

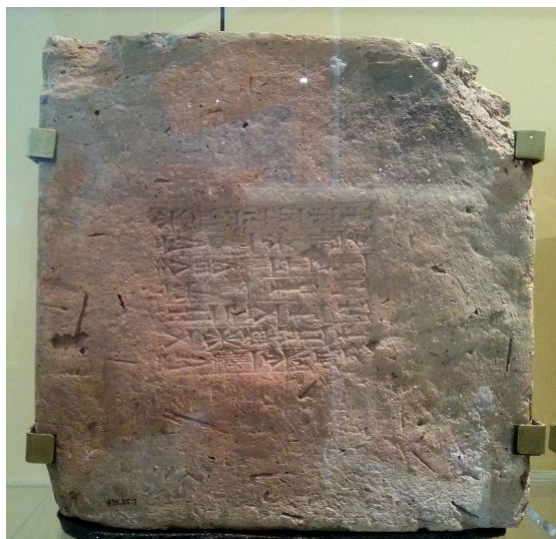
Bible Reading Archeology.



Posted on September 25, 2017September 12, 2018 | Babylon

The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar

In Toronto, at the Royal Ontario Museum (if you haven't visited you really should) are two square clay building blocks with an inscription stamped upon them reading, "*Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who provides for (the temples) Esagila and Ezida, the eldest son of Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, am I*". King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon was a prolific builder. According to some sources, Nebuchadnezzar's workers used over 15,000,000 bricks in his building projects and almost all of them carried the same inscription.



Nebuchadnezzar was keenly aware of Egyptian Pharaoh's and Mesopotamian monarchs who had been erased from the historical record by envious and resentful successors. The Babylonian king would not allow the same thing to happen to him. No one could ever take credit for his greatest work, the rebuilding of the great capital of Babylon but the man whose name and esteemed royal parentage was pressed into the very walls and foundations of everything he built.

For this reason, Nebuchadnezzar bricks are a relatively common sight at ancient history museums around the world. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in New York City is a dedication cylinder inscribed with cuneiform writing. It is one of many that have been found underneath

Nebuchadnezzar's building projects. The one at the MET commemorates Nebuchadnezzar's construction of a new outer city wall and it reads in part, *"I built a strong wall that cannot be shaken with bitumen and baked bricks... I laid its foundation on the breast of the netherworld, and I built its top as high as a mountain... The fortifications of Esagila and Babylon I strengthened and established the name of my reign forever."* The world's museums contain many other examples of Nebuchadnezzar's self-glorification.



Cuneiform cylinder: inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II describing the construction of the outer city wall of Babylon at the The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

All of this fits perfectly the Biblical portrait of King Nebuchadnezzar, whom the prophet Daniel records as boasting:

"Is this not Babylon the Great that I myself have built for the royal house by my own strength and might and for the glory of my majesty?" (Daniel 4: 30)

That Nebuchadnezzar was a vainglorious braggart is not controversial, nor is it particularly unusual for an ancient king. What is controversial is an episode that happened to the king as a direct consequence of his pride and his vanity. According to the Biblical prophet Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar was punished by

God and lost his sanity for a period of 7 years:

“He was driven away from mankind, and he began to eat vegetation just like bulls, and his body became wet with the dew of the heavens, until his hair grew long just like eagles’ feathers and his nails were like birds’ claws.” (Daniel 4: 33)

At the end of the 7 years, Daniel reports that his reasoning faculties were divinely restored to him and that Nebuchadnezzar, the proudest of ancient rulers was forced to acknowledge Jehovah, the God of Israel.

Some historians have described this event as being fictional. They make this claim on the following grounds:

- We know too much of Nebuchadnezzar’s life and the historical record does not allow for 7 missing years from his reign.
- If Nebuchadnezzar was incapacitated by mental illness, surely other ambitious and grasping nobles would have eliminated him to assume the throne.
- No other contemporary historical record reports this event as one might expect if Nebuchadnezzar suffered such a fate.

