

CHAPTER 19

Babylon

BABYLON'S history was closely intertwined with that of Assyria. Both Asshur and Babylon are known to us from the middle of the third millennium B.C., when both were among the cities of the Sumero-Akkadadian civilization which then embraced the whole of Mesopotamia. At that early stage, Asshur was already an important city, in its rather isolated position on the upper Tigris. Babylon, however, located on a branch of the Euphrates, was an insignificant town until the second millennium, over-shadowed as it was by more powerful and perhaps more ancient cities all around. Its position was fairly central in the heart-land of Mesopotamia. Under the Third Dynasty of Ur it came to serve as a provincial capital, in the twenty-second and twenty-first centuries B.C.

When the Amorite wave of migration took place, about 2000 B.C., Babylon was one of the towns occupied by the newcomers; and an Amorite chieftain in 1894 B.C. proclaimed himself king of the city, thus creating its first dynasty in history. His name was Sumu-abum. He and his successors immediately set about making Babylon the capital of a powerful kingdom, and by a combination of skill, chance and force they succeeded dramatically. Almost exactly one hundred years after the first king had taken the throne, the great Hammurabi¹ ascended it. His achievements are legendary, although it has to be acknowledged that his empire was not so large as used to be supposed; a contemporary of the same name was king of Aleppo in Syria, and his achievements were not inconsiderable in that area — achievements which were formerly mistakenly credited to Babylon's Hammurabi.

Hammurabi reigned from 1792 till 1750 B.C. He inherited a kingdom smaller and less powerful than its four neighbours — to the

1. The spelling "Hammurapi" is probably more accurate.

south, Larsa, and to the north, Mari, Eshnunna, and further north still, Asshur. To conquer these kingdoms required cunning and patience as well as able generalship; Hammurabi had all the requisite abilities, creating and discarding alliances as the needs of the moment dictated. The king of Mari was the obvious ally — the two kings between them dominated many miles of the Euphrates and the trade-route which followed its course. In due course the other cities made common cause and twice attacked Hammurabi, but he defeated these coalitions and went on to master the whole of central and southern Mesopotamia. He then turned against his ally Mari, and that great city was sacked in 1759, never to be rebuilt. Finally he defeated the kingdom of Asshur and made its king his vassal. What further triumphs he achieved are not clear, but at any rate he felt it appropriate to add to his regnal titles the phrase “King of the four quarters of the world”. Babylon’s rulers were never noted for their humility. At home his achievements were again far from negligible. His law-code is famous, and though it had its antecedents, it showed originality in its attempts to promote justice for all his subjects. The punishments it specified appear barbarous and the class distinctions it embodies unpalatable by modern standards, but we can still admire the efforts made to promote the well-being of every member of society, including women and children.

The kingdoms conquered by Hammurabi had their own proud heritage, however, and it is not surprising that his successors found it impossible to hold his empire together. It gradually dwindled in size, as rebels broke free and invaders marched in. Finally in 1595 B.C. a powerful invader, King Mursilis I of the Hittites, who had fought successful campaigns in Syria, suddenly marched down the Euphrates, captured and plundered Babylon, and put an end to its First Dynasty, which lasted exactly 300 years.

South Mesopotamia, or Babylonia as we may now call it (since Babylon was from now on its recognized capital), came under the rule of invaders from the east, the Kassites. The Hittites retired as suddenly as they had come, and the Kassites filled the gap they left behind. These people from Iran, hitherto peacefully inclined, had recently come under the control of Indo-European leadership, and they now showed themselves thoroughly efficient in the arts of war and peace. It would seem that they were benefactors to Babylonia, which they unified politically and to which they gave a long era (poorly documented) of peace and reasonable prosperity. The Kassite kings of Babylon respected the existing Mesopotamian religion and culture, and in due course themselves bore Akkadian names, so that they *were* Babylonians in all but origin.

