

Jeremiah 50-51 • The Characteristics of Babylon

Introduction

One of the most important, recurring themes throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is Babylon. In this study it is highly recommended that you begin by reading chapters 50 and 51 in their entirety. This study is not actually going to go in verse-by-verse order or cover every aspect of these chapters, but it's still important to understand the overall context. We will then go through and pull out the major "bullet points" to highlight what God is doing where Babylon is concerned.

¹The word which the LORD spoke concerning Babylon, the land of the Chaldeans, through Jeremiah the prophet:

²“Declare and proclaim among the nations.
Proclaim it and lift up a standard.
Do not conceal it but say,
'Babylon has been captured,
Bel has been put to shame, Marduk has been shattered;
Her images have been put to shame,
her idols have been shattered.’

³“For a nation has come up against her out of the north; it will make her land an object of horror, and there will be no inhabitant in it. Both man and beast have wandered off, they have gone away!

⁴¹“Behold, a people is coming from the north,
And a great nation and many kings
Will be aroused from the remote parts
of the earth.

⁴²They seize their bow and javelin;
They are cruel and have no mercy.
Their voice roars like the sea;
And they ride on horses,
Marshalled like a man for the battle
Against you, O daughter of Babylon.

⁴³The king of Babylon has heard the report about them,
And his hands hang limp;
Distress has gripped him,
Agony like a woman in childbirth.

[Read 50:1-3, 41-43]

Q: What is being predicted here?

A: That Babylon, currently the largest world empire and victor over Israel, will itself be destroyed.

Q: Why does the manner of its demise sound familiar? What is the biblical term for this?

A: In the same way it treated others in the course of overthrowing them, so will the same treatment result in their being overthrown. In biblical terms this is called “judgment” but also shows the Old Testament basis of the Golden Rule. They have no regard for God’s commandments of the “second tablet” to love others.

Q: Who are Bel and Marduk mentioned in v.2?

A: “Bel” is believed to be the Babylonian version of “Baal”, meaning “Lord”. He is one of the earliest, principal gods worshiped by Babylon. The Babylonians would also later worship “Marduk” (meaning “death” or “slaughter”), considered the god of creation and destiny. They are literally a contrast of Babylon’s “lord” in place of the Lord God, and their trust for the future and identity in Marduk in place their trust and identity in God.

Q: Why is it significant God identifies them by name?

A: This is God’s way of explaining the greater spiritual issues behind the earthly ones. The Babylonians have not only mishandled their earthly relationships with others, but their heavenly relationship with God. This shows they have no regard for the commandments of the “first tablet” to love God.

Observation: This is why Babylon in Scripture and throughout this study is often referred to with the feminine pronoun “she”. Babylon is best pictured as an unfaithful and adulterous woman who has not only rejected her husband but entices other into sin with her.

Q: Both in v.3 and 41 it specifically mentions this will be accomplished by a nation “from the north”. Who is God speaking about?

A: The Medo-Persian Empire about which Isaiah also prophesied. (Is.13:17-22)

Application: The judgment of God’s wrath comes on those who forsake and completely abandon what amounts to both the tablets of the Law: loving God and loving others. It comes about as the result of forsaking the One True God for another and by exploiting and overcoming others for one’s own gain. It is the complete rejection of God personally and His Law completely.

⁹For behold, I am going to arouse and bring up against Babylon
A horde of great nations from the land of the north,
And they will draw up their battle lines against her;
From there she will be taken captive.
Their arrows will be like an expert warrior
Who does not return empty-handed.

¹Thus says the LORD:
“Behold, I am going to arouse against Babylon
And against the inhabitants of Lebkamai
The spirit of a destroyer.

¹¹Sharpen the arrows, fill the quivers!
The LORD has aroused the spirit of the kings of the Medes,
Because His purpose is against Babylon to destroy it;
For it is the vengeance of the LORD,
vengeance for His temple.

¹²Lift up a signal against the walls of Babylon;
Post a strong guard,
Station sentries,
Place men in ambush!
For the LORD has both purposed and performed
What He spoke concerning the inhabitants of Babylon.

¹¹“Because you are glad, because you are jubilant,
O you who pillage My heritage,
Because you skip about like a threshing heifer
And neigh like stallions,

[Read 50:9, 51:1, 11-12]

Q: Although Babylon’s defeat will be carried out by the Medo-Persians, who do these verses clearly attribute to be the source of these events?

A: God Himself.

1. (50:9) “...I am going to arouse and bring up against Babylon...:
2. (51:1) “...I am going to arouse against Babylon...”
3. (51:11) “...The LORD has aroused the spirit of the kings of the Medes...”
4. (51:12) “...for the LORD has both purposed and performed...”

Point: What happens to the first and literal historical Babylon serves as a pattern for what will ultimately happen to the final and spiritual Babylon spoken of in Revelation. In other words, the wrath of God’s judgment is expressed in great, earthly events but all have greater, spiritual meaning.

