

Daniel 4 and the Testimony of Nebuchadnezzar

How the Emperor Persuades the Nations to Submit to the Most High God

By Mark Hassler

When we consider the topics of evangelism and epistolary literature in the Bible, we normally think of the NT documents. Might the OT book of Daniel contain an evangelistic epistle?

Six of Daniel's twelve chapters originally appeared in Hebrew, and the other six in Aramaic. The Aramaic section, chapters 2–7, conveys conceptual parallels as illustrated below. The central segments of the parallelism, chapters 4 and 5, describe the dethronements of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. Belshazzar clung to his pride until the bitter end (5:22–23). He died at a drinking party, unrepentant and possibly even inebriated (“under the influence of beer,” v. 2). Nebuchadnezzar, on the other hand, arguably experienced true spiritual conversion. This foray into Daniel 4 contends that Nebuchadnezzar published his personal testimony as a redeemed evangelist in order to persuade the nations to submit to the Most High God.

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Conceptual parallels of Daniel 2–7.

Nebuchadnezzar's Epistle

Nebuchadnezzar stands as one of the most famous rulers of antiquity. He comes to the fore in the books of Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and numerous other sources. According to the Nebuchadnezzar Chronicle, after the battle of Carchemish he captured Jerusalem¹. He prospered as the world ruler and reigned 43 years (605–562 BC).

Later in life, the emperor issued an epistle “to all the peoples, nations, and languages” (Dn 4:1). His purpose for writing emerges in verse 2: “It seemed good to me to declare the signs and wonders which the Most High God has done for me.” By writing an autobiography, the king made known the miracles that God had performed for him.

The theme of Nebuchadnezzar's epistle surfaces in verse 3: “His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion endures from generation to generation.” This excerpt derives most notably from Psalm 145:13. Nebuchadnezzar employs Scripture—a psalm by David. Not only that, but he repeats the excerpt at the end of his epistle. The monarch begins and ends his testimony by appealing to Scripture. The excerpt brackets the letter and therefore reveals the theme: God's kingdom endures.

Nebuchadnezzar's own kingdom, by contrast, would not endure. That reality bothered the king earlier in his reign. As a young king, Nebuchadnezzar envisioned a colossus with a head of gold. A stone came hurling out of the sky and pulverized the colossus. The message was clear: mankind's kingdoms will not endure. Obviously, Nebuchadnezzar rejected the message, because soon thereafter he defied the Most High by erecting a

90 ft (27 m) gold-plated effigy on the plain of Dura (Dn 3:1). Hubris certainly characterized Nebuchadnezzar. Subsequently, however, Nebuchadnezzar used his platform as the world ruler to tell everyone what the King of heaven had done for him. And what had the Most High done? It all began with God giving the emperor a nightmare.

Nebuchadnezzar's Nightmare

Everything in life seemed to go Nebuchadnezzar's way—that is, until a nightmare caused the king great consternation. He called for the sages, but they failed to interpret the vision. Finally, the king summoned Daniel to elucidate the dream. As the king spoke to Daniel, he bracketed his discourse with the affirmation that “the Spirit of the holy God is in you” (4:9, 18). This *inclusio*, or envelope structure, indicates that Nebuchadnezzar viewed Daniel's relationship to God as his chief qualification for interpreting the dream.

In the dream, the emperor saw a fruit tree—tall, stout, conspicuous and attractive. The tree provided food and protection for the birds and wild animals. A spirit-being descended from heaven and instructed the listeners to chop the tree and dismantle it, but to leave the roots. The watcher had sentenced someone to a life of beasthood for seven periods of time (v. 16). The identity of that particular someone greatly concerned the emperor.

Daniel finally interpreted the nightmare. The tree represented Nebuchadnezzar. The majestic tree would fall, but the roots would survive. The monarch would lose his sovereignty for a period of seven, but when he acknowledged God's sovereignty, he would regain his empire. The nightmare forecasted a role reversal and irony of epic proportions: the dictator would plummet from the lofty position of being the

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tree that provides for the wild beasts, to the humiliating position of being a beast-like creature himself. To the horror of Nebuchadnezzar, the nightmare became a reality.