Towards the end of the fourteenth century, when the Mitanni kingdom fell, Babylon’s days of peace ended, due to the resurgence of Assyrian power; and in the following century the accession of a

powerful and energetic dynasty in Elam, Babylonia's eastern neighbour, left Babylon incapable of fighting off the inroads of two strong kingdoms. Thus Tukulti-ninurta I of Assyria (1244-1208 B.C.) was able to conquer Babylonia, though that proved a relatively short-lived humiliation for the southerners. After that it was the Elamites who proved the more troublesome; their final victory in 1162 B.C. brought to an end the Kassite dynasty. Soon, however, native Babylonian kings retrieved the throne from the Elamites, and one of them, who bore the famous name of Nebuchadrezzar (I, 1124-1103 B.C.), achieved notable victories on Elamite soil. No sooner had he died, however, than Assyria's Tiglath-pileser I attacked and captured Babylon, which he plundered and partially sacked.

By now the Aramaean wave of migration, which threatened to engulf the Assyrian kingdom, had struck Babylonia hard. Aramaeans settled in all parts, but especially strongly in the eastern part of the kingdom, while a similar migrant group, the Chaldaeans (*Kaldu*, in Akkadian records), made the south of Babylonia their own. These newcomers came to adopt Babylonian ways in nearly every respect, except that they preserved a distinct social order (with their own kings), and in time became a naturalized part of the Babylonian kingdom, but at first they severely weakened their unwilling hosts, whose three dynasties between 1050 and 1000 B.C. were none of them native, it appears. Four centuries were to elapse before Babylon once again achieved real power.

During the period of the Assyrian ascendancy, which began at the end of the tenth century, Babylon found herself dominated by her powerful neighbour to the north, but on the whole treated with respect and consideration. Some of the Assyrian kings were her benefactors, in fact, driving back enemies such as the Elamites and subduing the Aramaeans in the south. The first Assyrian king to aid Babylon in this fashion was Shalmaneser III, who in 851 B.C. upheld the Babylonian king Marduk-zakir-shumi against an Aramaean-backed conspiracy headed by his own brother. In consequence Babylon became the vassal of Assyria, but it cost her little. Nevertheless she threw off the Assyrian yoke once Shalmaneser died, and thereby provoked an attack by his successor Shamshidad V. These events set the pattern for the following century or two; Babylon broke free when she could, but otherwise submitted to a relatively light Assyrian yoke. A united and stable Mesopotamia was vital to Assyrian interests, and it paid her, therefore, to treat the Babylonians as generously as possible.

A new departure in Assyro-Babylonian relations took place when Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria took the throne of Babylon in 729 B.C., taking the regnal name of Pulu; in effect, he made himself king of a twin kingdom. In similar fashion his son Shalmaneser V

reigned in Babylon as Ululai. Some native Babylonians may have been well content with this arrangement, which did no dishonour to their venerable capital; but the Chaldaean elements in Babylonia were more unremittingly rebellious. In the unrest which followed the accession of Sargon II in 722 B.C., a Chaldaean prince named Marduk-apal-iddina (the Old Testament Merodach-baladan), whose proper realm was the small state of Bit-Yakin on the Persian Gulf, seized the throne of Babylon, and held it for twelve years, with the support of the Elamites. It was to Elam that he retreated when eventually Sargon managed to force him out of Babylon, and from there he continued to foment trouble for the Assyrians. As soon as Sargon died, he reappeared in Babylon, and held it for three years this time. It was now that he conspired with Hezekiah of Judah. Sennacherib in 702 B.C. drove him out yet again, and Babylonia was now subjected to the Assyrian deportation policy, while the throne of Babylon was occupied by an Assyrian called Bel-ibni, Sennacherib's own appointment. Further troubles ensued, and in 689 B.C. the Babylonians with Elamite help all but defeated Sennacherib; it was now that the infuriated Assyrian king took his revenge on Babylon, destroying much of it, inundating it by diverting the waters of the Euphrates, and leaving it kingless for the remainder of his reign.