Application: It is the same for Babylon just as it is for every nation and individual. God holds everyone accountable not only for their relationship with Him, but for their relationship and treatment of others.

[Read 50:11]

Q: What is the sin of Babylon identified here?

A: The phrase “pillage My heritage” is a reference to Babylon **plundering** God’s chosen people, not merely carrying out the minimum requirements of judgment. It indicates they have crossed a line where their behavior is concerned.

Q: Why does God point out that in doing so Babylon was “glad”, “jubilant” and skipping about like horses?

A: They were raised up as God’s tool of judgment on Israel which they pursued from all the wrong motives.

Point: When God’s judgment falls on someone we’re supposed to learn the lesson for ourselves so as not to repeat it, not take it as a license to act in furtherance of our own sin.

⁵¹We are ashamed because we have heard reproach;
Disgrace has covered our faces,
For aliens have entered
The holy places of the LORD'S house.

[Read 51:51]

Q: What is the sin of Babylon identified here?

A: The reference to "aliens have entered the holy places of the LORD'S house" means that the Temple was defiled. In other words, the Babylonians showed their spiritual disrespect of God through the literal disrespect of the Temple. It's as close to a physical assault on God Himself that they could manage.

³¹"Behold, I am against you, O arrogant one,"
Declares the Lord GOD of hosts,
"For your day has come,
The time when I will punish you."
³²The arrogant one will stumble and fall
With no one to raise him up;
And I will set fire to his cities
And it will devour all his environs."

[Read 50:32]

Q: What is the sin of Babylon identified here?

A: Arrogance is the visible proof of pride. They are consumed with their self and hold no one in higher esteem than their self.

³⁸A drought on her waters, and they will be dried up!
For it is a land of idols,
And they are mad over fearsome idols.

[Read 50:38; 51:7]

Q: What is the sin of Babylon identified here?

A: Not only is she completely given over to idolatry ("it is a land of idols"), but she actively seduces everyone else into false religion ("intoxicating all the earth").

⁷Babylon has been a golden cup in the hand of the Lord,
Intoxicating all the earth.
The nations have drunk of her wine;
Therefore the nations are going mad.

Point: *Babylon doesn't merely conquer **literally**, but also conquers **spiritually**. Physical enslavement to Babylon eventually culminates in spiritual enslavement to the gods of Babylon.*

Summary

Q: So how would you summarize the character of Babylon according to her sins?

A: Rooted in pride, she not only worships false gods but entices others to do the same. As a result her spiritual warfare with the One True God is expressed in her earthly actions of making war on God indirectly against His people and directly against His Temple.

Application: *These are the same characteristics of the last Babylon to come who is rooted in pride, seduces the whole world, and makes war on God both against His people and against Him personally. The spirit of Babylon is repeated throughout history (e.g., the Spanish Inquisition, Nazi Germany, etc.) and teaches something about the final, ultimate fulfillment yet to come.*

⁵⁶For the destroyer is coming against her, against Babylon, And her mighty men will be captured, Their bows are shattered; For the LORD is a God of recompense, He will fully repay.

⁵⁷“I will make her princes and her wise men drunk, Her governors, her prefects and her mighty men, That they may sleep a perpetual sleep and not wake up,” Declares the King, whose name is the LORD of hosts.

⁵⁸Thus says the LORD of hosts, “The broad wall of Babylon will be completely razed And her high gates will be set on fire; So the peoples will toil for nothing, And the nations become exhausted only for fire.”

[Read 51:56-58]

Q: What is God going to do to Babylon for her sins?

A: “He will fully repay”. (v.56) She will suffer the same things which she inflicted on others.

Q: How will God repay her for the physical destruction Babylon inflicted?

A: From this and many other verses throughout these chapters (Jer. 50:10, 12-16, 21-27, 29-31, 37; Jer. 51:27-43, 52-58) her physical destruction is unprecedented in its totality.

Q: How will God repay her for the spiritual destruction Babylon inflicted?

A: “I will make her princes and her wise men drunk”. (v.57) This is the biblical expression for spiritual deception. (Righteous believers are always portrayed as “sober”, the deceived and backslidden as “drunken”.) She was the worldwide leader of idolatry and spiritual deception and in the end she is completely deceived spiritually herself.

Application: *These are important, repeated themes which are associated with every type or instance of Babylon throughout history until the final one. Her physical sins reflect her even greater spiritual sins, and so her physical judgment reflects her even greater spiritual judgment.*

After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with his glory. And he cried out with a mighty voice, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful bird. For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the passion of her immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed acts of immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich by the wealth of her sensuality.”

— Revelation 18:1-3

⁴⁰As when God overthrew Sodom And Gomorrah with its neighbors,” declares the LORD, “No man will live there, Nor will any son of man reside in it.

[Read 50:40]

Q: What might be significant about comparing Babylon to Sodom and Gomorrah?

A: This is the ultimate example of the judgment of God’s wrath upon someone who is completely corrupt in every way possible. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah embraced a lifestyle of violating every commandment of God not only in their treatment of other people but of God personally, the inevitable end of which is the fire of God’s judgment.

