

Oracle Against Babylon (Jeremiah 50-51)



1. Tale of Two Cities

- A. Jeremiah wrote almost as much about Babylon's future as he did about the future of other nations. Two major themes alternate in Jeremiah 50-51 of 110 verses - '*Judgment on Babylon*' and '*Restoration of Jerusalem*'. There are seven cycles of prophecy alternatively addressing Babylon, and Israel and Judah. Each time the emphasis falls on the diverging destinies of the two cities. In the final analysis, when Christ returns, there will be only two cities to which every person will belong. Jesus will divide the nations into two groups – those who belong to Heavenly Jerusalem and Harlot Babylon. It is '*The tale of two cities.*'

Selections of passages for reading: 50:1-10; 17-20; 51:1-10; 52-64.

- B. At the end of Jeremiah's life, Babylon was at the peak of its glory while Jerusalem was burned down to the ground. But Jeremiah boldly predicted the fortunes of the two cities would turn soon. Babylon would be destroyed, and Jerusalem would become a thriving city again. Today Jerusalem is a bustling city full of people, but Babylon lies in desolate ruins. It is an archaeological site without permanent inhabitants. Robert Koldewey the archaeologist did not want to stay the night there, fearing evil spirits. Jeremiah's prophecy came to pass. It took about 70 years for the mighty city of Babylon to fall. Jerusalem lay in ruins for 70 years, then it was built back up again according to the word of the Lord. It just took one lifetime.

2. History of Babylon

- A. In Gen 11:1-9, people built a tall tower on a flat plain and said, '*Let's huddle together and let's make a name for ourselves.*' They wanted a tower 'reaching to the sky' (Bab. 'gate of heaven'). God called this city 'confusion' (Heb. 'babbling'). It was built with clay bricks and bitumen - dust and slime of the earth. It was the peak of man's achievement and pride. The Jerusalem temple was not built with brick and mortar, but with solid sandstone rocks. Jesus builds his church with living stones. This is the difference between the city of God and the city of man. At Babel God confused the human language so people could not unite to build the highway to destruction without God. This slowed down the human degeneration so that more could be redeemed before the human sin reaches full maturity and bring down God's judgment.
- B. Chaldeans lived in a highly advanced city between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the modern Persian Gulf where most of the world's oil comes from. Houses in Ur had running water in bedrooms and central heating system! Chaldeans moved along the Euphrates river and rebuilt the 'tower of Babel' called Ziggurat, and built the city of Babylon around 3000BC. Ziggurats looks like stepped pyramids of 2 to 7 levels. It all originated from the city of Ur where Abraham comes from. He travelled up the Euphrates river looking for a city (not Babel), then went further up to Haran where he buried his father, and then came down to the hills of Hebron in Canaan where the Lord appeared to him, and there he buried his wife. Abraham lived in a tent all his life. He didn't go back to Ur because he was looking for a city built by God. Abraham never saw the city except from a distance and welcomed it, seeing it through the eyes of faith.
- Do you see this city built by God? Are you also looking for this city? There is no darkness, no night, no sin, no broken relationship, no broken covenant, no disease, no death there. Babylon was built by the best engineering the world could offer at the time, but Abraham chose to live in a tent because he wanted to be part of the city of God more than any other city that offered him ease and comfort in this fleeting life.
- C. The founder of the Neo-Babylonian empire was Nabopolassar (626-539BC), but the man who built the city of Babylon was his son Nebuchadnezzar, who during the 25 years of his reign wanted his city to be the greatest city on earth. The city was built with the Euphrates river running through it, with two circular walls and a canal system irrigating the whole city from the inside. The city walls covered 322km, and the outer layer was 3.6m thick. The walls were so wide that chariots with horses could run on top in parallel. And along the wall towers were built every 18m. The reconstructed gates, called 'Ishtar Gate', were extremely high, and Nebuchadnezzar built a wide processional way 915m long, and put 575 statues of bulls and lions in blue bricks all along the way. His Mede wife from Persia missed her hometown of hills and mountains covered with green trees. So, Nebuchadnezzar built the hanging garden of pyramid-shaped

hills in the middle of a flat plain. This was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. His room was 55m in length. Archaeologists have unearthed many temples inside the city.

Jeremiah prophesied this magnificent city will come to complete ruin, and Jerusalem which was in ruins will be rebuilt!



