

## Babylon and Bethlehem

**G**olden Babylon. Mighty Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar said, “Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?”

Thanks to German archeologist Robert Koldewey, who excavated at Babylon for nearly two decades in the early 1900s, we know quite a bit of the grandeur of this ancient city.

Nebuchadnezzar engaged in aggressive building projects constructing walls, temples, and palaces with bricks inscribed “I am Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, son of Nabopolassar, king of Babylon.”

During his reign, the city spread over 8.5 square kilometers, making it the largest ancient Mesopotamian city. The city was divided into ten quarters or districts boasting at least 53 temples plus other shrines or religious buildings.

The center of Babylon was enclosed by triple walls and straddled the river Euphrates. Anyone entering passed through one of eight gateways — the most splendid by far was the Ishtar Gate, which controlled the processional road leading to the main temples. This gate had walls decorated with magical animals molded in relief in the brickwork, glazed yellow and brown against a blue background. A road led from this gate about a half mile to the temples of the god of Babylon, Marduk, commonly called Bel, Lord.

According to Nebuchadnezzar’s own records and the report of the Greek writer Herodotus, one of the temples had the walls of the holy place covered with gold and featured a great gold-plated bed and throne for the god. Local priests told Herodotus over 20 tons of gold had been used for the temple and its furniture. Rituals in the temple reportedly required over two tons of imported frankincense each year.

Babylon — big, potent, godless, trying to kill the believers who wouldn’t bow to the golden image. Yet right there in the furnace of trial, “the fourth man,” the Son of God, was present with

His people.

Scripture portrays Babylon as the epitome of man’s arrogance and the center of human wickedness. Yet, God allowed this heathen empire to destroy the nation of Judah and ravage Jerusalem, the city of God.

The Prophet Isaiah declared that Babylon, the glory of the kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, would become like Sodom and Gomorrah. The Revelation of John predicts that Babylon, symbol of the entire world system built on ego and lust, will be suddenly and completely destroyed in one day.

Contrast little Bethlehem — Jacob buried Rachel nearby, Boaz lived there, and the names of Obed, Jesse, and of course David, are forever connected with this ancient place. Originally called Ephrath (*fruitfulness*), Bethlehem (*house of bread*) overlooked the main highway to Hebron and Egypt. Shepherds caused a stir there looking for the Savior. Two thousand years later, in the 20th century, shepherds again made their way to Bethlehem, this time carrying scrolls they had found in caves while caring for their flocks. Today, they are the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, and one of them was a copy of the book Isaiah, 1,000 years older than any copy of the day.

The Dead Sea Scroll find spoke to the veracity of the Old Testament and the reliability of current copies. The Christmas texts were there in those scrolls — Isaiah 7:14, “A virgin shall conceive ...” and Isaiah 9:6, “For unto you a child is born, unto us a Son is given ...” Let’s not be too hard on the Jews of Jesus’ day. They were looking for this mighty conqueror promised in the Old Testament. How could they know there were at least 2,000 years between that first phrase in Isaiah 9:6 and the rest of the verse?

Again, contrast “Babylon the great” with Bethlehem, “... too little to be among the clans of Judah” (Micah 5:2). Isn’t God forever turning our thinking upside down? Isn’t God the God of

small things and weak things? Those things easy to overlook: the seed of the woman, a couple too old to bear children, the forgotten youngest son of Jesse, a stone from a slingshot, a Galilean peasant who turns out to be Messiah.

All around little Bethlehem, the levianess of the power of Rome was at work in a way remarkably similar to Babylon. The emperor mandates a census and the world must migrate to comply. Rome and Babylon always appear to have everything. Looking for an economic engine? Looking for innovative technology? Looking for the power that can make a difference in our world? Looking for the wealth that it takes to get things done? Anybody’s bet would be on the big and powerful Babylon, or Rome, or some similar great city, but not Bethlehem.

Healing for the nations? Transformation for individuals? Hope for families? Bethlehem did not appear to have anything to offer. Meanwhile Babylon brought more of what humanity had plenty of: man’s wisdom, man’s power, man’s glitz and glamour, man’s pride.

And from Bethlehem comes God’s promise, God’s plan. God chose Bethlehem as the entry point for a supernatural, extraterrestrial deliverer bringing good news to the whole world.

God uses the little, the least, the last.

And when that happens, there’s no contest. Bethlehem beats Babylon.

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