

The Empire Next Door: Babylon

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[0:00] So last week we talked about Assyria. This week, John Belts will be talking about Babylon. Next week is Easter Sunday, so no Sunday school. And then the following week we'll conclude with Persia.

As you know, John's a Ph.D. candidate in the Assyriology program at the Yale Department of Near Eastern. Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. Let's open in a word of prayer.

Father in heaven, we thank you for this opportunity to learn about your word and to learn about your world. We ask that you would bless John with insight. You would help him to show us all the beautiful connections, Lord, that the Bible has with history.

We pray that you would open our hearts to your Holy Spirit, to work in them, Lord, and that we would not merely gain intellectual knowledge, but knowledge of you. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Amen. Okay. Okay. Welcome, everybody. Glad that you all decided to come back and hear me ramble on again.

[1:03] So that's good. As Tom said, we're talking about some of the different major empires and geopolitical figures that show up in the Hebrew Bible.

And last week we talked about Assyria, and this week we're going to talk about Babylonia, or the Neo-Babylonian Empire, and we'll talk a little bit about what that means. So just a quick recap from last time.

We talked a little bit about how the ancient Israelites and the Judeans were sort of smaller, weaker powers trapped sort of in between larger sort of superpowers of their day.

And the ones that we're focusing, so Egypt on this side, and a series of different empires on this side. So those are the three that we're looking at, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia.

Okay. So we talked about that. We talked about how even though they are sort of smaller nations that don't have a lot of power in and of themselves, they do sort of form this land bridge between Africa, Asia, and Europe.

[2:19] And so these larger powers did want to control that area. So this is why a lot of these superpowers will have an interest in the area where Israel and Judah are, even though they're not necessarily the biggest players on the stage.

So let's go through Assyria. You can see me being scared again. Babylonia. Okay. So let's start with three.

There's a number of different verses, several hundred verses, right, in the Hebrew Bible that mention Babylonia specifically. But I pulled three just to sort of talk about, just to get us sort of started in thinking about who these people are as we encounter them in the Bible.

Right. So in 2 Kings 25, we first hear about how King Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem, besieged it, and conquered the city and sacked it and deported a large amount of the population to Babylonia.

So Babylon appears as a very sort of like destructive force, and this is a very traumatic event that happens in the history of Israel and Judah.

[3 : 43] But then we hear later in the same chapter that 37 years into his exile, King Jehoiachin of Judah is released under Nebuchadnezzar's successor and allowed to sort of live in Babylon and at least not be a prisoner, but be, I don't know, someone less than, slightly less than a prisoner, house arrest maybe.

And then finally in Jeremiah, and this happens a number of other places, but again, this is just emblematic, where God says, promises that he is going to destroy Babylon for what it's done to his people.

And he says, as I punished the king of Assyria. So already we're seeing this sort of a, you know, an idea that there is a sort of succession of these empires.

So we have these three different sort of depictions sort of of the Babylonians that we find in the Hebrew Bible. One very much of destruction and trauma, one of Judeans living in Babylonia, and one of sort of God's retribution against Babylon for the destruction of Jerusalem.

Okay. So let's talk a little bit about the history of the Babylonian Empire. As I said, last week we talked about Assyria, and I mentioned the sort of downfall of the Assyrian Empire.

[5 : 27] The Assyrians were sort of projected out from their sort of main core area and took over much of the Near East as we know it, down into even as far as Egypt, and were known for their excessive cruelty and bragging about their excessive cruelty.

And eventually this sort of caught up with them and the people of Babylonia down here and another group called the Medes up here sort of formed an alliance and attacked the Assyrian heartland and sacked all of their capital cities and basically ended the Assyrian Empire.

So with that, with the collapse of the Assyrian Empire, there's sort of a power vacuum.

Somebody has to take over. And the king of Babylonia, Nabopolassar, who was Nebuchadnezzar's father, we'll get to Nebuchadnezzar in a couple minutes, sort of begins to, there we go, begins to sort of reincorporate as much of the Assyrian holdings into his empire as he could.

This happens particularly more than under Nebuchadnezzar II as well, who is the biblical Nebuchadnezzar. We call this period the Babylonian Empire.

[6 : 56] It lasts for a little under 100 years. Babylonia and Babylon as we know it have been around for a good 2,000 years or so before this.

So if in school, if you ever learned about Hammurabi and his famous law code, that's back maybe during the time of Abraham. So this is a long time before this. But sort of like we did with Assyrian history, I want to break down the Neo-Babylonian Empire into three phases because three is a good number and it's easy to sort of divide things into parts of three.

So the first one is expansion and consolidation. This is sort of in the aftermath of the collapse of Assyria and Nebuchadnezzar and Nebuchadnezzar sort of are sort of consolidating their hold on this territory.

And this is going to cover, again, we'll get to this when we talk about biblical connections in a little bit. But this is going to cover the period when Judah is destroyed.

Sorry, I missed this last time too. I always forget to give the outline of what I'm doing. We're going to first talk about the history of the Neo-Babylonian Empire and then we'll go over some notes about sort of their culture and then finally we'll hit with more biblical connections.

[8 : 21] Again, I missed that last time too. So. So we first have this period of expansion and consolidation. After Nebuchadnezzar dies, there's what we could call sort of a revolving door of kings.

We have this king, Amal Marduk. In the Bible, his name is rendered in Hebrew as Evel Marodach. And he reigns for about two years and then we have three more kings, two or three more kings after him who reign for even less than that.

So it's a very, very quick turnover of kings, usually not a good sign of stability. And then we hit our third period of what I've termed to be dramatic the mad king, Nabonidus.