Of course, if this account is fiction than a case may be made that the famous prophetic claims in the Bible book of Daniel are fictional as well. So let us examine each of those objections closely.

The Critics Arguments Examined

How much do we really know of the life of King Nebuchadnezzar? In some respects, we know a great deal. This knowledge is acquired by means of contemporary or near-contemporary historians, the Biblical record and finally the archeological record. Paul Ferguson, a professor of the Old Testament wrote that, *“Meticulous historical records are available up to about the eleventh year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, after which the chronicles are practically silent.”* This would suggest that something was seriously amiss in the later part of the king’s reign. As Nebuchadnezzar II had the longest reign of any king of the Babylonian empire (almost 43 years), and as so little is known about so many of those years, there can be no basis for claiming that too much is known of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign to allow for 7 missing years.

Would Nebuchadnezzar’s incapacity necessarily have led to his assassination? This is the weakest argument against Daniel’s claim, because many historical examples argue otherwise. King George III of England famously struggled with mental illness for decades and for the last 10 years of his life was incapacitated to the point that a Regent had to be appointed to carry out his royal functions. Yet George III died of natural causes at a ripe old age. Similarly, it is likely that the son and eventual successor of Nebuchadnezzar named in the Bible Evil-merodach (Jeremiah 52: 31) known to history as Amel-Marduk served as Regent during his father’s incapacity.

It should also be noted that in the ancient Middle-East, the mentally ill were sometimes regarded with a superstitious fear as it was thought that they had a special channel to the divine and so their ravings were often examined for evidence of inspiration. For this reason, many cultures thought it bad luck to kill a mentally ill person. This seems to have been why David, before he became King feigned insanity while amongst the Philistine’s in Gath. (1 Samuel 21: 13) Doing so seems to have saved his life because the Philistines had wanted him to kill him.

So there is no reason to suppose that Nebuchadnezzar would have necessarily been murdered during his period of his incapacitation. Evil-merodach may have been happy to wait for his father's natural death and of course in the meantime he enjoyed all the privileges of full kingship while serving as Prince Regent.

Finally, is the contemporary historical record silent on the subject of Nebuchadnezzar's period of insanity? Before answering this question, a couple of points should be made. Ancient historical records were seldom written to be objective, but rather served as national propaganda. Therefore, public monuments would record victories, but seldom defeats. The accomplishments of a ruler were boasted of and often embellished. For example, it is not unusual to read on ancient monuments boastful accounts of successful military campaigns, the construction of some new palace or public building project or of the unsurpassed wealth of the ruler etc. Defeats in battle, national or royal scandals or other accounts that did not serve to flatter or elevate the esteem of the sovereign were almost never recounted (which makes the Biblical "warts and all" historical accounts of the kings of Judah and Israel so refreshing!) So we should not expect to find many historical or archeological records detailing what was to the Babylonian royal family, likely an embarrassing family secret.

The second point about the lack of information from the contemporary historical record is simply that *absence of evidence is not evidence of absence!* The fact that little or no historical evidence exists does not mean a certain event never occurred. It may simply mean that the event was not sufficiently recorded by historians. For example, the Bible book of Ezekiel recounts two events regarding the military campaigns of Nebuchadnezzar that contemporary historians were generally silent on. They were the protracted siege by Nebuchadnezzar of the Phoenician city of Tyre and the second was his military campaign against Egypt. Yet while contemporary historians were silent on those two events, [archeological evidence has shown that they both took place \(https://biblereadingarcheology.com/2017/09/13/what-happened-to-tyre/\)](https://biblereadingarcheology.com/2017/09/13/what-happened-to-tyre/)! The archeological record showed that the Bible was correct. If you are a regular reader of this blog, you will have seen that this has been the case over and over again.

