



Tigris River at Diyarbakir. The Chaldeans settled in the swampland along the lower courses of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

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The Chaldeans

BY CHARLES W. DRAPER

THE BIBLE IS A RECORD of God’s dealings with His chosen people. Many great epochs of ancient history and the empires involved in them are not in the Old Testament because those events did not directly involve God’s people. If kings and kingdoms did not cross paths with Israel, the writers of the Scriptures did not mention them. However, the Old Testament sometimes briefly opens windows through which we can glimpse sweeping events that would not be known to us unless the Bible recorded them.

Though mention of the Chaldeans in the Old Testament is limited, their historical significance was substantial over a long period of ancient history. The term *Chaldeans*

was not always applied with consistency in ancient records. Sometimes it referred to tribes of western Semites known collectively as Chaldeans and other times to peoples in the locale who were not Chaldeans ethnically. In the Hellenistic era, the term referred often to astrologers from Babylonia.¹

Home of the Chaldeans

Chaldea, the homeland of the Chaldeans, was in southern Babylonia just northwest of the Persian Gulf. The land was primarily marshes and coastal plains. The area was once under control of the Sumerian kingdom and is associated with Ur, the home city of Abraham, referred to in Genesis as “Ur of the Chaldeans” (Gen. 11:31). As early as the ninth century B.C., the archives of Assyria’s King Shalmaneser II refers to the area



Above: From the tomb of Queen Shubad, a silver cosmetic box from Ur, Iraq from 2500 B.C. The lid of the box is shell inlaid with the stone lapis lazuli showing a lioness attacking a sheep.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/UNIVERSITY MUSEUM/UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA (6/3/3)

and its people. The term *Chaldeans* referred to a number of tribes that migrated into this region. Although history does not indicate their locale prior to this migration or the exact time of their entry into the region, it

LESSON REFERENCES

FBSC: Habakkuk 1:6;
ETBS: 2 Kings 24–25

does teach that they settled along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and became townspeople and farmers.² This era of migration involved many other tribal groups and confederations that settled in various regions throughout the Fertile Crescent.

Babylon was a city-state in southern Mesopotamia in Old Testament times. Babylon dominated the ancient Near Eastern political scene at several points between 3000 and 539 B.C. The city was located about 50 miles south of modern Baghdad, Iraq. “Babylon may have been an important cultural center during the early period of the Sumerian city-states (before 2000 B.C.), but the corresponding archaeological levels of the site are below the present water table and remain unexplored.”³

Chaldeans and Ancient History

Shortly after 2000 B.C., about the time of Abraham, Babylon’s history became available for modern study. Amorite kings, such as Hammurabi (ca. 1792-1750 B.C.), brought the city to international prominence and ultimately built an impressive empire by conquering other nations, establishing national treaties, and imposing a vassal status on conquered peoples. Because of its expanding empire, Babylon became the political seat for southern Mesopotamia.

The Hittites conquered Babylon about 1595 B.C. but soon withdrew, leaving a political vacuum. History offers little information about the period that followed. It teaches, though, that the Kassite tribe seized

Babylon’s throne and held it for over four centuries. The Kassite’s long dynasty was relatively peaceful and helped Babylon’s culture to reach new heights of international prestige. Seeking some relief, though, from Assyria’s growing power and influence, around 1350 B.C. Babylon’s kings began to work with Egypt. An Elamite invasion brought an end to the Kassite dynasty about 1160 B.C.

As the Elamites withdrew, Babylonian princes came to power and founded Babylon’s Fourth

Right: This stylized bull with a human face was in the palace gate of Assyria’s King Sargon II (8th cent. B.C.). Sargon’s empire eventually included Syria, Phoenicia, Israel, Urartu, and Babylon.

Below: King Nabopolassar, who established the last Chaldean dynasty (625-605 B.C.) ordered this foundation tablet that shows King Nabu-apal-iddina of Babylon (885-852 B.C.) in the presence of the sun-god, Samas, sitting in his shrine. The tablet and impression, placed in the clay box, were found buried in the floor of a room of the temple, near the ziggurat at Sippar (Abu Habbah).

Dynasty. During this era, Nebuchadnezzar I (ca. 1124-1103 B.C.) brought political victory to Babylon by invading the Elamites, recapturing the Marduk statue the Edomites had taken from the Kassites, and returning the statue to Babylon. Afterwards, though, Babylon became anemic and remained so for almost two centuries. Several factors afflicted Babylon during this time: factors such as floods, famine, widespread settlement of nomadic tribes, and the arrival of the Chaldeans in the south.