Nabonidus was a military commander under Nebuchadnezzar and he, after some of these weak kings sort of launched a military coup, took over, and actually did sort of have a relatively lengthy reign even though he was sort of an elderly man already by that point.

He and sort of his son Belshazzar also did some of the ruling at that point. There may have been a co-regency between them for a little bit.

[9 : 55] The reason I call him the mad king is that he seems to have had a particular, we'll get into this with Babylonian culture a little bit. But he seems to have had a particular fascination with the moon god and sort of really pushed the worship of the moon god over and above some of the other deities that were more common in Babylonia.

And this may have put him at odds with some of the priesthood of some of these different gods and other sort of powerful figures in Babylonian society.

He also campaigned down into Tema, which is today in Saudi Arabia, and spent a number of years living there, which is when he left his son Belshazzar as sort of either a co-regent or a governor in Babylonia itself.

And historians are a little divided as to why he ran away to the Arabian desert for several years. Some people who really lean into the idea that he was like a mad king really think that he had, you know, some kind of religious epiphany that like he was just like, I need to go to the desert and worship the moon god.

Other people think, I think that it's more likely that he's trying to control certain trade routes that came up through. Down, okay, off the screen, in Yemen today, right?

[11 : 23] There's a trade in frankincense and spice that would, moves up through this area here.

And this was becoming a real lucrative trade at this point. Think like oil today, right? You can control an oil pipeline, right? This is one of the things now with the Russia and Ukraine thing is, you know, if people cut off, anyway, modern geopolitics.

We'll stick with Babylon. I'm better with Babylonian geopolitics. So he, it's possible that he may have wanted to control some of these trade routes in spice because that's a very, would have provided a lot of wealth.

But at any rate, he stayed there for a number of years and then ended up returning to Babylon. But later, later, Babylonian authors who wrote about this sort of portrayed him as, as kind of a mad king who angered the gods by pursuing this other cult and stuff like that.

So there were a lot of people, even in Babylon itself, who really didn't like him. And so when we get to, do I have a slide here?

[12 : 41] Oh, we'll come back to that. So basically, the end of the Babylonian empire will come when the, and we'll hit this again next time, more in detail, but when the Medes, again, team up with a different group, the Persians, actually the Persians team up with the Medes, if you want to look at it that way, that Persians take over the Medes.

But a guy named, by the name of Cyrus, who is the king of the Persians, invades Babylonia and probably, seems to have had a pretty easy time conquering it and it's thought that there were a lot of people who wanted a turnover of regime after Nabonidus' reign.

So, Cyrus will take over and inaugurate the Persian empire, which we'll look at next time. So this is a, it's a fairly short, again, moving from about the 620s to the 530s BC, right?

So that's just 90-ish years for an empire. It's not very, not very long compared to the Assyrians who had a couple hundred years under their belt. But it's incredibly influential, partly because of some of the things that they do, such as sacking Jerusalem, which, of course, ends up in the Bible and we have it today.

But I wanted to next look at some things about Babylonian culture. So these are some different clay tablets that we have here in the Babylonian collection at Yale.

[14:20] I showed, when we did the Assyrians, I showed some clay objects before with writing on, so these have a writing system called cuneiform on them, which is written with signs that are sort of these little triangular wedge shapes that are incised into clay.

And I should have put a better view of what that looks like, but I didn't. We'll have to look at these. And this is what I spend a lot of my time looking at, are these beautiful objects that some people think look like rocks and some people think look like cookies.

But I had a picture, every now and then I'll post a picture online of myself holding a tablet and someone will be like, oh, wow, did you bake cookies? No, no. No, it's not a cookie.

But I do see the resemblance. It's fair. Anyway, so this is what a lot of these big empires in Mesopotamia wrote on. They wrote on these tablets of clay with this sort of impressing these sort of wedge-shaped signs into them.

And the Babylonians in particular had a very rich culture in this. So much so that they were in many ways more culturally powerful than Assyria.

[15:40] So the Assyrians actually would, when they were the big power on the scene, would actually imitate Babylonian culture.

So they would import Babylonian literature and scribes and ideologies and different things like that. And even in some of the royal inscriptions that the Assyrian kings made, they would imitate the language of Babylonia because it always just had more of a cultural force to it.

But the Babylonians were, like the Assyrians, also very militarily powerful. They practiced, we talked about with the Assyrians, how they practiced sort of this form of mutual deportation as part of their sort of campaign of terror and psychological warfare that they would take people from one side of their empire and move and move them to the other once they would conquer a place.

And this had the effect of breaking up people's attachment to land, the ability to resist and fight back. The Babylonians did something similar, except they practiced what we sometimes call one-way deportation, which is they would take people from an area like Judah when they conquered it, and they would just move them into their heartland.

It's thought that they may have had a labor shortage, and they were trying to get an influx of people who could then become workers, so they would forcibly move people closer to their heartland.

[17:21] Here we are. So as I said, culturally the Babylonians were very powerful, and they have, so a lot of the major literary works that come out of Babylonia, or sorry, that come out of Mesopotamia are Babylonian in origin.

So if you ever had to read the Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, in like a high school literature class or something, world lit, this is a tablet from that epic. This particular copy is actually a lot older than the period we're talking about.

This is closer to Hammurabi's time, right? So that's closer to Abraham. So there's a creation myth called Numa Elish that was Babylonian and very popular, a flood story about a guy named Atrahasis who survives a worldwide flood, lots of, again, really interesting literature that comes out of Babylonia.

