

Nebuchadnezzar



Biography Workbook Series

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KING NEBUCHADNEZZAR OF BABYLON

(645-561 B.C.)

With the death of Sardanapalus, the great monarch of Assyria, and the taking of Nineveh, the capital city, by the Medes, the kingdom of Assyria came to an end. The vast domain was parceled out among the conquerors. At the time of the catastrophe, the district of Babylonia, with its capital city Babylon, was ruled as a dependent satrapy of Assyria by Nabopolassar. Aided by the Medes, Nabopolassar now took possession of the province and established himself as an independent monarch, strengthening the alliance by a marriage between the Princess Amuhia, the daughter of the Median king, and his son Nebuchadnezzar.

1. How did Assyria come to an end?

2. What was the capital city of Babylonia?

3. Who was Nabopolassar's son?

In the partition of Assyria, the region stretching from Egypt to the upper Euphrates, including Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine, had fallen to the share of Nabopolassar. But the tribes that peopled it were not disposed to accept the rule of the new claimant, and looked about for an ally to support them in their resistance. Such an ally they thought they had found in Egypt.

4. Which of the following was **not** ruled by Nabopolassar?

- a. Egypt
- b. Palestine
- c. Phoenicia
- d. Syria

Egypt was the great rival of Babylon, as she had been of Assyria. Both desired to control the highways of traffic connecting the Mediterranean with the farther East. Egypt had the advantage, both from her actual position on the Mediterranean and her nearer neighborhood to the coveted territory, and she used her advantage with audacity and skill. No sooner, however, did Nabopolassar feel himself firm on his throne than he resolved to check the ambition of Egypt and secure for himself the sovereignty of the lands in dispute.

5. What did both Egypt and Babylon hope to control?

The task was not an easy one. Pharaoh Necho had been for three years in possession of the whole strip along the Mediterranean—Palestine, Phœnicia, and part of Syria—and was pushing victoriously on to Assyria, when he was met at the plain of Megiddo, commanding the principal pass in the range of Mount Carmel, by the forces of the petty kingdom of Judah, disputing his advance. He defeated them in a bloody engagement, in which Josiah, King of Judah, was slain, and then continued his march to Carchemish, a stronghold built to defend one of the few fordable passes of the upper Euphrates. This important place having been taken after a bloody battle, Necho was master of all the strategic points north and west of Babylonia.

6. Pharaoh Necho confronted what people in battle on the plain of Megiddo?

7. What king was killed in this bloody battle?

Nebuchadnezzar was now put in command of an army, to force Pharaoh to give up his prey. Marching directly upon Carchemish, he attacked the Egyptian and defeated him with great slaughter. Following up his victory, he wrested from Pharaoh, in engagement after engagement, all that he had gained in Syria, Phœnicia, and Palestine, and was in the midst of fighting in Egypt itself, when the news came of the death of his father; and he hastened home at once by forced

marches to secure his possession of the throne. In his train were captives of all the nations he had conquered: Syrians, Phoenicians, Jews, and Egyptians. Among the Jewish prisoners was Daniel, the author of the book of the Old Testament called by his name, and to whom we owe the little personal knowledge we have of the great Babylonian monarch.

8. Who was the most famous of Nebuchadnezzar's prisoners?

Of all the conquests of Nebuchadnezzar in this long struggle with Egypt, that of the Jewish people is the most interesting to people today. The Jews had fought hard for independence, but if they must be conquered and held in subjection, they preferred the rule of Egypt to that of Babylon. Even the long slavery of their ancestors in that country and the sufferings it had entailed, with the tragic memories of the exodus and the wanderings in the desert, had not been potent to blot out the traditions of the years passed in that pleasant land with its delicious climate, its nourishing and abundant food. Alike in prosperity and in evil days the hearts of the people of Israel yearned after Egypt, and the denunciations of her prophets are never so bitter as when uttered against those who turned from Jehovah to worship the false gods of the Nile.

