

BABYLON

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Babylon was one of the great cities of the ancient world—one that had a great amount of influence on the ancient Israelites and on the Old Testament. In Hebrew this place name is *Babel*, deriving from *Babilu*, its name in Akkadian (the language spoken by the ancient Babylonians). The word itself means “gate of god” or “gate of the gods.” The form of the word *Babylon* derives from ancient Greek. In Genesis 10 and 11, the city’s name appears as *Babel*, therefore making the famous tower of Babel the tower of Babylon. In Genesis 11, the name Babylon (*Babel*) is explained as coming from Hebrew *balal*, a verb that means “to confuse.” This is a polemic in the Old Testament against the Babylonians.

Although it had an ancient and complex history of its own throughout the biblical period, Babylon didn’t really enter the biblical narrative until the latter part of the Old Testament with the rise of what historians call the Neo-Babylonian Empire, which lasted from around 626 BC to around 539 BC. After the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the Kingdom of Judah came under the control of the Babylonians after the military campaign of Babylon’s most famous king in this period, Nebuchadnezzar II (Akkadian *Nabukudurri-ušur*, meaning “Nabu [the Mesopotamian god of writing and scribes] protect my heir”). After the Judahites rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, he destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple, carrying off many Judahites into Babylon as captives.

Although the Babylonian Exile was not very long, it had a long cultural and religious influence on the ancient Israelites: The destruction of the temple and the end of Judahite kingship had far-reaching consequences, even though the Judahite exiles would rebuild the temple. The end of the temple, even temporarily, meant that priority had to be given to other forms of worship, such as prayer and scripture reading. The end of the kingship meant that individuals needed to fill the power vacuum left by the king. This

especially led to the rise in prominence of the Aaronic high priest. The line of Davidic kingship would never return politically, creating space for Jewish messianic concerns and eventually for Christianity.

Scholars have noted numerous examples of Babylonian cultural influence on the Hebrew Bible. Some of these, such as the use of Babylonian month names, are a result of the Babylonian Exile. Others, such as similarities between the biblical and Babylonian Flood accounts, seem to be part of the broader cultural sharing at various periods in ancient Israelite history.

Related verses

Genesis 10:10

Genesis 11:8–9

2 Kings 20:12–17

2 Kings 24:1–15

2 Kings 25:5–7

Ezra 2:1–5

Psalms 137

Isaiah 13:1–5

Isaiah 43:14

Isaiah 48:14

Jeremiah 20:1–6

Jeremiah 21:1–10

Ezekiel 17:12–20

Daniel 1:1–2

Daniel 3:1–11

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