And I, oops, hit my mic, and I in particular like working with literary sources. last week we also talked about the Assyrian king and how the Assyrian king was sort of the high priest of the Assyrian chief god Ashur, and so he had a lot of like autocratic, authoritarian power that came out of that.

The Babylonian king had a little bit of a different relationship with the priesthood around him. He was not the high priest of the Babylonian chief deity whose name was Marduk, not Marmaduke, that's the comic from the newspaper.

[19:03] So he was still very authoritarian, very much in control, but the priesthood of Marduk and of other individual deities also had a significant amount of power.

And again, think back to Nabonidus who really wanted to stress a particular god and other priests didn't like that, and he was still able to force them to go along with it, but when they had a chance to take an out, they did.

And the power of this priesthood also comes from the fact that a lot of, in Mesopotamia, they, sorry, in Babylonia in particular, there were large, temples were not just like our equivalent of a church, right?

Temples in Babylonia specifically were often large estates. They controlled vast amounts of agricultural land and the income from that land, and so there's people, for example, who are economic historians who just dig into that whole system and how that worked, and I don't know enough about money to do that.

I just know that it was very powerful, and it gave them a lot of ability to affect society and to affect sort of the way things where it is, where they derived a lot of their power from that meant that they could keep the king in check sometimes.

[20:34] So one final example on that is that the, one of the projects that took place in these Babylonian temples was a series of astronomical observation projects.

So from about the, we think, from about the 600s down to about the turn of the era, every night Babylonian priests would go up to the top of their, these temples, which were sort of these big kind of stepped pyramid-looking things, and they would take observations of where different planets were in the sky, and if they saw a comet, and if there were, what the weather was like, and all these different things.

And, so this is a whole side thing I could give a whole thing on, but they were able to sort of create the beginnings of mathematical observational astronomy.

And so if you look at, for example, the later Greek astronomer Ptolemy, when he wrote his big book of astronomy, the Almagest, he has a bunch of charts in the back of it that give a whole bunch of data and numbers about things.

And he says, I got this data from, he calls them Chaldean priests, he means Babylonian priests. And it's very clear from the data he has that he got it from them.

[22:04] And that book is considered one of the foundations of the beginnings of Western astronomy. So if you like astronomy, you have Babylonian priests in some sense to thank for that.

But they were able to continue doing these observations even when there were regime changes, even when the Assyrians would come in and conquer Babylon, even when later the Persians came in and later Alexander the Great came in and conquered.

These Babylonian priests, their temples had enough autonomy that they were able to just kind of keep doing this astronomy project for several hundred years. It's actually the longest running human research project.

So, you know, and this tablet that I'm holding here is actually an astronomical it's not one of the diaries. I think it's one of the if I remember I think it's a predictive text, a text where they're actually going through and trying to say like okay if that planet's here at this time and here at that time then at this time it's going to be there.

So, yeah. John, is that the background for the Magi viewing star in Matthew, the Chaldeans who are observing the heavens?

[23:20] It very well could be. There's a lot of debate about who the Magi were that come and visit Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew but yeah, the possibilities for that range from Persian astronomers who would have gotten their data also from Babylonians to maybe Babylonians themselves who were still doing astronomical projects at that time.

We just don't know. But it's a possibility. So a lot of biblical connections here mostly because of the Babylonian exile.

As I said, you know, at the end of the Book of Kings, the Kingdom of Judah finally ends up succumbing to Babylonian conquest.

The Assyrians before them had never actually managed, if you remember from last week, had never managed to actually fully conquer Judah. They had tried under Sennacherib and we talked about that invasion and how that may or may not have gone.

according to Sennacherib and in the Bible. And Nebuchadnezzar, at first, it seems like he may not have initially wanted to fully conquer Judah.

[24:45] It seems that, again, because they're here and they're on that highway that sort of runs between his empire and Egypt, a lot of historians think that he may have intended to simply just, he wanted the Judeans to be on his side as a buffer state against Egypt so that the Egyptians couldn't come and cut into his empire.

But the Judeans didn't really want to do that and seemed more likely to cut a deal with the Egyptians. And so he just decided the easiest thing in that case was just to conquer them.

So from a geopolitical perspective, that's how we get the Babylonian exile. And this is, again, one of the most pivotal events in the shaping of what will then become early Judaism.

And a lot of the biblical books that we have come from this time period. a lot of prophets, for example, I've just listed Jeremiah and Ezekiel here who write at that time.

Jeremiah kind of, he gets the, he sees where things are going. He says, look, he says, we can't be cutting a deal with Egypt, right? We, you know, God wants us to just lay low.

[26:09] If the Babylonians want us to do their thing, let them do their thing. And interestingly, it seems that when you look at the things that the people, the other people who are speaking against Jeremiah say, they reference the earlier campaigns by Sennacherib, not so much in directly, but they have this idea that they're like, well, the Assyrians couldn't take Jerusalem, so what do we think the Babylonians are going to do?

God won't let anything bad happen to us. And Jeremiah says, well, that's not how things work. So Ezekiel, also writing in the same time, actually writing in exile.

He was a priest who was, a Judean priest who was taken into exile. So he is probably actually writing from Babylon itself and delivering his oracles from there. He works, he's, a lot of his oracles come at this interesting time when some of the people have been taken initially and Nebuchadnezzar is hoping that like this, the Judeans will kind of get in line and he won't have to do anything more.

And he hasn't actually had to come in and destroy the city yet. So Ezekiel writes at this interesting time when he's kind of, at least a lot of his material, partway through his career the whole city gets destroyed.

But his early career, there's a lot of stuff where he talks about, you know, sort of like, guys, I'm in exile and if you don't get your act together you're going to be here too.

