

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Babylon

in a Hurry

Hanging gardens, star charts, and the first great
city

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The Whole Thing in One Page

Babylon began as a secondary city in a country already old enough to have ruins, then became the place later ages used when they needed civilisation to look magnificent, dangerous and doomed. It was not the first city, the first empire or the birthplace of law. Uruk, Akkad, Ur and others had occupied those positions long before Babylon mattered. Fame later dragged older achievements towards the better-known name, which is how Babylon acquired inventions it inherited. Its achievement was different. Babylon learned how to inherit older systems, concentrate them, rename them and make the result look inevitable.

The city rose under Hammurabi in the eighteenth century BCE, when one Amorite king turned a modest kingdom into a short-lived empire and placed his decisions about justice on a stone monument. His dynasty collapsed. Babylon did not. Kassite rulers from outside the region adopted its language of kingship, restored its temples and helped make its god Marduk supreme. Assyrian kings conquered it, quarrelled with it, destroyed it and rebuilt it. Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II then made it the capital of an empire whose walls, palaces, glazed gates and processional roads supplied the Babylon later imagination preferred.

The visible city rested on less visible systems. Marduk's temple and the New Year festival did political work that walls could not. A conqueror might take Babylon in a night, but ruling it usefully meant entering a sacred order maintained by priests, scribes and

families whose authority had survived the army he defeated. Mud-brick buildings required repair. Canals required dredging. Temples required land, staff and deliveries. Households secured marriages, loans, inheritances and sales on clay because memory was not trusted to survive interest, death or family argument. Babylonian scholars watched the Moon and planets for generations, recorded regularities and developed mathematical procedures that made prediction possible. The zodiac on a modern horoscope is one distant result. It arrived through institutions, not one genius looking upwards.

Babylon was conquered by Cyrus in 539 BCE, entered by Alexander in 331, and gradually lost people and functions to newer centres. It did not disappear on schedule. Temples, archives and scholarship continued under Persian, Macedonian, Seleucid and Parthian rule, while the political capital moved elsewhere. The city contracted across centuries, which is less satisfying than divine punishment and more common in history.

Meanwhile another Babylon escaped the Euphrates. For Judean exiles it became the place of captivity. Genesis attached linguistic division to Babel. Revelation used Babylon as a name for persecuting imperial power, probably Rome. European art, preaching, politics, music and film kept rebuilding the city as luxury, tyranny, sexual excess or collapse. Each version selected something real and removed most of the residents.

That is the argument. Babylon endured because it could be rebuilt twice: first in brick by rulers who needed the city, then in language

by cultures that needed what the city had come to mean. One history concerns maintenance. The other concerns reuse. They are the same habit at different scales.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

Your phone can tell you that Mercury is retrograde. It may even tell you what this supposedly means for your relationships, patience or decision-making. The prediction is modern entertainment dressed in ancient authority, but the wheel behind it is not invented scenery. The division of the zodiac into twelve equal signs of thirty degrees was developed by Babylonian scholars during the first millennium BCE. They used it to locate the Sun, Moon and planets, calculate regular movements and connect celestial events to earthly affairs. Your horoscope is one of Babylon's most successful exports, even though a Babylonian scholar would not recognise most of the advice attached to it.

That combination matters. Babylon is often presented as the place where rational knowledge and superstition sat on opposite sides of a table. They did not. The same scholarly institutions that interpreted eclipses as signs for kings also kept observations, compared records and developed predictive mathematics. An explanation can be alien to us while the method beneath part of it remains exact. History becomes useless when the past is divided into people who were secretly modern and people who were merely foolish.

Babylon also sits inside arguments you still hear about law, empire and cultural inheritance. Hammurabi is invoked as the first law-giver, although older law collections survive and his stele was not a modern statute book. Cyrus is praised through a clay cylinder as

the author of the first human-rights charter, although the text is a royal foundation inscription written in Babylonian political language. The Hanging Gardens are reconstructed with staircases and irrigation systems despite the absence of an agreed site in Babylon. Each claim takes a real object, attaches a modern category and then forgets to mark the join. That habit is not confined to antiquity. It is how institutions manufacture ancestry.

The city is useful for a second reason. It shows that conquest does not settle who controls the meaning of a place. Babylonian armies destroyed Jerusalem and deported part of its population. Judean writers then made Babylon one of the most durable names for oppressive power in world culture. Centuries later, the author of Revelation could call Rome “Babylon” without needing to move the city. Defeat produced the stronger metaphor. The empire won the territory and lost the afterlife.

That pattern still operates. Cities, companies and states cultivate images that later users detach from the institutions that produced them. The image can become commercially or politically more valuable than the underlying place. “Babylon” may mean luxury, corruption, racial exile, linguistic confusion, technological ambition or collapse, depending upon who is speaking. The ordinary city of contracts, workshops, temple staff, market prices and canal repair usually disappears because maintenance weakens a moral symbol.

The city also exposes how modern confidence often grows as the evidence beneath it becomes thinner.

The limit is important. Babylon does not explain every city, every empire or every religious metaphor. Its ecology, cuneiform institutions and cult of Marduk were specific. Much of the evidence was written by rulers, temples and property-owning households, and excavation has reached only part of the site. We can reconstruct systems more securely than private feelings, and elite records more densely than the lives of people who owned little.

Babylon should therefore change one habit in the reader. When a famous past appears complete, separate the structure from the reputation. Ask who maintained the first and who benefits from the second. The bricks and the metaphor were both built. Neither built itself.

The Core Ideas

The City That Had to Be Rebuilt

Babylon stood in the alluvial plain of southern Mesopotamia, a place rich in water and poor in the stone and timber from which later tourists expect permanence to be made. Its ordinary building material was earth. Clay-rich soil was mixed, moulded into bricks and dried in the sun; fired bricks and bitumen were used where expense, water resistance or display justified them. The result could support palaces, walls, temples and houses on a scale that astonished visitors. It could also slump, crack, erode and be dismantled for the next project. Monumentality did not defeat maintenance. It made maintenance larger.

The Euphrates made the city possible and kept it unstable. Canals carried water to fields, supplied transport and helped define property, but they silted, breached and changed usefulness as the river moved. Irrigation raised crops and, badly managed, contributed to salinity. A royal inscription could announce that a canal had been cleared or a wall restored, then leave no record of the crews who repeated the work after the king's death. The inscription presents order as an achievement. The city reveals order as a schedule.

Some bricks were baked, glazed and set into the Ishtar Gate as bulls and snake-bodied dragons; others remained plain structural units. The colour attracts the museum visitor, but both kinds be-

longed to the same economy of repeated production. Look at a brick stamped with Nebuchadnezzar II's name. The stamp compresses the clay diggers, moulders, fuel gatherers, transporters, builders, ration distributors and administrators into one royal signature. This is not proof that the king did nothing. Coordinating labour and resources across an empire was itself power. It is proof that monuments are accounting tricks in solid form. Thousands contribute. One name survives.

Babylonian rulers understood rebuilding as political language. They did not normally claim novelty in the modern manner, as though the highest praise for a king was that nobody had thought of his project before. They searched for ancient foundations, restored temples to proper plans and presented repair as the return of order. A new ruler became legitimate by proving that he could recover what neglect, impiety or enemies had damaged. Innovation entered through restoration because restoration came with ancestors and gods attached.

This helps explain why Babylon could survive dynastic failure. Hammurabi's empire fragmented after his death, the Hittites sacked the city, Kassites ruled it, Assyrians dominated and sometimes devastated it, Chaldean kings enlarged it, Persians took it and Macedonians entered it. The urban fabric changed under every regime. The claim that Babylon ought to exist did not. Temples, titles, archives, families and ritual expectations gave each conqueror reasons to rebuild rather than begin elsewhere.

Do not romanticise resilience. Rebuilding consumed labour, taxation and materials, and some inhabitants experienced a restored capital as another demand. Nor did every phase recover the same city. A rebuilt temple could erase an earlier arrangement; a widened processional road could displace houses; a palace could convert conquered wealth into scenery. Continuity is selective even when the builder calls it faithful.

Core Idea 1 is therefore material. Babylon was never a finished object. Its greatness consisted partly in an institution's ability to keep earth behaving like eternity. The later symbolic city would work the same way. Every age would inherit damaged material, restore what suited it and stamp a new name on the result.

Marduk Made Conquest Incomplete

Babylon's political ascent elevated its patron god. Marduk did not begin Mesopotamian history as the uncontested ruler of the divine world. Older cities had older gods, older cults and excellent reasons not to surrender precedence. As Babylon became powerful, scholars and priests placed Marduk inside inherited theology, identified him with established divine qualities and made his supremacy look like the completion of a system rather than a local promotion.

The clearest literary expression is the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation epic. The younger Marduk defeats Tiamat, organises the cosmos from her body and receives supreme names from the other gods. The poem does more than tell how the world began. It

explains why authority should converge upon Marduk and therefore why Babylon's sacred centre should matter beyond Babylon. Cosmic order and civic rank become the same argument at different sizes.

Esagila, Marduk's main temple, and the nearby ziggurat Etemenanki placed that claim in the city. Temples were not quiet buildings reserved for private belief. They held land, employed dependants, received offerings, trained scholars, stored wealth and organised ritual. The god's statue was treated as a living royal presence, clothed, fed, moved in procession and consulted through established forms. If the statue was removed, the loss was theological, administrative and political at once.

