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A General History for Colleges and High Schools

by P. V. N. Myers, c. 1889

Part I. Ancient History Section I.--The Eastern Nations

Chapter 5

CHAPTER V.

BABYLONIA.

Babylonian Affairs from 1300 to 625 B.C.—During the six centuries and more that intervened between the conquest of the old Chaldæan monarchy by the Assyrian king Tiglathi-Nin and the successful revolt of the low countries under Nabopolassar (see pp. 43, 51), the Babylonian peoples bore the Assyrian yoke very impatiently. Again and again they made violent efforts to throw it off; and in several instances they succeeded, and for a time enjoyed home rulers. But for the most part the whole country as far as the "Sea," as the Persian Gulf is called in the inscriptions, was a dependency of the great overshadowing empire of the north.

Nabopolassar (625-604 B.C.).—Nabopolassar was the first king of what is called the New Babylonian Monarchy. When troubles and misfortunes began to thicken about the last Assyrian king, Saracus, he intrusted to the care of Nabopolassar, as his viceroy, the towns and provinces of the South. The chance now presented of obtaining a crown proved too great a temptation for the satrap's fidelity to his master. He revolted and became independent (625 B.C.). Later, he entered into an alliance with the Median king, Cyaxares, against his former sovereign (see p. 51). Through the overthrow of Nineveh and the break-up of the Assyrian Empire, the new Babylonian kingdom received large accessions of territory.

Nebuchadnezzar (604-561 B.C.).—Nabopolassar was followed by his renowned son Nebuchadnezzar, whose oppressive wars and gigantic architectural works rendered Babylon at once the scourge and the wonder of the ancient world.

Jerusalem, having repeatedly revolted, was finally taken and sacked. The temple was stripped of its sacred vessels of silver

and gold, which were carried away to Babylon, and the temple itself with the adjoining palace was given to the flames; the people, save a miserable remnant, were also borne away into the "Great Captivity" (586 B.C.).

With Jerusalem subdued, Nebuchadnezzar pushed with all his forces the siege of the Phœnician city of Tyre, whose investment had been commenced several years before. In striking language the prophet Ezekiel (ch. xxix. 18) describes the length and hardness of the siege: "Every head was made bald, and every shoulder was peeled." After a siege of thirteen years, the city seems to have fallen into the hands of the Babylonian king, and his authority was now undisputed from the Zagros Mountains to the Mediterranean.

The numerous captives of his many wars, embracing peoples of almost every nation in Western Asia, enabled Nebuchadnezzar to rival even the Pharaohs in the execution of enormous works requiring an immense expenditure of human labor. Among his works were the Great Palace in the royal quarter of the city; the celebrated Hanging Gardens; and gigantic reservoirs, canals, and various engineering works, embracing a vast system of irrigation that reached every part of Babylonia.

In addition to all these works, the indefatigable monarch seems to have either rebuilt or repaired almost every city and temple throughout the entire country. There are said to be at least a hundred sites in the tract immediately about Babylon which give evidence, by inscribed bricks bearing his legend, of the marvellous activity and energy of this monarch.

In the midst of all these gigantic undertakings, surrounded by a brilliant court of councillors and flatterers, the reason of the king was suddenly and mysteriously clouded.¹ After a period the cloud

¹ "Nebuchadnezzar fell a victim to that mental aberration which has often proved the penalty of despotism, but in the strange and degrading form to which physicians have given the name of lycanthropy; in which the patient, fancying himself a beast, rejects clothing and ordinary food, and even (as in this case) the shelter of a roof, ceases to use articulate speech, and sometimes persists in going on all-fours." — Smith's *Ancient History of the East*, p. 357.

passed away, "the glory of his kingdom, his honor, and brightness returned unto him." But it was the splendor of the evening; for the old monarch soon after died at the age of eighty, worn out by the toils and cares of a reign of forty-three years, the longest, most memorable, and instructive in the annals of the Babylonian or Assyrian kings.

The Fall of Babylon. — In 555 B.C., Nabonadius, the last king of Babylon, began his reign. He seems to have associated with himself in the government his son Belshazzar, who shared with his father the duties and honors of royalty, apparently on terms of equal co-sovereignty.

To the east of the valley of the Tigris and the Euphrates, beyond the ranges of the Zagros, there had been growing up an Aryan kingdom, the Medo-Persian, which, at the time now reached by us, had excited by its aggressive spirit the alarm of all the nations of Western Asia. For purposes of mutual defence, the king of Babylon, and Cræsus, the well-known monarch of Lydia, a state of Asia Minor, formed an alliance against Cyrus, the strong and ambitious sovereign of the Medes and Persians. This league awakened the resentment of Cyrus, and, after punishing Cræsus and depriving him of his kingdom (see p. 75), he collected his forces to chastise the Babylonian king.

