Nebuchadnezzar II and the Jews: A Critical Reassessment of Archaeological, Historical, and Religious Narratives

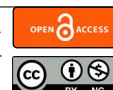**Musallam R. Al-Rawahneh** [ID][1]

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Article Info	Abstract
	The figure of Nebuchadnezzar II continues to fascinate scholars precisely because of the striking contradictions in how different sources remember him. While Babylonian records celebrate a pious king and master builder, biblical texts cast him alternately as God's instrument of judgment and a symbol of tyrannical pride. This study aims to unravel these competing narratives, examining how the trauma of exile has shaped Jewish memory and how theological concerns have influenced historical accounts. Rather than simply cataloging different perspectives, I argue that understanding Nebuchadnezzar requires recognizing how the Babylonian exile became a defining moment that fundamentally transformed Jewish identity. The destruction of the First Temple was not merely a political catastrophe—it forced an entire people to reimagine their relationship with the divine. The figure of Nebuchadnezzar, whether depicted as a divine agent or an arrogant tyrant, served the needs of different communities to make sense of this upheaval. Through careful analysis of Babylonian administrative records, biblical literature, and the later Islamic sources, this research reveals how historical memory gets constructed and reconstructed across cultures. The supposed "religious conversion" of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel, I contend, tells us more about the theological struggles of the exiled Jews than about any genuine spiritual transformation of the Babylonian king.

Homepage of this Article: https://jarcs.ut.ac.ir/article_103047.html?lang=en

1. Introduction
- Why Nebuchadnezzar Still Matters

When I first encountered the story of Nebuchadnezzar's supposed madness in the Book of Daniel, I was struck by how dramatically it differed from the confident royal inscriptions found in Babylon. Here was a king who, according to one tradition, crawled on all fours eating grass like an animal, while according to another, he was building magnificent temples and expanding a glorious empire. This contradiction sparked my interest in how different communities remember the same historical figures in fundamentally different ways.

Nebuchadnezzar II governed the Neo-Babylonian Empire between 605 and 562 BCE, a time marked by major political and cultural developments in the ancient Near East (Wiseman, 1985: 1). His military campaigns reshaped the regional balance of power, while his architectural projects transformed Babylon into one of the ancient world's most magnificent cities (Beaulieu, 2018: 123; Lundbom, 2017b: 45; Pedersén, 2021: 89). Yet for many readers today, his name is inextricably linked with one particular act: the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its inhabitants. This event was not simply another imperial conquest. For the Jewish people, it marked a crisis that would reshape their entire understanding of God, covenant, and identity (Lipschits, 2005: 25; Albertz, 2003: 112). The loss of land, the Temple, and political independence forced profound questions: Had God abandoned his people? Could faith survive without a homeland? How should communities that are scattered maintain their traditions in foreign lands (Smith-Christopher, 2002: 56; Grabbe, 2006: 88).

2. The Challenge of Competing Narratives: Problem Statement

The central problem this research addresses is not just historical but also methodological. How do we approach sources that tell fundamentally different stories about the same events? The Babylonian chronicles present Nebuchadnezzar's campaigns as legitimate responses to rebellions. Biblical accounts portray them as a divine judgment on a sinful population. Later Islamic traditions suggest the possibility of King Nebuchadnezzar's eventual conversion to monotheism.

Each tradition serves different purposes and emerges from distinct contexts. The Babylonian royal inscriptions were designed to legitimize imperial power and demonstrate divine favor (Beaulieu, 2018: 150; Wiseman, 1985: 20; Da Riva, 2014: 78). Biblical narratives sought to explain the catastrophe while maintaining faith in God's ultimate justice (Collins, 2008: 34; Bandstra, 2004: 112; Sack, 2004: 67). Islamic accounts attempted to integrate earlier traditions into a broader monotheistic framework. Rather than simply choosing one narrative over others, this study examines how these different memories developed and what they reveal about the communities that preserved them. I am particularly interested in how the experience of exile shaped Jewish interpretations of Nebuchadnezzar and how these interpretations, in turn, influenced the development of post-exilic Judaism.

3. Research Questions and Methodology
- Several key questions guide this investigation

First, what can we know about the historical Nebuchadnezzar beyond the competing religious and political interpretations? While complete objectivity remains impossible, careful analysis of contemporary sources can help us distinguish between documented events and later theological elaborations.

Second, how did the experience of exile influence Jewish perceptions of Nebuchadnezzar and the meaning of their suffering? The biblical portrayal of the king was shaped not just, by what happened but also by how displaced communities sought to understand and cope with their loss.

Third, what role did the figure of Nebuchadnezzar play in the broader transformation of Jewish religious life during and after the exile? I suggest that narratives about the king served as vehicles for working through fundamental theological questions about divine justice, human agency, and the nature of the covenant.

Finally, how do later traditions—particularly Islamic sources—reinterpret earlier narratives about Nebuchadnezzar, and what does this tell us about the ongoing construction of religious memory?

My approach combines historical analysis with attention to the literary and theological dimensions of ancient sources. I treat religious texts not as simple historical records but as complex documents that reveal how communities understood their past and envisioned their future. This requires careful attention to the genre, audience, and historical context.