Participation mattered because divine approval was not treated as private belief. Processions moved statues through streets, temple personnel controlled access to ritual knowledge, and the king's place in the ceremony made hierarchy visible. The city did not merely contain its religion. It performed a political order in which gods, officials, households and ruler occupied ranked positions. A conqueror could copy the titles, but the people who staged the order retained leverage.

Babylonian royal language included the act of taking the hand of Bel, another name for Marduk, as a marker of legitimate kingship, although the practice and its political force changed over time. The phrase matters because it makes rule relational. The king does not manufacture divine approval; he enters a ceremony controlled by an older cult. The Akitu festival, especially as known

from first-millennium evidence, renewed this order around the New Year. Marduk's movement, recited myth and royal participation joined city, god and king. Details varied across time, and later descriptions should not be projected unchanged into Hammurabi's reign. The principle is firmer than any one reconstruction: kingship in Babylon required more than military possession. The ruler had to enter a sacred constitution he had not invented.

This made conquest incomplete. Sennacherib of Assyria destroyed Babylon in 689 BCE after repeated rebellion and carried away divine images. The act was spectacular and politically disastrous enough that his successor Esarhaddon presented rebuilding as correction. Cyrus conquered the city in 539 BCE and had his foundation text describe Marduk as the power who selected him after Nabonidus failed. The winner still needed a Babylonian god to explain why Babylon had been won.

Propaganda is often treated as evidence to discard. That wastes it. Cyrus's account does not tell us neutrally what every Babylonian thought, and Marduk did not issue a press statement. It shows what the Persian regime believed had to be said to priests, officials and urban audiences whose cooperation mattered. A conqueror's chosen fiction maps the institutions he cannot ignore.

Marduk's supremacy also had limits. Babylonia contained many cities and gods, local cults remained active, and rulers balanced competing traditions. Nabonidus's devotion to the moon god Sin has often been simplified into an attack on Marduk, partly because hostile sources prepared the case against him. His long res-

idence at Tayma and unusual religious policies created real political difficulties, but the surviving accusation was written by winners.

The central point is narrower. Babylon converted local religion into a technology of continuity. Armies could replace dynasties faster than they could replace the reasons people accepted rule. Marduk made the city governable only through participation. The gate could be forced. Legitimacy had to be performed.

Hammurabi's Stone Was an Argument About Justice

Around the end of Hammurabi's reign, a tall dark stone monument presented the king before a seated god, usually identified as Shamash, and covered the surface below with a prologue, hundreds of legal case formulations and an epilogue. Modern editors number 282 provisions. The monument is famous enough to appear in court buildings and textbooks, where it is usually introduced as the first written code of law. Both "first" and "code" create more certainty than the object earns.

Older law collections survive from rulers including Ur-Nammu and Lipit-Ishtar, while contracts, judgments and administrative rules pre-date Hammurabi's stele. Law did not wait for one Babylonian king to invent it. Nor does the stele contain every rule needed to run his kingdom. It says little about some common legal procedures, arranges cases without a modern statutory structure and was not cited by judges through numbered clauses in the surviving court records.

Its cases still matter. They address property, theft, agriculture, debt, marriage, inheritance, injury, professional responsibility, slavery and status through conditional formulations: if a situation occurs, then a consequence follows. The penalties vary according to social rank and gender. The eye-for-an-eye clauses are memorable because physical retaliation looks severe and symmetrical. Much of the text is concerned with compensation, proof, obligation and who bears loss when work or trust fails.

The stele is therefore neither a modern code nor decorative propaganda with no legal content. It belongs to a learned tradition in which difficult cases could be abstracted, ordered and copied. Scribes studied legal collections long after the political circumstances that produced them had vanished. The text preserves ways of reasoning about disputes, while the prologue and epilogue place that reasoning inside a royal claim. Hammurabi is not merely powerful. He is the king who prevents the strong from oppressing the weak, establishes justice and makes right decisions available for the future.

Read that claim beside the hierarchy of the cases. Protection was not equality. Free men of different status, enslaved people, wives, children, debtors and creditors did not stand before one universal law as interchangeable persons. The king's justice stabilised a stratified order rather than abolishing it. That is not a minor blemish attached to an otherwise modern constitution. It is what justice meant inside the system the text was designed to preserve.

The monument's later history sharpens the point. It was removed from Babylonian territory as war booty and found at Susa, where an Elamite ruler had carried it centuries after Hammurabi. The most famous statement of ordered justice survived because somebody conquered the kingdom that owned it. The object became a trophy before it became a legal icon.

Why carve decisions on stone when daily documents were written on clay? Stone projected duration, scarcity and public authority. Clay handled transactions. The stele made royal justice monumental and teachable. A debtor did not walk up to it, find clause 117 and instruct a barrister. The audience was political, divine and scribal as much as judicial.

The useful reversal is this: Hammurabi's monument matters less because it started law than because it shows law being used to define a king. The cases demonstrate competence. The image supplies divine authority. The frame tells the reader what justice is supposed to prove. The stone is not the birth certificate of law. It is a campaign poster for lawful kingship, written by people who understood cases too well for that description to make it trivial.

The Tablet Economy Made Promises Survive People

Clay was cheap, local and unusually good at preserving distrust. A transaction could be spoken, witnessed and remembered, but memory altered, witnesses died and heirs discovered interpretations that favoured themselves. A tablet fixed names, quantities, obligations, dates and witnesses in a form that could be stored,

sealed and produced during dispute. Some documents were enclosed in clay envelopes carrying seals and a duplicate text, which made alteration harder and authentication visible. Bureaucracy acquired packaging. The first question to ask of a contract is not why ancient people were bureaucratic. It is what they feared speech would fail to preserve.

Babylonian archives contain sales, leases, loans, marriage agreements, dowries, adoptions, inheritances, partnerships, tax obligations, work assignments and court decisions. These documents turn the city from a row of royal names into households attempting to continue across generations. A father arranges property. A widow protects a claim. Brothers divide an estate. A creditor secures repayment. An enslaved person appears in a sale because the archive records ownership more readily than experience.

The detail can feel modern and then cease to be modern without warning. Interest was normal, security could include land, crops, persons or future income, and default carried consequences shaped by status and local practice. Rates often encountered in Mesopotamian legal tradition, such as one-fifth on silver and one-third on grain, were conventions rather than a universal market tariff applied identically across centuries. The document must be dated, located and read inside its institution before the number becomes an economic law.

Large family archives make continuity visible. The Egibi archive from the sixth and fifth centuries BCE records property dealings, credit, leases and partnerships across several generations. Calling

the family a bank is tempting and misleading. Its members performed activities familiar from finance, but no modern banking licence, corporate separation or regulatory category contained them. The household was the business, inheritance system, social network and legal person in combinations that modern vocabulary separates.

Women appear as property holders, priestesses, wives, widows, creditors, debtors and parties to litigation, although their room for action depended upon period, status, household and institution. A contract naming a woman does not prove gender equality. It proves that her claim mattered enough to document. That is both more modest and more useful. Legal agency can exist inside durable subordination.

The archive also records forced movement. After Nebuchadnezzar II's campaigns in Judah, deported Judeans appear in Babylonian documentation through ration lists, land obligations and business records. The tablets do not narrate exile as the Hebrew Bible does. They show people entering imperial systems of allocation, agriculture and administration. One source preserves grief and communal memory. Another preserves barley, dates, names and debt. Neither cancels the other.

Survival creates bias. Clay tablets endure, especially when accidentally fired, while leather, wood and ordinary speech vanish. Temples and wealthy families maintained archives because they possessed rooms, staff and claims worth defending. Poor labourers generated fewer recoverable documents. The density of a re-

cord may measure institutional power rather than social importance.

Yet this bias is not a reason to call the documents dry. A receipt is conflict prevented or postponed. A marriage settlement anticipates death, divorce and inheritance before celebration begins. A loan prices time and risk. Babylonian urban life was held together by people making promises and preparing for the possibility that the promise would fail. The tablet did not remove mistrust. It made mistrust administratively productive.

Knowledge Advanced Because Somebody Kept the Previous Tablet

Babylonian mathematics and astronomy are often introduced through isolated marvels: a tablet that resembles a theorem, an eclipse predicted, a numerical approximation close to a modern answer. The marvel is real and the presentation is wrong. The deeper achievement was institutional memory. Scholars learned sign lists, copied problems, inherited procedures, checked observations and added work to sequences that outlived individual careers. Knowledge advanced because the next person did not have to begin with an empty sky.

Mesopotamian mathematics used place-value notation with a sexagesimal structure inherited from much older traditions. Sixty is divisible by many small numbers, which makes fractions convenient, but the system was not one pure base applied in every

practical context. Metrology mixed units and conventions according to what was being counted or measured. School mathematics trained scribes through tables, reciprocals, areas, volumes and problems whose language could turn a field or pile into an abstract exercise.

The surviving material does not justify calling Babylonians the hidden inventors of every later formula. Similar numerical relationships can arise from different questions, and a correct procedure does not imply a Greek-style proof or a modern concept written in disguise. The right question is what operation the text performs, how it expresses generality and what kind of user it was training. Translating every tablet into current notation can reveal the answer while erasing the thought.

Astronomy developed through the same accumulation. Scholars recorded lunar and planetary phenomena, eclipses, weather, river levels, commodity prices and political events in texts now called Astronomical Diaries. Positions were measured against recognised stars and written through conventions that another trained reader could recover. Missing observations might be calculated, copied from reports or marked as unavailable; the record itself preserves work rather than effortless certainty. The records were not casual journals kept by one observer. They belonged to organised scholarly work centred upon Babylon and maintained across generations. Repetition turned events into series. Series made regularity visible.