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Left: Painted wooden coffin of a priest of Amun and Bastet, Penamunnebnesc uttawy—probably from Thebes. Thebes was capital of Egypt’s Upper Kingdom until it fell to Assurbanipal in 663 B.C.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ BRITISH MUSEUM (7/21/12)

Right: Ruins at Haran, the last Assyrian stronghold, which was abandoned in 609 B.C. After this date Assyria was no more.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (25/8/05)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM (6/57/26)

A number of times Chaldean tribal leaders ruled Babylonia. While Babylon was autonomous, rule changed hands among several Semitic tribal peoples. Later Babylon often came under Assyrian control. The Assyrians repeatedly gained and lost control of the region. Assyrian kings ruled Babylon directly through their own families or as a vassal kingdom with a local titular head subservient to the Assyrians. During much of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., the Chaldeans competed with the Assyrians for control of northern Babylonia, sometimes prevailing.⁴ But the cycle continued as Assyrian fortunes improved and declined repeatedly.

Assyria's greatest weakness was

during the impressive expansion of Israel under Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.), which rivaled the size of Israel under Solomon, and a similar period of prosperity under Judah's King Uzziah (792-740 B.C.). Jeroboam II, encouraged by professional court prophets, mistakenly believed that God was pleased with his syncretistic and pagan worship practices. In reality, the idolatrous period sealed the fate of both Israel and Judah. Because Hoshea, king of Israel, failed to pay tribute to Assyria, Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) besieged Samaria for three years (2 Kings 17:3-5). The city finally fell to Shalmaneser in 722 B.C. (v. 6; 18:9-12), and the Northern Kingdom of Israel passed off the scene permanently. But Judah survived for

another 135 years before the new world power, Babylon, lay her waste and took her survivors into exile.

Chaldean power and influence reached its height during the era known as the Neo-Babylonian Empire (ca. 609-539 B.C.). The Neo-Babylonian Empire was instrumental in the downfall of Assyria. This brief era of Babylon's international control was centuries in the making. Babylon had proven troublesome to the Assyrians over a long period, often in conjunction with Elam, a kingdom bordering Babylonia on the east. Elam, though often attacked by Assyria, continued to support and encourage Chaldean resistance to Assyria.

Ironically, the Assyrian Empire's success led to its own collapse. Having



maintained a substantial empire for centuries, the Assyrian Empire reached its maximum size in the middle of the seventh century B.C., an empire of unprecedented dimensions. The entire Fertile Crescent was under Assyrian domination, from Egypt and the shores of the Mediterranean in the west to the Persian Gulf in the east and almost to the coast of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea in the north.

Collapsing Kingdoms

To briefly summarize the end from the perspective of Judah, even after the fall of Samaria, Judah continued to presume the Lord's pleasure. Its kings were unmindful of impending doom, despite the faithful ministry of the prophets sent to each generation. Ahaz (735-715 B.C.) did not test Assyrian resolve, remaining compliant. Hezekiah, Ahaz's son, (715-687 B.C.) instituted substantial religious reforms but unwisely rebelled against Assyria. During his reign an emissary of Merodach-Baladan, the Chaldean chieftan of Babylon, visited Hezekiah, who naively revealed the wealth of the temple to him, foreshadowing the ultimate devastation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (2 Kings 20:12-18).

Manasseh, Judah's most wicked and longest reigning king (687-642 B.C.), sacrificed his sons in a pagan ritual (2 Chron. 33:6). Josiah (640-609 B.C.) reinstated the observance of Passover and sought to restore faithfulness and integrity to the religious life of God's people. Believing the collapse of Assyria offered an opportunity, Josiah tried to block the army of Pharaoh Neco II in their belated support of the Assyrians. Tragically Josiah died in battle (2 Kings 23) and the decline of Judah accelerated.

Babylon installed Zedekiah, a puppet king, to follow two weak kings: Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin. Remarkably, Zedekiah also decided to rebel against Babylonian rule. Finally after 20 years of headaches, Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar resolved the question of Judah decisively by destroying the city and the temple in



Above: Funeral headdress of Queen Shubad of Ur (in modern Iraq).

Right: Gold dagger from Ur, dated 2500 B.C. A gold dagger with small nails decorating the restored wooden handle.