9. Why did the ancient Hebrews prefer Egypt to Babylon?

Three times did the inhabitants of Jerusalem rebel against the rule of Babylon, and three times did Nebuchadnezzar come down upon them with a cruel and unrelenting vengeance, carrying off their people into bondage, each time inflicting great damage upon the city and leaving it less capable of resistance; yet each time its rulers had turned to Egypt in the vain hope of finding in it a defense against the oppressor, but in every instance Egypt had proved a broken reed.

10. To what country did the ancient Hebrews turn for assistance against the Babylonians?

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Of the three successive kings of Judah whom Nebuchadnezzar had left to rule the city as his servants, and who had all in turn rebelled against him, one had been condemned to perpetual imprisonment in Babylon; a second had been carried there in chains and probably killed, while the third, captured in a vain attempt to escape after the taking of the city, had first been made to see his sons killed before his eyes, had then been cruelly blinded, and afterward carried in chains to Babylon, and cast into prison. The last siege of the city lasted eighteen months, and when it was finally taken by assault, its ruin was complete.

11. Why do you suppose that Nebuchadnezzar's puppet kings in Judah continued to rebel against him?

By previous deportations Jerusalem had been deprived of her princes, her warriors, her craftsmen, and her smiths, with all the treasure laid up in the palace of her kings, and all the vessels of gold and silver consecrated to the worship of Jehovah. Little then was left for her to suffer, when the punishment of her latest rebellion came. Her walls were thrown down, her temple, her chief glory, was destroyed, the greater part of the inhabitants who had survived the prolonged siege were carried off to swell the crowd of exiles already in Babylon, and only a few of the humbler sort of folk, the vine-dressers and the small farmers, were left behind.

12. Why do you imagine that the Babylonians deported Judah's wealthiest, rather than its poorest, residents?

When Nebuchadnezzar rested after his conquests, secure in the subjugation of his rivals, and in the possession of his vast kingdom, he gave himself up to the material improvement of Babylon and the surrounding country. The city as he left it, at the end of his reign of forty-three years, was built on both sides of the Euphrates, and covered a space of four hundred square miles, equal to five times the size of London. It was surrounded by a triple wall of brick; the innermost, over three hundred feet high, and eighty-five feet broad at the top, with room for four chariots to drive abreast. The walls were pierced by one hundred gate-ways framed in brass and with brazen gates, and at the points where the Euphrates entered and left the city the walls also turned and followed the course of the river, thus dividing

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the city into two fortified parts. These two districts were connected by a bridge of stone piers, guarded by portcullises, and ferries also plied between the quays that lined the river-banks, to which access was given by gates in the walls.

13. For how long did King Nebuchadnezzar rule Babylonia?

Nebuchadnezzar's palace was a splendid structure covering a large space at one end of the bridge. In the central court were the Hanging Gardens, the chief glory of the city, and reckoned one of the wonders of the world. No clear idea can be formed of these gardens from any description that has come down to us, but it would appear that arches eighty feet high supported terraces of earth planted with all the skill for which the gardeners of the East were famous. We are told that they were built for the pleasure of Queen Amuhia, who, as a Median princess, missed her native mountains, but a more commonplace explanation is that they were carried so high to escape the mosquitoes that swarmed on the lower level.

14. What feature of Babylon was counted among the seven wonders of the world?

Various splendid edifices, chiefly religious, adorned the great squares of the city: the temple of the god Bel, enriched by the spoils of Tyre and Jerusalem, was the especial pride of Nebuchadnezzar. It rose in a succession of eight lofty stages (a ziggurat), and supported on the top a golden statue of the god, forty feet high. Still another temple of Bel was built in seven stages, each faced with enameled brick of one of the planetary colors; the topmost one of blue, the color dedicated to Mercury or Nebo, the patron god of Nabopolassar.

15. What god was preferred by Nebuchadnezzar?

But the most important of the civic undertakings of Nebuchadnezzar was the extension of the great system of canalization by which the barren wastes of the Babylonian plain were made to rival the valley of the Nile in fertility, and become

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the granary of the East. The whole territory was covered with a network of canals fed by the Tigris and Euphrates, and used for both irrigation and navigation. One branch had already connected Nineveh with Babylon, and another constructed by Nebuchadnezzar united Babylon to the Persian Gulf, running a distance of four hundred miles. This is still to be traced in a portion of its length.