Celestial observation served divination. Eclipses and unusual appearances could be read as signs concerning king and country. This did not prevent precise observation; it helped create demand for it. By the later first millennium BCE, Babylonian scholars used arithmetical schemes to predict lunar and planetary phenomena, constructing step and zigzag functions that modelled changing velocity without describing a physical mechanism in modern terms. Prediction did not require the sky to become secular first.

The twelve-sign zodiac emerged from this culture. Dividing the ecliptic into twelve equal sections of thirty degrees gave scholars a standard coordinate system for locating celestial bodies. The constellations and names had older histories, but equal signs created a mathematical framework that could travel. Greek astronomers absorbed Babylonian observations, period relations and parameters, then worked them into different geometric traditions. Transmission changed the knowledge while preserving its usefulness.

Individual scholars existed, and some names survive, but the archive resists the biography of genius. A prediction may depend upon observations recorded before the calculator was born. A table may embody corrections whose authors disappeared. Institutional continuity is not the background to discovery. It is one form of discovery.

This is why calling Babylonian astronomy “just astrology” misses the evidence, while calling it modern science born early misses the culture. The scholars inhabited a world in which divine signs, mathematical regularity and political counsel belonged together.

Their explanations were not ours. Their discipline was still discipline. The sky became calculable because somebody kept watching after the omen had passed.

Foreign Rulers Had to Become Babylonian Enough

Babylon's history is full of rulers whose origins lay elsewhere. Amorites founded the dynasty of Hammurabi. Kassites governed Babylonia for centuries. Assyrian kings claimed Babylonian titles and fought over the city. Chaldean dynasts created the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Cyrus entered as a Persian conqueror. Alexander arrived as a Macedonian. If political culture passed only through blood or native dynasty, Babylon should have restarted repeatedly. It did not.

The reason was not tolerance in the modern sense. Conquerors could deport populations, seize estates, punish revolts and redirect tribute. Continuity survived because useful institutions survived. Temples managed land and cult. Scribal families controlled specialised knowledge. Local officials understood taxation, property and irrigation. Urban elites could legitimate a ruler or make government expensive. A foreign king who retained these systems acquired revenue and recognition. One who attacked them risked ruling a famous ruin.

Kassite rule provides the longest demonstration. The dynasty emerged after the collapse of Hammurabi's line and adopted Babylonian royal language, patronised established gods and helped preserve cuneiform scholarship. Its rulers did not become

ethnically Babylonian by decree, and Babylonia did not stop changing. They made foreign origin compatible with local kingship by learning which forms could not be discarded cheaply.

Assyrian control exposed the tension. Assyrian kings could be kings of Babylon as well as kings of Assyria, but the roles carried different expectations. Rebellion recurred, and the city's prestige made it too valuable to ignore and too troublesome to treat as an ordinary province. Sennacherib chose destruction in 689 BCE. His successor Esarhaddon chose reconstruction. The reversal was not sentimental regret. It recognised that obliterating Babylon had created a political and theological problem larger than the city's walls.

The Neo-Babylonian kings were themselves products of this mixed world. Nabopolassar rose amid Assyria's collapse, and Nebuchadnezzar II converted victory into a capital that advertised ancient legitimacy through new construction. The dynasty's power was recent. Its buildings insisted that it was restoring the proper centre of the world.

Cyrus used the same grammar after conquest. The cylinder issued in his name criticises Nabonidus, presents Marduk as searching for a righteous ruler and describes restoration of cults and divine images. It is not a transcript of popular opinion and not a declaration of universal rights. It is evidence that Persian government addressed Babylon through Babylonian categories. Imperial flexibility was strategic because local continuity was valuable.

Continuity could also conceal rupture. Taxes changed, land changed hands, languages shifted, populations moved and institutions lost patronage. Aramaic became increasingly important in daily administration even while Akkadian cuneiform retained learned prestige. Languages therefore divided labour as well as communities. Ink on perishable material handled much business that clay no longer preserves, while cuneiform remained attached to temples, scholarship, archives and claims to antiquity. A temple that survived under a new empire might do so with fewer resources or different obligations. "The Babylonians accepted the conqueror" is too clean. Some collaborated, some rebelled, some adapted and most are not individually visible.

The pattern is still firm. Sovereignty changed faster than civic knowledge. Conquest delivered the palace. Administration required the archive, temple, canal and household. Babylon's institutions repeatedly forced outsiders to become Babylonian enough to rule it.

The City Became a Verdict

The historical Babylon was crowded with residents who married, borrowed, worshipped, traded, quarrelled and repaired walls. The symbolic Babylon became easier to use after those people disappeared. A metaphor does not need drainage. It needs one dominant quality, repeated until the name performs the accusation by itself.

The Hebrew Bible preserves several Babylons because its texts emerged from different periods and arguments. Babylon is the empire that destroyed Jerusalem, removed temple treasures and deported part of Judah's population. It is also Babel, the city and tower through which Genesis explores human concentration, name-making and linguistic division. Later prophetic and poetic texts imagine Babylon's humiliation. These are not neutral surveys of an Iraqi city. They are records of conquest being processed through theology, memory and hope.

The irony is severe. Nebuchadnezzar's empire imposed exile through military power. The exiled community helped give his capital an afterlife more durable than the empire. Psalm, prophecy and story converted Babylon from a location into a moral structure. A regime can control bodies and still lose control of the noun by which it will be remembered.

Greek and Roman writers added another city. Herodotus described immense walls and customs, including the notorious claim that every Babylonian woman was required to have sex with a stranger at a sanctuary. Later authors supplied the Hanging Gardens, royal legends and measurements whose relationship to the excavated city varies from plausible memory to fantasy. Classical Babylon became a wonder because distance rewarded scale.

The New Testament's Revelation used "Babylon" for a persecuting, wealthy imperial power, commonly understood as Rome. The name could now travel without explanation. Christian interpretation, medieval art and early modern painting expanded the reper-

toire: pride, idolatry, luxury, sexual corruption, linguistic confusion and collapse. Bruegel's Tower of Babel looks nothing like a Mesopotamian ziggurat because archaeological accuracy was not the job. The building had to make ambition visible to a European audience.

Nineteenth-century excavation added a material Babylon to the inherited moral one, but museums then rebuilt the city again. Berlin's Ishtar Gate combines ancient glazed bricks with modern restoration inside a new architectural frame. The display is magnificent and cannot be the original gate in its original city. Archaeology recovered Babylon by redistributing it.

Modern uses remain selective. Rastafari and reggae transformed Babylon into a name for oppressive political and racial systems, giving the old symbol a new history grounded in slavery, colonialism and exclusion. Films and novels use the city for decadence or spectacle. Political rulers have used ancient Babylon to claim national grandeur. Saddam Hussein's reconstruction placed modern bricks bearing his name above ancient remains, repeating the royal habit of making restoration sign the restorer.

None of this is false in the same way. Babel is not an excavation report. Revelation is not confused geography. A political song is not attempting to date Nebuchadnezzar's palace. Symbols should be judged by what they do, then separated from claims about the ancient city. The error begins when a moral Babylon is used as evidence that historical residents lived inside the metaphor.

The payback to Core Idea 1 is exact. Ancient Babylon survived through selective rebuilding: foundations were found, walls restored, temples renewed and royal names stamped into replacement brick. Imagined Babylon survives through the same mechanism. Each culture inherits fragments, chooses a plan and removes whatever obstructs the new construction.

The result is not one afterlife but a chain of replacements, each historically real in its effects and incomplete as a description of the city. That is why Babylon never finished falling. Its destruction is one of the materials from which it keeps being rebuilt.

How It Actually Works

Babylon entered history late by Mesopotamian standards. Uruk had already become a large city, writing had existed for centuries, Akkadian kings had claimed empire and the Third Dynasty of Ur had risen and fallen before Babylon became politically important. The name appears in late third-millennium records, probably in forms related to Bābili, later understood as “Gate of God”. The famous explanation may itself be learned interpretation rather than the word’s original origin. Even the city’s name was rebuilt.

After the collapse of Ur III around 2004 BCE under the conventional Middle Chronology, southern and central Mesopotamia divided among competing kingdoms. Amorite-speaking dynasties established themselves in cities including Isin, Larsa, Eshnunna and Babylon. The first dynasty at Babylon is conventionally begun with Sumu-abum around 1894 BCE, although early succession and control are not perfectly clear. For several generations Babylon was one kingdom among stronger neighbours. Nobody looking at the map in 1800 BCE needed to predict that its god would later rule the cosmos.

Hammurabi came to the throne in 1792 BCE. Most of his forty-three-year reign does not resemble an uninterrupted campaign of conquest. He negotiated alliances, maintained canals, built temples and survived among larger powers. Mari under Zimri-Lim, Larsa under Rim-Sin, Eshnunna and Elam all mattered. Then, late in his reign, the balance broke. Hammurabi defeated a coalition in-

volving Elam, turned against Larsa, took Eshnunna and eventually destroyed Mari as an independent power. Within a few years he controlled much of Mesopotamia.

The diplomatic archive from Mari makes the world behind this expansion unusually vivid. Kings called one another brothers while counting troops, requesting intelligence, shifting alliances and worrying that an ally had become too successful. One letter summarises the balance brutally: no king was strong by himself. Hammurabi's later image as solitary lawgiver hides a ruler who survived through negotiation before he survived through victory.

