

# Ancient Hebrew History: The Chaldeans (612 - 539 BCE)

After the fall of Assyrian power in Mesopotamia, the last great group of Semitic peoples dominated the area. Suffering mightily under the Assyrians, the city of Babylon finally rose up against its hated enemy, the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, and burned it to the ground. The chief of the Babylonians was Nabopolassar; the Semites living in the northern part of Mesopotamia would never gain their independence again.

Nabopolassar was succeeded by his son, Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BC). Nebuchadnezzar was the equal of all the great Mesopotamian conquerors, from Sargon onwards; he not only prevented major powers such as Egypt and Syria from making inroads on his territory, he also conquered the Phoenicians and the state of Judah (586 BC), the southern Jewish kingdom that remained after the subjugation of Israel, the northern kingdom, by the Assyrians. In order to secure the territory of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar brought Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, the two kings of Judah (in succession) and held them in Babylon. In keeping with Assyrian practice, the "New Babylonians," or Chaldeans forced a large part of the Jewish population to relocate. Numbering possibly up to 10,000, these Jewish deportees were largely upper class people and craftspeople; this deportation marks the beginning of the Exile in Jewish history.

Under Nebuchadnezzar, the city of Babylon was rebuilt with great splendor; it would eventually become one of the most magnificent human cities in the area of the Middle East and Mediterranean. But all was not perfect beneath the shining surface; there still existed a number of cities that were loyal to the Assyrians. The entire period dominated by the Babylonians, in fact, is a period of great unrest as Babylonian hegemony was continually tested by philo-Assyrians. This conflict slammed the door on the Babylonian empire after a dynasty of only five kings. Babylon in 555 BC came under the control of a king loyal to the Assyrians, Nabonidus (555-539 BC), who attacked Babylonian culture at its heart: he placed the Assyrian moon-god, Sin, above the Babylonian's principal god, Marduk, who symbolized not only the faith of Babylon but the very city and people itself. Angered and bitter, the priests and those faithful to Babylon would welcome Cyrus the Conqueror of Persia into their city and end forever Semitic domination of Mesopotamia. The center of the Middle Eastern world shifted to Cyrus's capital, Susa, and it would shift again after the Greeks and then the Romans. For almost two and a half centuries, Mesopotamia and Babylon at its center, dominated the landscape of early civilization in the Middle East to be finally eclipsed by the rising sun of the Indo-European cultures to the north and to the west.

Sources:

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