

Disambiguating Babylon

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Abstract

Translating the name “Babylon” in some languages requires that a choice be made whether the name refers to a city, a nation, or a country. This article discusses how the meaning can be determined on the basis of the immediate context, the larger context, the occurrence of collocations, and by logical inferences. It discusses the additional problems related to places where “Babylon” is personified and where it is used metonymically. An appendix contains a list of suggested choices. The procedures provided here can be applied to similar disambiguation problems for other names, such as Judah and Israel.

Keywords

Babylon, named entity translation, Caucasian languages, noun-classes, exile

I. Introduction

In Isa 21.9, a sentry gives the news that “Babylon” has fallen. But what is Babylon? Does the Hebrew בָּבֶל “Babylon/Babel” refer to the city, the country, or the people?¹

I ran across this question while checking the translation into Chechen, a North Caucasian language. Languages from this group have noun-classes, and in this particular verse the verb rendering “has fallen” needs to start with a one-letter prefix that identifies the class of “Babylon.” Assuming that this problem might occur in other languages in this group I wanted to find a solution. I am excited that the editor’s invitation to write an article

¹ I use the term “Babylon” throughout the remainder of this article. English translations also refer to בָּבֶל as “Babel” and “Babylonia.” Genesis describes Nimrod as founder of the city Babylon. It is located on the Euphrates river in the Shinar valley (Mesopotamia). The city later became the capital of the Babylonian Empire until the Persians took over.

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in this issue of *The Bible Translator* in honour of David Clark gives me the stimulus to share my thoughts.

2. Relevance

If I take myself as representative, then I would say that most readers of English and Dutch translations do not necessarily need to know the nature of “Babylon” in each of the 278 places where it occurs in the Bible. Other languages, however, are less lenient, especially when foreign-sounding names can easily cause confusion as to whether they refer to people or geographical entities. The question is even more relevant for translation into languages like Chechen that grammatically require a choice to be made or that tend to use an entity-type modifier for unknown named entities.

The answer to the question is not a trivial one. A survey of just a few English translations reveals that the percentage of places where the translation “Babylonia” (presumably referring to the country) is used ranges from 1% to 72%, as shown in Table 1.

If the translations in Table 1 intended to make a one-to-one connection between “Babel” as city, “Babylon” as nation, and “Babylonia/Babylonië” as country, then the numbers show that they either failed or were in stark disagreement on the nature of Babylon in the different passages. If the translations did *not* want to make a one-to-one mapping between the name of the place and its nature, then it is not clear to readers like me what the distinction between the three terms signals in the different versions.

Table 1. Several English and Dutch translations of Babylon in the OT and NT

| Hebrew/ Greek Term | Translated Term | Dutch | | | | English | | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-------|-----|-----|-----|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| | | NBG | HSV | NBV | BGT | T4T | NIV | GNB | NLT | CEV | ESV |
| OT בָּבֶל (262x) | Babel | 290 | 303 | 138 | 213 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| | Babylon | 99 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 393 | 280 | 99 | 291 | 102 | 302 |
| | Babylonië/- ia | 0 | 0 | 146 | 248 | 215 | 15 | 233 | 19 | 275 | 8 |
| NT βαβυλων (16x) | Babel | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Babylon | 11 | 9 | 10 | 15 | 20 | 11 | 15 | 12 | 18 | 15 |
| | Babylonië/- ia | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 |

How is a translator to know what Babylon refers to in each of its uses? There is some help from the UBS Handbook series, especially from the handbook on Jeremiah, but the translator is left on his or her own in many places.

3. Target language issues

I would like to distinguish two target language issues for the translation of בָּבֶל. The first issue is the one where a choice between the three possible meanings of “Babylon” *must* be made on grammatical grounds. This occurs in North Caucasian languages that divide nouns into gender classes, and I would be very surprised if the same issue is not relevant to other languages in the world that also use noun-classes.

