

Nebuchadnezzar

Contents

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NEBUCHADNEZZAR *neb-ə-kəd-nez ər*,
neb-yoo-kəd-nez ər [Heb *nebûkadre šsar*,
nebûkadne šsar < Akk *nabû-kudurri-ušur*—‘Nabu
has guarded my boundary-stone’ or ‘May Nabu
protect ...’ or ‘... the accession-rights’; Gk *Nabou-
chodonosor*]. King of Babylon (605–562 b.c.) and
conqueror of Jerusalem.

I. Forms of the Name The form *nebûkadre šsar*
(and its variants), with an *r*, occurs thirty-three
times in the OT — twenty-nine times in Jeremiah,
four times in Ezekiel. The form *nebûkadne šsar*
(and its variants), with an *n*, occurs fifty-eight
times — thirty-two times in Daniel and otherwise
in Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and
Jeremiah. On the basis of the Akkadian, the form
with *r* is generally preferred. The theory that
the form with *n* comes from Aramaic is perhaps
to be rejected, since the illustration usually given
(Ben/Bar Hadad) has *r* in the Aramaic form. An-
other theory, that “Nebuchadnezzar” arises from
an Aramaic word that translates Akk *kudurri*, is
specious. The LXX supports the form with *n* and
is followed by the Vulgate; these versions are late,
however, and do not provide evidence contempo-
rary with the prophets. The form used by Josephus
is that of the LXX. Possibly the *n/r* shift is dial-
ectal, but this explanation is made questionable by
occurrences of both forms in one book, Jeremiah
(chs 27–29 only). Since Jeremiah and Ezekiel are
unquestionably from the time of the king, their
evidence may be stronger — but the evidence of
Daniel and of Jer. 27–29 is not to be brushed aside
lightly.

II. Historical Sketch Nebuchadnezzar, fre-
quently called “king of Babylon” in the OT, was
the son of Nabopolassar (a usurper of the throne).
His sons were Awîl-Marduk (Evil-merodach; the
later spelling *Amêl-Marduk* is orthographic, not
phonetic, as the Hebrew form indicates), Marduk-
šum-ušur, and *Marduk-nadin-aḥi*, and his wife was
Amytis, the daughter of Astyages king of Media.
Knowledge about Nebuchadnezzar comes from a
number of sources: about five hundred contracts
dated variously to forty-three years of his reign,
about thirty inscriptions, the biblical books men-
tioned above, and the authors Berossus, Menander
of Ephesus, Megasthenes, Abydenus, and Alexan-
der Polyhistor, who are known mostly from cita-
tions in Josephus and Eusebius. Most important
for chronology, however, are the tablets published
in CCK. Records from the eleventh to forty-third
years of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar are almost en-
tirely lacking, however, except for fragments of an
inscription dated in the thirty-seventh year.

Nebuchadnezzar II — so designated to distinguish
him from Nebuchadnezzar I (1112–1103) and from
the pretenders Nebuchadnezzar III (*Nidintu-Bêl*,
who reigned three months in 522) and Nebuchadrez-
zar IV (Arakha, who reigned from Aug. to Nov.,
521) — acceded to the throne when his father
died in 605. In Nabopolassar’s nineteenth regnal
year (607) in the month of Siwanu he and the
crown prince had led an expedition against moun-
tain tribes (CCK, pp. 64–67). The father in his
twenty-first year (605) remained in Babylon, prob-
ably because of failing health, and the army un-
der Nebuchadnezzar engaged the Egyptians at Car-
chemish. The Egyptians were badly beaten, and
Nebuchadnezzar proceeded to conquer *Hatti*-land
(Syria and Palestine; CCK, pp. 66–75; cf. Josephus
Ant. x.6.1 [84–86]). On 8 Abu (Aug. 15) Nabopo-

lassar died, and when Nebuchadnezzar received the news, he hurried back to secure his claim, ascending the throne on 1 Elul (Sept. 7), 605. Following the custom of his predecessors he counted this his “accession year” (MU.SAG; CCK, pp. 68f); the first year of his reign commenced when he “took the hands” of the gods Bel and Bel’s son on 1 Nisanu (Apr. 2, 604; lines 14f). According to lines 13f Nebuchadnezzar returned to *Hatti*-land in his accession year “until the month of Shabatu” (Feb. 2–Mar. 2, 604) and took “heavy tribute.”

In his first year Nebuchadnezzar again invaded *Hatti*-land in Siwanu (May–June), receiving heavy tribute from “all the kings” and sacking Ashkelon in Kisliwu (Nov.–Dec.). According to his chronicle he “turned the city into a mound and heaps of ruins” and returned to Babylon in Shabatu (Jan. 23–Feb. 20, 603). In his second, third, and fourth years Nebuchadnezzar conducted campaigns in *Hatti*-land. The significance of these data for biblical studies will be mentioned below.