[27:43] So we sort of, we see the whole thing in process. Daniel and his friends are also said to have been taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, right, especially in Daniel 1.

You read about them being taken there and not being trained in all the different, in all the Babylonian culture, right, so their literature and they probably learned some Babylonian astronomy and all this stuff, right?

And the historical work that is the Book of Kings, right, since it ends right with the exile, the exile, or right around the exile, seems to have been sort of something that was compiled and written sort of around that time as a way of explaining to people, like, guys, this is why we were taken into exile.

If we look back through our history, we can see how we consistently didn't follow God, and he told us we're not going to get to stay in our land if we don't follow him, and then here we are, the exile.

So it serves this sort of purpose of explaining how they got where they were, right, which is a lot of good history does that.

[28:58] Interestingly, too, again, looking at things in my field, there's also, just a few years ago, there were a number of texts published from a site called Al-Yehudu, which in Babylonian just means the, like, Judah city, city of Judah.

And it's from a place that seems to be, it's right in the heartland of Babylonia, and there's a number of people there who have names that sound an awful lot like good Judean names.

And so we can actually see some of these people who are living in exile. And I know some people who work on these texts, and it's very interesting.

They have a lot of, we get to see that, I mean, a lot of these texts are things like loan contracts and marriage contracts and, you know, the minutiae of life, right?

We don't have, like, hello, I'm a Judean exile, and my name is Bill. And, you know, we don't get that, unfortunately. But we do get their financial records, which is kind of fun, and we can sort of begin to reconstruct aspects of what life may have been like for them in exile.

[30:10] So that's really exciting. Yeah, I think that's basically, I talked about Amal Marduk, Evel Marodach, releasing Yehoiachin, the Judean king, a little bit already at the beginning, right?

So this is another example of somebody who gets to sort of live, you know, a Judean who's taken into captivity, but then gets to sort of live in Babylonia. So again, to draw it back to where we started, with these sort of three themes of Babylonia, right?

Babylon as the destroyer of Jerusalem, Babylon as a place where Judeans now live, right? In fact, until the 20th century, really, there was a huge, huge Jewish community that lived in Babylonia, right?

The Babylonian Talmud, one of the major works of Rabbinic Judaism, was compiled in Mesopotamia at a much later time than this, right?

This is a couple centuries after Christ. But that Babylonian Jewish community gets its start from these exiles because when they get a chance to go back, not everybody goes back.

[31:34] And finally, then, as we touched on a little bit and we'll hit next time, Babylon will suffer punishment from the Judean perspective of what it's done to Jerusalem, just as Assyria suffers punishment.

So, okay, that's all I have for this week. Questions? Yeah? Under what king was the Hanging Gardens of Babylon built and did the Hanging Gardens of Babylon really exist?

Great question. So, according to, so the Hanging Gardens of Babylon are something that we know of specifically from Greek historians who were writing a little bit after this period, often in the Persian period, right?

And so, and they attribute it to, if I remember correctly, whoops, why did I go there? They attribute it specifically to Nebuchadnezzar, right?

Archaeologically, we haven't found anything in Babylon that seems to be something like this. There is an Assyriologist who has suggested that actually the, that the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were actually in Assyria and that it was an Assyrian king who built them.

[32 : 58] And she thinks there's a specific part of the archaeological site of Nineveh, which hasn't been fully dug, that might have these gardens in them.

It's a theory that some Assyriologists agree with and some don't. I haven't, I haven't looked at it enough to know what I think. I know, I think my advisor doesn't buy it, but it has some strengths, it has some weaknesses.

But yeah, it's probably based on something. I'll put it that way. Yeah, Tom? I just wanted to point out the start of the Jewish community in Babylon, that in the area where I studied, like the ancient Near East and the medieval period, there's still tons of Jews living in what was Babylonia.

Now we call it Iraq, but like in the 7th, 8th century, you get Persian kings talking about this huge Jewish community. So that started 1200, or like you said, I mean, even until the 1930s, there were lots of Jews still living there.

Yeah. It lasted like 2,500 years. Yeah. That community. It's a long time. Yeah, your stuff is a lot closer to the Babylonian town than my stuff.

[34 : 19] Yeah, yeah, yeah. And that was, I mean, it wasn't just for a period, it wasn't just a Jewish community. There was a period where it was like the Jewish community, where it was the most powerful, most educated Jewish community in the world for hundreds of years.

There's another question in here somewhere, I think. Yeah. So this may be beyond what you, but obviously Genesis 11, you have a Tower of Babel, and then you have this place later called Babylon.

Is there a relationship archaeologically, historically, biblically? Yeah, so it's... This is hotly debated as well, as I think you know.

Yeah. So there is a connection between the name, right? Babel, Babylon. There's different sort of etymologies that, you know, ancient people love coming up with...

Well, even we do this today as well. I shouldn't say ancient people do this, but people love coming up with etymologies for how things, where words come from, right? So the Babylonians, for example, said that Babel, which is how they pronounce Babylon, right?

[35 : 32] Actually, Babylon is how the Greeks pronounced it, right? So it's really Babel, right? But they said Babel comes from Bab-ili. And Babu in Akkadian is gate, Elu is God.

So Bab-ili is gate of the gods. And so that's how... That's what they etymologize it as. The... In the Bible, right, we get this story about how it comes from a root meaning to mix, right?

Because it's where God mixed up the languages. So we don't know exactly what site is being referred to by the Tower of Babel narrative, whether it's Babylon itself.

