

Old Testament Backgrounds: Neo-Babylonian Empire and End of Judah

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Session 21

Sponsored by Biblecallearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Neo-Babylonian Empire, Judah, Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar, Josiah, Battle of Carchemish, Babylonian Exile, Nabonidus, Belshazzar, Medo-Persian Empire

Abstract

This lecture examines the collapse of the Assyrian superpower through an alliance of Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians, leading to the rise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire under Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar. Following the tragic defeat of King Josiah at Megiddo and subsequent anti-Babylonian revolts, Judah suffered the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of its population into exile. Stripped of their temple and homeland, the exiled Judeans underwent a vital religious transformation, reorienting their faith away from temple ritual toward strict adherence to the Mosaic law and the biblical text. Finally, the lecture analyzes the reign of Nabonidus and the fall of Babylon under Belshazzar, marking a historic shift of geopolitical power from the Fertile Crescent to the Medo-Persian Empire.

Outline

I. Introduction and the Fall of the Assyrian Power

A. End of a three-century hyperpower

1. Generations had known only Assyrian domination
2. Rapid collapse enabled by a unique set of circumstances

B. The anti-Assyrian coalition

1. Babylonian power to the south
2. Medes from east of the Zagros Mountains (prime movers)
3. Scythians (horsemen from the Russian steppe)

II. The Rise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire

A. Relationship between Babylon and Assyria

1. Assyrian religious respect for ancient Babylonian heritage
2. Continuous friction and Babylonian resentment

B. Nabopolassar and Chaldean leadership (626–605 BC)

1. Chaldeans as southern Aramean-speaking population

2. Expulsion of Assyrians from Babylonia by 617 BC

3. Attacks on Haran (611–610 BC)

C. Egyptian intervention and alignment

1. Surprising alliance: Egypt attempting to rescue weakened Assyria

2. Defeat of Egyptian and Assyrian forces in 609 BC

III. The Collapse of Judah and the Babylonian Conquest

A. The tragic death of King Josiah at Megiddo (609 BC)

1. Josiah's attempt to intercept Pharaoh Necho at Megiddo pass

2. Fatal outcome and theological crisis for Judah's orthodox leaders

3. Assessment of Josiah's reforms: top-down reform rather than deep societal revival

B. Egyptian control and appointment of Jehoiakim

C. The Battle of Carchemish (605 BC) and Battle of Hamath (604 BC)

1. Total routing and destruction of Egyptian forces by Nebuchadnezzar

2. End of Egypt as a major regional superpower

D. Nebuchadnezzar's ascension and early campaign

1. Death of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar's direct ride across the Arabian desert for coronation

2. Taking elite hostages to Babylon (including Daniel and Ezekiel)

E. The Judean revolts and the Fall of Jerusalem

1. First revolt (597 BC): Surrender and deportation of 10,000 captives

2. Second revolt (587–586 BC) under Zedekiah

- a. Revolt driven by religious nationalist sentiment despite Zedekiah's hesitation

- b. Fall of Jerusalem, destruction of the temple, and exile of population

- c. Tragic execution of Zedekiah's family and his blinding

IV. Religious Transformation in Exile: Shift from Temple to Text

A. Survival of Jewish identity in exile

1. Unprecedented preservation of national and religious identity without a homeland

2. Contrast with other ancient Near Eastern peoples absorbed into captivity

3. Small returning remnant (approx. 50,000) vs. majority remaining in diaspora

B. Structural shift in religious platform

1. Pre-exilic problem: reliance on temple ritual without obedience to Mosaic law

2. Exilic adaptation: reorientation from temple ritual to Mosaic law and sacred text

3. Foundation for 2,500 years of Jewish survival in exile

V. The Reign and Architectural Achievements of Nebuchadnezzar

A. Extensive building programs

1. Massive construction in Babylon (later recorded by Herodotus)
2. Conscious archaizing to connect with historical Babylonian heritage

B. Obscure closing years and biblical correlation

1. Period of royal invisibility reflecting the illness described in Daniel
2. Humbling and subsequent restoration

VI. The Controversial Reign of Nabonidus

A. Unusual religious devotion to the moon god Sin

1. Reconstruction of Sin's temple at Haran and appointment of daughter at Ur
2. Construction of temple and city wall at the desert oasis of Tayma (Tima)
3. A decade-long absence from Babylon, leaving governance to Belshazzar

B. Scholarly theories explaining Nabonidus's behavior

1. Devotee / Ascetic View: Personal religious devotion and avoidance of Marduk priesthood conflicts
2. Religio-Political View: Attempt to unify Fertile Crescent around widely worshipped moon god Sin
3. Geoeconomic View: Effort to reformulate trade routes in response to 200% inflation and Persian encirclement

VII. The Fall of Babylon under Belshazzar

A. Belshazzar's co-regency and the royal banquet

1. Feasting while the city of Babylon was under Persian siege
2. Desecration of sacred Jerusalem temple vessels for drinking

B. Divine intervention and Daniel's interpretation

1. Writing on the wall: Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin
2. Linguistic meaning and wordplay (Tekel = weighed; Upharsin = divided/separated, homonym for Persian)
3. Prophecy fulfilled: fall of Babylon that very night and death of Belshazzar

VIII. The Epochal Shift of Global Power to the Medo-Persian Empire

A. Transition of power out of the Fertile Crescent

1. First world empire based outside the Fertile Crescent
2. Permanent decline of Fertile Crescent as the center of global power

B. Background of the Indo-Aryan tribes

1. Migration into Iranian plateau (c. 1000 BC)
2. Five primary tribes: Medes (Madai), Persians (Parsua), Parthians (Parthava), Arachosians, and Bactrians
3. Non-Semitic language, culture, and worldview

C. Rise of Cyrus the Great and looking ahead

- 1. Unification of tribes and superseding of Median dominance**
- 2. Emergence of Cyrus the Great as a unique monarch in antiquity**