4. Significance of the Research

This research sheds light on a pivotal period in the history of the ancient Near East, which witnessed significant political and civilizational transformations. It provides an in-depth analysis of an influential historical figure, Nebuchadnezzar II. The research provides a platform for a comparative study of different religious narratives and interpretations of a single historical event and a single figure, which helps in understanding the evolution of religious thought and the relationships between the three religions. The research encourages critical engagement with historical and religious sources, distinguishing between historical facts and ideological interpretation, which is essential in the study of ancient and religious history. The research seeks to compile and synthesize scattered knowledge from multiple studies (including the attached research papers) on this topic, presenting it within a comprehensive and organized academic framework, thereby enriching the world's library in this field. The research helps in understanding the deeper roots of certain stereotypes or prejudices about historical figures and events, and contributes to building a more balanced and objective view of the shared history of the region's peoples. Through this comprehensive and comparative study, we hope to make a valuable contribution to the understanding of the complex relationship between Nebuchadnezzar II and the Jews and the implications of this relationship on the course of history and civilization in the ancient Near East.

5. Historical Context: Assyria's Collapse and The Rise of Neo-Babylonian Power

The political landscape of the ancient Near East underwent a dramatic transformation during the late seventh century BCE. For centuries, the Assyrian Empire had dominated the region through a combination of military might and administrative efficiency (Grayson, 1975: 47-49; Oded, 1979: 134-137). Yet by the 640s BCE, internal succession disputes and external pressures were weakening Assyrian control. The death of Ashurbanipal around 627 BCE triggered a crisis that would reshape the entire region. Various subject peoples saw an opportunity to assert independence, while ambitious rulers sought to fill the emerging power vacuum. Among these was Nabopolassar, who declared Babylonian independence in 626 BCE and began building what would become the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

What made Nabopolassar's revolt different from earlier Babylonian attempts at independence was his ability to forge strategic alliances, particularly with the Medes. The coordinated assault on Assyrian strongholds culminated in the capture of Nineveh in 612 BCE—an event that sent shockwaves throughout the ancient world (Sack, 1983: 88-92; Lundbom, 2017a: 210). The great capital that had once struck terror into subject people lay in ruins, its palaces burned, and its inhabitants scattered.

This collapse created opportunities but also dangers. While Babylon was now free to pursue its own imperial ambitions, it faced competition from Egypt, which sought to expand its influence northward (Wiseman, 1956: 111-113; Novotny & Weiershäuser, 2024: 22-24). The struggle between these emerging powers would profoundly affect the smaller kingdoms caught between them, particularly Judah. Nabopolassar emerged as a central figure in this transformation (Oded, 1979: 145-147; Grayson, 1975: 52-53; Frame, 1995: 279-281). He was of Chaldean descent—part of the Aramean tribes settled in southern Mesopotamia—and proved himself both an ambitious ruler and a skilled military commander. Taking advantage of the chaos following Ashurbanipal's death, he declared Babylonian independence from Assyria in 626 BCE and claimed the title "King of Babylon."

The alliance with the Medes proved crucial for eliminating Assyrian power. This partnership, reportedly reinforced by the marriage of Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar to Amitis, daughter of the Median king, enabled coordinated attacks that led to the fall of Nineveh (Wiseman, 1956: 15). Nabopolassar not only liberated Babylonia but also actively sought to inherit Assyrian territories, particularly in Mesopotamia and Syria.

6. Judah's Precarious Position

The Kingdom of Judah in the late seventh century BCE was a small state facing enormous challenges. Since the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, Judah had served as the sole repository of Israelite identity and tradition (Lipschits, 2005: 30; Grabbe, 2006: 115). Yet its location between major powers made independence extremely difficult to maintain. Some kings, like Hezekiah, had adopted policies of resistance against Assyrian domination, though these efforts ultimately failed and led to heavier tribute payments (Grabbe, 2006: 120). Manasseh, by

contrast, had accommodated Assyrian influence and provided temporary stability, but coincided with what biblical texts describe as a period of religious deviation (2 Kings 21).

King Josiah had attempted to take advantage of Assyrian weakness by implementing religious reforms aimed at centralizing worship in Jerusalem while expanding the kingdom's influence (Bright, 2000: 290). His death at Megiddo while attempting to block Egyptian advances marked the end of Judah's brief period of relative autonomy. Subsequently, Judah fell under Egyptian influence, becoming entangled in the struggle for hegemony over Syria and Palestine between Egypt and Babylon (Bernd, 2010: 55; Kent, 2013: 88). Internally, the kingdom faced deep political and religious divisions. Prophets like Jeremiah opposed reliance on political alliances and advocated for repentance—a stance that would prove prophetic as the kingdom faced collapse and exile (Jeremiah 1-9; Miller & Hayes, 1986: 380; Tantlevskij, 2020: 110).

7. The Battle of Carchemish: A Turning Point

The confrontation at Carchemish in 605 BCE marked a decisive shift in regional power (Bernd, 2010: 60). The battle pitted Nebuchadnezzar, and then the crown prince, against Egyptian forces allied with Assyrian remnants under Pharaoh Necho II. The crushing Babylonian victory near the Euphrates River effectively ended Egyptian territorial ambitions in the Levant and established Babylon as the dominant regional power (Wiseman, 1956: 20; Fantalkin, 2017: 150: Holloway2018: 75-77). For Judah, the implications were immediate and dire. King Jehoiakim, who had been within Egypt's sphere of influence, was compelled to declare submission to Babylon and begin paying tribute (2 Kings 24: 1; Bernd, 2010: 65). Following his victory, Nebuchadnezzar was forced to return to Babylon upon the news of his father's death, beginning a reign that would witness complete Babylonian domination and Judah's eventual destruction (Lundbom, 2017b: 90; Novotny & Weiershäuser, 2024: 112).