The speed of expansion made the empire look stronger than its foundations. Hammurabi died in 1750 BCE, and his son Samsuiluna inherited revolts, territorial losses and pressures the dynasty could not reverse. Southern cities broke away, and rulers of the so-called First Dynasty of the Sealand held territory in the marshy south. Populations shifted, agricultural systems suffered and the kingdom contracted towards its core. Dating and causation remain disputed, and older explanations that relied on one invasion or one environmental collapse have given way to regional sequences. The contraction was political, demographic and ecological in different combinations. Later kings still ruled Babylon, but the empire associated with Hammurabi had been a phase, not a permanent structure. The law stele outlasted the state whose justice it advertised.

In 1595 BCE, again using the Middle Chronology, a Hittite army under Mursili I raided deep into Mesopotamia and sacked Babylon.

The campaign did not create a Hittite province on the Euphrates. It removed the existing dynasty and left a political gap. Kassite rulers eventually filled it, although the transition remains obscure and should not be narrated as one clean handover. The Kassites ruled Babylonia for roughly four centuries, longer than Hammurabi's dynasty and far longer than the Neo-Babylonian Empire that dominates popular memory.

Kassite kings adopted Babylonian titulature, supported established temples and participated in an international diplomatic world linking Egypt, Anatolia, Assyria and the Levant. Letters exchanged with Egyptian pharaohs discuss royal marriage, gold and status with the tense courtesy of families whose gifts were also foreign policy. Kassite art is especially associated with kudurrus, stone records of royal land grants and privileges marked by divine symbols. They are often called boundary stones, although many were deposited in temples rather than planted around fields. Their capital was often at Dur-Kurigalzu rather than Babylon, yet Babylon's religious and cultural rank increased. Marduk's rise cannot be reduced to one royal decree, but the long Kassite period helped consolidate the city's authority. Babylon could lose the palace and keep becoming more Babylonian.

The Kassite dynasty ended in the twelfth century BCE amid Elamite invasion and regional disruption. Elamite rulers carried monuments from Babylonia to Susa, probably including Hammurabi's stele. The movement was deliberate. Conquerors did not collect these objects because they were meaningless stone; they removed compressed claims to kingship and made possession itself

a claim. The following centuries brought short dynasties, Aramean and Chaldean groups, unstable kingship and increasing Assyrian intervention. “Babylonian” now described a political and scholarly tradition more securely than one continuous ruling family. Assyria could dominate Babylonia, install kings, remove kings or claim the throne directly, but the city’s prestige made every settlement temporary.

Chaldean leaders from southern Babylonia repeatedly used the city’s prestige against Assyria. Marduk-apla-iddina II, the Mero-dach-baladan of the Hebrew Bible, seized the Babylonian throne and sought foreign support before Sargon II drove him out. Sennacherib inherited the problem, installed and removed rulers, and found that each settlement created another faction with a reason to rebel.

This relationship reached its most violent point under Sennacherib. Babylon rebelled repeatedly, and in 689 BCE the Assyrian king captured and devastated it, removed inhabitants and divine images, and presented the destruction as punishment. Ancient accounts magnified the totality of the act, and archaeology cannot confirm every phrase in royal rhetoric, but the assault was exceptional. It also failed as policy. Sennacherib’s son Esarhaddon reversed course, rebuilt Babylon and framed restoration as obedience to divine will. Assyria had discovered that a troublesome sacred capital could be harder to govern as a ruin.

Further rebellion followed. Esarhaddon arranged for his son Ashurbanipal to rule Assyria and another son, Shamash-shum-

ukin, to rule Babylon. The brothers went to war. Babylon was besieged and fell in 648 BCE, and Shamash-shum-ukin died. Assyrian power survived the crisis but not the century. After Ashurbanipal, succession struggles weakened the empire. Nabopolassar, a ruler associated with the Chaldean south, secured Babylon in 626 BCE and led resistance that became independence.

Babylonian and Median forces destroyed the major Assyrian centres, with Nineveh falling in 612 BCE. Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar II inherited the new empire in 605 BCE after defeating Egyptian forces at Carchemish. His reign joined conquest to construction on the scale later memory required. Babylon's walls, palaces, temples, Processional Way and Ishtar Gate were rebuilt or enlarged. The city became an argument that the political centre of the region had returned to its proper address.

Approaching the ceremonial centre meant passing blue-glazed brick, lions, bulls and the composite dragons associated with Marduk. The Processional Way channelled movement through the Ishtar Gate towards Esagila and Etemenanki. Palaces occupied immense compounds behind fortifications. The plan made festival, defence and kingship reinforce one another. It was not the whole city. Most inhabitants lived beyond the reconstructed museum image, in houses and neighbourhoods whose materials were less photogenic and whose repairs did not carry imperial animals. Streets narrowed and shifted, houses were rebuilt above houses, courtyards organised domestic work, and burials could be placed beneath floors. The capital was not a stage set surrounding a palace. It was a changing accumulation of households.

The Hanging Gardens may have existed somewhere within this royal city, but Nebuchadnezzar's extensive building inscriptions do not securely identify them and excavation has not settled the question. Classical authors describe an elevated, irrigated garden; they wrote later and differ in detail. The gap between the famous wonder and the contemporary evidence is not a footnote. It is a warning about how eagerly Babylon attracts buildings.

The empire's wealth came from somewhere. Campaigns in the Levant secured tribute, labour and strategic control. Jerusalem submitted, rebelled and was punished. Nebuchadnezzar captured the city in 597 BCE, deported King Jehoiachin and members of the elite, then returned after another revolt. Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed in 586 BCE under the standard chronology, and another deportation followed. The phrase "Babylonian exile" compresses several movements, different social groups and lives that continued both in Judah and Babylonia. It remains one of the decisive events in Jewish history because political defeat produced textual, religious and communal reorganisation rather than disappearance.

Some deportees entered settlements and administrative systems in Babylonia. Temple archives and private family records show the same empire from within. The Esagila and other sanctuaries controlled property, employed workers and received offerings, while households lent silver, leased land, bought dates and arranged inheritance. The large Egibi archive begins in the Neo-Babylonian period and continues under Persian rule, which is precisely the

point: a royal dynasty could end while a family's obligations continued.

The Al-Yahudu tablets, named after a place whose name means "Judah-town", record Judean families through land, tax, service, credit and inheritance during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. They do not give the inner history of exile. They show exiles becoming legible to imperial administration. The biblical lament and the loan document describe the same displacement from opposite ends of the archive.

Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BCE. Three short reigns followed before Nabonidus took the throne in 556. Nabonidus was not the obvious dynastic successor and developed an unusual royal programme centred partly upon Sin, the moon god. He spent around a decade at Tayma in northern Arabia, leaving his son Belshazzar with authority in Babylonia. The reasons remain debated: Arabian strategy, trade, religious policy, illness and conflict with Babylonian institutions have all been proposed. Tayma offered control over Arabian routes and a major oasis, but strategic value does not explain every religious choice. Nabonidus also excavated ancient foundations and revived cults with the enthusiasm of a ruler who treated antiquity as authority. His scholarship did not make his politics safer. No single explanation closes the case, and confident biographies usually reveal their source's allegiance.

The absence mattered because Babylonian kingship depended upon presence and ritual. Later texts hostile to Nabonidus accused him of neglecting Marduk and disrupting proper cult. These

sources cannot be treated as neutral records, especially because the Persian conqueror benefited from the accusation. They do show that Nabonidus had created a legitimacy problem his enemies knew how to use.

Cyrus defeated the Babylonian army at Opis in 539 BCE. Sippar fell, and Babylon was entered with limited recorded resistance. The surviving chronicle presents an orderly takeover, while the Cyrus Cylinder makes Marduk choose Cyrus and denounces Nabonidus. Herodotus later supplied a dramatic story in which Persians diverted the Euphrates and entered through the riverbed during a festival. The contemporary Babylonian evidence does not require that scene, and modern histories should not combine every source merely because the result is cinematic. The city was not destroyed. Temples and administrative systems continued, and Babylon remained a major centre within the Achaemenid Empire. Persian kings used the title king of Babylon, royal estates and tax systems reached through local administrators, and private archives continued to date documents by the new rulers. Conquest is clearest in the changed royal name at the top of a tablet whose transaction otherwise proceeds. Cyrus's achievement was not generosity without strategy. He conquered the city and let Babylonian institutions explain why he deserved it.

Babylonia revolted under Darius I and again during the reign of Xerxes. Older accounts described Xerxes as destroying temples, removing Marduk's statue and ending Babylon's special status after revolts in 484 BCE. Current scholarship is more cautious. Repression, confiscation and changes among elite families are vis-

ible, but a complete religious closure is not. Esagila continued, cuneiform scholarship continued and “the destruction of Babylon by Xerxes” now looks like another dramatic event assembled from uneven evidence.

Alexander defeated Darius III at Gaugamela in 331 BCE and entered Babylon. He treated the city as an imperial centre, ordered work on temples and planned campaigns from it. He returned in 323 and died there at the age of thirty-two. The date, 11 June in the conventional conversion, is supported by a Babylonian astronomical diary as well as Greek narrative traditions. One of history’s most famous deaths appears in a text that also cared about the sky and weather. Babylonian categories remained themselves while recording a Macedonian king.