(1) Isaiah 14.23

| | | | |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| <i>Baaviel</i> | <i>zynashna</i> | <i>dwaalur</i> | <i>ju</i> |
| Babel | to.the.hedgehogs | will.given.away | J.be |

The city Babylon will be given over to the hedgehogs.

(2) Jeremiah 50.12

| | | | | | | | |
|--------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|------------------|------------|-----------|
| <i>Qechu</i> | <i>q'aemnashna</i> | <i>juq'ahw</i> | <i>Baaviel</i> | <i>uggar</i> | <i>k'ezignig</i> | <i>xir</i> | <i>du</i> |
| other | nations | among | Babel | most | small.one | will | D.be |

Among the other nations Babylon will be the most insignificant.

(3) Jeremiah 50.38

| | | | | | |
|-----|---------------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|-----------|
| ... | <i>hunda aelcha</i> | <i>Baaviel</i> | <i>c'uujn</i> | <i>muoxk</i> | <i>bu</i> |
| | because | Babylon | of.idols | country | B.is |

because Babylonia is a country of idols

The examples in (1–3) are taken from the Chechen translation and they illustrate the possible choices: (1) the city Babel takes the class marker *j*, (2) the nation Babylon takes the marker *d*, and (3) the country takes the marker *b*. Fortunately, the grammatical problem is not so great: it only occurs in some 20 of the 278 places.² Headings like “Babylon has fallen” also need

² Gen 10.10; Isa 14.23; 21.9; Jer 27.7; 50.2, 9, 10, 12, 23, 24, 32, 38, 46; 51.7, 8, 14, 20, 25, 33, 37, 41, 53, 56, 64. Chechen, being a morphologically ergative language, requires agreement where Babylon is the subject of an intransitive verb, the complement of an equative clause, or the direct object of a transitive verb. It is this grammatical situation that only occurs in 20 of the 278 OT places. Most of these places can be found with the

the proper noun-class to be chosen, but I do not want to include section headings in this research, since they are very much project-dependent.

The second target language issue involves what I refer to as “entity labels”: using labels like “city,” “country,” or “nation” to disambiguate the nature of a named entity. Chechen uses entity labels for its own purposes. The capital city is called *Syelzha-ghaala* “Sunzhe-city” to distinguish it from the river *Syelzha* that runs through it. One village is called *Chyra-evla* “Chyra-village,” probably because the word *chyra* by itself is a postpositional meaning “out of.” Entity labels are frequently found in newspaper articles and books.

(4) Isaiah 21.9

| | | | | | | |
|--|---------------|-------------|------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| <i>Baaviel-ghaala</i> | <i>jyezha</i> | <i>ju</i> , | <i>iza</i> | <i>ieshiina</i> | <i>ma</i> | <i>ju!</i> |
| Babylon-city | J.fallen | J.is | it | defeated | emph | J.is |
| The city Babylon is fallen, it surely is defeated! | | | | | | |

The Chechen translation also uses entity labels to disambiguate the nature of named entities: 39 times for the city, 82 times for the country, and 10 times for the nation. One example is Isa 21.9, shown in (4), where the entity label *ghaala* “city” is used (the noun-class marker *j* is also used). But is the choice of “city” in this last example actually right? Is it the city that has fallen (as a result of a siege) or the country as a whole, or could one argue that the nation has fallen?

4. Establishing the meaning

Given the grammatical and entity-labelling needs of some languages like Chechen, it would be very worthwhile to know to which entity the term “Babylon” refers in each of its instances in the Old and New Testaments. A detailed verse-by-verse exegesis is beyond the scope of this article. I will, instead, illustrate a number of principles that can be used for the disambiguation of Babylon. These same steps can also be used for the disambiguation of other named entities, such as Judah and Israel (person, people, region).

One principle that I would like to use in all the steps is that decisions are to be based on evidence in the text itself.³

Shebanq web application, which allows restricting searches to grammatical functions (Roorda et al. 2014).

³ This is similar to the principle Dr. David Clark uses in his discourse structure analyses (1996; 2001; 2006; 2007). He builds his analyses on grammatical and/or lexical markers in the text.