Some people will suggest that it might be something in one of the Assyrian capitals. We're not quite sure. It's hotly debated. Sure. John, is it fair to say that some of this stuff, before the Neo-Babylonian Empire, when we get to the time of, quote, the Tower of Babel, we're dealing with, like, the mists of history here.

Like, this is so far back that we have... Right. And this is... We don't have cuneiform tablets that even would have gone back that far, right? Like, two... I guess maybe... Well, back as far... So we get cuneiform writing as far back as, like, 3,200.

[36:54] Okay. Right. So pretty far back. But we also just keep in mind, it's also very spotty. Right? So sometimes we're like, oh, we have a huge archives, but it's only economic tech.

It's all receipts. Right? So we're like, well, we know what the city looked like, and we know what people were buying and selling there, but we don't know anything else, right?

Or sometimes we'll dig up something and we'll get something that I like, which is literary texts. And then we're like, oh, well, we know what... At least the scribes, anyway, were reading. And maybe what stories people were telling each other.

But what do you go from that? So there's a lot of different things. And this is where it gets interesting, you know, in trying to... as readers of the Bible, when we look at this kind of stuff, because we have both, like, what we read in the Bible and what we do with it theologically, and we also have what we can sort of talk about, what we can verify historically, where things overlap.

Part of the reason I've focused on the periods that I've focused on here is because we actually have a lot more sources that allow us to sort of line these things up together and then sort of look at how they're interacting a little bit more so.

[38:04] I mean, we have things from earlier periods, don't get me wrong. But there's plenty of gaps in there where certain things can be happening, right?

Like, we don't have Abraham attested in a cuneiform document, even though we probably have documents from the time period... We have documents from the time period when he lived.

It's just... the ones we happened to find don't mention him. Or maybe because he was living sort of as a nomad, and he may not have shown up in those records, right? So there's a lot of things like this that we sort of have to take into account.

And this goes in, I think, also with the Tower of Babel narrative as well, is, you know, they can be referring to something that we simply may not have the text for.

Yeah? Do you think because of the... Okay, whoever was king at the time, or whatever empire was in power, that money was more the focus, and that's why you're saying some records that only contain receipts, power over money?

[39:22] Sort of. So one of the things is that, like, when we think of writing... Because we write everything, right? I mean, I wrote my notes, you know? I still write, too, even though there's computers.

Exactly. Well, whether we're typing or writing by hand, like, the written word is such a huge part of our lives. But when we look at the development, particularly in Mesopotamia, the development of writing, it's very much centered around administration.

So most of the very early sources we have, these things from, like, you know, 3,100 up through the 2,000s, a lot of that is...

And even beyond that, a lot of what we have are these sort of economic and administrative records, simply because that's... You know, accounting was one of the main things they used it for.

And so it's... I think even today, if we looked at, you know... If we actually kept all the receipts that we got and didn't just throw them out like I always do instead of being better at my own personal accounting, right?

[40:25] Like, we might have, in many cases, like, if we looked at all the paper we have, we might actually have a lot more receipts than we do, you know, novels, right? So if we actually kept every single one from every transaction.

And so this is, you know... I think I might have mentioned this a little bit last time, too, but because they wrote on clay, you know, especially if it's fired or even if it's just sun-dried, right?

You have something that is... Especially if it's fired, you have something that's essentially as robust as your coffee cup, as your coffee mug, right? But that you bury it in the ground, it's going to survive.

So because they wrote on a very durable material, we have a lot of this stuff that still survives. Whereas if... When they start writing on papyrus and parchment in the Persian period, we start losing sources as historians because a lot of that stuff just disintegrates over time.

Got it. Thank you. I'm curious, what are the... Are there estimates on how much is yet to be dug up out of the ground? Probably a lot.

[41 : 32] It's hard to sort of estimate what you don't have or how much you don't know. Well, like you said, there was a site in Nineveh that is known to exist that just hasn't been dug up. Like, is that...

Are there many such sites? Yes. So there are a number of sites and parts of sites. The other thing, too, is a lot of times when a site... When an archaeological site is dug, especially if it's a big one like Nineveh, they focus on certain areas of the site because you can't really...

Unless you just trash the site, you can't scientifically excavate a whole area unless you have, you know, millions and millions of dollars and all kinds of logistics and stuff like that, right?

So there's a lot of... There's still a lot of areas that still need to be dug up. One of the... One of the complicating factors is that we have not only, you know, archaeological excavations that dig things up, but looters, especially in the wake of the Second Gulf War and ISIS and the Syrian Civil War.

There are a lot of sites throughout this whole area here, especially, that you can see... I've seen satellite images, right? And they'll show you, you know, before some of this stuff and, you know, three years later.

[42 : 53] And you have what looks like a nice hill in the before and in the after it's just pockmarked. And you can tell that you've had looters in there with sometimes shovels, sometimes backhoes, right?

just digging stuff up to sell in the black market. And as a historian, it's heart-rending. I feel for the people as well because the reason they're doing it is because they need to make money to feed their families and there's a war on.

But it's heart-rending because that's a lot of... Sometimes this material does come to light and scholars do get to look at it.

But a lot of the valuable information about where it comes from, you know, was it found in, like, some sort of administrative building or a palace archive or someone's private home?

This is all information that historians can use to help tell us more about what's going on. And we lose all that information if someone just takes it and then sells it somewhere. Yeah.

[44 : 01] The Bible records, you know, Daniel being brought over to Babylon. We know about the writing on the wall.

To me, spectacular things in terms of, you know, Daniel surviving in the lion's den and the fire of the darkness and the writing on the wall and all that other stuff, which is in the Bible.

Now, my question to you is, is there anything in the Babylonian literature or archaeological findings that verify that? Yeah.