8. Nebuchadnezzar II: Military Genius and Imperial Strategy

Nebuchadnezzar's rise to power in 605 BCE came at a crucial moment. Fresh from his victory at Carchemish, he was conducting military operations in the Levant when the news of his father's death arrived. The speed with which he returned to Babylon and secured the throne suggests both the loyalty of his key supporters and his own political acumen (Wiseman, 1956: 25; Beaulieu, 2018: 190). The new king inherited an empire still in formation. While Nabopolassar had successfully thrown off Assyrian rule and established Babylonian independence, the territorial extent and administrative structures of the new state remained fluid. Nebuchadnezzar faced the challenge of consolidating these gains while expanding the Babylonian influence. His origins have been subject to historical debate. Contemporary Babylonian inscriptions clearly identify him as Nabopolassar's eldest son, placing him within the Chaldean-Aramaic tribal confederation (Wiseman, 1985: 30; Roux, 1992: 345; Beaulieu, 2018: 180). His Akkadian name, "Nabû-kudurri-uṣur," meaning "O Nabu, protect my heir," reflects devotion to the Babylonian god Nabu (Eph'al, 2003: 78; Da Riva, 2014: 110). Later Islamic sources sometimes attribute different origins to

him, but these accounts lack archaeological corroboration and likely reflect later interpretive traditions rather than historical fact (Al-Tabari, 1967, vol. 1: 500; Mahmood & Nori, 2019: 45).

From the outset, Nebuchadnezzar confronted substantial challenges. He needed to complete the expulsion of Egyptian influence from the Levant and subjugate rebellious kingdoms such as Ashkelon and Sidon (Sack, 2004: 80). The effective governance of the vast and newly acquired territories required the development of robust administrative frameworks, building upon the systems inherited from the defunct Assyrian Empire. Additionally, he faced persistent rebellions, particularly in western provinces, often instigated or supported by Egypt, necessitating continuous military campaigns (Lundbom, 2017b: 100). Nebuchadnezzar's military campaigns reveal sophisticated strategic thinking. Rather than simply pursuing conquest for its own sake, he sought to create a stable imperial order that would secure Babylon's borders and economic interests (Novotny & Weiershäuser, 2024: 63-67). After his decisive victory at Carchemish, he embarked on systematic campaigns aimed at expanding imperial borders, stabilizing Babylonian hegemony in the Levant, and deterring Egyptian resurgence. His focus on the "Hatti" region, the Levantine territories, was particularly intense. He subdued Phoenician coastal cities and various Aramaic, Hebrew, and Edomite kingdoms. Ashkelon was destroyed in an early campaign in 604 BCE, demonstrating Babylonian power (Novotny & Weiershäuser, 2024: 63-67). The siege techniques employed by the Babylonian forces were highly advanced for their time, combining engineering expertise with psychological warfare.

Judah became a major flashpoint due to its frequent rebellions, often with Egyptian support. An inconclusive confrontation with Egypt in 601 BCE was followed by King Jehoiakim's rebellion, prompting Nebuchadnezzar to besiege Jerusalem in 598/597 BCE, resulting in the first Babylonian exile (Albertz, 2003: 441-444). The second rebellion under Zedekiah proved more destructive, culminating in a prolonged siege that ended in 587/586 BCE with Jerusalem's destruction and the Temple's burning, leading to the second and more extensive Babylonian exile (Lipschits, 2005: 89-93; Tantlevskij, 2020: 304-308). The thirteen-year siege of Tyre demonstrates both Nebuchadnezzar's persistence and his strategic adaptability. While he never stormed the city, he ultimately received its political submission and tribute (Shahar, 2015: 144-146; Dixon, 2022: 165-199; Belsky, 2023: 212-215). Scattered sources also refer to campaigns in Anatolia and the Arabian Peninsula, although the details remain limited.

Beyond his military achievements, Nebuchadnezzar transformed Babylon into one of the ancient world's most magnificent cities. The Ishtar Gate, the Hanging Gardens (whose historical existence remains debated), and numerous temples he constructed or restored testified to both his ambition and the empire's wealth (Dalley, 1994: 12; Reade, 2000: 183). These projects served multiple purposes beyond mere display. They demonstrated the king's piety and his special relationship with the gods, particularly Marduk and Nabu—a traditional means of legitimizing royal authority in Babylonian culture (Novotny & Weiershäuser, 2024: 140). They provided employment and economic stimulus for Babylon's population while projecting power to foreign visitors.

The scale of these undertakings was unprecedented. Advanced construction projects, financed from imperial resources, contributed to economic dynamism and job creation, promoting social stability (Wiseman, 1985: 75-78; Beaulieu, 2018: 94-101). The king's royal inscriptions consistently portray him as a pious ruler serving the gods, supervising the restoration and construction of major temples to ensure political legitimacy through religious patronage.

9. **The Destruction of Judah: Politics, Strategy, and Catastrophe Understanding the Babylonian Motivations**

The Babylonian campaigns against Judah were not random acts of aggression but calculated responses to specific political and strategic challenges. Judah's location made its loyalty crucial for maintaining communication between Babylon and its western territories (Lipschits, 2005: 40). Egyptian efforts to regain influence in the Levant often focused on encouraging rebellion among Babylonian vassals, with Judah being a frequent target of such diplomatic overtures. From Nebuchadnezzar's perspective, Judah's repeated rebellions represented not just political defiance but threats to imperial stability. His primary objective was strengthening his empire and eliminating potential threats to its stability. Judah's flirtations with Egypt, despite explicit warnings from Babylonian authorities and even its own prophets like Jeremiah, were perceived as direct challenges to Babylonian hegemony.