Nebuchadnezzar's Dethronement

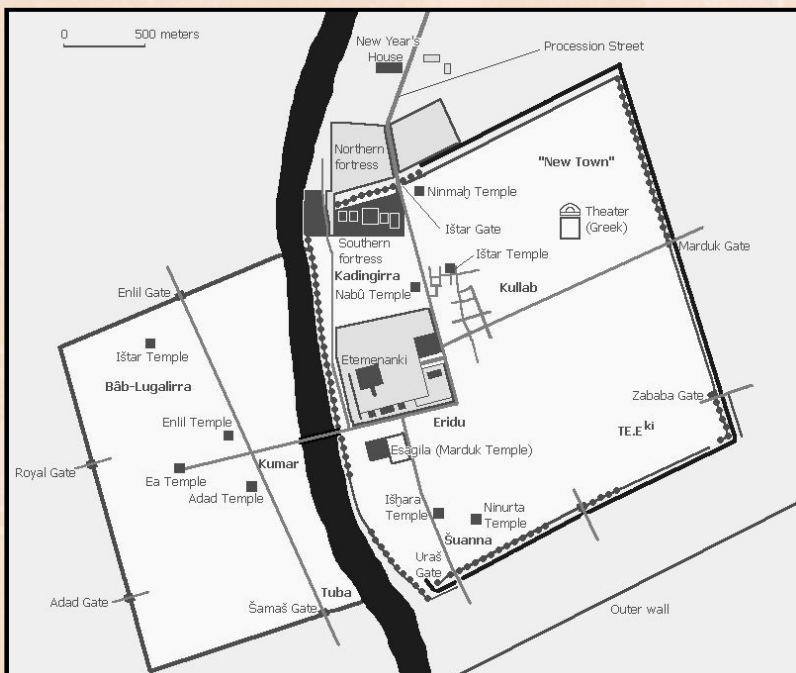
Twelve months after the nightmare, while atop his palace, Nebuchadnezzar boasted, “Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dn 4:30).

Nebuchadnezzar certainly revitalized Babylon's culture, economics, politics, religion, art, literature and technology.² Walls, watchtowers, gates, roads, temples, palaces, moats, bridges and waterworks dazzled the eye. Of all the ancient cities, only Babylon had multiple listings among the Seven Wonders of the World. The list by Antipater of Sidon in 140 BC included the Hanging Gardens and “the walls of impregnable Babylon along which chariots may race.”³

Inscriptions and archaeological finds illustrate the greatness of Babylon and the pride of Nebuchadnezzar. The twin inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar in the Wadi esh-Sharbin in Lebanon read,

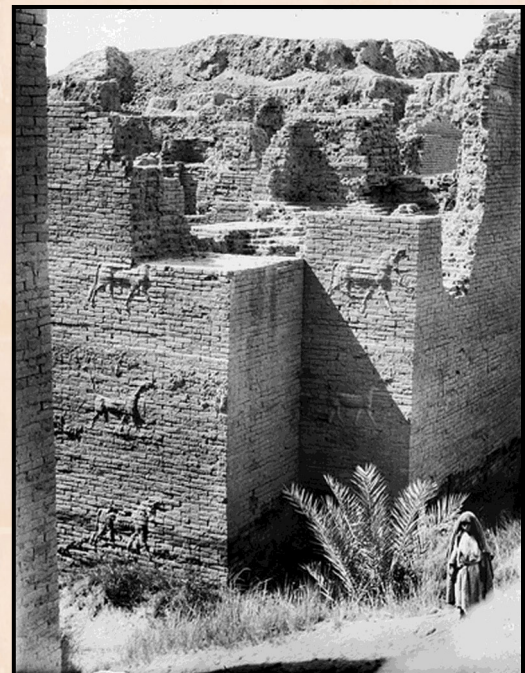
I made Babylon pre-eminent [from] the Upper Sea [to] the Lower Sea, all the lands that my lord Marduk had entrusted specially to me, in the totality of all lands, the whole of all the inhabited world...I caused its (Babylon's) name to be praised.⁴

Robert Koldewey excavated Babylon from 1899 to 1917 on behalf of the German Oriental Society. He unearthed the



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Archaeological map of Babylon showing the location of the Esagila.



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Excavated ruins of Babylon. Ishtar Gate, 1932.

