to this structure’s role: a storehouse used for the distribution of sesame oil, grain, dates, and spices.

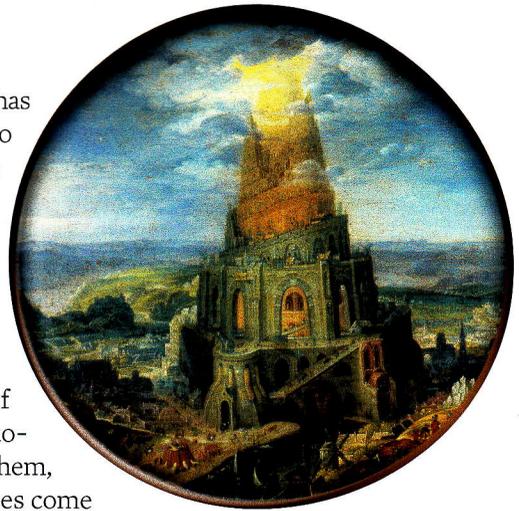
So where in the city could those famous gardens have been? Perhaps nowhere at all. There is no text from Nebuchadnezzar II’s time that refers to the building of any such gardens. The Greek historian Herodotus did not mention them, either. The only written references come much later, from scholars such as Diodorus Siculus, Quintus Curtius, Strabo, and Flavius Josephus, all writing at a time after Babylon had been abandoned.

It is, perhaps, little surprise that so much confusion surrounds Babylon when texts by Greek and Roman authors often confused Assyrians with Babylonians. When the first-century B.C. writer Diodorus Siculus describes the walls of Babylon, he actually appears to be describing the walls of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire. He describes a hunting scene that resembles no artwork found on the palaces in Babylon. It does, however, fit descriptions of the hunting reliefs discovered on Assyrian palaces in Nineveh.

This confusion may be due, in part, to the fact that some kings of Assyria, such as Sennacherib (reigned 704–681 B.C.), held the title of king of Babylon. More intriguingly still, a depiction of that Assyrian king found on a bas relief in Nineveh shows leafy gardens watered by an aqueduct. Could it be, then, that the famous gardens were in Nineveh all along?

Inconvenient historical realities have never discouraged rulers from reshaping the history of Babylon in their own image and generating new myths in the process. One of the most brazen examples is not from antiquity, but from the 1980s, when Saddam Hussein—then dictator of Iraq—set out to create a reconstruction of its royal palace. Like his predecessors, he left behind inscriptions on his building projects. On some of the bricks Hussein had inscribed in Arabic: *Built by Saddam, son of Nebuchadnezzar, to glorify Iraq.* ■

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## THE TOWER OF BABEL

Babylon’s ziggurat, which became a symbol of human arrogance before God, was a favorite subject for artists through the centuries. Oil painting by Roelant Saverg, 1607, Nuremberg Museum

BPK/SCALA, FLORENCE