The Account Of Megasthenes

Oftentimes, ancient historians had access to records or histories that are simply lost to us. The famous 4th century historian of early Christendom named Eusebius quoted one such source. He quoted a Greek historian named Abydenus who wrote a history of the Assyrians. In that history, Abydenus quotes another ancient Greek historian named Megasthenes whose works are also largely lost to history. Megasthenes was born circa 350 B.C, so his writings by ancient standards could be considered nearly contemporaneous with the reign of Nebuchadnezzar.

Eusebius quotes regarding Nebuchadnezzar: "*ABYDENUS, in his history of the Assyrians, has preserved the following fragment of Megasthenes, who says: That Nabucodrosorus (Nebuchadnezzar), having become more powerful than Hercules, invaded Libya and Iberia, and when he had rendered them tributary, he extended his conquests over the inhabitants of the shores upon the right of the sea. It is moreover related by the Chaldæans, that as he went up into his palace he was possessed by some god; and he cried out and said: "Oh! Babylonians, I, Nabucodrosorus (Nebuchadnezzar), foretell unto you a calamity which must shortly come to pass..."*

This may be seen as a badly garbled recounting of the same episode that Daniel records in Daniel chapter 4. Megasthenes says Nebuchadnezzar, after completing his various military adventures (which we know included the [conquest of Judah \(https://biblereadingarcheology.com/2017/04/10/the-babylonian-invasion-in-archeology-part-2-the-lachish-letters/\)](https://biblereadingarcheology.com/2017/04/10/the-babylonian-invasion-in-archeology-part-2-the-lachish-letters/) and its [capital Jerusalem \(https://biblereadingarcheology.com/2017/04/04/the-babylonian-invasion-in-archeology-part-1-jerusalem-falls/\)](https://biblereadingarcheology.com/2017/04/04/the-babylonian-invasion-in-archeology-part-1-jerusalem-falls/)), went up into his palace and there, "*he was possessed by some god*". The dismissive

sounding phrase, “some god” would seem to refer to a deity who was foreign to Megasthenes but whom Bible readers would identify as Jehovah the God of Israel. This possession was followed by a judgement message. Compare now the Bible account in the book of Daniel:

“... he (Nebuchadnezzar) was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon. The king was saying: “Is this not Babylon the Great that I myself have built for the royal house by my own strength and might and for the glory of my majesty?” While the word was yet in the king’s mouth, a voice came down from the heavens: “To you it is being said, O King Nebuchadnezzar, ‘The kingdom has gone away from you, and from mankind you are being driven away.’” (Daniel 4: 29-32)

The similarities between the accounts are obvious. Of course there are differences. In Megasthenes account, the judgement message concerns the eventual downfall of Babylon to the Persians. In Daniel’s account the judgement message concerns the king’s debasement, to live as an animal for 7 years. In Megasthenes account, Nebuchadnezzar dies after his possession ends. In Daniel’s account, Nebuchadnezzar’s senses are restored to him after 7 years and he dies at some point after this. Still there is enough here to come to the reasonable conclusion that both accounts refer to the same event.

A Babylonian Document Of Nebuchadnezzar’s Illness?

And what of archeology, can it shine any light on the madness of King Nebuchadnezzar? Remarkably, a rare find at the British Museum seems to corroborate Nebuchadnezzar’s illness! The Babylonian cuneiform tablet was first published in 1975 by A.K. Grayson. The tablet is broken and so the text is not as complete as what we might wish for. But for a Bible student, the text that remains is very exciting indeed! The tablet reads:

2 [Nebu]chadnezzar considered

3 His life appeared of no value to [him,]

5 And (the) Babylon(ian) speaks bad counsel to Evil-merodach [....]

6 Then he gives an entirely different order but [. .]

7 He does not heed the word from his lips, the cour[tier(s) – – -]

11 He does not show love to son and daughter [. .]

12 ... family and clan do not exist [. .]