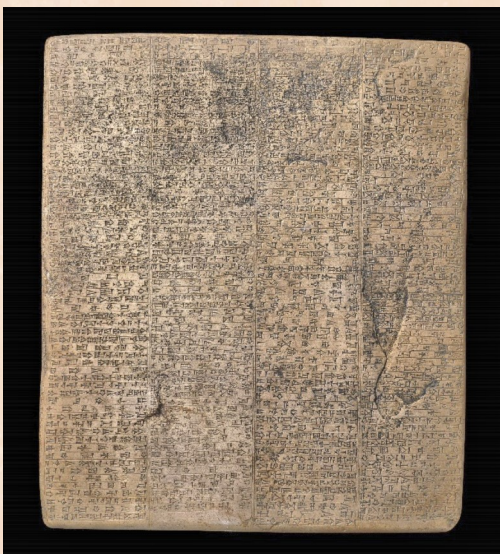


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The reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.

grandest ruin in Babylon, the famous Ishtar Gate. It functioned as the city's main gate, one of eight double gates in the inner wall. The gate structure consisted of glazed mudbricks decorated with more than 575 bulls (*aurochs*) and dragons (*sirrushes*).⁵ The East India House Inscription describes the construction of the gate in Nebuchadnezzar's words:

I skillfully rebuilt (the gate) in pure lapis-glazed baked bricks, by which means bulls and dragons were fashioned within it; I stretched across it mighty (beams of) cedar for its roof; I set firmly in place the doors of cedar overlaid with bronze, the thresholds and the door-pivots, cast in copper, in each of its gates; I stationed at their sills fierce bulls of copper and frenzied dragons, filling these gates with splendor to the wonderment of the whole nation.⁶



©Trustees of the British Museum

East India House Inscription: A large stone slab (57 x 50 x 10 cm) engraved with cuneiform.

The Ishtar Gate led to Processional Way, the city's main strip, flanked with walls decorated with lions.

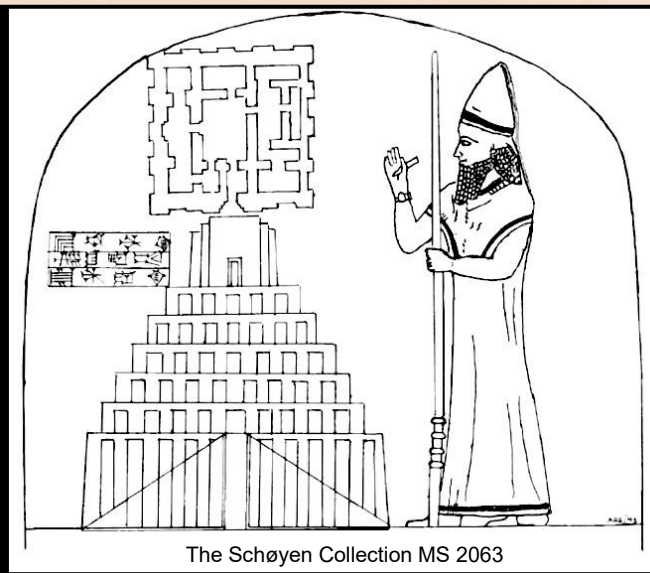
More than 53 temples populated Babylon. The most prominent included the stepped temple tower called Etemenanki and the lower temple known as the Esagila—both dedicated to the god Marduk, and both completed by Nebuchadnezzar. The Etemenanki ziggurat stood 300 ft (91 m) high with a square base of 300 ft (91 m), according to a cuneiform tablet from Uruk.⁷ Hansjörg Schmid, who excavated the ziggurat's foundation and core in 1962, estimated that the temple tower used 32 million bricks.⁸ On the so-called Tower of Babel Stele Nebuchadnezzar states, "[E]-temen-anki and E-ur-me-imin-anki—I built their structures with bitumen and [baked brick throughout.] I completed them, making [them gleam] bright as the [sun]."⁹

Nebuchadnezzar enjoyed multiple palaces, namely, the northern palace, the summer palace, and the southern palace. The southern palace contained the spacious throne room (171 x 56 ft; 52 x 17 m) decorated with tile flooring and fancy murals of multicolored palmettos and floral ornaments. After



Relief of a lion from Processional Way in Pergamon Museum, Berlin.

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The Schøyen Collection MS 2063

Drawing by Martin Schøyen

Image of Nebuchadnezzar and Etemenanki on the upper half of the Tower of Babel stele. One of four extant images of the king.