Anticipating the attack, Nabonadius had strengthened the defences of Babylon, and stationed around it supporting armies. But he was able to avert the fatal blow for only a few years. Risking a battle in the open field, his army was defeated, and the gates of the capital were thrown open to the Persians (538 B.C.).¹

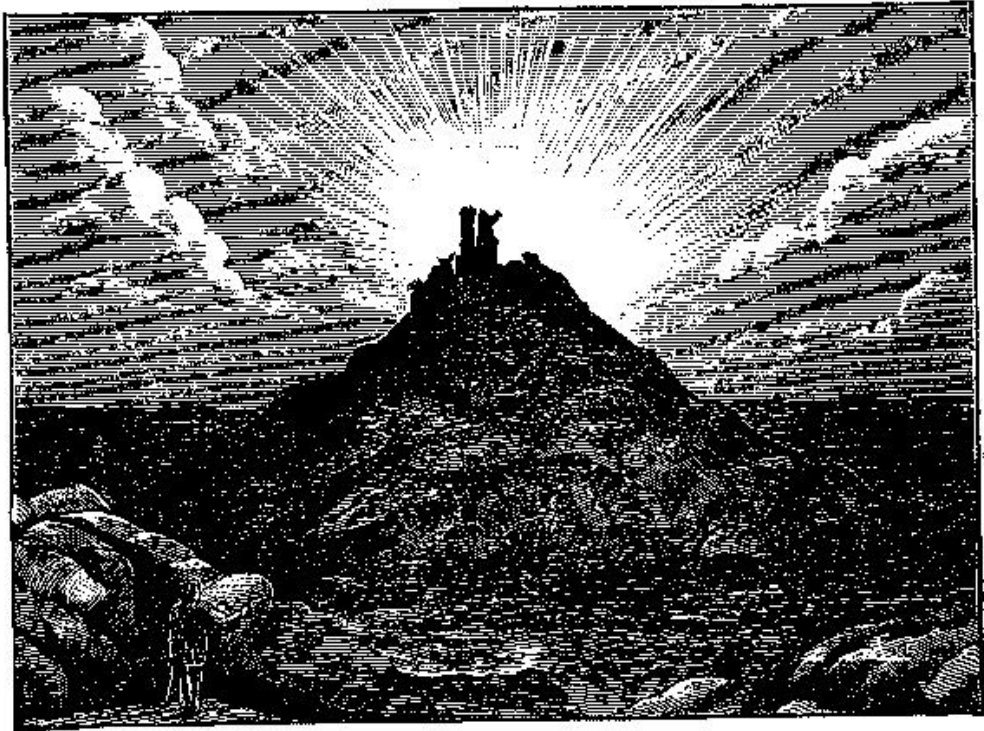
With the fall of Babylon, the sceptre of dominion, borne for so many years by Semitic princes, was given into the hands of the Aryan peoples, who were destined, from this time forward, to shape the course of events, and control the affairs of civilization.

¹ The device of turning the Euphrates, which Herodotus makes an incident of the siege, was not resorted to by Cyrus; but it seems that a little later (in 521-519 B.C.), the city, having revolted, was actually taken in this way by the Persian king Darius. Herodotus confused the two events.

The Great Edifices of Babylon. — The deep impression which Babylon produced upon the early Greek travellers was made chiefly by her vast architectural works, — her temples, palaces, elevated gardens, and great walls. The Hanging Gardens of Nebuchadnezzar and the walls of the city were reckoned among the wonders of the world.

The Babylonians, like their predecessors the Chaldæans, accorded to the sacred edifice the place of pre-eminence among their architec-

tural works. Sacred architecture in the time of Nebuchadnezzar had changed but little from the early Chaldæan models (see p. 44); save that the temples were now larger and more splendid, being



BIRS-NIMRUD. (Ruins of the great Temple of the Seven Spheres, near Babylon.)

made, in the language of the inscriptions, "to shine like the sun." The celebrated Temple of the Seven Spheres, at Borsippa, a suburb of Babylon, may serve as a representative of the later Babylonian temples. This structure was a vast pyramid, rising in seven consecutive stages, or platforms, to a height of over one hundred and fifty feet. Each of the stages was dedicated to one of the seven planets, or spheres. (The sun and moon were reckoned as planets.) The stages sacred to the sun and moon were covered respectively with plates of gold and silver. The chapel, or shrine proper, surmounted the uppermost stage. An inscribed cylinder discovered under the corner of one

of the stages (the Babylonians always buried records beneath the corners of their public edifices), informs us that this temple was a restoration by Nebuchadnezzar of a very ancient one, which in his day had become, from "extreme old age," a heap of rubbish. This edifice in its decay has left one of the grandest and most impressive ruins in all the East.

The Babylonian palaces and palace-mounds, in all essential features, were like those of the Assyrians, already described.

The so-called Hanging Gardens excited the greatest admiration of the ancient Greek visitors to Babylon. They were constructed by Nebuchadnezzar, to please his wife Amytis, who, tired of the monotony of the Babylonian plains, longed for the mountain scenery of her native Media. The gardens were probably built somewhat in the form of the tower-temples, the successive stages being covered with earth, and beautified with rare plants and trees, so as to simulate the appearance of a mountain rising in cultivated terraces towards the sky.

Under the later kings, Babylon was surrounded with stupendous walls. Herodotus affirms that these defences enclosed an area just fourteen miles square. A recently discovered inscription corroborates the statement of the historian. The object in enclosing such an enormous district seems to have been to bring sufficient arable ground within the defences to support the inhabitants in case of a protracted siege. No certain traces of these great ramparts can now be found.