14 His attention was not directed towards promoting the welfare of Esagil [and Babylon]

16 He prays to the lord of lords, he raised [his hands (in supplication) (. .)]

17 He weeps bitterly to Marduk, the g[reat] gods [.....]

18 His prayers go forth to [.....]

A couple of points before we attempt to understand the inscription. The missing lines are illegible, so significant content is missing. The end of every line is missing due to the condition of the tablet so some of the lines are incomplete. This being said, enough remains of the text that coupled with Daniel chapter 4 we can make a reasonable reconstruction.

It is clear from line number 2 that the text refers to King Nebuchadnezzar. Lines 3, 6, 7, 11, 12 and 14 seem to refer to the abnormal behaviour of Nebuchadnezzar which is being reported to his son and heir Evil-merodach by the courtiers and palace officials. They report to the son that his father the king's life appears of no value to him, his orders are contradictory, he does not listen to his palace courtiers, he neglects his own sons and daughters, he is not performing his sacred religious duties as king at the most important temple complex in Babylon called the Esagil. Who is giving bad counsel to Evil-merodach in line 5? Could it be palace officials who counselled Evil-merodach to assume the throne entirely, rather than merely serve as Regent during his fathers incapacity? Lines 16 through 18 may refer to Evil-merodach's attempts to enlist the aid of Marduk, the principal god in the Babylonian pantheon of deities. It seems his prayers go unanswered.

Although other interpretations are possible, in the light of Daniel chapter 4 we seem to be catching a glimpse of a Nebuchadnezzar's period of affliction from the perspective of palace officials. In the text, something is seriously wrong with Nebuchadnezzar and nobody, least of all his son and heir Evil-merodach knows what to do about it. The gods just aren't listening! There is a definite tone of desperation in the text. We are listening in as those who are in the know discuss a deep, dark palace secret.

Of course, Daniel chapter 4 reveals that Nebuchadnezzar would survive his 7 year period of insanity and his faculties were restored to him. It was then that Nebuchadnezzar, this haughtiest of rulers was forced to acknowledge that Jehovah, the God of the Hebrew people who were at this point languishing in exile (<https://biblereadingarcheology.com/2017/08/15/the-babylonian-invasion-in-archeology-part-3-exile/>) throughout his empire, was superior to the god's of Babylonia.

*"Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, am praising and exalting and glorifying the King of the heavens, because all his works are truth and his ways are just, and because he is able to humiliate those who are walking in pride."
(Daniel 4: 37)*

Did Nebuchadnezzar abandon Marduk and the vast array of gods in Babylon and come to worship the one god of the Hebrews? Since the first part of his reign was marked with abundant public declarations of devotion to Marduk and the gods, some have suggested that the fact that very few religious inscriptions or proclamations exist from the later part of his reign may indicate a loss of enthusiasm for the gods of Babylon. Still, the evidence is scanty. Nebuchadnezzar's acknowledgement of Jehovah at Daniel 4 verse 37 may have been a short-lived recognition or his declaration may have been simply a statement of fact but did not reflect a changed heart. It also seems likely that after his restoration to active duty, Nebuchadnezzar did not have many years of life left to him. Thankfully for Bible readers and history lovers, the prophet Daniel would survive Nebuchadnezzar and live to see the end of Babylonian rule.

Picture Credits:

Nebuchadnezzar by William Blake from 1795. Copper engraving with pen and ink and watercolour. {PD} Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_Blake_-_Nebuchadnezzar_-_WGA02216.jpg).

Building brick from Babylon with inscription at the Royal Ontario Museum. Photo by author.

Nebuchadnezzar cylinder at the MET. {PD} Source: [Metropolitan Museum of Art](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/321676) (<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/321676>).

Daniel

2 thoughts on “The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar”

fascinating reading –

Anonymous , October 14, 2018 at 4:55 pm

Reply

This is such a fascinating argument! It was absolutely intriguing to read, and it blessed me as it accompanied my study this morning...thanks for a great read!

AnUnexpectedAuthor , September 21, 2018 at 9:21 am

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