Left: Lyre decoration from Ur. Panel of shell and lapis lazuli representing two banquet scenes.

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Below: Assyrian bronze lion weights. The inscriptions describe the weights and name the king for whom they were made. Most are from the time of Shalmaneser V, who defeated Israel in 722, thus bringing an end to the Northern Kingdom.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM (509/35)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/UNIVERSITY MUSEUM/UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA (62/16)



to pay tribute (17:3-5). In 722 B.C., the city finally fell to Shalmaneser (17:6, 18:9-12), who died that same year. His successor, Sargon II (722-705 B.C.), took credit in inscriptions for deporting over 27,000 inhabitants of Samaria.

Sargon campaigned in the region to counter rebellions in Gaza (720 B.C.) and Ashdod (712 B.C., Isa. 20:1). Sargon died in battle (704 B.C.) and Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) ascended the throne in the midst of widespread revolt led by Merodach-Baladan of Babylon. Hezekiah of Judah also led a number of states in Phoenicia and Palestine in rebellion.

After subduing Babylon, Sennacherib turned his attention westward. In 701 B.C., he reasserted control over Phoenicia, sacked Joppa and Ashkelon, and invaded Judah where Hezekiah had made considerable military preparations (2 Kings 20:20, 2 Chron. 32:1-8,30; Isa. 22:8-11; 36:20). He destroyed many walled cities, including Lachish and besieged, but did not capture, Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:13-19:36). Carved panels at Nineveh's palace show graphic details of Sennacherib's conquest of Lachish. While laying siege to Lachish, Sennacherib also sent an army against Jerusalem.

Three of Sennacherib's dignitaries tried to negotiate the surrender of Jerusalem (18:17-37), but because of Isaiah's encouragement (19:1-7,20-36) Hezekiah refused to surrender. In the end the Assyrian army withdrew,



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/UNIVERSITY MUSEUM/UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA (6/3/2)

586 B.C., relocating many survivors to Babylon.

From the broader international perspective, Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.) reestablished Assyrian power and began wars of conquest. In 743, he began a series of campaigns into Syria and Palestine. Annexing

Aramean kingdoms as provinces, he exacted tribute from Israel and Judah (2 Kings 15-16).

Little is known of the reign of Tiglath-Pileser's successor, Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) except that he besieged Samaria for three years in response to Hoshea's failure

but Hezekiah paid an enormous tribute (18:14-16).

Either at this time, or in 688 B.C., a plague decimated the Assyrian army at Jerusalem and 185,000 soldiers died overnight (19:35-36; Isa. 37:36). The fifth century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus said that a plague of field

mice destroyed the army's equipment and the Assyrians were defeated.

Hezekiah was the only king in the region to keep his throne. Some years after returning to Nineveh (in 681 B.C.), Sennacherib's own sons took his life (v. 37). Because he had razed Babylon, the Babylonians considered Sennacherib's death divine retribution for the assault on their sacred city.

Chaldean rulers of Babylon continued unabated to foment discontent and rebellion against Assyria, even as apparent Assyrian success and expansion rolled on. Ashurbanipal ruled at Assyria's zenith but also saw the beginning of the empire's swift collapse. Egypt rebelled again in 651 B.C., but Assyria could do nothing because of war with Elam, Babylon, and others from 652-639 B.C., a war that significantly depleted Assyria's resources.

Ashurbanipal left no official records after 639. With his death in 627 B.C. unrest escalated. By 626 B.C., Babylon had fallen to the Chaldean Nabopolassar. Outlying states, such as Judah (which was under Josiah, 641-609 B.C.), were free to rebel without fear, allowing Josiah to bring temporary reform and restoration to Judah. War continued with Babylon until 614 B.C., when the Medes sacked the old Assyrian capital of Asshur.

In 612 B.C., both Calah and Nineveh fell to a combination force of Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians. The Babylonians conquered Haran, the last Assyrian stronghold, in 609 B.C. and Assyria was no more. The story of Assyria finally ended with the decisive defeat of Egypt at

Carchemish in 605 B.C. under the Babylonian crown prince Nebuchadnezzar, thus solidifying Babylonian dominance as the next superpower.

