

Appendix I

THE RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND PERTAINING TO THE EXILE IN BABYLON

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Part of the covenant agreement between the LORD and Israel was that Israel would commit herself to being faithful. According to Deut 28—30, if she obeyed and remained faithful to the covenant stipulations, God would bring blessing; if she disobeyed, however, God would bring curses. These curses would come in various levels of severity, but prolonged disobedience would eventuate in exile from the land of promise. The LORD directly forewarned Israel of this in Deut 28:36-37,

The LORD will bring you and your king whom you shall set over you to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone. And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a taunt among all the people where the LORD will drive you.

Throughout her history, Israel embraced the deities of other nations in direct violation of the Ten Commandments. Although God gave ample time for repentance, this tendency to idolatry persisted. Therefore, exile eventually came, first to the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC (by the Assyrians) and then to the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BC (by the Babylonians). One purpose of the exile was to impress upon God's covenant people just how revolting idolatry was to the Holy Creator God. In effect, God was saying, "If you like idolatry and the worship of other gods so much, then I will plunge you into a society that is totally given to this so that you will see how repugnant this is to Me." The discipline worked its intended effect, for after the Babylonian exile the nation did not turn back to idolatry again.

To appreciate the culture into which Daniel and the other Jewish exiles were placed, we should understand a little about the religious nature of Babylon. Although Assyria and Babylon existed as political and military rivals for much of Middle Eastern history, the two shared much in common in their religion.¹ Much of the Assyro-Babylonian religion was derived from the earlier Sumerian culture. In contrast to Israel's strict monotheism, Assyro-Babylonian religion held to a vast pantheon of deities. Furthermore, these deities were often struggling with one another. There were mythological accounts of both creation and a universal flood, but creation was not the result of a spoken word by a single deity (as with Israel's God, Yahweh).

¹ See M. J. A. Horsnell, "Religions of the Biblical World: Assyria and Babylonia," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4:85-95; Helmer Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 49-123; and Joan Oates, *Babylon*, 170-80.

Central to Mesopotamian religious practice was the belief that man was created in order to serve the gods. The list of deities is so long that it is simply not possible to list them all here (over 3000 deities are known from god-lists or theophoric personal names). Furthermore, many of their functions and attributes would overlap at times. However, a few highlights can be noted by mentioning the three cosmic deities, the three astral deities, and then other prominent deities.

The three cosmic deities:

1. Anu

Anu (meaning "heaven") was the father and king of the gods, the heavens personified. Although in theory he was the supreme deity among the gods, he was in practicality rather passive. His consort was variously Antu or Ishtar, and his chief city was Uruk. Supposedly the demons derived their origin from him.

2. Enlil

Enlil (meaning "lord wind") represented the atmosphere, wind, and storm. He practically functioned as the chief deity. He also possessed the "tablets of destiny" which determined the destiny of the world. His city was Nippur.

3. Ea

Ea was lord of the subterranean sweet-water ocean, and was god of wisdom, sorcery, arts, crafts and culture, and the source of all secret magical knowledge.

The three astral deities:

1. Sin

Sin represented the moon. His principal city was Ur, but he was also worshiped at Harran in northern Mesopotamia. The last king of the Neo-Babylonian empire, Nabonidus (father of Belshazzar), attempted to make Sin the highest god.

2. Šamaš

Šamaš represented the sun, and was god of justice and equity (as well as judge of the gods).

3. Ishtar

Ishtar was the most important female deity, and the functions and characteristics of other goddesses were often assimilated into her. She was particularly viewed as the goddess of love and fertility, but also of war as well. Ishtar was also popular at Babylon, and one of the notable archaeological discoveries from the ruins of Babylon has been the Ishtar Gate (a major gate of the city that was especially dedicated to her). She later became the most important goddess throughout Western Asia. She was also Venus, the Morning and Evening Star, and was often represented riding on her sacred beast, the lion.

Other prominent deities:

1. Adad

Adad was the god of thunder and rainstorm (Hadad was his prominent West Semitic counterpart). He could either be beneficent by enabling vegetation and life to flourish, or destructive through flooding.

2. Ashur

Ashur became the national god of Assyria.