4.1 The immediate context

The first reference to Babylon is in Gen 10.10, which describes Nimrod building his empire.

(BHS) וְתָהִי רְאשִׁית מַמְלַכְתּוֹ בְּבֶל וְאַרְדּוֹ וְאַכַּד וְכַלְנֵה בְּאַרְצָא שִׁנְעָר:

The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Calneh, in Shinar. (NIV)

The text identifies Babylon, Erech, Akkad, and Calneh as רְאשִׁית “beginning,” a term that does not give us much evidence for the entity type. The only real clue the text gives here is that the three named entities are “in the land Shinar.” That still leaves two possibilities: Babylon can be a city or it can be a region within the larger land Shinar. The matter can be resolved by first looking at Gen 11.8-9.

(BHS) וַיִּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר: עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בְּבֶל

and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel (NIV)

Verses 4-8 explain that the people had an idea to build a city, and v. 9 discloses the name of that city. The “Babylon” mentioned in Gen 10.10 must then, consequently, also be the name of that city.

A good example of deriving the meaning of “Babylon” from the immediate context is provided by Isa 39.3, where the name “Babylon” is an explanation of “a far country.”

(BHS) וַיֹּאמֶר חִזְקִיָּהוּ מֵאַרְצָא רְחוֹקָה בָּאוּ אֵלַי מִבְּבֶל:

Hezekiah said, “They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon.” (ESV)

A *parallelism* occurs where two lines repeat the same idea but in different words. Parallelisms can also work slightly differently: the second line *extends* the idea of the first line. Here is an example from Jer 50.35.

“A sword against the Chaldeans,

declares the Lord

and against the inhabitants of Babylon,

and against her officials and her wise men!”

(ESV)

חָרֵב עַל־בְּשָׂדִים

נֹאֵם־יְהוָה

וְאֶל־יֹשְׁבֵי בְּבֶל

וְאֶל־שָׂרֵיהֶּ וְאֶל־חֲכָמֶיהֶּ: (BHS)

The ambiguity is in the “Babylon” in line 3: Is it the country or the city? If lines 3–4 are a rephrasing of line 1, then “Babylon” in line 3 must refer to the location where the Chaldeans⁴ mentioned in line 1 live. This resolves the ambiguity of “Babylon” in line 3: the name must refer to the whole country.

4.2 The larger context

If a project were to translate by the order of the books as they appear in the Greek and consequently most Christian Bibles, then the notion of the “exile” to Babylon starts appearing in 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles (9.1), 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and so forth. None of these books explicitly says whether the exile took place to the city Babylon or the country. The translation of any of these books will benefit greatly by looking at the larger context of the other books in the Bible.

Jeremiah 24.5 is the verse that solves the matter. The Lord is there reported as saying to Jeremiah, “Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the *land* of the Babylonians [Hebr: אֶרֶץ בְּשָׂדִים]” (NIV; emphasis mine). The insight offered here can be implemented in all of the more than forty places where the exile or deportation to Babylon is under discussion.

An example where parallelism may not mean that both parts refer to the same entity, and where the larger context needs to be taken into account, is Jer 50.1.

This is the word the Lord spoke through Jeremiah the prophet

הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה

concerning Babylon

אֶל-בָּבֶל

[and] the land of the Babylonians: (NIV)

(BHS): אֶל-אֶרֶץ בְּשָׂדִים

If line 2 refers to the same entity as line 3, then “Babylon” is the country. Could it be, however, that line 2 starts with the city Babylon, and that the parallel in line 3 extends this to the whole land? The handbook’s point of view here is confusing:

Babylon and the land of the Chaldeans are one and the same (see 21.4).

Translators can either drop one of the terms, as TEV does, or say, for example, “the city of Babylon and the land of the Babylonians.” (Newman and Stine 2003)

⁴“Chaldeans” is another name for the Babylonians.