Uncontrolled peoples on the fringes of Assyrian dominance had tried to displace the Assyrians many times, but the difference at this time was that Assyria was stretched so far in so many directions that it was more vulnerable than ever before. Its most ancient foe, Egypt, was subdued when Thebes was sacked in 663 B.C. Ashurbanipal II, who ruled 669-627 B.C., presided over the greatest extent of Assyria but also over the beginning of her fatal decline. Expansion continued until about 640 B.C. Even the victory over Susa, Elam's capital, further depleted Assyria's military assets.⁵

These conquests in the south and the east meant more extensive boundaries to defend than ever before. The deterioration of Assyrian power accelerated after the death of Ashurbanipal II. Chaldean Nabopolassar took control of Babylon in 626 B.C. and orchestrated attacks on many Assyrian positions that quickly took their toll. Babylon's Elamite, Persian, and Median allies came from the east. Scythians on the northern frontier, and others, including the Lydians from Asia, came from the west.

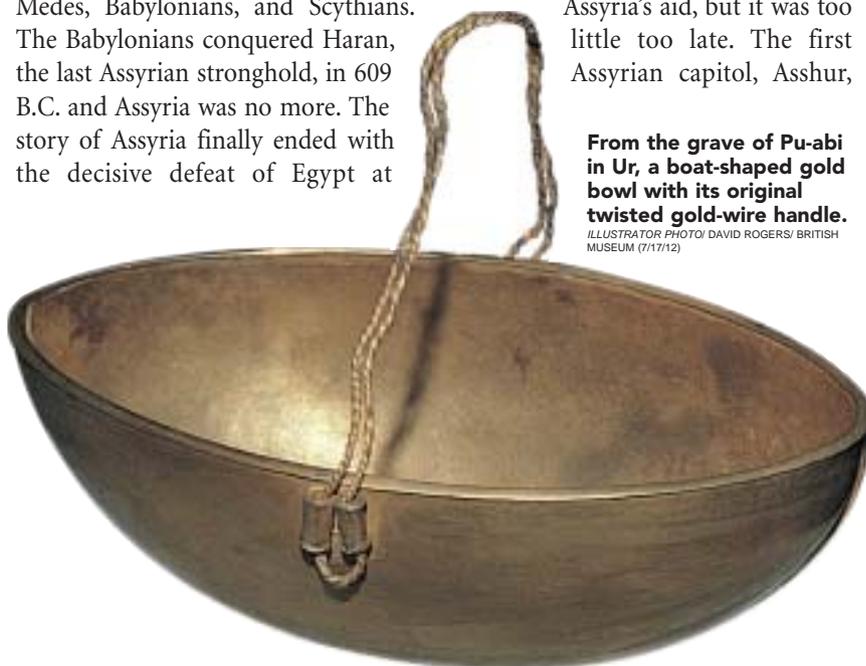
With Assyria collapsing, the new Egyptian pharaoh, Neco II, came to Assyria's aid, but it was too little too late. The first Assyrian capitol, Asshur,

fell in 614 B.C., and the great city of Nineveh followed two years later. In 610 B.C., Haran in the north fell and with it the last Assyrian defendable position. The last Assyrian army failed in its attempt to retake Haran in 609 B.C., and the once grand empire simply ceased to exist.

Chaldean Victory

Though they were latecomers to the region, the Chaldeans' success ultimately resulted in the term *Chaldean* becoming virtually synonymous with the term *Babylonian*. Chaldean ascendancy was short-lived. Yet the Chaldeans served as God's instrument in fulfilling His promise to the Israelites through Moses: abandoning covenantal obligations would result in both loss of the land and the people being scattered to the four winds. Second Kings 24-25 documents the tragedy that Habakkuk had vividly described in his prophecy (see Hab. 1:5-11). Though shaken to his core by what the Lord revealed to him, Habakkuk clung to hope, as God's promise of judgment was tempered by His grace.

Moses also promised that God would fulfill all His promises to Abraham, gathering His scattered people again and blessing all the peoples of the earth through Abraham's descendants. Unfolding in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the ultimate fulfillment remains for Christ's second coming to establish His kingdom and rule in glory and splendor. **B**



From the grave of Pu-abi in Ur, a boat-shaped gold bowl with its original twisted gold-wire handle.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ BRITISH MUSEUM (7/17/12)

1. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Peoples of the Old Testament World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 57-58.

2. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, James Orr, gen. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1956), 1: 589-590.

3. See "Babylon, History and Religion," *Holman Bible Dictionary*, Trent C. Butler, gen. ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1991), 141.

4. Hoerth, Mattingly, and Yamauchi, 57.

5. Brisco, Thomas C., *Holman Bible Atlas* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998), 150.

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