3. Marduk (= biblical "Bel")

Marduk is one of the primary deities of interest to us, for it was Marduk who was chosen as the national god of Babylonia. As such, he assumed the functions accorded to other deities and came to have the prominent place of honor in Babylonia.² As son of Ea, he was god of magic and incantation. Babylon was his chief city, and his temple (named Esagila) was located there. Daniel and his friends would have seen the worship of Marduk firsthand.

4. Nabu (Hebrew = Nebo)

Another key deity was Nabu, god of Borsippa, who was Marduk's son. Nabu was popularized greatly in the 1st millennium BC, even at Babylon. So, the name Nebuchadnezzar may mean "O Nabû, protect my offspring."³ Nabu played a role in the New Year festival also.

Not only was Assyro-Babylonian religion extremely polytheistic, but it was very superstitious. Adherents believed that numerous demons attacked people with distress and diseases. Hence, the people felt that it was through appeasement of the deities that they could avoid bad fate. Service to the deities, divination and magic were a way of life. In addition, the promotion of the local religious cult was considered important. In the religious cult, the king stood as head of the cult, although in practice the various functions of the cult were delegated to others. Horsnell notes,

The ancient Babylonians believed that kingship came down from heaven and was bestowed by the gods. Thus the king ruled by divine sanction. . . . He was the head of the cult, the foremost servant of the gods, bearing the ultimate responsibility for correctly perpetuating the cult and for building and restoring the temples of his realm.⁴

Although temples were erected to other gods at Babylon, Marduk was the primary god worshiped at Babylon.⁵ At least for much of his life, Nebuchadnezzar fulfilled his expected role as king of being

² According to Gaebelien, Marduk's rise to supremacy over other deities occurred early in her history, over 1000 years before the days of Nebuchadnezzar:

"Upon the political ascendancy of Hammurabi of Babylon (*ca.* 1750 B.C.), Marduk the god of Babylon became supreme among the older Sumerian gods as creator and ruler—a position formerly enjoyed by Enlil but affirmed for Marduk in the Code of Hammurabi (*ANET*, pp. 163-180) and the Creation Epic (*ANET*, pp. 60-72)" (P. W. Gaebelien, Jr., "Marduk," *ISBE*, 3:244).

In the *Enuma Elish* epic of creation, Marduk becomes the real hero. This story was recited on the 4th day of the New Year Festival at Babylon.

³ D. J. Wiseman (*Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, The Schweich Lectures [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985], 2-5) has a good discussion on the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's name, although there has been some confusion and disagreement on the exact meaning. He points out, "The meaning of the name formerly given as 'O Nabû, protect the boundary' is now more likely to be interpreted as 'O Nabû, protect my offspring.'"

⁴ M. J. A. Horsnell, "Religions: Assyria and Babylonia," *ISBE*, 4:88.

⁵ Although the major temple of Babylon was the Temple of Marduk situated at the center of the city, other temples existed for Gula, Shamash, Adad, Belit Nina and Ishtar of Agade. See the city map of Babylon in *Babylon* by Joan Oates, 148.

the leader of the cult. In an ancient inscription, Nebuchadnezzar gives praise to Marduk and prays to him:

