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Babylonian Kings in the Bible

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The ancient neo-Babylonian Empire left a significant mark on the flow of Old Testament events in spite of its relatively brief dominance. Although the city of Babylon itself had a long history, the neo-Babylonian Empire lasted only from the defeat of Assyria in 612 B.C. until the conquest by the Medo-Persians in 539 B.C. During that roughly seventy-year period there were seven kings who ruled the Babylonian Empire, only four of whom are mentioned by name in the Bible. One other Babylonian king from an earlier era is also mentioned by name. These biblical references to known historical figures demonstrate the historical basis and reliability of the Bible.

Merodach-Baladan

Over a century before the rise of the neo-Babylonian Empire one king of Babylon, Merodach-Baladan, attempted to break free from the dominance of the Assyrians. He is mentioned in the Bible as the son of Baladan, and a contemporary of Judah's King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:12; Isaiah 39:1). Merodach-Baladan was a Chaldean tribal leader who resisted the Assyrian control of Babylon on more

than one occasion. Assyria's king Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BC) abandoned military action in the west in order to put down Merodach-Baladan's resistance in the east. "Even after Babylonia, now under the tenacious and resilient leadership of Marduk-apla-iddina (Merodach-Baladan in the Old Testament) was finally forced to submit, Tiglath-Pileser never returned to the west."¹

When Sargon II (721-705 BC) took the throne of Assyria, Merodach-Baladan "had himself solemnly installed as king of Babylon on the Babylonian New Year's Day, 1st Nisan, 721 BC."² He maintained that position until 710 BC.

When Sargon died, his son Sennacherib came to the throne of Assyria (704-681 BC). Rebellions arose across the Assyrian Empire. "Merodach-Baladan, whom Sargon had expelled from Babylon in 710 BC, returned and made himself king once more. He took an active part in stirring up revolts elsewhere."³ It was at this time that Merodach-Baladan sent an envoy to Judah's King Hezekiah, no doubt seeking an alliance against Assyria (1 Kings 20:12). However, Sennacherib defeated Merodach-Baladan in 702 BC, and Merodach-Baladan died in exile.⁴

Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BC)

The efforts of Merodach-Baladan to break free from the control of Assyria were never achieved in his lifetime. However, in 612 BC another Chaldean leader, Nabopolassar, succeeded in finally defeating Assyria. His son, Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BC), became the most recognized Babylonian king in the Bible. Nebuchadnezzar subdued Jehoiakim, King of Judah in 605 BC and took some of the elite of Judah, like the prophet Daniel, to Babylon. Jehoiakim eventually rebelled against Babylon (2 Kings 24:1-7).

In 598 BC Jehoiakim's successor, Jehoiachin, was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar who took Jehoiachin and many of the Jews into captivity and installed Mattaniah, renamed Zedekiah, as King of

Judah (2 Kings 24:8-17). Zedekiah also later rebelled against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar returned, defeated the Jews, destroyed Jerusalem, and leveled the Temple in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:1-21). Nebuchadnezzar is well known for his famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon as well as for his interactions with Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 1:1-7).

Evil-Merodach (562-560 BC)

Upon Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 BC his son, Evil-Merodach became ruler of the Babylonian Empire (562-560 BC). "The name, in the Babylonian language, is written Amel-Marduk; i.e., man (or servant) of the god Marduk, or Merodach."⁵ Evil-Merodach is mentioned only in 2 Kings 25:27 and Jeremiah 52:31 for his role in releasing Judah's former king Jehoiachin from prison. "Nebuchadnezzar's son and successor, the ineffectual Evil-Merodach (562-560), is known primarily as the ruler who released Jehoiachin of Judah from confinement and provided him with a royal pension until his death."⁶

Nergal-Sharezer (560-556 BC)

Evil-Merodach's successor, Nergal-Sharezer, came to the throne through an act of treason. "But two years after his succession Evil-merodach was assassinated in a palace revolt, and his brother-in-law Nergal-sharezer (Neriglissar in the Greek historians) succeeded him."⁷ Apparently Nergal-Sharezer was involved in this murder.⁸ Before these events occurred, Nergal-Sharezer had been present at the fall of Jerusalem and the release of the prophet Jeremiah from imprisonment (Jeremiah 39:3, 13).

Belshazzar (553-539 BC)

Following the reign of Nergal-Sharezer Labashi-Marduk (556 BC for two months) and Nabonidus (556-539 BC) ruled over Babylon, neither of whom is mentioned in the Bible. Nabonidus' son Belshazzar (553-539 BC), however, is best known for ruling at the time of the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians. Belshazzar never reigned as the sole leader of the Babylonian Empire, but co-ruled with his father. "Nabonidus had made a habit of absenting himself from the capital; he did so even (or especially) at New Year's when it was customary for the king to participate as a principal in traditional rites. These absences were so frequent and long-lasting that *de facto* control was placed in the hands of his son Belshazzar."⁹ Belshazzar witnessed the hand writing on the wall on the night that the Babylonian Empire fell, as recorded in Daniel 5:1-31. It was during Belshazzar's reign that Daniel received two significant visions about the future (Daniel 7:1; 8:1).

Biblical references to historical figures such as the kings of Babylon demonstrate that the Bible is verifiable historically and therefore reliable in its content and teachings.

¹ Merrill, Eugene H. *Kingdom of Priests*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996, p. 395.

² Bruce, F. F. *Israel and the Nations*. Revised by David F. Payne. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997, p. 59.

³ Bruce, p. 61.

⁴ Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 715.

⁵ Unger, p. 329.

⁶ Merrill, p. 474.

⁷ Bruce, pp. 87-88.

⁸ Unger, p. 788.

⁹ Merrill, pp. 474-475.