The initial deportations, such as that of King Jehoiachin and the elite in 597 BCE, were likely intended as punitive measures and a means of removing influential figures who might incite further rebellion, while simultaneously integrating skilled labor into the Babylonian economy (Younger, 1998: 55). However, persistent defiance under King Zedekiah, culminating in his alliance with Egypt, forced more drastic action. The final siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 587/586 BCE were not merely acts of vengeance but calculated strategies to neutralize a persistent geopolitical irritant and send an unequivocal message to other vassal states about the futility of resistance (Albertz, 2003: 130). The destruction of the Temple served both symbolic and practical purposes—dismantling the spiritual heart of the Jewish national identity while demonstrating Babylonian power. The systematic deportation of skilled populations was a deliberate policy to weaken conquered territories while enriching the imperial core (Oded, 1979: 80).

10. The Role of Egypt

Egyptian involvement in Judean affairs proved consistently destabilizing (Bernd, 2010: 112-115). With Babylon's rise, Egypt attempted to regain influence in the Levant by exploiting small kingdoms like Judah. Although Judah had been subjugated after Carchemish, a pro-Egyptian political current within the Jewish court continued to see Egypt as a potential ally against Babylonian domination. Biblical texts, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel, show how the prophets warned against relying on Egypt, calling it an unreliable ally or "bruised reed" (Jeremiah 2: 18; 37: 5-10; Ezekiel 17: 15-17). However, Zedekiah chose this dangerous course, sending

delegations requesting Egyptian support, to which Egypt responded by sending an army north to break the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (Daniel, 2014: 156-158; Belsky, 2023: 221-223).

Although the Babylonian army temporarily withdrew to face this Egyptian threat, the intervention failed to yield decisive results. The Egyptians withdrew quickly, allowing Nebuchadnezzar to resume the siege until the city fell in 586 BCE. Judah's dependence on Egypt proved a costly strategic mistake, as Egypt was unable to provide decisive support and even exacerbated the crisis by giving Babylon additional justification for destroying the kingdom as punishment for allying with its largest regional enemy (Eph'al, 2003: 117-120; Lipschits, 2005: 89-91).

11. The First Campaign (597 BCE): Elite Deportation

The first Babylonian campaign against Judah in 597 BCE resulted directly from King Jehoiakim's rebellion, taking advantage of Babylon's preoccupation with Egypt in 601 BCE. After reorganizing his forces, Nebuchadnezzar sent an army to besiege Jerusalem, but Jehoiakim died under mysterious circumstances before the army arrived. His son Jehoiachin, who succeeded him, was forced to surrender after only three months to spare the city from destruction (2 Kings 24: 10-12). Nebuchadnezzar's response was firm but measured. Rather than complete destruction, he looted temple and palace treasures and took Judah's political, military, and economic elite to Babylon, including Jehoiachin and his family, military leaders, skilled craftsmen, and senior officials (Wiseman, 1956: 32). Biblical texts estimate 10,000 exiles, while Jeremiah refers to a lower figure of 3,023 (Jeremiah 52: 28). Nebuchadnezzar's annals confirm this event, dated to the twelfth month of his seventh regnal year.

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, as the new king, changing his name to Zedekiah and requiring an oath of allegiance (2 Kings 24: 17). This policy aimed to weaken Judah while maintaining its vassal status. However, Jehoiachin continued to be viewed as the legitimate monarch, and Babylonian documents show he received relatively privileged treatment as a royal captive (Weidner, 1939: 7-8; Laurie & Cornelia, 2014: 232-235), contributing to continued hopes for resistance that would later lead to Zedekiah's rebellion.

12. The Second Campaign (587/586 BCE): Complete Destruction

Zedekiah's rebellion, despite being appointed by Nebuchadnezzar, directly triggered the second Babylonian campaign. With Egyptian support and instigation, Zedekiah revoked his oath of allegiance to Babylon around 589 BCE, prompting a swift Babylonian response. The army imposed a prolonged siege lasting two and a half years under tragic humanitarian conditions (2 Kings 25: 1-3; Jeremiah 52: 4-6). Although Egyptian forces attempted to break the siege, their intervention failed, and the Babylonians resumed their attack until breaking through the city walls in the summer of 587/586 BCE (Jeremiah 39: 2). Zedekiah fled but was captured and taken to Riblah, where Nebuchadnezzar ordered his sons to be executed before him, then blinded him and took him to Babylon (2 Kings 25: 4-7).

A month after the city's fall, Nebuzaradan arrived to conduct systematic destruction. The Temple was burned, and the palaces and walls demolished—a spectacle that shocked Jewish consciousness (2 Kings 25: 8-10). This was followed by mass exile, including Jerusalem's remaining inhabitants and religious and administrative elites, while poor peasants were left in the land (Jeremiah 52: 29; 2 Kings 25: 11-12). Gedaliah ben Ahikam was appointed to govern the remnant, but his assassination led to an administrative breakdown and mass exodus to Egypt (Jeremiah 41-43). A third exile of approximately 745 people was recorded in 582 BCE (Jeremiah 52: 30). Thus ended the Kingdom of Judah as a political entity, beginning the exile period that would profoundly affect Jewish religious and cultural identity (Lipschits, 2005: 103-106; Albertz, 2003: 452-455; Levine, 2009: 28-30).

13. How Different Communities Remembered Nebuchadnezzar
- The Babylonian Perspective: Royal Propaganda and Religious Devotion

Babylonian sources present Nebuchadnezzar in consistently positive terms, although we must remember that most texts were produced under royal patronage. The royal inscriptions emphasize his piety, building projects, and military victories, portraying him as the chosen representative of the gods, particularly Marduk and Nabu (Beaulieu, 2018: 200; Da Riva, 2014: 120).

These sources highlight temple restoration projects, including Esagila (Marduk's primary temple) and the Ziggurat of Etemenanki (associated with the Tower of Babel). Military successes are presented as necessary measures to maintain order and punish rebellious vassals, thereby ensuring stability and prosperity. There is no suggestion of divine punishment or personal arrogance; rather, they emphasize wisdom, power, and divinely appointed leadership.