The campaign in the fourth year (Kisliwu, early Dec., 601) brought a confrontation with the Egyptian forces. The chronicle reports that they “inflicted great havoc on each other” (reverse, line 7), and as a result Nebuchadnezzar spent his fifth year at home rebuilding his army (reverse, line 8). Jehoiakim had been placed on the throne of Judah by Pharaoh Neco in 608. 2 K. 24:1 states: “Nebuchadnezzar ... came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant three years; then he turned and rebelled against him.” It is reasonable to assume that this revolt took place soon after the battle with Egypt (cf. Josephus Ant. x.6.2 [88]). In his sixth year Nebuchadnezzar was in *Hatti*-land from Kisliwu (Nov.–Dec., 599) until Addaru (Feb.–Mar., 598), during which time he “took much plunder from the Arabs” (reverse, line 10; cf. Jer. 49:28).

In the seventh year in the month of Kisliwu (Dec., 598–Jan., 597) the king marched his troops to *Hatti*-land and “encamped against the city of Judah.” After a siege of three months he took the city and captured the king (cf. 2 K. 24:10–16). He dated this event “the second day of Addaru,” i.e., Mar. 15/16, 597 (not 598, as sometimes given; the author of 2 Kings, using a Tishri-Tishri year, calculated that this was Nebuchadnezzar’s eighth regnal year — the first would have commenced in Tishri, 605, the beginning of Jehoiakim’s fourth regnal year). Nebuchadnezzar put on the throne of Judah “a king of his heart,” namely, the puppet Zedekiah (v 17). Jehoiachin, who had succeeded his father Jehoiakim, was taken to Babylon (v 12;

2 Ch. 36:10; Ezk. 40:1).

In his ninth year the Babylonian king seems to have had a confrontation with Akkad and Elam (reverse, lines 16–20, broken text). In the tenth year (595–594) and again in the eleventh he put down a rebellion in Akkad and also had reason to march into *Hatti*-land (reverse, lines 21–25). The Babylonian Chronicles break off at this point and do not resume until the third year of Neriglissar, 556. Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by his son Awil-Marduk (Evil-merodach) in early October, 562. This date is deduced from two bits of evidence: the last date formula based on the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, 26 Ululu of his forty-third year, which is found on a tablet from Uruk (modern Warka, biblical Erech); and the first date formula based on the reign of Awil-Marduk, 26 Ululu of his accession year, found on a tablet perhaps from Sippar. Nebuchadnezzar could not have died much earlier than the latter date, i.e., Oct. 8, 562 (cf. R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology* [2nd ed 1956], p. 12).

Between Nebuchadnezzar’s eleventh and forty-third years a number of events must be placed. According to Josephus there was a thirteen-year siege of Tyre beginning in Nebuchadnezzar’s seventh year (CAp. i.21 [156, 159], an account probably from Menander of Ephesus; cf. Ezk. 29:18). A text published in 1882 by T. G. Pinches (*Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, 7 [1882], 210–225) records Nebuchadnezzar’s march in the thirty-seventh year of his reign against Amasis king of Egypt. According to Pinches this was an expedition to quell the revolt of Amasis (Ahmoses), who had been placed on the Egyptian throne as a Babylonian puppet after the defeat of Apries (Hophra) in 572. The many building projects in Babylon, some of which have left inscriptions, must be placed in this period (cf. Dnl. 4:30; see Babylon IV). And, of course, the siege and destruction of Jerusalem occurred in this period (see Jerusalem III.E).

III. Biblical Significance Since Nebuchadnezzar is named about ninety times in the OT, his importance is to be carefully evaluated. It falls biblically into two categories, the historical and the apocalyptic.

A. Historical Nebuchadnezzar was the king who brought the Davidic dynasty to an end. He besieged Jerusalem, captured it, and finally destroyed it completely. He carried its last legitimate king (Jehoiachin) captive to Babylon, recognizing his

royal status by providing daily rations and thus preserving his seed.

According to Dnl. 1:1–6 the Babylonian king came to Jerusalem in the third year of Jehoiakim (*see* Daniel, Book of VIII.B), besieged it, and carried off not only treasures but also members of the royal family and nobility, among whom was Daniel. It is not known what chronological system Daniel used. According to that used in 2 Kings Jehoiakim's first regnal year began in Tishri (Sept. 10), 608, and he reigned eleven years (23:36), or until 597. His third year, according to this reckoning, would have begun in Tishri, 606, and extended to Tishri, 605. It is clear that Nebuchadnezzar was still crown prince until he ascended the throne in September, 605, and it is hardly likely that he would have taken time to collect people and goods from Jerusalem when he was rushing back to Babylon to secure his throne. More reasonable, it seems, is the view that the "siege" of Jerusalem to which Daniel refers took place in 604, when the Babylonian king destroyed Ashkelon and made Jehoiakim his tributary (2 K. 24:1; cf. Jer. 47:5). Jehoiakim revolted in the third year, which coincides with the terrible beating that the Babylonians took at the hands of Egypt in Nebuchadnezzar's fourth year (Josephus Ant. x.6.2 [88]).