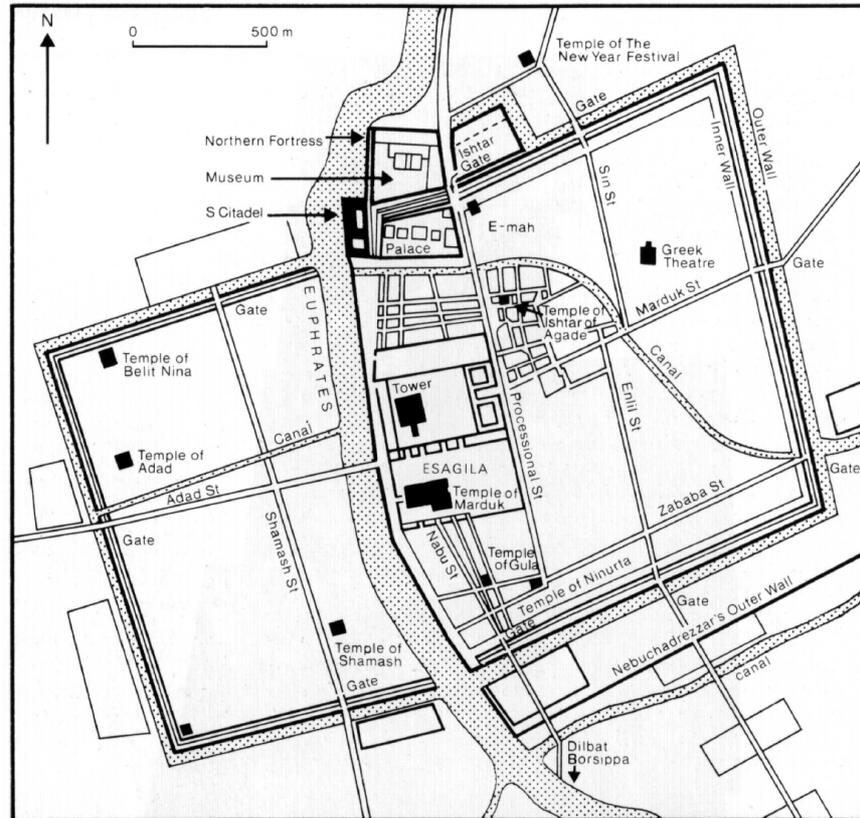
I have made . . . the city of Babylon to the foremost among all the countries and every human habitation; its name I have [made/elevated] to the (most worthy of) praise among the sacred cities. . . . The sanctuaries of my lords Nebo and Marduk (as a wise ruler) . . .

. . . (Trusting in the power of my lords Nebo and Marduk, I organized [my army] for a[n expedition] to the Lebanon. . . .

O Marduk, my lord, do remember my deeds favorably as good [deeds], may (these) my good deeds be always before your mind (so that) my walking in Esagila and Ezida—which I love—may last to old age. May I (remain) always your legitimate governor (*šakanakku*), may I pull your yoke till (I am) sated with progeny, may my name be remembered in future (days) in a good sense, may my offspring rule forever over the black-headed.⁶

How humbling it must have been for Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and head of the cult of Marduk to honor Daniel's God:

But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but



Schematic Plan of the Inner City of Babylon

In the Neo-Babylonian Period (Source: J. Oates, *Babylon*, 148)

⁶ From the so-called Wadi-Brisa Inscription as published in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 3rd ed., 307.

He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'⁷

Mesopotamian religion held that man was created in order to serve the gods. Hence, the image of the god was important (as the deity was considered to be present in its image). When the image was carried off to war, the deity remained absent until its return. During festival times, the image was carried through the streets in solemn procession.

The focal point of religious life in Babylon centered around the temple of the deity, of which there were several in Babylon. The primary temple, of course, was the temple for Marduk named Esagila. A major temple complex would typically have a ziggurat, i.e., a great, man-made, multistaged mountain of earth and brick up to 90 meters. Describing the temple, Horsnell remarks,

The temple was the deity's dwelling place, where he was present on earth to provide blessing for city and people and to be approached by the priesthood and rulers. Here many of the cultic rituals, and especially the daily service (Akk. *dullu*), were carried out.⁸

There would be priests and temple staff for carrying out the daily offerings and animal sacrifices.

Once a year, in the springtime, an important festival was held . . . a New Year Festival to honor the chief deity of the city. This "akitu festival" was held during the first eleven days of the month Nisan (about the time of Israel's Passover). On the second day of the festival, "the *šešgallu*-priest prayed to Marduk, extolling the god's victories and seeking his favor for Babylon, its people, and the temple Esagila."⁹ Also during this festival, the god Nabû, Marduk's son, would arrive from neighboring Borsippa. On the tenth day of the festival, the king of Babylon would accompany Marduk, i.e., his image, and lead a procession from Esagila through Babylon.