16. Based on your knowledge of the ancient Fertile Crescent, why was irrigation important to the Babylonians?

The fate of Nebuchadnezzar is one of the most tragic in the long list of calamities that have overtaken the great and powerful of the earth. According to Daniel, it was just after the king had spoken those words of exulting pride as he walked in the palace of the Kingdom of Babylon: "Is not this great Babylon that I have built," when he was attacked by that dreadful form of madness, called by the Greeks, lycanthropy (wolf-man), in which the victim fancies himself a beast: in its fiercer manifestations a beast of the forest, or in milder visitations a beast of the field. Nebuchadnezzar's madness became so violent that for four years he was exiled from his throne and from the company of men, and wandered in the fields, eating grass like oxen, "and his body was wet with the dews of heaven, and his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws."

17. Based on your modern knowledge of disease and illness, from what do you suspect Nebuchadnezzar suffered?

Although no mention is made of this strange malady in any writing but the book of Daniel, yet it has a pathetic confirmation in one of the rock-cut inscriptions that record the acts of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. "For four years the seat of my kingdom did not rejoice my heart. In all my dominions I built no high place of power, nor did I lay up the precious treasure of my kingdom. In Babylon I erected no buildings for myself nor for the glory of my empire. In the worship of Bel-Merodach, my Lord, the joy of my heart, in Babylon the city of his worship and the seat of my empire, I did not sing his praise, nor did I furnish his altar with victims"—and then, as if returning to the thing that lay nearest him—"In four years I did not dig out the canals."

18. Mention is made of two primary sources that refer to the four-year lull in Nebuchadnezzar's life—the Book of Daniel and a cuneiform inscription. Why is it so important for historians to have multiple primary sources related to a historical event?
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In time, the black cloud of the king's madness passed away and health and reason were restored to him. And if the words that Daniel puts into the king's mouth on his recovery are really his, we must recognize in this Eastern despot a decided strain of religious sensibility, a trait that appears beside in his almost passionate expressions of affection for his god Merodach, and in his sympathy with Daniel and the youths who were his companions, in their own religious devotion.

Although Daniel and the other youths whom the king had caused to be called out from the mass of the Jewish captives for his own particular service—boys distinguished from the rest by their personal beauty, their intelligence and aptitude—were too earnest in their religious convictions and too high-spirited to conform to

the Babylonian religion or to conceal their sentiments under the cloak of policy, yet the king tolerated their adherence to their ritual and yielded only in part to the persistence of the Jew-baiters, who saw with angry eyes the promotion of the hated captives to places of power and authority over the heads of their captors.

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In spite of his enemies Daniel was allowed to exercise his own religion in peace; and the persecutors of his companions, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, were themselves destroyed in the furnace they had heated for their innocent victims, which the youths themselves were rescued from by the personal interposition of the king, who pretended to see—or in his religious exaltation did really see—the god himself standing guard over the victims in the midst of the flames.

19. Why did native Babylonians grow jealous of the Hebrew captives?

20. Name the three young men who were famously, according to the Old Testament, saved from a furnace.

Of Nebuchadnezzar after the recovery of his reason we learn but little. The chronicle of Daniel passes abruptly from Nebuchadnezzar to Belshazzar, and the great king is not mentioned again. History, too, is silent. It tells us only that he left the throne to a son, whose name, Evil-Merodach, records the devotion of his father to the god of his people.

21. Imagine that you are being sent in a time machine to visit Babylon during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. You are being given from dawn until dusk to explore the city. What would you most like to see, and why?

WORD SEARCH PUZZLE



- TERMS
- Assyria
 - Babylonia
 - Daniel
 - Euphrates
 - Hanging Gardens
 - Judah
 - monarch
 - Nabopolassar
 - Nebuchadnezzar
 - slaughter

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Select and illustrate a scene from the life of Nebuchadnezzar.