Alexander’s successors fought over the empire. Seleucus I founded Seleucia on the Tigris around the beginning of the third century BCE, and administration, population and commerce shifted towards the new city. Babylon did not empty at once. Its temples functioned, Greek civic institutions appeared alongside older ones, and scholars continued to write cuneiform. A Greek theatre and gymnasium did not transform every resident into a Greek, while a cuneiform tablet did not prove the city had escaped Hellenistic rule. Communities shared the site through institutions that overlapped without becoming identical. Astronomical work reached some of its most sophisticated forms after Babylon had ceased to be capital of an independent kingdom.

Decline therefore happened by subtraction. Royal patronage moved. River channels changed. Buildings were robbed for brick. Population contracted. Archives narrowed. Political events affected different institutions at different speeds. The last known dated cuneiform texts from Babylon belong to the first century CE, around two thousand years after the city first appeared in writing. A moral story requires Babylon to fall in one night. The documents refuse.

How we know

Babylon is reconstructed from sources that disagree because they were made to do different jobs. Royal inscriptions describe building, conquest and restoration through the king's ideal voice. Chronicles offer terse sequences of campaigns, accessions, omens and deaths, but survive unevenly and reflect scholarly selection. Legal and administrative tablets record transactions with extraordinary precision while ignoring most people unless property, labour or obligation brought them into the document. Literary and ritual texts preserve theology, education and learned tradition, not a census of belief.

Survival distorts the balance. Clay endured fire and burial; ink on leather, wood and papyrus usually did not. Aramaic became increasingly common during the first millennium BCE, but much of that everyday writing disappeared with its material. A cuneiform archive can therefore look like the whole literate world when it is

the durable remainder of one part. Absence from the tablets may record the medium, not the absence of the activity.

The Hebrew Bible records Babylon through conquest, exile, prophecy and memory. It is indispensable for Judean experience and dangerous when treated as a neutral history of the city. Greek and Roman authors preserve observations, rumours and lost traditions, but their measurements and customs often belong to the Babylon they expected. The Hanging Gardens exist securely in classical description and insecurely in Babylonian evidence. Stephanie Dalley's proposal that the tradition derives from Sennacherib's garden and waterworks at Nineveh is the strongest alternative and remains contested.

Archaeology adds walls, gates, houses, streets, tablets and destruction, then introduces its own losses. Robert Koldewey's German excavations from 1899 to 1917 established much of the city's plan and removed monumental material later reconstructed in Berlin. High groundwater, later occupation, modern rebuilding, looting, war damage and the enormous size of the site limit what can be recovered. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon is visible because he built extensively and because excavators searched for it. Earlier and ordinary Babylons are harder to display.

Dates in the second millennium BCE depend upon competing chronologies. This book uses the Middle Chronology for Hammurabi and the Hittite sack because it remains the most common reference system, while acknowledging that lower chronologies shift those dates. Certainty improves in the first millennium as king

lists, chronicles, astronomical observations and synchronisms converge.

No source gives the whole city. Put them together and the gaps do not disappear. They acquire edges. That is how Babylon becomes historical again.

What People Get Wrong

“Hammurabi gave the world its first laws”

Hammurabi’s stele is the most famous legal monument from the ancient Near East, which is not the same as being the first. Collections associated with Ur-Nammu, Lipit-Ishtar and Eshnunna are older, and legal practice existed long before any surviving collection. Section 3 set out the second mistake: calling the stele a code makes it sound like a complete statute book applied uniformly by judges. The text calls its cases just decisions, arranges them only loosely and leaves much of Babylonian law outside the stone.

Its importance lies elsewhere. Hammurabi placed nearly three hundred case formulations between a prologue and epilogue presenting him as the divinely authorised guardian of justice. The monument taught kingship, scribal reasoning and hierarchy. Copies remained part of learned education for more than a thousand years, although surviving court records do not show judges citing clause numbers as a modern court cites legislation.

The myth survives because history prefers one founder, one object and one date. Ur-Nammu is older. Hammurabi is taller, better preserved and carved beneath a memorable image of the king before a god. Public memory selected the better monument and then promoted it to first place. The promotion also flatters the modern story of law progressing from one great legislator to the

next. Mesopotamian legal life was older, more distributed and less obedient to a single founding moment.

“The Hanging Gardens definitely stood in Babylon”

Ancient Greek and Roman writers describe an elevated garden associated with Babylon, and later artists supplied terraces, arches and cascades until uncertainty became scenery. The problem is contemporary evidence. Nebuchadnezzar II described his building works at length, praised structures he considered wonders and left no secure reference to a Hanging Garden. Excavation at Babylon has not identified one beyond serious dispute.

That does not prove the gardens never existed. Texts can be lost, names can differ and archaeology has uncovered only part of the city. It does mean the standard reconstruction is not an established fact. Stephanie Dalley has argued that the tradition belongs instead to Sennacherib's palace garden and waterworks at Nineveh, whose inscriptions, reliefs and engineering fit parts of the classical description. The case is substantial and contested. Nineveh is the leading alternative, not a solved relocation.

The honest label is therefore the Hanging Gardens tradition. We have late descriptions, no accepted Babylonian identification and a serious Assyrian candidate. Anyone showing you a precise plan of Nebuchadnezzar's terraces is illustrating a hypothesis, usually without admitting which century supplied the missing architecture. The images may be useful reconstructions. They become

misleading when the caption quietly changes “may have looked like” into “looked like”.

“Archaeologists found the Tower of Babel”

Babylon contained a real ziggurat called Etemenanki, rebuilt on an enormous scale under Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II. Its ceremonial name meant House, Foundation of Heaven and Earth. Later remains, building inscriptions and a tablet showing a stepped tower support the broad reconstruction of a monumental sacred platform beside Marduk’s temple. It is a plausible historical stimulus for the Tower of Babel story.

Plausible stimulus is not excavated proof. Genesis presents a theological narrative about human concentration, name-making, divine limits and the multiplication of languages. It does not name Nebuchadnezzar, describe Marduk’s cult or offer dimensions that can be checked against a foundation trench. The Hebrew story also plays upon Babel as confusion, while Babylonian tradition understood the city’s name differently. Two cultures used the same place to make opposite claims about order.

Etemenanki’s ruins were dismantled, disturbed and robbed across centuries, and its exact height and appearance remain debated. Archaeology can identify Babylon’s great ziggurat. It cannot certify the dialogue, motive or linguistic miracle in Genesis. The tower has a historical setting. The story remains a story.

“The Cyrus Cylinder is the first human-rights charter”

The Cyrus Cylinder records the Persian conquest of Babylon in the language a successful Mesopotamian king was expected to use. Marduk chooses Cyrus because Nabonidus has failed, the conqueror restores proper cult, repairs order and returns divine images and displaced communities. The text matters because it reveals how Cyrus presented legitimate rule to Babylonian audiences. It says nothing about universal, equal rights possessed by human beings against the state.

Calling it the first charter of human rights translates royal restoration into a modern legal category that did not exist in the document. Cyrus did not renounce empire, free every subject or establish freedom of religion as an individual entitlement. Returning cult statues and deported groups could repair temples, stabilise provinces and reverse policies blamed upon the defeated king. It was intelligent imperial government and useful propaganda at once.

The correction should not swing into dismissal. Cyrus often governed conquered regions through local institutions more flexibly than rulers who tried to erase them. Judean traditions remembered Persian permission to return and rebuild as a decisive act of restoration. That still does not turn a foundation inscription buried in Babylon into a declaration addressed to humanity. It is an imperial text about a good king. Human rights begin from a different political idea.

“Babylonian women had to practise sacred prostitution”

Herodotus claimed that every Babylonian woman once in her life had to sit in a sanctuary and have sex with a stranger who paid a coin in the goddess's name. The story became one of the most repeated facts about Babylon because it joined sex, religion and an eastern city already accused of excess. It has no convincing support in Mesopotamian documentation.

Modern re-examination has dismantled the supposed institution of Babylonian sacred prostitution. Cuneiform terms once translated as temple prostitute do not securely mean that, and later Greek, Roman and Christian accounts often depend directly or indirectly upon Herodotus. An outsider's extraordinary custom became evidence for itself through repetition. Babylonian temples employed women in varied religious, economic and dependent roles. Sex work existed in Mesopotamian societies. Sacred marriage imagery and ritual also existed. None proves a rule requiring every woman to sell sex for a goddess.

This matters because the myth turns Babylonian women into a spectacle while discarding the contracts, dowries, property claims, priestly offices and household constraints through which their lives are documented. The lurid story survives because ordinary legal agency is less marketable than compulsory temple sex. Herodotus gave Babylon a custom. Later readers gave the custom certainty.

“Babylonian astronomy was just superstition”

Babylonian scholars treated celestial events as signs with political and religious meaning. They compiled omen series, advised kings and practised forms of astrology. Describing this as superstition and stopping there removes the institutional work that made later astronomy possible. The same scholarly communities observed eclipses, lunar motion and planetary appearances across generations, recorded results systematically and developed mathematical procedures capable of predicting phenomena.

Their astral science did not divide cleanly into modern astronomy on one shelf and irrational astrology on another. Divination supplied reasons to observe, temples supported scholars, and mathematical models grew inside that setting. By the late first millennium BCE, Babylonian systems used tabular arithmetic, step functions and zigzag schemes to calculate lunar and planetary behaviour. Greek astronomers later drew upon Babylonian observations and techniques, then placed them inside different geometric and philosophical programmes.