Nebuchadnezzar's death, the throne room accommodated Belshazzar's banquet.¹⁰

The metropolis possessed inner and outer fortification walls, complete with moats and guard towers. Koldewey traced the outer city wall for 11 mi (18 km) on the eastern side of the Euphrates, but lost the wall on the western side. Even so, the acreage enclosed by the walls surpasses that of any walled city, ancient or modern, including Nineveh.¹¹ The outer wall, Koldewey says, measures a staggering 56–72 ft (17–22 m) thick—about six or seven times thicker than the norm.¹² The inner wall, a double wall, fortified the inner city. One layer,

known as *Imgur-Enlil*, measures an impressive 21 ft (6.5 m) thick, and the other layer, *Nimetti-Enlil*, 12 ft (3.7 m) thick.¹³

Herodotus, the Greek historian of the fourth century BC, marveled at the splendor of Babylon: “in magnificence there is no other city that approaches it.”¹⁴ According to him, the well-planned city formed a square: a moat and two massive walls surrounded the famed metropolis. The outer wall, 15 mi (24 km) per side, stood 333 ft (102 m) high and 83 ft (25 m) thick, while the inner wall was slightly narrower. Atop the outer wall were guard towers and enough room for chariots to patrol. One hundred bronze gates punctuated the wall. Three-



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“Nebuchadnezzar.” Painted by William Blake in 1795 and later enhanced with ink and watercolor by Blake and his wife.

and four-story houses filled the city, which straddled the Euphrates. One half of the city featured the royal palace, which was enclosed by its own wall. In the other half of the city, the enclosure of *Zeus Belus* surrounded an eight-story ziggurat. The Babylonian temple contained a golden statue of Zeus that weighed about 22 tons.¹⁵

Nebuchadnezzar wielded total power and even determined people’s destinies. Everyone “feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled” (Dn 5:19). People feared the despot because he habitually executed and humiliated them. The Aramaic of verse 19 expresses habitual action by the tenfold use of the periphrastic participle.

The grandeur and opulence of Babylon stirred Nebuchadnezzar’s pride, prompting a swift dethronement. As Daniel puts it, “when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne and glory was taken away from him” (5:20). Relegated to beasthood, the king ate plants like cattle, and his dew-soaked body grew hair and long nails, like that of a bird. Human interaction fled as quickly as his mental capabilities. But restoration would come—eventually.

Nebuchadnezzar’s Conversion

Daniel 4:34 signals a new period in Nebuchadnezzar’s life. The period of beasthood came and went. Times had changed. The king’s reason returned, and his officials once again recognized his authority. He even recovered his vast domain.

Did Nebuchadnezzar become a follower of the Most High God? Some interpreters question whether the Bible gives enough information to make a determination. After all, Daniel 4 excludes the vocabulary of salvation such as “faith,” “repentance,” and “pardon.” Nevertheless, six reasons support the notion that Nebuchadnezzar experienced an authentic spiritual conversion.

First, Nebuchadnezzar worshiped the Most High God: “I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever” (v. 34). And again, “I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven” (v. 37). Both confessions use three terms for worship. Verse 34 uses bless, praise, and honor, while verse 37 employs praise, exalt, and honor. The fact that the monarch piles up synonyms for worship reinforces the authenticity of his devotion. Readers would not expect him to use six verbs of worship if he was being disingenuous. Moreover, the verbs of worship appear at a strategic location within the story. They emerge in the first and last verses of the post-beasthood section (vv. 34, 37). The verbs of worship form an *inclusio* that bookends this new chapter in the king’s life, and thus, worship characterizes this period of his life. In addition, no evidence exists that the king continued to worship his former god or gods (cf. 3:14, 4:8). Over time, we can observe a change in the king: at the fiery furnace fiasco, the king outlawed blasphemy against the God of the Hebrews (3:29); as an older man, he himself engaged in worship and public exaltation, unashamed of the Most High.

Second, the king shows humility. His final words reveal his heart: God “is able to humble those who walk in pride” (4:37). An oriental tsar such as Nebuchadnezzar would not have

*The writer of Acts casts Paul as a
Nebuchadnezzar-like figure—that is, as a
dramatically converted evangelist who becomes
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published an autobiographical epistle featuring his own demotion and humiliation, especially if he still embraced his pride. When monarchs or nations suffered humiliation, they would often exclude the circumstances from the historical record. Not so with Nebuchadnezzar.