⁵⁹The message which Jeremiah the prophet commanded Seraiah the son of Neriah, the grandson of Mahseiah, when he went with Zedekiah the king of Judah to Babylon in the fourth year of his reign. (Now Seraiah was quartermaster.) ⁶⁰So Jeremiah wrote in a single scroll all the calamity which would come upon Babylon, that is, all these words which have been written concerning Babylon. ⁶¹Then Jeremiah said to Seraiah, "As soon as you come to Babylon, then see that you read all these words aloud, ⁶²and say, 'You, O LORD, have promised concerning this place to cut it off, so that there will be nothing dwelling in it, whether man or beast, but it will be a perpetual desolation.' ⁶³And as soon as you finish reading this scroll, you will tie a stone to it and throw it into the middle of the Euphrates, ⁶⁴and say, 'Just so shall Babylon sink down and not rise again because of the calamity that I am going to bring upon her; and they will become exhausted.'"

Thus far are the words of Jeremiah.

[Read 51:59-64]

Q: Why is Zedekiah going to Babylon?

A: There is no reference in Scripture to this occurring "*in the fourth year of his reign*", which is still about six years before Babylon will capture Jerusalem. Extra-biblical Jewish sources maintain that this did, indeed, happen when Zedekiah made an effort to make peace with Nebuchadnezzar and took Seraiah as a member of his delegation.

Q: Why might the timing of this be significant?

A: First because God declares the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10), and second because it clearly shows Babylon's spiritual condition and the intentions of her heart in advance of what she is going to do. However, like Jonah to Nineveh before her, Babylon still might have responded to God's Word.

Q: But how do we know biblically that Babylon is so far gone that it cannot and will not repent and return to God?

A: In Jeremiah 51:9 it specifically states, "*We applied healing to Babylon, but she was not healed*". This is why Scripture repeatedly employs a double use of "*fallen*" to dramatically emphasize that she is completely and hopelessly beyond redemption. Babylon cannot be healed.

*"Now behold, here comes a troop of riders, horsemen in pairs."
And one said, "**Fallen, fallen** is Babylon;
And all the images of her gods are shattered on the ground."
— Isaiah 21:9*

*And another angel, a second one, followed, saying, "**Fallen, fallen** is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her immorality."
— Revelation 14:8*

Q: If Babylon cannot be healed, what are God's people supposed to do where Babylon is concerned?

*I heard another voice from heaven, saying, "**Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and receive of her plagues;**
— Revelation 18:4*

*Depart, depart, **go out from there,**
Touch nothing unclean;
Go out of the midst of her, purify yourselves,
You who carry the vessels of the Lord.
— Isaiah 52:11*

*"**Come forth from her midst, My people,**
And each of you save yourselves
From the fierce anger of the Lord.
— Jeremiah 51:45*

[Continued on the next page.]

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Q: Why do you suppose that Baruch was not directed to read this Word of God in the presence of the Babylonian kings or in some special political setting?

A: Remember, Babylon cannot be healed and will not respond to God's Word. But the captives present, who were presently in Babylon as the result of God's judgment, would be receptive to hearing God's judgment upon Babylon and, perhaps, do what Babylon never did: learn the right lesson from judgment and repent.

Q: What might the action of tying the scroll to a stone and throwing it into the river represent?

A: Something thrown into a great body of water in the Bible often represents something being completely swallowed up by the nations, someone completely losing their identity and never being able to be recovered. (Hence the meaning of Elisha and the axe head in 2 Kings 6:1-7.) Being irretrievably lost at the bottom of such a great river is an allusion to being irretrievably lost spiritually and having to suffer the complete wrath of God's judgment.

Q: Why might Baruch's action sound familiar to us?

A: It's exactly what happens to the final Babylon in Revelation.

Then a strong angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, "So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, and will not be found any longer.

— Revelation 18:21

Epilogue

The Bible has been described as a loaf of bread which looks the same on each end and has the same, repeated structure throughout. In Genesis we find the Tree of Life in the garden (creation), in the Gospels we find Jesus the Tree of Life in the garden (new creation), and in the final chapters of Revelation we again find the Tree of Life in the garden (re-creation). Babylon is another such repeating theme. What began at the Tower of Babel escalates to the literal, historical Babylon first encountered in history. But many spiritual types of Babylon are subsequently encountered throughout history. Remember how Peter called Rome in his day "Babylon"? (1 Pe. 5:13) And in Revelation we see the final, ultimate fulfillment of Babylon.

It's important to take note of everything revealed to us in Scripture about Babylon. What occurred with the first Babylon establishes a pattern for all those who follow. She is first and foremost rooted in pride, not just faithful to her own false gods but the chief evangelist where false religion and spiritual deception is concerned, and she always ends up persecuting God's people and attacking God Himself. In the end all of these things are brought by God upon her own head.

Whenever we see Babylon mentioned in Scripture, the Holy Spirit is trying to teach us something about the final Babylon to come.