The correct reversal is not that Babylonians secretly practised modern science. They did not share modern assumptions about causation, experiment or disciplinary boundaries. It is that reliable quantitative knowledge can develop within purposes a later culture rejects. Calling the whole enterprise superstition explains the scholar's motive badly and the calculation not at all. The opposite simplification is no better: Babylonian scholars were not secular researchers waiting for modern terminology. Their achievement

was to make exact observation and predictive mathematics work inside a religious account of the sky.

“Babylon disappeared when Cyrus conquered it”

Cyrus took Babylon in 539 BCE. He did not close it. The city remained an Achaemenid royal and administrative centre, its temples continued, Babylonian titles remained politically useful and cuneiform scholarship developed further. Revolts under Persian rule brought repression and institutional change, especially under Xerxes, but the clean picture of a city destroyed for rebellion is no longer defensible.

Alexander entered Babylon in 331 BCE, returned there and died in the city in 323. Seleucid rulers later founded Seleucia on the Tigris, which drew population, commerce and government away from Babylon. Even then the older city retained temples, residents, Greek institutions and cuneiform scholars. Astronomical diaries and learned texts continued under Seleucid and Parthian rule, with the final dated cuneiform documents belonging to the first century CE.

Babylon's decline was a transfer of functions, people and patronage rather than one fatal conquest. River change, political relocation, warfare and the reuse of building material reduced the city across centuries. The symbolic Babylon prefers a dramatic fall because moral cities are expected to receive moral endings. The historical one contracted slowly, long after several conquerors had announced a new age. Decline is visible in shrinking archives and

transferred institutions, not in one layer of ash large enough to satisfy the metaphor.

Use It

Babylon is useful because it shows how a place can be conquered twice: first by armies, then by interpretation. The historical city sat on the Euphrates and depended upon canals, fields, temples, archives and repeated maintenance. The symbolic city became a portable accusation against luxury, pride, persecution and empire. Keep those Babylons separate long enough to see how they interact. The real city explains why the symbol acquired force. The symbol explains why later people kept rearranging the real city until it delivered the verdict they wanted.

Begin with maintenance. Mud brick, canals and riverbanks make power visible in a form monuments usually hide. A wall can be inaugurated once, but it must survive rain, rising damp, neglect and human reuse. A canal can be celebrated by a king, then silt while his inscription remains confident. Ask who repaired the system after the dedication. This moves attention from the exceptional act to the recurring labour that made the act continue to exist. Political authority often presents maintenance as restoration of an ancient order because repair looks more legitimate when the ruler claims to be recovering what should never have failed.

Use the same test on institutions. Babylon changed dynasties repeatedly while temples, scribal families, titles and ritual expectations survived. Conquest transferred sovereignty more quickly than it transferred legitimacy. Assyrian, Persian and Macedonian rulers could enter the city by force, but useful rule required

people who already knew how land, cult, taxation, record-keeping and public ceremony worked. Ask what the conqueror retained. Whatever survives the victory is usually doing more work than the victory narrative admits.

This is the legitimacy test. A new ruler will often describe continuity as evidence that the old order wanted him to succeed. Cyrus did not present himself to Babylon as a foreign king who had defeated its army and acquired its property. His public text placed Marduk behind the conquest and Nabonidus beneath it. That does not make the account worthless. Propaganda identifies the institutions and grievances the new regime believed it had to address. Read it neither as confession nor as pure fiction. Read it as a negotiation in which the winner still needs the conquered city to agree about what winning means.

Then put the monument beside the invoice. The Ishtar Gate, Processional Way and royal palaces display order through scale, colour and controlled movement. Their existence also implies taxation, quarrying, clay preparation, fuel, transport, food and organised labour. A monument compresses thousands of obligations into one king's name. Reverse the compression. Before admiring the wall, trace the materials. Before praising the builder, identify the households and conquered territories from which resources moved. Beauty survives more honestly when the bill remains attached.

Clay tablets permit the same reversal at household scale. Contracts record marriage, debt, inheritance, leases and sale because

people expected disagreement. The document is not dry evidence sitting below the real history. It is the real history of people attempting to make promises survive memory, death and bad faith. Ask why this transaction needed writing, who supplied the witnesses and what would happen if one party could not perform. A receipt is a map of distrust made practical.

The archive also teaches a harder lesson. What survives most densely is not automatically what mattered most. Property owners generated more documents than labourers with nothing to transfer. Temples preserved accounts because temples had store-rooms, scribes and institutional continuity. Enslaved people appear often through somebody else's ownership claim. Judean deportees become visible when land, rations, obligations or royal households required recording. The archive has a class structure. Read the silence around each tablet as carefully as the signs impressed into it.

Follow knowledge through institutions rather than geniuses. Babylonian astronomy became powerful because observations were recorded, copied and compared across generations. The method did not require every scholar to begin again or one celebrated individual to invent the sky. It required trained readers, durable conventions and organisations willing to preserve work whose value might emerge decades later. This is a useful correction to histories of discovery built around sudden brilliance. Accumulation is an achievement. Continuity can be intellectually creative.

Do not separate accuracy from purpose too quickly. Babylonian scholars observed planets and eclipses within a world where celestial events carried divine and political meaning. Their predictions did not become mathematically serious only when stripped of religion by later cultures. Exact observation and unfamiliar explanation can coexist. The useful question is not whether an ancient scholar was secretly modern. Ask what standards of regularity, calculation and correction operated inside the system he inhabited.

Treat decline as the movement of functions. Babylon did not vanish when Cyrus entered, when Alexander died there or when Seleucia grew nearby. Administration, population, patronage and scholarship shifted at different speeds. A city can lose political centrality while remaining sacred, learned or commercially useful. It can shrink without experiencing one final collapse. Whenever a place is said to have fallen, ask what stopped, what moved and what remained. Dramatic verbs often combine processes that the people living through them experienced separately.

The same rule applies to cultural inheritance. Greek astronomy could use Babylonian observations without becoming Babylonian astronomy translated word for word. Jewish memory could transform Babylon into exile without providing a neutral urban survey. Christian writers could apply Babylon to Rome because the name had become a moral structure rather than an address. Transmission is selection. The receiving culture preserves whatever can be made to answer its own problem.

This gives you a test for every later Babylon. When a politician, preacher, musician or filmmaker uses the name, identify which feature has been selected: wealth, sexual excess, religious oppression, imperial violence, linguistic confusion or magnificent doom. Then ask what disappears. The working city almost always does. Symbolic Babylon has no canal maintenance, inheritance dispute or school exercise because ordinary life weakens the accusation. A city becomes easier to condemn when its residents have been removed from it.

Do not correct symbolism by pretending it has no historical value. Biblical Babylon shaped real communities, political thought and later language. The Tower of Babel mattered without being an architectural survey. Revelation's Babylon mattered without moving the Euphrates to Rome. A symbol is historically real when it changes behaviour, even if it describes its source selectively. The task is to study both levels without using one to cancel the other.

Use the firstness test whenever Babylon is credited with inventing something. Fame creates a gravitational field around evidence. Hammurabi becomes the first lawgiver, Babylon the first great city and its scholars the inventors of any later technique that resembles their work. Replace the word "first" with a narrower claim: earliest surviving, earliest securely dated, first known in this form, or unusually influential. The correction does not diminish Babylon. It prevents reputation from swallowing older cities, parallel developments and lost evidence. A civilisation should not need every medal in order to remain important.

Finally, apply the reconstruction test. Every claim to restore Babylon, whether made by Nebuchadnezzar, an archaeologist, a museum or a modern ruler, chooses a period and an audience. Restoration is never the return of the complete past. It stabilises some walls, replaces missing material, labels uncertain features and often privileges the most spectacular phase. Ask what has been restored, what has been conjectured and what earlier or later city had to disappear so this version could stand.

Limits

Babylon cannot be reduced to a general lesson about every city or empire. Southern Mesopotamian ecology, temple institutions, cuneiform scholarship and the political authority of Marduk created a specific system. Modern states do not acquire legitimacy by participating in the Akitu festival, and a contemporary contract does not operate through the same household, status and legal structures as a Babylonian tablet.

The evidence also remains unequal. Royal inscriptions exaggerate order, legal documents select people with claims worth recording and later biblical or Greek texts approach Babylon through their own arguments. Archaeology has uncovered only part of the city, while groundwater, reconstruction and modern damage limit access. Critical reading narrows what each source can prove. It does not produce an all-seeing account once the biases are named.

The final limit is moral convenience. Babylonian splendour was funded through hierarchy, coercion and empire. Its residents also

lived ordinary lives not exhausted by the crimes of their rulers. Refusing to romanticise the city does not require turning every brick into evidence for a prosecution.

The one thing to keep

Whenever Babylon appears, ask who is rebuilding it and what they need the rebuilt city to mean.

Terms

Akitu

The Babylonian New Year festival, held in spring. Processions, divine statues and ritual texts renewed royal authority beneath Marduk. Kingship had to be recognised through sacred order.

Akkadian

A Semitic language written in cuneiform across ancient Mesopotamia. Babylonian and Assyrian were major dialects. Scholars copied Akkadian texts long after everyday speech changed.

Astronomical Diary

A Babylonian record combining observations of the Moon, planets, eclipses and weather with river levels, prices and political events. The diaries let knowledge accumulate across generations.

Babylonia

The southern Mesopotamian region dominated culturally and sometimes politically by Babylon. It contained older cities, temples and local identities. Babylon was its leading centre, not the whole region.

Cuneiform

A writing system of wedge-shaped impressions pressed into clay. It recorded several languages for more than three thousand years. Cuneiform is a script, not a language.