Mentions of Jerusalem's destruction and population deportation are construed within imperial policies concerning rebellious subjects, without moral or theological judgment against Nebuchadnezzar himself. This represents state-sponsored historiography, carefully crafted to project absolute power, divine favor, and unwavering commitment to Babylonian welfare (Bandstra, 2004: 286-288; Sack, 2004: 72-76; Collins, 2008).

14. Biblical Narratives: The Divine Instrument and Arrogant Tyrant

Biblical depictions of Nebuchadnezzar are complex and seemingly contradictory. In Jeremiah, he appears as God's "servant," chosen to punish Judah for covenant violations (Jeremiah 25: 9). This portrayal serves crucial theological functions, maintaining divine sovereignty even in defeat by casting Babylonian victory as part of God's plan rather than evidence of divine weakness. Second Kings provides detailed accounts of the siege, wall breaching, temple burning, and deportations, describing Nebuchadnezzar as a direct agent in Judah's destruction (2 Kings 25). While historically factual, the essential theological message emerges clearly: this represents fulfilled prophecy and concrete evidence of God's righteous judgment. The narrative focuses not on Nebuchadnezzar's character or motives but on his role as an instrument fulfilling God's plan.

Ezekiel emphasizes Nebuchadnezzar's role as God's instrument against Tyre and Egypt,

presenting him as a tool for God to fulfill decrees against nations opposing Him (Ezekiel 29: 17-20). This demonstrates that history remains under God's control, with even foreign rulers serving His purposes. The Book of Daniel presents the most sophisticated psychological portrait. Initially appearing as an exceedingly powerful though pagan king who recognizes Daniel's supernatural wisdom, Nebuchadnezzar undergoes a dramatic transformation. In Daniel 2, he becomes troubled by dreams only Daniel can interpret, establishing the motif of conflict between royal power and Israel's God, who repeatedly challenges his pagan worldview.

The most remarkable development occurs in Daniel 4 with his sudden fall into madness and subsequent restoration. He is depicted as one consumed by tyrannical pride, boasting of his achievements while forgetting their divine source. His period of insanity, during which he behaves like an animal, continues until he recognizes the supremacy of the Highest God. His restoration depends on humble confession: "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. Furthermore, those who walk in pride he is able to humble" (Daniel 4: 37).

This account serves profound theological purposes rather than providing a historical biography. It represents an allegorical tale demonstrating God's absolute sovereignty over earthly rulers and kingdoms. The narrative of Nebuchadnezzar's madness and restoration likely serves as a theological construction showing that even the mightiest pagan king must bow to Israel's God, carrying a message of hope and consolation for exiled Jewish communities that their suffering was part of a divine plan and that God remained active even in desperate circumstances.

15. Islamic Perspectives: Integration and Reinterpretation

Islamic sources provide varied perspectives on Nebuchadnezzar, often drawing on earlier Jewish and Christian traditions while adapting them to Islamic theological frameworks. The Quran does not mention Nebuchadnezzar by name, though it alludes to Jerusalem's destruction in ways later commentators connected to the Babylonian conquest. Surah Al-Isra (17: 4-7) discusses two periods of corruption by the Children of Israel followed by divine punishment, with many exegetes interpreting the first punishment as Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians. Later Muslim historians and exegetes, such as al-Tabari (d. 923) and Ibn al-Athir (d. 1233), provided elaborate accounts often blending material from Jewish (Israelite) traditions that entered Islamic literature (Al-Tabari, 1967, vol. 1: 500; Mahmood & Nori, 2019: 45). These accounts sometimes assign non-Babylonian origins to Nebuchadnezzar, such as Persian or Israeli descent, unsupported by contemporary evidence but reflecting cultural assimilation and reinterpretation processes.

One interesting aspect of the Islamic portrayal concerns his possible conversion or interaction with prophets. While not clearly indicating conversion to monotheism, some traditions refer to his encounters with figures like Daniel or Jeremiah and his ultimate acknowledgment of God's supremacy. This fits within broader Islamic themes regarding universal divine revelation and the possibility for even non-believers to perceive truth when confronted with divine signs. The Islamic treatment demonstrates how religious communities adapt earlier narratives to serve new

theological and cultural purposes. The emphasis on potential conversion fits within Islamic themes about revelation's universality and divine guidance's possibility for all peoples, though these narratives often reflect later traditions prioritizing theological coherence and moral lessons over historical accuracy.

16. Comparative Analysis: Discrepancies and Theological Interpretations

Comparative analysis of Nebuchadnezzar's image across the three monotheistic religions reveals general agreement that he was a powerful Babylonian king who destroyed the First Temple and exiled Israelites—an event all religions considered divine punishment for the people's deviation from God's teachings (Bandstra, 2004: 286-288). Despite this agreement, religious images differ in several theological and interpretive aspects. In Judaism, texts such as Jeremiah and Second Kings feature Nebuchadnezzar as a divine instrument of punishment while describing him as a cruel tyrant, despite some positive glimpses in Daniel (Collins, 2008: 52-58; Levine, 2009: 32-35). Christianity preserved this image but evolved it symbolically, with Babylon representing the forces of evil and spiritual decay, reducing emphasis on Nebuchadnezzar's individual figure in favor of symbolic dimensions.