This humiliation at Assyrian hands was quite unprecedented, and Esarhaddon of Assyria spent his reign (681-669 B.C.) trying to undo the damage. The city was rebuilt, and treated with great respect once again. When he died, one of his sons, Shamash-shum-ukin, became king of Babylon, and Assyrian though he was, his subjects proved loyal to him. He, however, did not prove loyal to Assyria. We may suppose that he had personal ambitions to rule Assyria as well as Babylon, and also that he was subjected to strong pro-Babylonian pressures in his own kingdom. He organized a confederacy of many peoples, most of them Assyria's vassals; and if Judah was one of the rebels, it would explain the statement of 2 Chronicles 33:11 that King Manasseh was carried off in fetters to Babylon, presumably after the fall of that city in 648 B.C.

Ashurbanipal, the victorious Assyrian king, appointed a Chaldaean as the new viceroy of Babylon. At the end of Ashurbanipal's long reign (627 B.C.) another Chaldaean, Nabopolassar, held that position, and he now broke free, and began the last great dynasty of Babylon in 626 B.C. We have already traced the course of events by which he conquered Assyria, in alliance with Cyaxares king of Media, an alliance cemented by the marriage of Babylon's crown-prince Nebuchadrezzar with the Median princess Amytis.

The collapse of Assyria permitted Babylon to become the new rulers of most of the Near East; the Medes might have contested it, but they remained loyal to their treaty. The Egyptians tried to sal-

vage something for themselves, but the attempt failed miserably. It is unnecessary to trace again the stages by which Nebuchadrezzar II, who succeeded to the throne in 605 B.C., conquered the Levantine seaboard, put down revolts in Judah and Tyre, and inflicted serious defeats on Egypt. In every respect Nebuchadrezzar showed himself the equal of the greatest Assyrian kings, whose techniques and policies he adopted wholeheartedly. He even shared their building propensities, and Babylon was greatly enhanced and strongly fortified by his efforts — so much so that it became, with its famed hanging gardens, one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The last years of Nebuchadrezzar are unchronicled and obscure, and probably the swift decline of the Neo-Babylonian empire started before his death in 562 B.C. Three successors came and went very rapidly, and then Nabonidus (556-539 B.C.) was elected to the throne. He proved more and more unpopular with his subjects; and he chanced to be the contemporary of a man who turned out to be one of the greatest kings and conquerors in history, the Persian Cyrus II. Cyrus inherited the throne of Persia and Anshan, two small states on the Persian Gulf, in 559 B.C.; in 550 B.C. he fought victoriously against the major power to the north, Media, and created Medo-Persia; and then he proceeded step by step to make the Babylonian empire his own property. When at last he came to conquer Babylonia itself, neither Nabonidus nor his crown-prince Belshazzar had much support from their own people. Belshazzar was killed in battle at Opir on the Tigris, but “the troops of Cyrus entered Babylon without battle”.² The year was 539 B.C.

The Babylonian empire was thus a much briefer affair than its Assyrian predecessor, but at least it had less time in which to create enemies, and escaped the devastation Assyria had suffered. Cyrus showed Babylon every mark of respect, and it survived for some centuries. Nevertheless its days of glory were a thing of the past, and its proud inhabitants never knew independence again. In due course the Greeks replaced the Persians as its masters. The Greeks built a new city, Seleucia, not far away, and gradually the population moved away from Babylon itself. Its population had shrunk to village dimensions by the beginning of the Christian era.

Babylonian Religion and Culture

The name Babylon is the Greek form of the Hebrew *babel*, the Akkadian *bab-ili*, “the gate of the god”. One is reminded of Jacob’s description of Bethel, “the house of God” and “the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17). It was no single deity who was revered at Babylon,

2. *DOTT*, p. 82.

however — “Babel” truly denoted a “confusion” of deities, many of whom had their temples in the great city on the Euphrates. The pantheon for Babylonia was in general the same as for Assyria, drawn from the Sumerian beliefs, modified over the years by the addition of Semitic gods and by local developments. Thus while the general fabric of the religion was identical, the most prominent deities were different in the two kingdoms. From the names of the Assyrian kings we extracted the names of the deities Asshur, Ninurta and Shulman; from the Babylonian king lists we can extract three other divine names occurring and recurring: Marduk (in Hebrew “Merodach”, as in Merodach-baladan), Bel (as in Belshazzar) and Nabu (as in Nebuchadrezzar or Nabonidus). Nabu (Hebrew “Nebo”) was the principal deity at the important city of Borsippa, seven miles south of Babylon, though he was worshipped throughout Mesopotamia as the god of literature. In the pantheon he was held to be the son of Bel, originally a title of Enlil, one of the most prominent of the Sumerian gods. In Babylon itself, however, the title Bel³ was transferred to another deity, Marduk, who was the patron deity of the city.