Not a lot specifically. It's not necessarily the kind of thing that if it happened, a Babylonian king is going to have put in their records.

right? Like, I got really mad at one of my courtiers and I threw him in a lion's den, but he wasn't eaten and now I feel a little bit chagrined. You know, like, this stuff doesn't end up in their records.

[45 : 04] There's some people who have suggested, you know, there's the story where Nebuchadnezzar goes insane for a couple of years and people have debated about, you know, somebody even fairly recently in a serilogist has written suggesting that, you know, because there are gaps when we don't have a lot of sources from Nebuchadnezzar's reign and we are always asking the question of, like, was, is that just because we don't have sources for those, you know, just luck of the draw, luck of what we did or didn't dig up or was, did he actually have some sort of mental breakdown at some point?

So that is a possibility. Some people also connect that more with Nabonidus and the sort of mad king tradition. Even though, again, it's a different king, so there's a problem there, right?

But, yeah, so we don't have a lot of it. It is interesting in Daniel that Belshazzar, Nabonidus' son, shows up as the last king before the Persians come in, right?

So, which, which is reflected in, in the historical text, the fact that we have Belshazzar ruling either as a co-regent or as a governor under his father, Nabonidus.

So, I think it's interesting that that shows up as something that comes through in Daniel that doesn't come through some of the other sources because we didn't know this until, or we didn't have evidence of this in the cuneiform records, I should say, until about 50 years ago.

[46 : 48] Yeah, Tom. John, I wanted to ask you about the genre of history because you're talking about different genres that are referenced in the cuneiform tablets, so receipts and then some mythological, fictional writings or mythological writings or stories people would tell, but in terms of the genre that we would call history writing, I've heard at least that that's kind of a relatively new genre as far as human civilization is concerned.

It didn't come about until more recently than we would think, and that, so I guess I'm wondering about the Babylonians. Did they do that? Did they just have some list of dates? I know they had date lists and stuff, but did they actually say, the king went and did this because of the following reasons, but the right, you know, like a full-blown historical narrative, or does that genre not even exist yet in Babylonian?

Yeah, so this is also a hotly debated question. You know, when does history writing start? When do we go from just sort of recording dates when things happen to sort of giving a narrative, giving an interpretation for what happened?

I mean, in the Greek tradition, right, Herodotus is usually called the father of history, and he's writing in, you know, the mid-Persian period. So...

That's like 450, right, what's that? Yeah, something like that. Yeah. So the Cuneiform tradition often in historiographical circles gets a lot of flack for having texts that are mostly like, in this date, I went and I conquered this city, in that date, I went and conquered this, that other city, right, and not having like a narrative historiographical tradition.

[48 : 35] I tend to think, though, and I have not studied this as in depth as I would like, I've not published on it, but I tend to think that some of their historiographical texts do contain a lot of implicit, implicit but intended interpretation.

This idea that, you know, sure, he's listing places that he went and places that he conquered, but he's doing that to tell a narrative. He's doing that to say, like, look, we all know that, like, these are, the first few places that I go are places where most of my forefathers, the kings before me, have gone, but the later places are all places that seemed, like, almost mythological to us until my reign when I went there and conquered them, right?

So, look at me being the most advanced of all kings out there, you know. So, there's, which, again, it's still a very simple narrative.

It's self-aggrandizing. There's also other texts that are less pro-royal. Some of these ones, again, that we'll get that present Nabonidus as sort of a mad king will sort of be presenting, like, well, there was a bad king who angered the gods and made all the people unhappy, and then there was a good king who came in from the outside and initiated a regime change and a set of reforms and everybody was happy, right?

Like, that's a narrative. Again, very simple narrative, but it's a narrative. So, I think it's there more than, more than we, more than we traditionally have thought, but there's a lot of, a lot of that sort of self-awareness that we tend to think of more with the Greek tradition and later, I think is, I think is there in the Kineoform tradition, but they, they have a different way of talking about it.

[50:34] And I have a lot more, like, longer thoughts on that in a number of different genres that we can talk about later, but I don't want to bore everybody with my thoughts on that. So, when we preached through Daniel a couple years ago, you start with Daniel 1, and there's a group of young men who seem particularly who were brought in and given a particular place in the, in the, in the, the court, so to speak.

Like, they're brought in, it seems like they're being groomed to become insiders in a global sort of, you know, ruler system where they might be then appointed to governors to go back.

Is there actual historical evidence or is that just biblical, you know, inference? I think, I can't think of as many, like, Neo-Babylonian examples, but I can think of some Assyrian examples, for example, where the Assyrians would take, especially when, when the Assyrians were trying to control Babylonia because they had a really hard time with it.

Part of it was because Babylonia was another superpower and it's hard for a superpower to control another superpower. And part of it is also that, again, like I said, the Assyrians respected and admired Babylonian culture and so it's kind of hard to sort of say, like, well, we're better than you, but also we really like your culture.

Can we have your, like, literature and music and things? You know, so they had a hard time controlling Babylonia. One of the ways that they would try to do it is they would get, you know, they'd have, like, the son of a Babylonian king and they would raise him in the Assyrian court, right?

[52:20] And then they would send him back in, like, if his father got, you know, a mind of his own to start trying to do things independently, they'd go in, take out the dad and then send in the son and be like, hey, you know, you like us, right?

We've been on hunting trips together, you know, and then they would send him in there and then they would have him, you know, take over the throne. It didn't seem to work very well. That son, when he got a chance, usually also rebelled, but they tried.

And we know that similar things happened right in, like, medieval Europe, right? You had sort of, like, hostages, like, political hostages in medieval Europe were often, you know, sons or daughters of people and you wanted to keep them in check.