Third, Nebuchadnezzar embraced God's sovereignty, truth, and justice. The Most High "does according to His will in the army of heaven, and the inhabitants of the earth. No one can ward off His hand, or say to Him, 'What have you done?'" (v. 35). Only after Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged God's sovereignty did he regain his kingdom (4:26, 5:21). Moreover, he believed that the King of heaven governs according to truth and justice: "all His works are true, and His ways just" (4:37).

Fourth, the Most High not only restored Nebuchadnezzar, but restored him abundantly ("surpassing greatness was added to me," v. 36). It appears unlikely that God would lavish Nebuchadnezzar with surpassing greatness if he remained cocky and hardhearted. Nebuchadnezzar's restoration resembles Job's restoration. "Yahweh increased all that Job had twofold" (Jb 42:10).

Fifth, Nebuchadnezzar used Scripture in context. The monarch begins and ends his personal testimony by appealing to Scripture (Dn 4:3, 34). He employs Psalm 145:13 as the theme of his testimony. It seems improbable that an unbeliever would highlight the written word of God in a message to the nations.

Sixth, the emperor authored Scripture. Much of the epistle appears in the first person ("I, Nebuchadnezzar"). If Daniel had written the chapter, he would not have used his Babylonian name, "Belteshazzar." Elsewhere in the book, he uses his Hebrew name, "Daniel," except when he needs to explain his name change by the king. Nebuchadnezzar, like every other author of Scripture, wrote not merely to inform his audience, but to persuade. He aimed to persuade the nations to submit to the Most High. It remains doubtful that God would grant an unbeliever the privilege of writing Scripture. For these six reasons it appears that Nebuchadnezzar did indeed undergo spiritual regeneration.

In some respects, Nebuchadnezzar stands as the apostle Paul of the Old Testament. Consider their similarities. Both Nebuchadnezzar and Paul (Saul) initially persecuted believers. Both received special revelation from above. Both had miracles and a physical transformation accompany their conversions (restoration from beasthood; scales on the eyes). Both evangelized Gentiles. And both can relate to an ox: Nebuchadnezzar became like an ox (Dn 4:33) while Saul was as stubborn as an ox (he "kicked against the [ox] goads," Acts 26:14). The writer of Acts casts Paul as a Nebuchadnezzar-like figure—that is, as a dramatically converted evangelist who becomes committed to the global mission.

Conclusion

Following his period of humiliation, Nebuchadnezzar experienced genuine spiritual conversion. As a redeemed evangelist, he publicized his personal testimony concerning the everlasting kingdom of the Most High God. His evangelistic epistle in Daniel 4 beckons the nations to learn from his own failures and submit to the King of heaven. Proud people tend to think about themselves and what others can do for them, but Daniel counseled the emperor to help others, uphold justice, and forsake his vices (Dn 4:27). Christians, like Nebuchadnezzar, can use their personal testimony as an evangelistic tool to proclaim the Most High God.

Notes

¹ A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, TCS 5. Locust Valley, NY, 1975, pp. 99, 102.

² H.W.F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon: A Survey of the Ancient Civilization of the Tigris–Euphrates Valley*, rev. ed., Great Civilizations Series. London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1988, chaps. 6–15.

³ Antipater, *Greek Anth.* 9.58. Researchers debate the location and historicity of the Hanging Gardens.

⁴ Rocío Da Riva, *The Twin Inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar at Brisa (Wadi esh-Sharbin, Lebanon): A Historical and Philological Study*, AfOB 32. Vienna, Institut für Orientalistik der Universität Wien, 2012, p. 62.

⁵ Robert Koldewey, *Das wieder erstehende Babylon*, 5th ed., ed. Barthel Hrouda. Berlin, Akademie, 1990, p. 51.

⁶ A.R. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, OLA 40. Leuven, Peeters, 1992, p. 340.

⁷ F. Thureau-Dangin, *Tablettes d'Uruk à l'usage des prêtres du Temple d'Anu au temps des Séleucides*, TCL 6. Paris, Geuthner, 1922, plate 32.

⁸ Hansjörg Schmid, *Der Tempelturm Etemenanki in Babylon*, Baghdader Forschungen 17. Mainz am Rhein, Zabern, 1995, p. 92.

⁹ A.R. George, ed., *Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions and Related Texts in the Schoyen Collection*, CUSAS 17. Bethesda, MD, CDL, 2011, p. 160.

¹⁰ Koldewey, *Babylon*, pp. 110–13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16, 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁴ Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.178.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.178–87.

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