Islam presents the event within a broader Quranic context without direct name mention, seeing Nebuchadnezzar among the "servants of great power" whom God sent to discipline the Children of Israel (Quran, Al-Isra 17: 4-7). Later Islamic accounts show diversity in his portrayal, ranging from a mighty king to a potential believer, reflecting overlap with Jewish and Christian sources (Al-Tabari; Ibn Kathir). The traditions also differ in symbolism versus historical emphasis. Judaism offers a detailed historical narrative requiring critical review, while Daniel tends toward symbolic character. The Islamic tradition integrates mythological and ethical elements into the general historical narrative. These disparities reflect theological and historical contexts in which each religion originated: Judaism was influenced by direct exile experience, Christianity by symbolic dimensions in light of its message, while Islam provided a monotheistic interpretation linking events to general perspectives on God's relationship with nations (Wiseman, 1956: 29-35; Morrison, 2010: 117-120).

17. Life in Exile: Transformation and Survival

The popular image of the Babylonian exile as unmitigated suffering requires significant qualification. While deportations were certainly traumatic and homeland loss devastating, recent archaeological and textual evidence reveals a more complex picture of exile life. Administrative documents from Babylon, including the famous "Judean" or "Yehudite" archives, show that many exiles achieved considerable economic success (Daniel, 2014: 163-168; Laurie & Cornelia, 2014: 211-219; Tantlevskij, 2020: 296-300). Some became prominent merchants, others served in administrative positions, and a few gained access to the royal court. The survival of distinctly Jewish names and customs in these documents suggests that cultural assimilation was neither required nor universal.

Despite relatively favorable material conditions, we should not minimize psychological and spiritual challenges. Temple loss eliminated the primary focus of religious life, while land separation called into question fundamental beliefs about divine promises. Psalms and Lamentations preserve the emotional impact of these losses, expressing grief, anger, and confusion that must have been widespread among exile communities. Conditions were not uniformly harsh exiles were allowed to practice rituals and establish semi-independent communities. Some, like Jehoiachin, received privileged treatment. However, spiritual and theological shock was profound, as exile raised questions about covenant meaning and God's existence outside the Temple (Smith-Christopher, 2002: 64-68; Albertz, 2003: 457-460).

18. Religious Innovation and Adaptation

The exile period witnessed remarkable religious creativity as Jewish communities struggled to maintain their identity without traditional institutional supports. Unable to offer sacrifices at the destroyed Temple, the exiled communities developed new worship forms centered on prayer, scripture study, and observance of distinctive practices like Sabbath and circumcision. Synagogue worship development likely began during this period, although evidence for early synagogues remains limited. More certain is the increased importance placed on preserving and interpreting sacred texts. Much of the Hebrew Bible appears to have been compiled, edited, and finalized durthe exilexile and early post-exile periods. The prophetic literature from this time reveals ongoing theological reflection about exile's meaning and restoration prospects. Figures like Ezekiel and the Second Isaiah reinterpreted traditional covenants and election themes in ways that provided hope to displaced communities. Their emphasis on spiritual renewal and eventual return would prove enormously influential for later Jewish thought.

This crisis contributed to crystallizing a new religious identity: increased emphasis on Torah, Sabbath, and prayer as worship centers, and the emergence of prophetic figures who reinterpreted catastrophe and offered salvation hope. The experience forced fundamental changes in how the Jewish identity was conceived and maintained, with geographic connection to Israel supplemented by emphasis on textual study, legal observance, and community solidarity (Smith-Christopher, 2002: 64-68; Albertz, 2003: 457-460). Perhaps the most significant long-term consequence was the creation of a sustainable model for Jewish life outside Israel. Exile communities developed institutions and practices that allowed Jewish identity to survive and flourish in diaspora settings. This transformation required fundamental changes in how the Jewish identity was conceived and maintained. The geographical connection to Israel, while remaining important, was supplemented by emphasis on textual study, legal observance, and community solidarity. These developments would prove crucial for Jewish survival during subsequent dispersion periods.

The success of this adaptation is evident in the fact that when the Persian policy allowed return to Judah, many exile families chose to remain in Babylon. The thriving Mesopotamian Jewish communities would continue playing important roles in Jewish life for centuries, producing

influential religious literature and maintaining connections with communities throughout the ancient world.

19. Assessing the Evidence: History versus Theology
- The Question of Nebuchadnezzar's Conversion

The account of Nebuchadnezzar's madness and conversion in Daniel 4 raises fundamental questions about the relationship between historical fact and theological narrative. The vivid description of the king's psychological breakdown and eventual recognition of divine sovereignty serves clear literary and religious purposes, but did anything resembling these events occur? Several factors suggest caution about accepting this account as historical. First, the complete absence of any reference to such events in the Babylonian sources is striking. Royal inscriptions from throughout Nebuchadnezzar's reign consistently present him as a devoted follower of traditional Babylonian deities (Beaulieu, 2018: 200; Da Riva, 2014: 120). If he had experienced conversion to monotheism, we might expect some trace in his official records.

Second, the literary structure and theological themes of Daniel 4 suggest that the narrative serves symbolic rather than historical purposes. The progression from pride to humiliation to restoration follows patterns common in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. The king's proclamation of divine sovereignty addresses concerns specific to Jewish communities under foreign rule. This does not necessarily mean that the entire account is fictional. Some scholars suggest that the narrative might preserve memories of illness or temporary absence from royal duties, later interpreted through theological lenses. However, the specific details of conversion to monotheism appear to serve the narrative's religious purposes rather than reflect historical events.

The scientific controversy surrounding Nebuchadnezzar's religious conversion, especially whether he underwent genuine conversion as depicted in Daniel 4, forms a major point of contrast between history and theology. While the biblical account musters moral and narrative strength, emphasizing his humiliation and praise of the Highest God, historical and archaeological work on Babylonian sources provides no substantiation for such personal transformation.