So there probably is something similar going on there with Daniel and his friends and, you know, even again, like, we can include, like, Ezekiel, not so, Ezekiel isn't in the court, but he is sort of a, he's a priest.

He's a higher person in culture who is sort of taken out partly so that his influence is removed from the culture itself and also maybe with the idea that he'll learn, you know, the way we do things and then, you know, if we send him back or if he has the chance to advise people, you know, things like that.

[53 : 35] So with that, the priests, what was the idea of bringing a priest into Babylon? Was it to retrain them in how to be a priest but for, like, Marduk or one of these other cults?

Not necessarily. It's more that, so, we have to think about priests in this culture as not just, not just, like, pastors, for example, right, but as sort of probably some of the most educated people so that the people who, like, who know how to write really well, who know all of the different sort of, they know all the laws, right, but if you go to a priest, you know, if you needed to consult on issues of legal matter, like, they would either know it themselves or be able to point you in the right direction, right, like, they had a much wider role in society.

There's, again, even to use the Babylonian example again, right, so we had, I mentioned these Babylonian temples are like these giant estates, right, so you have people who are priests or we consider them priests, but their job is, like, administer, administering, administering the, the temple's farmland, right, and sort of making sure that, like, you know, all the tenant farmers, you know, stay in check and pay the right amount of stuff to the temple and, but they're priests, you know.

They were, like, businessmen and lawyers also. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Or you can think again of, in the medieval world, like, the way, the way that the, the Catholic Church worked, in some senses, where you had, you know, certain bishops or things, people like that, who had, like, large, you know, amounts of land and, you know, or, or had positions in what we would consider the secular world and had a lot of control, power and control in the secular world.

Yeah. Yeah. A question about, I don't know if this is called the Rusev, but, does Egil and Daniel refer, as they write, I, like, pronoun wise? Is it safe to assume that they would have used the clay, kind of, in what form would they be writing, like, that big chunks of text?

[55 : 51] Yeah, that's a good question. So, we do know that the, the cuneiform writing on, on clay is, is happening mostly in this area, at that time.

In earlier periods, back before the Assyrians, in the first week when we talked about the late Bronze Age, everybody here was using cuneiform. One of the things that happens, that starts happening actually in, in the, the Assyrian period, possibly earlier, is that a lot of these areas in, actually definitely earlier than that, a lot of these areas in here start using an alphabetic script to write some of their own languages.

That script develops into what is then used for Hebrew and Phoenician and a couple other languages, right? So, they start using precursors of that script.

By the time we get to Ezekiel and Daniel and, and some, and his friends and so forth, there's a pretty long tradition of at least a good couple hundred years of people writing this Hebrew alphabetic script in this area here.

And this is probably why we don't have as many records from them because most of those records would have been on papyrus or parchment and they decay and we don't have them. We do know this was happening because we do have some stone inscriptions that were made and we have, they would take little shards of pottery and then they would write on those as sort of like post-it notes, right?

[57 : 27] Because the little bits of pottery are everywhere, you know, so you just pick one up off the ground and you write yourself a note, you know, and we have some of those because those survive. So, we know that they were writing on that and during this time in the late Assyrian period and into the Neo-Babylonian period, a lot of people in some of these different areas here are beginning to write more in this alphabetic script.

A number of different reasons have been suggested for that. Some people suggest that they simply may have preferred learning a script with 22 characters rather than a script that had several hundred.

Maybe, maybe not, I don't know. But, I would have to, so I would think that, to answer your question, I would have to think that Daniel probably would have been trained in how to write in cuneiform.

But, if he's writing things that go into the book of Daniel, those he's probably writing in, in using the alphabetic script. And Ezekiel, I don't know if Ezekiel would have ever learned cuneiform.

Maybe, maybe not. But, he probably would have been able to write in Hebrew. With that, when, when would widespread literacy come to the Hebrew people as a whole?

[58:49] Because, by the time we get to Ezra, one of the big issues with intermarrying, seems like, is that they're not teaching their kids how to read our, our religious works.

And that's, that's a big problem. And so, about, because like, I think a lot of us have this, maybe, misconception that like, oh, ancient peoples, they didn't know anything because they couldn't read.

are we mistaken in that? And like, when would they have really focused on the literacy, especially for that religious aspect? So, if I remember right, and I could be wrong about this, but if I remember correctly, in Ezra and Nehemiah, the issue with the language is not so much that the kids are learning how to write it or read it, but that they're not learning how to speak it.

Ah, okay. Right? So, because they're, if they're intermarried with these other people groups who speak different languages, the thought is that, you know, the other parent is teaching them a different language.

And so, they're either not learning Hebrew or they're learning Hebrew with an accent. Right? Yeah. Literacy is a tricky issue in the ancient world.

[59:58] Again, because we have the text, we don't necessarily have the people who read the texts. There seems to probably have been different levels of literacy. So, some people, like, for example, scribes probably were like, scribes and priests very, very good at reading and writing.

Right? Those are the people who could write you one of these. Yeah. But then there probably were people who could read and write their own name, could read and write small, short letters.

Some of the economic documents that we have from certain periods, there's one period in particular in Assyria, but from a much older period, where we have a lot of documents that are letters written between merchants.

And some people have suggested that these merchants, because of the really intimate details they're talking about with each other, and sometimes between merchants and their wives, if the merchants are away from home and they're writing back to their wives, that both these merchants and their wives might not be working through an intermediary scribe, but might be writing, actually taking a chunk of clay and writing a letter themselves to each other, just because of some of the intimate details that they're sharing with each other.

