

Nebuchadnezzar: from myth to history essay



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Nebuchadnezzar: From Myth to History The name Nebuchadnezzar has never left the minds of historians, however the absolute absence of archeological evidence that would point to his existence seems staggering. Had he really existed and constructed a metropolis at least closely resembling the descriptions of Herodotus, Berossus, or even the Bible, then the ruins of his palaces should certainly be visible in the vicinity of modern day Baghdad – the site of ancient Babylon. Yet, the only thing visible there was an immense desert with a large dusty mound that the Arabs traditionally call Babil. Accepting this Babil as the remnants of ancient Babylon was a difficult task even for the more lenient critics.

It was not a few researchers, that when arriving in Baghdad for the first time, were disappointed to see only a solitary mountain of bricks covered in ancient inscriptions that had to date not been translated. In light of the situation many rational scholars used the argument of silence in order to doubt the existence of that character mentioned in the book of Daniel. The simple fact that as of then no evidence of Nebuchadnezzar's existence had been discovered was enough for some to erase him from history. Such is the case today with the denial of the existence of Abraham, Moses, and other people from Biblical history.

The existence of Nebuchadnezzar is still persistently negated despite recent archeological discoveries in the Middle East, the rise of new sciences like Assyriology and Papyrology. In his old age, Ernest Renan, who was a Hebrew professor, and an intransigent critic of Biblical history initiated an analysis on the History of the Peoples of Israel. In this analysis Renan neglected to reevaluate Semitic studies based on new archeological findings and even

refused to accept certain Assyriological declarations and dissuaded the Louvre from acquiring cuneiform inscriptions found in Nineveh and Tel el Amarna. Nebuchadnezzar and Archeology Evidence “ rediscovered in Brazil In 1988 a professor of Brazilian history, called Paulo Barboza, received a very peculiar donation in the form of a brick directly from the site of ancient Babylon in modern day Iraq. The donor was a project analyst for a large civil construction firm, who had spent many years in that country and whose custom it was to visit the locales where Claudius J. Rich had first initiated the excavation of the great Chaldean city.

Among millions of pottery and clay shards that lay there, a piece of brick caught his attention. It was covered in strange letter that certainly formed some ancient inscription. With official authorization he was allowed to take the brick to Brazil as a souvenir from the Iraqi lands. Not knowing what the brick was he decided to give it to a friend that would have far greater appreciation for it – Professor Barboza, who used it as a visual aid when presenting lectures on world history. However, till that moment, no one had come to understand the content of the inscription and much less the true value of that artifact.

Years later, when Barboza retired and settled in the vicinity of the Adventist University of Sao Paulo – Brazil (Universidade Adventista de Sao Paulo – Brasil), the brick came into my life. It became our special project at our university’s Museum of Biblical Archeology to decipher and translate the artifact’s inscriptions. What the inscription revealed was nothing less than extraordinary. The inscription consisted of three parallel lines, read left to right conforming to the neobabylonian style used from 625 – 539 B.

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C. – the first paleographic indication of the artifact's age. Here is the transliteration of the cuneiform symbols followed by the translation:

Transliteration: 1)d. NA3-ku-du2r-ri-URU3 LUGAL KA2. DINGIR. RA.

KI [za-nin] 2)E2. SAG. IL2 u3 E2. ZI. DA IBILA [[x]] 3)Sha d.

NA3. IBILA. URU3 LUGAL KA2. DINGIR. [RA.

KI] Translation: 1)(I am) Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon [provider] 2)(of the temples) of Esagila and Ezida, first-born 3)of Nabopolassar, king of Babylon.

This inscription is widely known, having already been unearthed in Babylon and Borsippa. They vary slightly in their context and some are on display in the British Museum in London. The brick was an ancient form of “ royal signature” used by Nebuchadnezzar when erecting various monuments.

The transliteration mentioned above is based on the Assyrioch-babylonisches Zeichenliste by Berger (1981) that varies only slightly from the Manuel d'Epigraphie akkadienne by Labat (1988). Before being presented the inscription was personally edited and verified by several assyriologists including Everling Janos, editor of Babylonian Texts of the First Millennium BC and professor of the Universities of Paris and Budapest, Francis Jones, professor of Ancient History from the University of Paris, and Oseas Moura, doctor of Semitic languages from the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. The uppercase letter pertain to the Sumerian and the lowercase to the Acadian. The reference to Esagila and Ezida is also important, for these are the respective names of the temples of Marduke (Bel) also known as Nebo (meaning “ father of culture”) in Borsippa.

Esagila translates to house of the elevated tower or house that lifts ones head and Ezida means the house of peace. All are very suggestive titles that demonstrate the “ pietista” tone of Babylonian religion. Esagila evidently stand out more than Ezida not only in terms of dimensions and size but also for its dedication to Marduke, who is the principal deity of the Babylonian pantheon. It was there that constant sacrifices of cattle were offered.

The exaggerated measurements of Herodotus present Esagila as a massive square with sides of 354 meter, a dimension which can reduced by at least 50%. Yet, it still remains a magnificent show of labor and engineering considering the limitations of that period. The last two symbols on the second line are erased, but seem to suggest an error made by a scribe. Since the brick is broken on the right side, the inscription’s ending has been reconstructed with the help of other inscriptions whose sentence structure is tremendously similar. However, it is possible that the missing piece of the second line could be IBILA A- [sha-re-du] meaning “ exalted firstborn.

” With the final transliteration, Na3. Ibilá. URU3, there are no doubts that the name NAbu-apal-uszur is that of Nabopolassar the father of Nebuchadnezzar. It was the custom of Nebuchadnezzar to “ sign” with the seal of his inscription the bricks belonging to public buildings as a way to perpetuate his name. This aspect of his character confirms his description in the Bible which presents him onstructing a gold statue of his likeness in order to eternalize his reign among men. Nebuchadnezzar’s words also confirm this type of behavior in Daniel 4: 30 when the king boasts, “ Is this not the Babylon I erected for the royal house, with my grandiose power, and for the glory of my majesty? ” Hence, a find such as this brick is tremendous at shedding

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light on an naturally obscure subject which has little in terms of preserved historical documents.

Yet, in archeology, small fragments and few letters can, many times, solve ancient mysteries and inspire new theories.