Babylon, as we have seen, was an obscure and unimportant city till the end of the third millennium B.C.; the same can be said for its patron deity, who began life, so to speak, as the mere “bullock of the sun-god” — the apparent meaning of the Sumerian form of his name. But as the city rose to power and prominence, so did its god, till finally he was the chief god of the whole of Babylonia and then of the Babylonian empire. The Babylonians accordingly transferred to him many of the attributes of other deities, notably those of Enlil.

The Babylonian Creation Epic, which first came to light in the 1870s, has often been compared (or contrasted) with Genesis 1, since both describe the creation of the world and of man in much the same sequence. Here, however, we may consider it as a most interesting piece of politico-religious propaganda. The narrative opens with a primeval scene of watery chaos, symbolized by three deities of whom the most noteworthy was Tiamat; then a second generation of gods was born, which included Anu (the chief Sumerian deity), and before long discord broke out in heaven. War was declared, and at first Tiamat and her allies looked like winning; it was found that Anu was not strong enough to overcome her. At this point “a god then engendered the strongest, the ‘Sage of the Gods’ ” — Marduk, no other, who had “twofold divinity imparted to him”.⁴ It was obvious that he was the ideal champion, and the gods speedily met together to appoint him their king, by democratic election, notwithstanding his lack of seniority.

3. “Bel” is linguistically the equivalent of the Canaanite word “Baal”, and meant “lord”.

4. *DOTT*, p. 8.

Battle royal followed, and needless to say Marduk emerged victorious. Using the winds as weapons, he slew Tiamat. The corpse he divided up and he "created" the universe from it, beginning with the heavenly bodies, signs of the zodiac, and the like, and proceeding to fashion the earth — the Euphrates and Tigris, for instance, were to flow through Tiamat's eyes. Next a city had to be planned in which the gods would live; it would have to be an incomparable city, with majestic homes for all the gods. It would of course bear the name "Babylon". But all cities require menial labourers, and Marduk went on to create man as the lowly slave of the gods. Finally the gods set to and built Babylon according to the blueprint, one of the most sumptuous edifices being a home for Marduk (the temple Esagila), and proceeded to install Marduk as their king for all time, Anu himself seating Marduk on the throne.

This narrative acknowledges the junior position that Marduk once held among the gods of Mesopotamia, but justifies his rise to power and his kingship; at the same time it glorifies the city of Babylon. He is king of the gods because the other gods acclaimed him such, and also because he had brought order out of chaos; that is to say, he is credited with the power to subdue the annual rains and flood-waters. It is beyond doubt that the story had originally honoured another god, the Sumerian Enlil, but it was adopted and adapted to honour Marduk — and Babylon. (An Assyrian copy of the Epic in turn replaced Marduk by Asshur!)

If the Epic gives us some insight into the religious concepts of the citizens of ancient Babylon, it may also serve as an introduction to their cultic practices. One of the great occasions of the Babylonian year was the long-drawn-out (eleven days) new year festival in the month Nisan, each spring. Each day of the festival had its fixed rituals, including prayers, sacrifices and processions from one temple to another. Esagila, Marduk's own temple, played a big role, and so did a special edifice called the Akitu temple just outside the city. On the fifth day the king of Babylon went into Esagila and yielded up his royal insignia to the god. The king was ritually humiliated, being struck in the face by a priest, and he then retrieved his insignia — to reign for another year. On the following day the idol of Nabu arrived in procession from Borsippa; and in due course Marduk himself was taken to the Akitu temple, the king in person leading the idol by the hand. There is uncertainty about the remaining rituals, but they included a sacred marriage ceremony of some sort, and perhaps also a ritual combat between Marduk and Tiamat. The liturgy included the Epic of Creation, recited on the fourth day of the festival.