And so in those cases, it seems like those people who were sort of like maybe upper middle class or something like that, at least were able to function with these more rudimentary documents, but not necessarily, I mean, they would not have been able to write that, might be able to read part of it.

[61 : 34] So there's different levels to literacy as well. I want to just go back to the cultural aspects. Were the Babylonians interested in cultural acquisition or were they looking to cross-pollinate ideas and if that was the case, then do we have any evidence in any of the artworks of any of the cross-pollination?

Or were they looking to stamp out whatever the other culture was? Yeah, so they, this is a trickier one, I think. The Babylonians in particular, I think, were a little bit, they were not as interested in taking stuff from other cultures and using it.

But I don't know how sort of like hegemonic they were about it. I don't, so for example, when they conquer Jerusalem, they don't rebuild a temple to Marduk.

there. They're not forcing the Judeans to convert religiously. Even the ones who move to this town, who are, not move, they're taken, right, and put in this town in Babylon, they don't seem to force them to worship Babylonian deities, things like that.

A lot of the records there that are kept in cuneiform, so they're kept in a Babylonian style, not in Hebrew, like the Judeans would have been used to, but that's probably simply because again, these are administrative and economic records, they have to be kept in the sort of, the way that they do things locally, right?

[63 : 13] And so, I don't, I don't think they were quite as sort of forcible with, with their sort of cultural export.

import. The Assyrians also weren't, as much, we talked about this a little bit last week, but the, they did not force everybody to worship Ashur, they would force you to pay tribute.

And next week when we get to the Persians, they also were not forcible exporters, but they were a lot more sort of cultural importers. And we will see that with the Persians, that the Persians will kind of like conquer people and then be like, you guys have a really great way of doing this, you mind if we steal that?

you know. That's kind of what I was looking for in terms of any of the skill sets that the Judeans might have brought to the tables of the city. And I've always looked at the exile into Egypt as 400 plus years of being able to look at Egyptian culture and figure out how to do what they did, so that then when God removes them from Egypt, they had some skillset.

They could build a tabernacle, there were things that they could do that they possibly would not have come to Egypt with as nomadic farmer type people.

[64 : 41] So the question is, were some of those skills then transposed into the Babylonian culture, or did we not really see any evidence of that?

I can't think of any evidence of that. There probably would, especially if they're bringing that one-way deportation, they're bringing all these people in. There's probably examples of that.

I can't think of any off the top of my head, but I'm sure that that happened. And that probably is why some of the people that they took when they're taking priests and they're taking people from some of these skilled laborers and skilled positions and bringing them to Babylon.

It's because they want people who can do this kind of stuff. Most of the examples I'm thinking of that are from the Assyrian and Persian periods, but I'd have to think that that happens in the Babylonian period as well.

I just can't think of any examples. Okay, wait till I'm sorry. Yeah. I'm interested in this question where throughout the Bible it seems like the Babylonians are portrayed as like the peak of wickedness, like particularly in the book of Revelation, whereas they were obviously not the only people who had other gods, and they were not the only empire that conquered things.

[66 : 09] Was it just because they were the ones who conquered Jerusalem, or were there reasons to think that they were somehow more or more wicked or wicked in a different way than the other empires that might also have deserved titles like that?

Yeah, so this is, and this is part of the reason I'm sort of doing this series, right, is that, you know, in the Bible, right, you know, yeah, Babylon is sort of like the worst of the worst of the worst.

Historically and geopolitically it may not really have been so. Part of the reason that it becomes this sort of symbol for the worst of the worst of the worst is because of the sack of Jerusalem, and just how traumatic an event that that was for the Judean people, and also for the way then that that, that that is sort of born out in the biblical tradition, right, the fact that you have all of these people, sort of, all these different biblical authors addressing aspects of this one major event, and the fact that, I mean, this is, it's really one of these pivotal moments in the sort of history of early Judaism, really, because before this period, they have a king, they have a temple.

Like everybody else, they have a country, right? When that's gone, one of the main traumas they have to work through is how do we go on without a temple that's our own, and that's huge, like, we're very used to the idea today that, like, oh, well, God is everywhere, right?

Like, they didn't have that. They had the idea, like, if you aren't in the area where that God rules and that God doesn't have a temple, that God might as well not exist, right?

[68 : 14] So, they're working through how to sort of carry on after they don't have a temple, after they don't have a city, they don't have a king who is appointed by God, right?

So, so much of that, the reason that Babylon is used as that symbol is because of this trauma that's used.

And I very much think, we might get to talk about this in the week we do Persia, but I very much think that there is this idea that empires, particularly empires like Babylon, sort of helped to develop this sort of nebulous symbol in later biblical literature, especially like apocalyptic literature, which is very symbolic, right?

Of sort of like the empire, like empire in the abstract. Right? Like the world and the world systems of the way that the world works. Right? So, and I think very much that's what's happening in Revelation, where you have references to Babylon that might actually be talking about Rome or something yet to come or whatever, you know, but they use Babylon as a symbol for that because of how much of a that is.

I was talking to a friend of mine recently who's Jewish, and I mentioned to her that I was talking about this today. I said, yes, I'm going to talk about Nebuchadnezzar and those guys, and she's like, oh, yeah, Nebuchadnezzar.

[69 : 42] Still don't like him. And it's been 2,500 years. Now, she was kidding a little bit, but still, right, there's still that animus there.

there. I realize that we've gone on for a while now. I can hang out and chat for a bit if you guys want, but I also don't want to keep you as the services starting and stuff.

Thank you, John. Thanks for coming, everybody.