In the Bible, Marduk is referred to as Bel (בֵּל) meaning "lord", and Nabû is termed Nebo (נְבוֹ). In the forty-sixth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet proclaimed over a hundred years before Daniel the superiority of Yahweh over the gods of Babylon (even before they were ever taken into exile). Bel has bowed down, Nebo stoops over; their images are consigned to the beasts and the cattle (Isa 46:1; cf. Jer. 50:2; 51:44). Isaiah went on to declare that Babylon would be judged by Yahweh and that His covenant people would be delivered from Babylon. Mocking Babylon's reliance upon occultic measures, the LORD (speaking through Isaiah the prophet) challenged Babylon:

But evil will come on you which you will not know how to charm away; . . . Stand fast now in your spells and in your many sorceries with which you have labored from your youth; perhaps you will be able to profit, perhaps you may cause trembling. You are wearied with your many counsels, Let now the astrologers, those who prophesy by the stars, those who predict by the new moons, stand up and save you from what will come upon you.¹⁰

Babylon's reliance upon the occult would do her no good in the day when God visited her in judgment. That day would come in Daniel's own lifetime when the Medo-Persian forces under Cyrus would interrupt Belshazzar's feast to capture the city and terminate the Neo-Babylonian empire.

⁷ Daniel 4:34-35.

⁸ Horsnell, 4:89.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Isaiah 47:11-13.

In contrast to Israel who could look to the revealed Word of God for instruction about life, the future and the supernatural, Babylon relied on supernatural information supplied through occultic channels. One means was through divination (a technique of communication with the gods) by which the Babylonians sought to know the will of the gods and destinies they had determined for the people. Through the information gained by divination, they could hope to avoid disasters and choose more favorable outcomes. There were various means for the practice of divination,¹¹ and numerous manuals were compiled to assist the divination specialists.¹² Dream divination was also practiced for interpreting the content of dreams.¹³ It would not have been unusual for Nebuchadnezzar (see Dan 2) to summon his court for the interpretation of his dream. At times, an individual might even sleep in a temple in hopes of receiving an enlightening dream from the deity. The Babylonians passionately studied astrology, the observation of celestial phenomena, in hopes of detecting omens that might affect the nation,¹⁴ and Babylon became the most celebrated center for divination based on astrology. Magic was also a popular practice.

Horsnell states,

Magic and divination were closely related. Divination sought to know the will of the gods and the fate of people through the interpretation of omens, while the art of magic (conjuration or exorcism) sought to ward off evil forces that unfavorable omens indicated were about to invade people's lives with sickness and disasters.¹⁵

¹¹ Oates states, "A great variety of techniques were used in divination, including the observation of animals' entrails, oil in water, smoke from incense, the behavior of birds and other animals, and celestial and other natural phenomena" (*Babylon*, 178).

¹² Oates comments on the importance of those who practiced divination:

"Indeed its senior practitioners were men of influence, held in high esteem in their own society. They were consulted on all important occasions both by private individuals and officers of state. The army was always accompanied by a diviner . . ." (*Babylon*, 178).

¹³ Dreams were highly esteemed, and some were even regarded as revelation from the gods. Archaeology has recovered a well-preserved cuneiform baked-clay cylinder in which Nabonidus (555-539) has recorded his famous dream concerning the restoration of the temple of the moon-god in Harran: "At the beginning of my reign the gods let me see a dream: in it there stood both Marduk, the Great Lord, and Sin, the light of heaven and earth."

¹⁴ Ringgren (*Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 95) writes,

"In course of time observations of the heavenly bodies are developed to an astrological system. The planets are each connected with a god, and their course in heaven is assigned significance for events on earth. The starry sky is sometimes called 'the book of heaven' (*šitir šamê*), i.e., a writing which reveals the intentions of the gods. . . . We do not know for certain when and where the theory arose that a man's life depends on the position of the stars at the moment of birth, which led to the establishment of the horoscope, but there is much to suggest that it was precisely in Babylonia, where the oldest known horoscopes come from 410 B.C."

From the time of Nabonassar (r. 747-734), the Chaldeans accurately recorded the times of the motion of the stars. In fact the very term Chaldaean came to signify "astronomer." Oates (*Babylon*, 115) reports the functioning of an astronomical observatory in Babylon as early as the reign of Marduk-apla-iddina II (= biblical Merodach-Baladan, 721-710 BC).

¹⁵ Horsnell, "Religions: Assyria and Babylonia," *ISBE*, 4:90.