Such ceremonies were very important to the Babylonians (and similar rituals were practised at all the Mesopotamian sacred cities), for their well-being depended on the faithful observance of pre-

scribed ritual, they were convinced. The neglect of the New Year festival by the last king of Babylon, Nabonidus, caused his subjects no little distress. The harsh geographical and climatic environment in which the Mesopotamians found themselves led to a pessimistic strain in their thought which stood in marked contrast to the Egyptian outlook. It is clear that they sought desperately to look into and to manipulate the future, by means of astrology, hepatoscopy, and kindred superstitious measures, on which Isaiah 47:12-15 gives a sarcastic commentary. Addressing the Babylonians the prophet challenged them thus: "Persist in your spells and your monstrous sorceries, maybe you will get help from them . . . but no! in spite of your many wiles you are powerless. Let your astrologers, your stargazers who foretell your future month by month, persist and save you!"

In general, the cultural attainments of the Mesopotamians were no whit inferior to those of Egypt. The literature which has survived, written in the cuneiform script invented by the Sumerians, is by itself proof of that fact. But the Old Testament writers were little interested in intellectual attainment *per se*: in the case of Babylon, they saw that such attainment only served to puff up the ego of an already pretentiously vain city and nation. The day would come when the vaunted deities, Bel-Marduk and Nebo, would stoop low, their images nothing more than a wearisome burden for pack-animals (cf. Isaiah 46:1).

The overweening pride of Babylon was traced back by the Hebrew writer to its very earliest days, when the building of the city was not yet complete — though to be sure, the story of the tower of Babel may well have been intended as a denunciation of the Sumerian-Akkadian culture and faith as a whole. Towers such as that described in Genesis 11 were to be found throughout Mesopotamia; they are known as ziggurats, and many ruined examples can still be seen.⁵ Babylon's ziggurat must have been very impressive in its heyday. It was situated near the temple to Marduk, and bore the name Etemenanki — "House of the foundation of heaven and earth". Like all ziggurats, it was a temple set on a stepped pyramid. The purpose of these huge edifices has yet to be fully explained, but it was doubtless in some fashion to establish contact between heaven and earth, between god and man. The repair of such buildings remained important throughout the great days of Assyria and Babylon. Nebuchadrezzar was careful to restore Etemenanki, and the very last king of Babylon, Nabonidus, did the same for the great ziggurat of Ur, the famous city where Abraham was born, of which the tutelary deity was the moon god.

5. For illustrations and photographs, cf. C. M. Jones, *Old Testament Illustrations* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 30f.

Prophetic Attitudes to Babylon

The prophets' treatment of Babylon in general resembles that of Assyria. Just as Isaiah had described Assyria as the rod of God's wrath against Israel and Judah, so we find in Jeremiah 51:20 Babylon depicted as Yahweh's battle-axe, to punish Judah and other nations. Babylon, Jeremiah was sure, was raised up by God to be the new master of the whole Fertile Crescent, Judah included. But neither he nor other prophets had any illusions about the Babylonians' character. Habakkuk asked God, very pertinently, "Why keep silent when they devour men more righteous than they?" (1:13). Perhaps they were less cruel and rapacious than the Assyrians had been, but it was only a matter of degree; and for arrogant self-confidence, it would seem, they were worse than their predecessors, and had learned nothing from the fate of Assyria. Through his prophetic spokesman Yahweh addressed Babylon thus: "Never again shall men call you queen of many kingdoms. When I was angry with my people, I dishonoured my own possession and gave them into your power. You showed them no mercy, you made your yoke weigh heavy on the aged. You said then, 'I shall be a queen for ever'" (Isaiah 47:5ff.).

Finally, we may note the "song of derision" levelled at the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14: "How you are fallen from heaven, bright morning star! . . . You thought in your own mind, I will scale the heavens; I will set my throne high above the stars of God, I will sit on the mountain where the gods meet . . . Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the abyss." It must have been on the basis of this passage in particular that in the New Testament the name "Babylon" was used to typify not only Rome but the totalitarian, godless, arrogant state of any and every era of human history.