

The Hebrew Corner

There are frequent references in the Bible to a place called Babylon. Babylon is referred to in both the Tanach and the B'rit Hadasha (New Testament). Did you know that the first book of the Bible that Babylon is mentioned is in Genesis? Before discussing this, it is important to know that the Hebrew name for Babylon is Babel (בבל, bah-VEHL). So when the Tower of Babel is discussed in Genesis, the same Hebrew name is used as when discussing the empire of Babylon in later books of the Bible such as 2 Chronicles. The name Babel is derived from the Hebrew word balal (בלל, bah-LAHL) meaning to confuse or confound, so that Babel could be translated in English as "in confusion" or "in a state of confusion." Thus it is an appropriate name for the tower, as described in Genesis 11:9:

"Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth."

The confusion of languages was a result of the arrogance of the people, who originally all spoke the same language. There is a strong indication that the original language spoken was Hebrew, in that names such as Adam, Eve, Abel were all names that have a meaning in Hebrew, for example, Adam means "man", as translated into English.

The Babylonian empire is referred to in many places in the Tanach. In 2 Kings 20:12,13, we see King Hezekiah making the error of showing all of the treasures of Judah to representatives of the king of Babylon. The prophet Isaiah informs Hezekiah of his error and describes what is going to unfold as a result in the following passage (2 Kings 20:16-18):

“And Isaiah said unto Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord. Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store unto this day, shall be carried into Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the Lord. And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

Babylon was known to be ruthless in its conquest of other kingdoms, as evidenced by the distress of the prophet Habakkuk when God told him that Babylon would be the nation carrying out his judgment on Judah. Jeremiah was told by God that it was his will that Babylon would invade Judah and carry off the people captive, and that he should inform King Zedekiah that he should not resist their advances. In fact, he did not heed Jeremiah’s warning, and his sons were killed by the invading Babylonians, and he was captured and imprisoned in Babylon.

There are two chapters in Jeremiah that prophetically refer to the destruction of Babylon, however, the prophecies do not appear to have been fulfilled by the conquest of Babylon by the Medes and Persians who did not destroy Babylon but conquered it (see Daniel 5:28-31). Jeremiah's prophesy of the destruction of Babylon described it as follows (Jeremiah 50:26):

“Come against her from the utmost border, open her storehouses: cast her up as heaps, and destroy her utterly: let nothing of her be left.”

In two verses of Jeremiah (25:26, 51:41), the prophet uses an unusual literary device. Brown-Driver-Briggs, a biblical Hebrew lexicon, indicates that the name Sheshach (ששך, sheh-SHACH) that appears in these verses is an encryption made by using a cryptographic method known as Atbash (אתבש, aht-BAHSH). This is a cipher in which the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet is replaced with the last letter, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet is replaced by the next-to-last letter, and so forth. The original, unencrypted form of Sheshach becomes Babel by replacing the letter shin (ש) with the letter bet (ב), and the letter kaph (כ) with the letter lamed (ל), reversing the Atbash encryption. The question that may be asked is why did Jeremiah use an encrypted form of Babel in the same passage that he used the actual name Babel. The following may explain this at least in part:

In Isaiah we also have a prophecy of the destruction of Babylon concerning the destruction of Babylon. However, in this passage an end time phrase, “the day of the Lord’ is used along with references to the sun and the moon (Isaiah 13:9,10):

“Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof will not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine.”

This indicates that perhaps the Babylon described in the passage is not the same kingdom that existed at the time of Isaiah, but a nation or entity that will exist in the last days.

In the book of Revelation we also have an extensive description of a place known as Babylon. These references, from the prophetic vision of John the apostle, cannot be referring to the nation of Judah that took Judah into captivity, because that nation no longer existed in John’s time of writing this book, but must be referring to a nation during or after the time of John. Referring back to the book of Jeremiah, many of the passages in the chapters concerning God’s judgment upon Babylon parallel many of the passages in Revelation. Here is an example (Jeremiah 50:39):

“Therefore the wild beasts of the desert with the wild beasts of the islands shall dwell there, and the owls shall dwell therein: and it shall be no more inhabited for ever; neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation.”

Compare the above with the following passage from Revelation (18:2):

“And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great has fallen, is fallen and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.”

Here is another example from Jeremiah (51:9):

“We would have healed Babylon, but she is not healed: forsake her, and let us go every one into his own country: for her judgment reacheth into heaven, and is lifted up even to the skies.”

The following passage from Revelation (18:4,5) parallels the one above:

“And I heard another voice from heaven saying, Come out of her my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached into heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities.”

The question then is posed, is the encrypted name Sheshach used in Jeremiah intended to suggest to us that this is not the Babylon of Jeremiah's time that the prophet is referring to here, but a future Babylon, the one referred to in Revelation? If so, what and where is this Babylon being referred to? Two possibilities are proposed:

1. Babylon is a code word for a new rich but very corrupt nation that is going to exist in the last days. Many nations will prosper from her wealth, but will also mourn her when she is destroyed in God's judgment.

2. Babylon is not a nation or region, but represents the state of spiritual confusion that the world will be in during the end times, under the influence of demonic forces led by Satan. People will escape from this dark, spiritual state when Jesus, our Yeshua, returns to make things right.

May all who are in darkness come out of Babylon, that state of confusion, and receive the love of Jesus, our Yeshua. Blessings and shalom to all!