Cyrus Cylinder

A clay foundation text issued after Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BCE. It presents him as Marduk's chosen restorer and criticises Nabonidus. It is royal propaganda, not a human-rights charter.

Egibi family

A wealthy Babylonian household known through a large sixth and fifth-century BCE archive. Its members lent money, managed land and entered partnerships. Calling them bankers imports a modern profession.

Enuma Elish

The Babylonian creation epic in which Marduk defeats Tiamat and receives supremacy among the gods. Its opening words mean "When on high". The poem linked cosmic order to Marduk and therefore to Babylon.

Esagila

Marduk's principal temple in Babylon, ceremonially named the House Whose Top Is Lofty. It was a religious, economic and scholarly institution central to legitimate rule.

Etemenanki

The great ziggurat beside Esagila, whose name meant House, Foundation of Heaven and Earth. It probably helped shape later ideas about the Tower of Babel, but the biblical story is not an architectural report.

Hammurabi's stele

A tall stone monument bearing a royal image, prologue, legal cases and epilogue. It was taken to Susa as booty and found there. It was neither the earliest law collection nor a complete modern legal code.

Ishtar

A major Mesopotamian goddess associated with love, sexuality, war and political power. Babylon's Ishtar Gate carried her name, while lions representing her lined the Processional Way.

Ishtar Gate

A monumental glazed-brick gate rebuilt under Nebuchadnezzar II. Its blue surface displayed bulls and dragon-creatures of Adad and Marduk. Berlin's reconstruction combines ancient material with restoration.

Kassites

A dynasty of non-Babylonian origin that ruled Babylonia for several centuries after Hammurabi's line ended. Kassite kings adopted Babylonian titles, temples and scribal traditions rather than replacing them with one foreign system.

Kudurru

A stone monument recording royal land grants, privileges or boundary-related claims, especially in the Kassite and post-Kassite periods. Despite the common translation “boundary stone”, many were kept in temples rather than placed around fields.

Marduk

Babylon's patron god, elevated over time to head of the Babylonian pantheon. His rise followed Babylon's political ascent. Kings who ruled the city sought legitimacy through his temple, festival and divine approval.

Middle Chronology

A modern system for dating the second millennium BCE. It places Hammurabi at 1792–1750 BCE and the Hittite sack at 1595 BCE. Other chronologies shift both.

Mud brick

Southern Mesopotamia's principal building material, made from clay-rich earth dried in the sun. Cheap and practical, it eroded without maintenance. Babylon survived through repeated repair.

Nabonidus

The last Neo-Babylonian king, ruling from 556 to 539 BCE. He promoted the moon god Sin and spent years at Tayma in Arabia. Later sources hostile to him helped Cyrus present conquest as religious restoration.

Nebuchadnezzar II

The Neo-Babylonian king who ruled from 604 to 562 BCE. He expanded the empire, rebuilt Babylon and destroyed Jerusalem. The spelling varies because the Akkadian name passed through several ancient languages before reaching English.

Neo-Babylonian Empire

The empire ruled from Babylon between 626 and 539 BCE, founded by Nabopolassar and expanded by Nebuchadnezzar II. Its political life was brief, while the capital and Judean exile gave it an enormous afterlife.

Processional Way

The ceremonial road running through the Ishtar Gate towards Babylon's sacred centre. Glazed-brick lions lined parts of it. The route organised royal and divine movement during festivals and made architecture perform political theology.

Scribal school

A modern label for settings where scribes learned signs, languages, mathematics and canonical texts. Training occurred in households, temples and other institutions, not one uniform school system.

Seleucia on the Tigris

A new city founded by Seleucus I near Babylon around the early third century BCE. It drew administration and population towards

the Tigris, contributing to Babylon's contraction without causing immediate abandonment.

Shamash

The sun god associated with justice, judgement and divination. On Hammurabi's stele, the seated god before the king is usually identified as Shamash, placing royal justice beneath divine authority.

Tiamat

The primordial sea in the Enuma Elish, personified as the opponent defeated by Marduk. He uses her divided body to construct the ordered cosmos. The story helped present Marduk's supremacy as the result of saving the gods.

Ziggurat

A massive stepped temple platform built from mud brick, often with a shrine at or near the summit. A ziggurat was not a tomb and did not function like an Egyptian pyramid despite the convenient resemblance.

Zodiac

The division of the Sun, Moon and planets' apparent path into twelve signs. Its systematic form developed in late Babylonian astronomy and entered later astrological traditions.

Go Deeper

For the full narrative: Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *A History of Babylon, 2200 BC to AD 75*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2018. This is the best single-volume history of Babylon from its emergence to the final centuries of cuneiform scholarship. Beaulieu keeps the city separate from Babylonia, dates political change carefully and gives Kassite, Assyrian, Persian and Hellenistic periods the space popular accounts usually surrender to Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar. Read it when this book's compression becomes suspicious. Its strength is chronology rather than spectacle: the long Kassite centuries and the city under foreign rule receive the attention required to explain why Babylon survived its own empires.

For primary evidence: Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*. Second edition, Scholars Press, 1997. Roth translates the major Mesopotamian legal collections, including the Laws of Hammurabi and the older texts that destroy the claim that Hammurabi was first. The introductions and notes show why "code" is an imperfect label and how scribal collections relate to legal practice. Read the prologues and epilogues as closely as the cases. The king is making an argument about himself. Keep the translation beside Section 5 and notice how much modern mythology enters through labels supplied after excavation rather than words written on the stone.

For the city's afterlife: Michael Seymour, *Babylon: Legend, History and the Ancient City*. I.B. Tauris, 2014. Seymour follows

Babylon through biblical and classical writing, excavation, museums, art and modern politics. Its subject is the second city built above the first: the Babylon of tyranny, luxury, linguistic confusion and predicted ruin. Read it to understand why correcting one false claim never dissolves the symbol. Too many cultures have invested in it. The book is especially useful on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when excavation appeared to recover the real city but immediately created new museum, imperial and national versions. It also explains why Babylon remains politically usable.

For how tablets become history: Dominique Charpin, *Writing, Law, and Kingship in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd, University of Chicago Press, 2010. Charpin explains what letters, contracts, school texts and royal inscriptions can reveal, and what their forms prevent them from revealing. It is the best bridge from a photographed clay tablet to the social world that produced it. Read it before calling an archive dry. The apparent dullness of a lease or receipt is methodological discipline: the document names what had to be fixed because somebody expected memory, trust or power to fail. It also shows how cautious translation prevents a familiar English category from silently deciding what an ancient document was.

Notes and Sources

Dating convention

Second-millennium chronology. Dates for Hammurabi, the end of the First Dynasty and the Hittite sack follow the Middle Chronology, the most widely used reference system in general histories. Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *A History of Babylon, 2200 BC to AD 75*, and Stephanie Dalley, *The City of Babylon*, both explain the underlying problems. Competing lower chronologies can shift major events by several decades. First-millennium dates are firmer because king lists, chronicles, astronomical observations and external synchronisms overlap.

Section 1

Babylon was not first. The book deliberately rejects the catalogue subtitle that called Babylon “the first great city”. Uruk was a large urban centre and writing existed more than a millennium before Hammurabi. Marc Van De Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City*, provides the wider urban setting; Beaulieu gives Babylon’s late emergence within it.

A city rebuilt twice. The distinction between historical and imagined Babylon is developed most fully by Michael Seymour, *Babylon: Legend, History and the Ancient City*. Seymour’s study supports the claim that biblical, classical, Christian and modern

Babylons became historically powerful without functioning as neutral descriptions of the excavated city.

The long end of Babylon. Beaulieu follows Babylonian history to AD 75, while Dalley continues the city's history to Trajan's visit in AD 116. The formulation here is cautious: the last dated cuneiform material belongs to the first century AD, but occupation and memory continued after the learned archive contracted.

Section 2

The zodiac. Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing*, and the *Astronomical Diaries* editions of Abraham Sachs and Hermann Hunger support the development of the twelve equal zodiacal signs within late Babylonian scholarly culture. Older constellations and divisions preceded the standard system. The modern personal horoscope is a later product and should not be projected backwards unchanged.

Knowledge and divination. Rochberg rejects the modern habit of separating Babylonian celestial inquiry into a rational astronomy and an irrational residue. Divination supplied political and religious purposes for observation, while mathematical prediction developed within the same institutions. Eleanor Robson, *Mathematics in Ancient Iraq*, makes the parallel point for mathematical knowledge: procedures belonged to communities, schools and work, not isolated discoveries.

Modern categories attached to ancient objects. Hammurabi's stele is treated through Martha T. Roth's *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* and Dominique Charpin's *Writing, Law, and Kingship in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia*. The Cyrus Cylinder is translated and contextualised in Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*. Stephanie Dalley, *The Mystery of the Hanging Garden of Babylon*, argues for Nineveh as the source of the garden tradition; this remains influential and contested rather than settled.

Section 3

Mud brick, water and maintenance. Van De Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City*, A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, and Dalley, *The City of Babylon*, support the account of southern Mesopotamian building materials, irrigation and institutional maintenance. Royal inscriptions repeatedly turn repair into kingship. The prose's "invoice test" is an analytical device, not a claim that kings played no organisational role.

Marduk and the New Year festival. The *Enuma Elish* is cited through Stephanie Dalley's translation in *Myths from Mesopotamia*. Marduk's rise was gradual and should not be assigned to one reign. Céline Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, is the principal recent study of the Babylonian New Year festival in the late cuneiform period and cautions against treating one ritual reconstruction as timeless. Beaulieu and Dalley provide the political history of Marduk's cult under foreign rulers.