3. Babylon's Fall

- A. Jeremiah prophesied Jerusalem's fall for 40 years. And it would NOT be by Egypt, but Babylon which was but a growing power in the far east. Now Babylon was at the peak of its power, and Jeremiah boldly predicts its total destruction. God calls Babylon by many names: *'a Roaring lion'* that broke the bones of Judah (50:17); *'The hammer of the earth'* (50:23) that breaks the wicked nations; *The 'battle-ax' and 'weapons of war'* the Lord uses to punish the sins of the nations (51:20-24); The *'destroying mountain'* which destroys all the earth like a volcano that spews out destruction.

When a dictator or world power arises, we need to ask for what purpose is God raising them up? When God raises up a man to deal with the wicked nations, power often goes to his head. He begins to think he is way better than others. But God says, *'I will burn down this mountain and obliterate this mountain to the point that the people will not be able to use their stones to build.'* (51:25-26) After using Babylon as a hammer, God raised up another hammer to break Babylon – the Medes, then Greece, then Rome, etc.

- B. *How was Babylon going to be destroyed?* At first, their enemy was described as a 'nation out of north' (50:3), but soon Jeremiah becomes specific. It would be a confederation of nations led by the Medes and Persia, and her allies would include Ararat, Minni, and Ashkenaz (51:11, 27-28). The Lord would raise up the 'spirit' of the Mede kings ('destroying spirit') (51:11). Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC (c.f. Dan 5:28, 31; Is 13:17). His mother was a Mede. On that day, *your idols would be embarrassed* because they cannot defend their worshippers. Babylon had two main idols, 'Bel' – 'god of storm and rain' (Baal), and Merodach (Marduk) – 'creator'. But Yahweh is the creator, not Marduk, Yahweh gives rain and harvest, not Bel (50:2, 51:15-19, 52-53). Yahweh introduces Himself as the 'Jacob's Portion' (51:19) and the tribes of Israel as Yahweh's inheritance. What is the difference? 'Idols are made. God makes.' God is the Maker, but He is also the Breaker.' Idol means 'dung or excrement' (lit. Heb. 'gilluleyha' - cow dung).

Jeremiah spells out *how Babylon would be captured*, *'I will dry up her sea and make her springs dry.'* (51:36 c.f. 50:38) Cyrus captured Babylon by diverting the Euphrates river that flowed through the city and entered the city through the dry riverbed under the walls. *The Lord would even prepare a 'feast' to lure them to a state of 'drunkenness.'* Remember King Belshazzar's feast on the night of sudden destruction (51:34-40, 57 c.f. Dan 5)? Jeremiah prophesied, the Lord would send the mighty bows and the swords against Babylon and they would be powerless as a woman in labour. Sowing and reaping will cease leaving the land desolate like Sodom and Gomorrah (50:9-10; 14-16; 29, 35-37; 42-43; 51:2-4, 11). *Your famous buildings (Ziggurats) and walls and gates will be burned to the ground* – the marvel of ancient engineering (50:15; 51:9, 52-53, 58). Then the *heaven will rejoice* at the destruction of Babylon (51:48 c.f. Rev 16:19) while nations mourn their losses in trade. Some modern scholars do not believe ch 50-51 were written by Jeremiah because of their incredible accuracy. This should not be the believer's problem.

4. Reason for Babylon's Destruction

- A. The multitude of idolatry (50:2-3, 38; 51:52 c.f. Is 47:12-13 – enchantments, sorceries, astrologers, stargazers, prognosticators, etc.) God calls Babylon, 'Merathaim' - 'double vengeance', 'Pekod' - 'punishment' (50:21), 'Sheshach' - humiliation (to crouch) (51:41), 'Leb Kamai' (51:1) – lit. 'heart of my adversaries'. Note also 'Mystery Babylon - Mother of all harlots' (Rev 17:5).
- B. Evil against Israel and Judah, and gleeful rejoicing in plundering them (50:11, 33). But Israel's Redeemer (Heb. *Go'el*) is strong, and will contend with Babylon and defend His people (c.f. 51:34). *'And I will repay Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea for all the evil they have done in Zion...'* (51:24; 51:49) *It was the 'vengeance of His temple'* (50:28). *'As Babylon has caused the slain of Israel to fall, so at Babylon the slain of all the earth shall fall.'* (51:49) Note Israel's complaint against Babylon (51:34-35).