The siege to which the author of 2 Kings referred (24:10) occurred in the eighth year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign (v 12). As pointed out above, Nebuchadnezzar's eighth regnal year by his reckoning did not begin until 1 Nisan (Apr. 13) 597, whereas according to the Tishri-Tishri year it had already begun the preceding October, which was also the start of Jehoiakim's eleventh year. Jehoiakim died and was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin (Coniah), who reigned but three months (v 8; 2 Ch. 36:9). According to the Babylonian Chronicle, Jerusalem was taken on 2 Adar (Mar. 16); hence Jehoiachin's accession to the throne can be calculated as at the end of 598 (specifically Dec. 9, 598, if the "three months and ten days" of 2 Ch. 36:9 are taken literally). Mattaniah, son of Josiah and uncle of Jehoiachin, was put on the throne as a puppet and given the throne-name of Zedekiah (2 K. 24:17). Zedekiah's first regnal year was counted from 1 Tishri (Oct. 9) 597.

Because of Zedekiah's revolt against Babylon, in the ninth year of his reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month (Jan. 15), 588, the armies of Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem (2 K. 25:1; Jer. 52:4; Ezk. 24:1f). The Egyptians apparently attempted to come to the aid of Judah (cf. Jer.

37:4f). Ezekiel's prophecy against Pharaoh (Ezk. 29:1ff, dated Jan. 7, 587) and Jeremiah's attempt to go to the land of Benjamin (Jer. 37:11f) are to be related to this event. On 9 Tammuz (July 18) 586 there was severe famine in Jerusalem (2 K. 25:3; Jer. 39:2). A breach was made in the walls; the Judean king and his warriors attempted to flee but were overtaken "in the plains of Jericho" (2 K. 25:5). Zedekiah was taken prisoner to Riblah (near Hamath on the Orontes), where the Babylonian king had his headquarters, and punishment was meted out (vv 6f; Jer. 39:4–8; 52:6–11). On 7 Ab (Aug. 12; cf. 2 K. 25:8) or 10 Ab (Aug. 15; cf. Jer. 52:12) in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar Jerusalem was burned, the walls were destroyed, and many of the people were taken captive (Jer. 52:13ff). Gedaliah was appointed governor with his headquarters at Mizpeh (2 K. 25:22f). He was killed by what appears to have been some of the pro-Egypt Judeans (v 25; Jer. 41:2; cf. 40:1–43:13). Jehoiachin, the last surviving king of the Davidic dynasty, was released from prison on 27 Adar (Apr. 2) 561, "in the year that he [Evilmerodach] began to reign" (i.e., in his accession year; cf. 2 K. 25:27–30; Jer. 52:31 dates the release two days earlier).

According to Dnl. 2:1 Nebuchadnezzar's dreams occurred in his second regnal year. He built a colossal image of gold and set it up on the plain of Dura (3:1); Daniel's companions refused to worship it. The king's tree dream was fulfilled by a curious disease (sometimes identified as lycanthropy, but more accurately boanthropy) that lasted for "seven times," generally interpreted to mean seven years. Whether these data are to be taken as a record of historical events or as figures used in an apocalyptic prophecy is debatable. The disease in particular has led some scholars to conclude that the author has mistakenly identified Nabonidus, Babylon's last king and often characterized as insane, with Nebuchadnezzar.

B. Apocalyptic Beyond question, Daniel is an apocalyptic work, for its stated purpose is to reveal what is to take place "in the latter days" (10:14; cf. 2:45). A characteristic of apocalypses is the use of historical and geographical names symbolically to set forth a revelation. Thus "Babylon" in Rev. 17–18 is generally interpreted to mean "Rome," but more likely it was meant to symbolize any tyrannical and satanic anti-God system. "Nebuchadnezzar" can be similarly interpreted as the splendid head of a great world kingdom that was given several opportunities to recognize the king-

dom of God (and appeared to do so — but repeatedly, indicating a lack of true repentance; cf. Dnl. 2:29; 4:34–37 [MT 31–34]; likewise Darius, 6:26–28 [MT 27–29]). This interpretation is not a rejection of the historicity of Daniel; it is rather a recognition that the author’s dreams and visions were God-given revelations, in the form of apocalyptic, of what would take place concerning the people of God, and in particular the establishment of the kingdom of God (cf. W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, and F. W. Bush, *OT Survey* [1982], ch 51).

In the days of the great king Nebuchadnezzar, who is portrayed as the head of gold (2:38), was foretold the end of man-made governments and the advent of the kingdom that God will establish and that will never be destroyed (v 44).

Bibliography.—D. J. Wiseman, CCK; *Assyria and Babylonia, ca 1200–1000b.c.* (1965), pp. 14–17; Josephus Ant. x.6.1–11.1 (84–228); CAp i.19–21 (131–160).

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