20. Distinguishing the Historical Core from Theological Interpretation

More broadly, varying accounts of Nebuchadnezzar illustrate the challenges of extracting historical information from religiously motivated sources. Each tradition—Babylonian, Jewish, and Islamic—presents the king in ways that serve particular ideological and theological purposes. This does not mean these sources lack historical value, but requires careful analysis to distinguish between documented events and interpretive frameworks. Basic facts of Nebuchadnezzar's military campaigns, building projects, and role in Jerusalem's destruction can be established through multiple sources. The interpretation of these events and their ultimate significance remains contested. Understanding how different communities remembered Nebuchadnezzar may be as historically significant as is determining what actually happened. These competing

narratives reveal how traumatic events get processed, interpreted, and transformed into sources of meaning and identity. They show us not just what occurred in the past, but how the past continues to shape community self-understanding.

Contemporary historians are inclined to regard Daniel's account as a theological narrative bearing serious messages about divine sovereignty and human humility rather than a historical account. The narrative serves as a serious theological tool illustrating God's complete control over earthly rulers while providing frameworks to understand the suffering of exiled Israelites as part of a larger divine scheme.

21. The Long Shadow of Exile: Transforming Disaster into Meaning

The Babylonian exile represents one of those historical events whose significance extends far beyond the immediate political and military consequences. While Jerusalem's destruction was devastating for those who experienced it, exile's long-term impact on Jewish thought and practice proved transformative in ways original victims could hardly have anticipated. Theological innovations developed during exile—particularly the emphasis on divine sovereignty over all nations and the possibility of maintaining a covenant relationship without a temple or homeland—would prove crucial for Jewish survival in subsequent dispersion periods (Albertz, 2003: 449-452). The diaspora community model developed in Babylon provided a template adapted and refined throughout Jewish history.

Literary and religious creativity stimulated by exile produced texts and traditions that influenced not only Judaism but also Christianity and Islam. Exile period prophetic literature, with themes of judgment, restoration, and universal divine sovereignty, would be repeatedly reinterpreted by later religious communities facing their own challenges. The exile also stimulated intense literary and theological activity. Most of the Hebrew Bible was compiled, edited, and finalized during this period. This experience gave powerful impetus to preserving and interpreting sacred traditions that helped understand the past, grasp present suffering, and formulate future visions. Prophetic voices of Ezekiel and Second Isaiah incorporated strong messages of hope, consolation, and divine promises that served exiles and interpreted exile catastrophe as a necessary preamble to a more glorious future restoration (Albertz, 2003: 463-466).

22. Nebuchadnezzar's Unexpected Legacy

Ironically, Nebuchadnezzar's efforts to eliminate Jewish political independence may have contributed to developing a more resilient and adaptable Jewish identity. By destroying the Temple and forcing exile, his policies inadvertently encouraged theological and institutional innovations, allowing Judaism to survive the later Second Temple destruction and adapt to diaspora life. This unintended consequence illustrates the complex relationship between political events and religious development. What appears as a catastrophe from one perspective may, over time, prove to be a catalyst for renewal and transformation. The exile that Nebuchadnezzar

imposed as punishment became, in Jewish memory, a necessary stage in the divine education of the people.

Nebuchadnezzar's figure was transformed in this process. From the sixth-century Judean perspective, he was primarily a destroyer and oppressor. Later traditions found in him a more complex figure, sometimes an instrument of divine will, sometimes an example of human pride humbled by divine power, sometimes even a potential convert to true faith. His legacy as one of the most powerful and influential ancient Near Eastern rulers was an accomplished military strategist and visionary builder who left an indelible imprint on Babylon (Beaulieu, 2018: 33-36). The Neo Babylonian Empire reached its zenith during his reign, a period of unprecedented power and affluence. His architectural achievements, such as the Ishtar Gate, Procession Road, and numerous temples, remain testimony to his ambition and the empire's enormous wealth (George, 1999: 161-168).

However, his historical reputation has always been associated with bringing destruction to Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. In Western and Jewish traditions, Nebuchadnezzar's memory often characterizes him as a tyrant, destroyer of nations, and emblem of pagan pride. This negative image, built mostly from biblical accounts, has usually overshadowed his contributions to the Babylonian civilization. A more balanced historical appraisal recognizes his character's complexities and the practical, if often brutal, nature of ancient Near Eastern statecraft (Lipschits, 2005: 89-92). Like many of his historical contemporaries, he used conquest and coercion tools to build and maintain his empire. His actions, while destructive to conquered nations, were compatible with his time's general imperial ideologies (Sack, 2004: 76-80).

23. Conclusion

This investigation of Nebuchadnezzar II and the Jews reveals the complex ways in which historical events become sources of religious and cultural meaning. The Babylonian king emerging from contemporary sources—a capable military leader and ambitious builder devoted to traditional deities—differs significantly from the figure preserved in Jewish and later religious traditions. These differences reflect not simply errors or biases but natural processes by which communities interpret traumatic experiences. Jerusalem's destruction and its inhabitants' exile required theological explanation. How could a faithful God allow such a catastrophe? What did it mean for divine promises in the covenantal relationship? How should displaced communities maintain their identity and hope?

Various portrayals of Nebuchadnezzar provided frameworks for addressing these questions. As a divine instrument, he demonstrated that God remained sovereign even in defeat. As an arrogant tyrant, he embodied earthly power's temporary nature. As a potential convert, he suggested that even foreign rulers might ultimately recognize divine truth. My analysis suggests that Nebuchadnezzar's supposed conversion described in Daniel serves primarily theological rather than historical purposes. The narrative addresses concerns of Jewish communities under foreign rule, offering hope that their oppressors might eventually acknowledge their God's

superiority. This interpretation does not diminish the text's significance but clarifies its function within its original context. More broadly, this study illustrates the importance of understanding ancient sources within their historical and literary contexts. Religious texts often serve multiple purposes simultaneously preserving historical memory, providing theological interpretation, and addressing contemporary concerns. Recognizing these various functions allows for more nuanced historical analysis while appreciating the texts' religious significance. The Babylonian exile's legacy extends far beyond the sixth century BCE. Theological innovations and institutional adaptations developed during this period would prove crucial for Jewish survival through subsequent challenges (Albertz, 2003: 462-466). The diaspora community model pioneered in Babylon provided a foundation for Jewish life that would endure for millennia.

