

2 The Bible - The evidence of prophecy

This topic covers just one of dozens of examples in the Bible of prophecies that have come true - the downfall of the ancient city of Babylon. We could have thought about many other examples:

- Prophecies about the Jews and the land of Israel
- Predictions about Egypt, Tyre and Sidon, or the Philistines
- Prophecies relating to the world in general
- Prophecies about the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The prophecies covered here come from the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Isaiah prophesied from about 745 BC to 685 BC, before Babylon had become the dominant empire in the Middle East, and Jeremiah around 600 BC, when it was at its height.

The prophecies in Isaiah are so amazing that many people have tried to argue that the book is a compilation of the work of several people, some of whom lived after Isaiah; but nobody can claim that it was written after 200 BC, as the Old Testament was translated into Greek (the Septuagint) at that time. Even if this were true, the prophecies concerning Babylon must have been fulfilled long after they were spoken.

There is a particular irony in the prophecies about Babylon: it was the home of astrology and fortune-telling, but it could not foresee its own downfall! “A sword upon the diviners, that they may become fools!” (Jeremiah 50:36 RSV). King Nebuchadnezzar had engraved on a statue of himself:- “Oh Marduk, lord of all countries, grant ... that my descendants may rule over men until the end of time.” Yet the Word of the Lord had already (Jeremiah 51:59-64) spoken:

“I will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, offspring and posterity, says the LORD. And I will make it a possession of owls (NIV), and pools of water, and I will sweep it with the broom of destruction, says the LORD of hosts.” (Isaiah 14:22;23 RSV)

Look at the scripture references and summarise what they say, then read through the information that follows and see what actually happened.



A reconstruction of part of the Ishtar Gate of Babylon. From a museum in Berlin.



What was predicted, and did it happen?

Isaiah 13:19-20

Isaiah 13:21-22

Isaiah 14:23

Jeremiah 25:12-14

Jeremiah 50:12, 38

Jeremiah 50:9-12

Jeremiah 50:14-15, 26

Jeremiah 51:26

Jeremiah 51:36-37

While you are looking at Isaiah 14, it is worth noting v12: "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!" (AV) So commonly misapplied to a fallen-angel 'Satan', 'Lucifer' is in other versions the "morning star" or Venus. It is another reference to the astrology of Babylon.

The fall of Babylon

After Belshazzar's feast, and the capture of the city by the Persians, it was not destroyed; but remained the biggest city in Asia, although not the empire's capital. It looked as if the prophecy had failed. Later, Alexander the Great planned to restore the city to its former brilliance. But after his death it entered into decline.

At the time of Christ, Babylon had shrunk considerably and was populated chiefly by Jews! However, the area was cultivated and the prophecy was still unfulfilled.

- By 412 AD, the canals had been "filled up"
- By 460 AD, no Chaldæans remained, only a few Jews
- By 917 AD, it was a small village
- By the 12th Century the ruins of the palace were inaccessible, owing to the number of scorpions and serpents.

So for hundreds of years Babylon was a desolate place.

Babylon was the prey first of the Medes and the Persians; then, about three hundred years before the time of our Lord, of the Macedonians under Alexander and his successors; then of the Parthians; and afterwards, from time to time, of the Romans. For two centuries, from 635 AD, it was held by the Arabs. In 1218 it was desolated by the Tartars under Zingis. For a time the country was in the hands of the assassins, who were overthrown and succeeded by Holagou Khan, the grandson of Zingis, in 1258. In 1380 it was conquered by Tamerlane, who erected on the ruins of Baghdad a pyramid of ninety thousand heads. Since then it has passed from the grasp of one fierce race into that of another.

John Urquhart, The Wonders of Prophecy, Christian Publications, Inc

On all sides, fragments of glass, marble, pottery and inscribed brick are mingled with that peculiar nitrous and blanched soil which, bred from the remains of ancient habitations, checks or destroys vegetation, and renders the site of Babylon a naked and hideous waste

Rawlinson, Egypt and Babylon

“All that remains today of what was once the largest city in the world is a desolate, dun-coloured mound of dried mud.”

Vanished Civilisations

On the actual ruins of Babylon the Arabian neither pitches his tent nor pastures his flocks - in the first place, because the nitrous soil produces no pasture to tempt him; and secondly, because an evil reputation attaches to the entire site, which is thought to be the haunt of evil spirits.

Egypt and Babylon

The remains of the city

In 636 AD a group of Arabs found large quantities of gold in the ruins

The naked robbers of the desert were suddenly enriched beyond the measure of the hope or knowledge. Each chamber revealed a new treasure, secreted with art, or ostentatiously displayed; the gold and silver, the various wardrobes and precious furniture surpassed the estimate of fancy or of numbers; and another historian defines the untold and almost infinite mass by the fabulous computation of three thousands of thousands of thousands of pieces of gold.

Gibbon, History of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire

In the 19th Century a British archaeologist called Sir Austen Layard excavated the mound of Babil (based upon the original tower of Babel), and found some ancient burial grounds, and coffins containing skeletons.

A foul and unbearable stench issued from these loathsome remains, and from the passages, which had become the dens of wild beasts which had worked their way in to them from above. ... Owls start from the scanty thickets, and the foul jackal skulks through the furrows. ... The mound was full of large holes; we entered some of them and found them strewn with the carcasses and skeletons of animals recently killed.

Rawlinson, Egypt and Babylon

More recently, Saddam Hussein began a major project to rebuild Babylon, so there are a few modern buildings, built in the style of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, but the occupation following the Iraq war has wrecked much of what remained of the original city.



Babylon, as it may have looked ...



... and the remains of the city today.

The tearing down of the ruins has been continued for centuries. The bricks, even at this late date, are so excellent in quality, that the shape of the mounds is being continually altered by the excavations which are made for them. "To this day," says Layard, "there are men who have no other trade than that of gathering bricks from this vast heap, and taking them for sale to the neighbouring towns and villages, and even to Baghdad. There is scarcely a house in Hillah which is not built of them." [Hillah is a nearby village of 5,000 people].

It seems that, in digging for old materials, the Arabs used the bricks for building purposes, but always burnt the stone thus discovered for lime.

The evidence of Prophecy

The Euphrates marshes

On the other hand, the neglect of the embankments and canals which anciently controlled the waters of the Euphrates, and made them a defence and not a danger, has consigned great part of what was anciently Babylon to the continual invasion of floods, which, stagnating in the lower grounds, have converted large tracts once included within the walls of the city into lakes, pools and marshes.

Egypt and Babylon

In spring each year the Tigris and Euphrates suddenly swell and flood the surrounding countryside. The Chaldæans harnessed these with an elaborate system of canals, but today the floods create swamps and forests of reeds, which spread fever and leave black mud.

The marsh Arabs lived in houses constructed of reeds on small islands at the confluence of Iraq's Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Saddam Hussein considered the swamps a haven for



Shiite opponents of his regime, so in the mid-1990s, he drained the marshes, broadcast pesticides to kill the fish and wildlife, attacked the people and destroyed their villages.

Damage caused by troops in Iraq

... they caused substantial damage to the Ishtar Gate, one of the most famous monuments from antiquity ... US military vehicles crushed 2,600-year-old brick pavements, archaeological fragments were scattered across the site, more than 12 trenches were driven into ancient deposits and military earth-moving projects contaminated the site for future generations of scientists ... Add to all that the damage caused to nine of the moulded brick figures of dragons in the Ishtar Gate by soldiers trying to remove the bricks from the wall."

Report by Dr John Curtis for the British Museum's Near East department, 2005