- C. Pride against the LORD, against the Holy One of Israel (50:30). Babylon was pride personified, 'the most haughty one!' *'The most proud shall stumble and fall and no one will raise him up.'* (50:31-32 c.f. Gen 11:1-9; 51:52-53). Usually, a nation's pride is at its highest before its fall. Babylon was full of pride before its sudden destruction. It was an amazing city with ziggurats, hanging gardens, high walls and gates and canals, rivers, etc., but Babylon would become like Sodom and Gomorrah because she trusts in her wealth and her covetousness which polluted the nations of the world (51:7-8). Babylon was a golden cup that caused drunkenness and derangement to the whole earth (51:7)

After the city's fall, Alexander the Great came to Babylon (330 BC). By the age of 31, he conquered the then-known world, and he wanted to rebuild Babylon to its former glory and make it his eastern capital. He went as far as getting the foundation ready, but before one brick was laid upon it, he suddenly died. Saddam Hussein too had the ambition to restore Babylon. He did not make it either.

5. Word of the Lord to Israel 'In Those Days'

1. When Babylon's sin of pride reaches the heavens *'Israel must flee Babylon so as not to share in her sins'* (51:6-7 c.f. Rev 18:3-4). Babylon's fall would be sudden and complete (51:8-9; 49-53 c.f. Rev 18:11-19).
2. The Lord would announce the rumours of Babylon's coming judgment for several years, so His people will have an advance warning to flee Babylon and return to Zion (51:46-47). *'A rumour will come one year, and after that another year a rumour will come, and violence in the land, ruler against ruler.'* (51:46) *'Remember Zion from afar off and let Jerusalem come to your mind.'* (51:50)
3. Israel will be back in her land. Although Israel and Judah were destroyed by Assyria and Babylon, God will bring them back home to feed on 'Carmel' and 'Bashan' (Golan Heights, Syria), 'Mount Ephraim' (West Bank) and 'Gilead' (East of Jordan River) (50:19). This word is currently being fulfilled.
4. Israel will be forgiven. *'In those days God will forgive their sins and therefore Israel's iniquities and Judah's sins will not be found anymore.'* (50:20)
5. Israel will be a leading nation again. Although Israel was led astray by the false shepherds in the past, in the future Israel is to be like the rams to lead the flock out of the pan to Zion (50:6-8).

Jeremiah used the wooden yoke, earthen vessel and underwear to prophesy to Judah in the past. Now he gave his scroll (ch 50-51) to Baruch's brother, Seraiah. He was to read out the prophetic word in Babylon, then tie the scroll to a heavy stone, and throw it into the Euphrates river and say, *'Thus Babylon will sink.'* The scroll was washed away and decomposed, but lying somewhere in the muddy river would be the stone, bearing witness against the city of Babylon as the prophecy of Babylon's sinking (51:64). An angel will repeat this prophetic act at the end of the age, *'Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'Thus with violence the great city Babylon shall be thrown down, and shall not be found anymore.'* (Rev 18:21) The largest building in Babylon was a stepped temple, a Ziggurat. Ziggurats were built by Akkadians, Assyrians, and Babylonians. The largest one was built by Babylonians called *Etemenanki*, 'foundation of heaven and earth' with 7 levels reaching 92m high and its base level 92m by 92m. Today it is a pit. The great Ziggurat that was so high reaching up to heaven is now a pit reaching down to the depth of hell.

6. Conclusion

- A. At the end of human history, there will be only two cities - Babylon and Jerusalem. Will ancient Babylon be rebuilt? Unlikely. Where then is Babylon now? Peter referred to Rome as 'Babylon.' The spirit of Babylon moved on to Rome, then to other cities. That is why it is called the 'Mystery Babylon.'
- B. God tells the church to get out of this harlot city. Just as surely as ancient Babylon fell, so too the mystery city of Babylon will fall - forever. This city will be near the sea with ports and with world commerce profiting from its trade. Just like Abraham set out to look for a city built by God, so also must we. The new Jerusalem is a city constructed from heaven and coming down out of space into the new heaven and new earth. It is built by God's hand, and it will come down as the bride of Christ.

One will be either taken up into this bride city and live on in Jerusalem, or go down with the harlot and finish off in Babylon. Help us to make the move from Babylon to Jerusalem as the citizens of another city!