Perhaps most significantly, the exile experience fundamentally transformed Jewish understanding of divine action in history. Jerusalem's destruction catastrophe was reinterpreted as part of a larger plan encompassing judgment, purification, and eventual restoration. This theological framework would influence not only Jewish thought but also Christian and Islamic understandings of historical meaning and divine purpose. Nebuchadnezzar's figure continues to fascinate because he embodies these larger questions about power, faith, and historical interpretation. His story reminds us that the same events can be understood very differently depending on one's perspective and purposes. It challenges us to think carefully about how we construct historical narratives and what purposes those narratives serve. In our contemporary context, marked by cultural conflict and competing claims about historical truth, Nebuchadnezzar's example offers valuable lessons. It suggests the importance of acknowledging multiple perspectives while maintaining commitments to careful analysis and evidence-based conclusions. It reminds us that historical figures often become symbols serving purposes beyond their original context. Most importantly, it demonstrates that historical study involves not just determining what happened but understanding how events acquire meaning and continue to shape community identity across generations. Jerusalem's destruction was a discrete historical event, but its interpretation and reinterpretation continue to influence how religious communities understand themselves and their relationship to divine purpose.

The scholarly challenges posed by sources such as Daniel 4 require acknowledgment that some questions may resist definitive answers. Did Nebuchadnezzar actually experience religious conversion? The evidence suggests skepticism about this account's historical accuracy while affirming its theological significance within Jewish tradition. Such conclusions require intellectual humility and the recognition that historical inquiry has both possibilities and limitations. Despite the comprehensive treatment provided by this study, issues remain that deserve academic investigation and represent research prospects. The most prominent include continuing archaeological investigations in Babylon, Nippur, Jerusalem, and Lachish to reveal new data the Babylonian rule and its impact on Judah. Comparative analysis between Babylonian inscriptions and biblical texts may reveal cultural overlaps and help understand the differences between the two narratives. Study of oral and religious traditions about Nebuchadnezzar

represents a means of understanding collective memory formation, while exploring neighboring cultures' responses to Babylonian exile opens the way for a broader understanding of regional influence. These issues underscore the importance of continuing critical and interdisciplinary research in this area.

The relationship between Nebuchadnezzar II and the Jews ultimately illustrates the complex interactions between political power and religious meaning in the ancient world. It shows how historical events become sources of identity and interpretation, extending far beyond their immediate political consequences. It is a reminder that history is often written from multiple perspectives and that understanding the past requires an ongoing effort to compare, critique, and synthesize. Most importantly, it demonstrates the human capacity to find meaning and hope even amid catastrophe—a capacity that continues to shape religious and cultural life today.

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Conflict of Interest

The author, while observing publication ethics in referencing, declares the absence of conflict of interest.

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نبوکدنصر دوم و یهودیان: بازنگری انتقادی روایت‌های باستان‌شناختی، تاریخی و دینی

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چکیده	تاریخچه مقاله
شخصیت نبوکدنصر دوم همچنان پژوهشگران را مجذوب خـود می‌کنـد، درسـت بـه دلیـل تضـاد چشمگیری که در چگونگی یادکرد او و در منابع مختلف وجـود دارد. در حالی کـه اسـناد بابلی او را پادشاهی دینـدار و سـازندۀ برجسـته معرفـی می‌کننـد، متـون کتـاب مقـدس، گاه او را بـه عنـوان ابـزار داوری خداوند و گاه به عنوان نماد غرور استبدادی به تصویر می‌کشند. هدف این پژوهش، گشودن گره این روایت‌های متعارض است؛ با بررسی این‌که چگونه آسیب روانی ناشی از تبعید، حافظه جمعی یهودیان را شکل داده و چگونـه دغدغه‌های الهیاتی بـر روایت‌های تاریخی اثر گذاشته است. این مطالعـه، بـه جـای صرفاً فهرست کردن دیدگاه‌هـای متفـاوت، اسـتدلال می‌کنـد کـه درک نبوکدنصر مسـتلزم آن اسـت که تبعید بابلی به عنوان نقطه عطفی شـناخته شود کـه بـه شـکلی بنیـادین هویت یهـودی را دگرگـون ساخت. ویرانی معبد اول صرفاً یک فاجعه سیاسی نبود، بلکه ملتی را واداشت تا رابطه خـود با امر الهی را از نو بازاندیشی کنند. چهره نبوکدنصر، چه در قالب یک عامل الهی و چـه بـه شـکل یک ستمگر مغرور، پاسخی بود به نیازهای جوامع مختلف برای معنا بخشیدن به این دگرگونی بـزرگ. از طریـق تحلیل دقیـق اسناد اداری بابلی، متون کتـاب مقـدس و منابع متأخر اسلامی، این پژوهـش نشان می‌دهد کـه چگونه حافظه تاریخی در فرهنگ‌های گوناگون ساخته و بازساخته می‌شود. «تبدیل دینی» نبوکدنصر که در کتاب دانیال روایت شده است، به باور نویسنده، بیش از آنکه بازتاب‌دهنده یک تحول معنوی واقعی در پادشاه بابل باشد، بازتابی از کشمکش‌های الهیاتی یهودیان تبعیدی است.

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