Hammurabi's stele. Roth translates the law collections of Ur-Nammu, Lipit-Ishtar, Eshnunna and Hammurabi, which is why the word "first" is rejected. Charpin explains how written law, legal practice and royal ideology intersect without becoming one modern code. The 282 divisions are modern editorial numbering; the monument itself does not present numbered statutes.

Law and hierarchy. The categories conventionally translated as free man, commoner and slave do not map neatly onto modern class language. This book therefore describes status differences without pretending that one English vocabulary resolves them. Roth and Charpin are the main authorities used.

Contracts and family archives. Charpin supports the Old Babylonian material. Michael Jursa, *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, supports the later account of credit, agriculture, households and institutional archives. The Egibi family undertook lending, property and partnership activity, but "bankers" would impose a modern corporate category.

Judeans in Babylonia. Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, publishes the Al-Yahudu material. Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, analyses deportees across the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. These tablets document obligations, property and family continuity; they do not replace biblical evidence for grief, theology or communal memory.

Mathematics. Robson is the main source for sexagesimal place value, school exercises, reciprocals and the danger of translating

every tablet into a modern theorem. The text avoids claims that Babylonian scholars “invented” modern minutes, seconds or algebra, which would collapse several periods and traditions into one slogan.

Astronomy and accumulated observation. Rochberg and the editions of the Astronomical Diaries by Abraham Sachs and Hermann Hunger support the account of observation, prediction and scholarly continuity. The diaries include celestial phenomena alongside weather, river levels, prices and political events. Their mixture is evidence for Babylonian categories, not editorial disorder.

Foreign rulers and local institutions. Beaulieu and Dalley provide the main narrative. The argument is not that conquerors became culturally identical to their subjects. It is that temples, scribes, urban elites and administrative practices made total institutional replacement costly. Sennacherib’s destruction and Esarhaddon’s rebuilding expose both the violence and the limit of imperial control.

Symbolic Babylon. Biblical references include Genesis 11, 2 Kings 24–25, Jeremiah 50–51, Psalm 137 and Revelation 17–18, read in the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Seymour traces their later reception. The identification of Revelation’s Babylon with Rome is the dominant historical reading, although the text’s symbolism is wider than one coded place-name.

Section 4

Early Babylon and the Amorite dynasty. Beaulieu and Dalley supply the sequence from late third-millennium attestations through Sumu-abum and Hammurabi. The etymology of Bābili as “Gate of God” may be a learned Akkadian interpretation of an older name, so the text does not present it as secure origin.

Hammurabi’s diplomacy and conquest. Charpin’s treatment of letters and kingship, together with Beaulieu’s political history, supports the account of Hammurabi’s long diplomatic phase and rapid late expansion. The Mari letters show alliance, intelligence and rivalry more vividly than Hammurabi’s later monumental image.

The First Dynasty’s collapse. The contraction after Hammurabi involved rebellion, the Sealand, demographic movement and regional economic change. No single cause explains every area. The Hittite sack is conventionally dated to 1595 BCE under the Middle Chronology.

Kassite rule. Beaulieu and Dalley are followed for the long Kassite period, diplomatic contacts and the status of kudurrus. Kassite government is not treated as an intermission between more famous Babylonian dynasties. Its duration and adoption of Babylonian forms are central to the book’s continuity argument.

Assyria and Babylon. Jean-Jacques Glassner’s *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, edited and translated into English by Benjamin R. Foster, is the main translated chronicle collection. Beaulieu sup-

plies the interpretation of Marduk-apla-iddina, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, Shamash-shum-ukin and Ashurbanipal. Royal claims that Babylon was annihilated are not read literally without archaeological support.

The Neo-Babylonian city. Dalley, *The City of Babylon*, and Beaulieu support the urban and imperial narrative. The Ishtar Gate, Processional Way, Esagila and Etemenanki are secure. A precise population figure is not supplied because estimates depend heavily upon the area counted and assumptions about density.

Jerusalem and deportation. The campaigns are reconstructed from Babylonian chronicles, biblical texts and modern historical synthesis. The destruction of Jerusalem is dated here to 586 BCE, while 587 BCE is also used in scholarship depending upon chronological reconstruction. The text flags the exile as several movements rather than one removal of an entire population.

Nabonidus at Tayma. Paul-Alain Beaulieu's work on Nabonidus and his later history of Babylon support the discussion. Strategic, economic, religious and personal explanations have all been proposed. The book refuses to turn hostile Persian and priestly traditions into a complete psychological biography.

Cyrus and the capture of Babylon. The Nabonidus Chronicle and Cyrus Cylinder are read through Kuhrt and Glassner. The peaceful-conquest image is partly the victorious regime's presentation, but the evidence does not support a destruction of Babylon in 539 BCE. Herodotus's river-diversion story is late and is not required by the cuneiform evidence.

Xerxes and the revolts. Caroline Waerzeggers's reassessment of the Babylonian revolts and later scholarship challenge the older picture of Xerxes closing Esagila and ending Babylonian culture in one act. Repression and elite disruption were real; complete cultic extinction was not.

Alexander's death. Greek narrative sources and a Babylonian astronomical diary place Alexander's death in Babylon in June 323 BCE. The conversion to 11 June is conventional. The diary's terse record is valuable precisely because it belongs to an observational series rather than a biography of Alexander.

Decline. Beaulieu, Dalley and Jursa support the movement of administration, population and commerce towards Seleucia and other centres. The final dated cuneiform texts do not mark the instant at which Babylon became empty. Decline is presented as the transfer of functions because the evidence does not provide one terminal destruction.

Archaeology and its limits. Dalley's excavation chapter and Seymour's history of representation support the account of Robert Koldewey's campaigns, the removal and reconstruction of glazed brick in Berlin, and the effects of later rebuilding and war. Excavation is indispensable and destructive: once a layer is removed, its context cannot be restored for a later method.

Writing media and survival. Beaulieu and Oppenheim support the caution that first-millennium cuneiform archives represent only part of the literate world. Aramaic writing increasingly used leather, wood and papyrus, which survive less reliably than clay.

The durable archive therefore overrepresents cuneiform institutions.

Section 5

Hammurabi's "first laws". Roth is the primary authority. Older collections and legal documents make the correction secure. The term "code" remains common as shorthand, but the text explains why it misleads when treated as a comprehensive modern statute book.

The Hanging Gardens. Classical descriptions are real evidence for a garden tradition, not proof of a Babylonian location. Dalley's Nineveh case draws upon Sennacherib's inscriptions, reliefs and water engineering. Beaulieu and other historians remain more cautious. The manuscript labels Nineveh the leading alternative, not a solved relocation.

The Tower of Babel. Etemenanki is securely attested as Babylon's great ziggurat and is a plausible stimulus for Genesis 11. No archaeological evidence can verify the story's dialogue, motive or multiplication of languages. The distinction between setting and event is intentional.

The Cyrus Cylinder and human rights. Kuhrt and the British Museum's own description place the cylinder within Babylonian royal foundation practice. Its concern is legitimate conquest, restoration of cult and good kingship, not universal rights held by indi-

viduals against government. Rejecting the modern label does not require denying Cyrus's political flexibility.

Sacred prostitution. The claim derives above all from Herodotus and later repetition. Stephanie Budin's *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* is the major modern demolition of the institution as commonly described. Babylonian temples employed women in many roles, and sex work existed, but the evidence does not support compulsory intercourse for every Babylonian woman.

Astronomy as superstition. Rochberg and Robson support the correction. The text also rejects the opposite myth that Babylonian scholars were secular modern scientists using religious language only as cover. Their celestial inquiry was exact, predictive and culturally different.

Babylon's disappearance. Beaulieu and Dalley provide the chronology after Cyrus. Cuneiform scholarship continued under Persian, Seleucid and Parthian rule. The symbolic demand for sudden judgment is stronger than the archaeological case for one fatal conquest.

Section 6

Analytical lenses. The "maintenance", "legitimacy", "invoice", "archive", "firstness" and "reconstruction" tests are the author's synthesis of the evidence, not terminology taken from one scholar. Their factual foundations come from Beaulieu, Dalley, Charpin, Jursa, Robson, Rochberg and Seymour.

Limits on analogy. Ancient Babylon depended upon southern Mesopotamian irrigation, temple institutions, status hierarchy and cuneiform scholarship. The section therefore uses Babylon to sharpen questions rather than prescribe modern policy. Similarity of pattern is not identity of institution.

Section 7

Terms and spellings. Names use familiar English forms rather than full scholarly transliteration. Akkadian long vowels and emphatic consonants are omitted for readability. “Nebuchadnezzar” follows conventional English spelling; “Nabu-kudurri-usur” would be closer to the Akkadian form.

Middle Chronology entry. Hammurabi’s dates and the Hittite sack follow the convention stated above. The glossary flags alternatives rather than silently presenting disputed second-millennium dates as exact.

Cuneiform is a script. The distinction between script and language is basic and necessary. Sumerian, Akkadian and other languages were written in cuneiform, while Aramaic was increasingly written alphabetically on perishable materials that survive less well.

Section 8

Edition verification. Publication details for Beaulieu, Roth, Seymour and Charpin were checked against the publishers' catalogues. These four books were chosen for different jobs: chronological narrative, primary translated law, cultural afterlife and documentary method. They are not the only strong books on Babylon.

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