The handbook seems to say that “Babylon” is the same as the land of the Chaldeans, yet it continues by citing TEV (= GNB), which takes line 2 to refer to the city, and sees line 3 as an extension (“the city of Babylon and its people”). The larger context of Jer 50 is required to see what “Babylon” refers to here. Verse 2 says *בָּבֶלְנָה תִּכָּבְדָה* “Babylon will be captured.” BDB admits that the verb could just as easily refer to a city as it does to a land. Verse 3 says that “her land” will be laid waste by a nation from the north, but that doesn’t help disambiguate the nature of “Babylon.” The same v. 3 says that “no one will live in it.” Taken at face value, one would think that a city would be more appropriate, since a whole uninhabited country seems a bit large. But such a line of thought would run against the principle of taking the *text* as the basis for evidence. Verse 8 picks up Babylon again after an intermezzo, and here too there is a parallelism: “Flee out of Babylon; leave the land of the Babylonians” (NIV). This is not much help, since it contains the same ambiguity as v. 1: the first line could refer to the city, and the second line could then extend that idea to the country at large. Verse 9 adds the information that the nations from the north will “take up their positions against her,” which seems to point more towards attacking a city rather than a whole land. Verse 13 speaks about people “passing by” Babylon, which would make a country interpretation quite unlikely. Verse 14 says that the warriors need to take up their positions “around” Babylon. That would make the most sense if a city is meant. The surrender of Babylon in v. 15 adds that “her towers fall” and “her walls are torn down.” This gives the most conclusive evidence: it is a city that has towers, and it is a city that has walls.

The implication, then, is that “Babylon” in Jer 50 (at least in the first part of that chapter) refers first of all to the city. The parallelisms in 50.1 and 50.8 are extension-type parallelisms: they start out with the city and end up with the country at large. And since Babylon was the capital of the Babylonian Empire, it is also clear that the city Babylon can represent the nation by metonymy.

4.3 Collocations

A collocation is the occurrence of words within close proximity.⁵ There are a few obvious collocations with “Babylon.” Some of them occur with a high frequency. Since translations aim to be consistent, it is worthwhile to notice and investigate collocations.

⁵ This “proximity” normally translates into syntax, for instance a verb taking a particular noun as object (such as “defend” and “thesis”), or a ruler–ruled relation (such as “president” and “United States”).

Table 2. Collocations with “Babylon”

| Collocation | Hebrew ⁶ | Frequency | Entity | Example passages |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------|---------|-------------------------|
| the king of Babylon | מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל | 79 | nation | 2 Kgs 20.12 |
| deportation to Babylon | | 47 | country | 1 Chr 9.1; Matt 1.11 |
| the daughter of Babylon | בַּת-בָּבֶל | 5 | city | Ps 137.8 |
| temple of Babylon | הַיְכָלָא דִּבְבֶל | 4 | city | Ezra 5.14; Dan 1.2 |
| Babylon + fallen | | 4 | city | Isa 21.9; Rev 18.2 |
| idols of Babylon | פְּסִילֵי בָבֶל | 2 | city | Jer 50.2; 51.47 |
| wise men of Babylon | חֲכִימֵי בָבֶל | 8 | country | Dan 2.48 |

4.3.1 *The king of Babylon.* The first collocation is “Babylon” co-occurring with “king.” A king generally rules over a physical territory (a city or a country), but also over the people in that territory (a nation). The first verse that helps us reach a decision is Jer 25.12.

(BHS) וְהָיָה כְּמֵלֵאוֹת שִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה אֶפְקֹד עַל-מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל וְעַל-הָגוֹי הַהוּא

Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation. (ESV)

The use of the demonstrative noun phrase “that nation” requires an antecedent, and the antecedent in this case is “Babylon.” This points to interpreting “Babylon” as a nation where it occurs in collocation with “king.”

4.3.2 *Exile to Babylon.* The second collocation is with “exile” or deportation of the people as a whole. Section 4.2 has shown that “Babylon” in this collocation refers to a country.

The deportation of individuals, such as kings, is a separate matter. There are two kings (Zedekiah and Jehoiachin) who were deported to Babylon. I have not seen convincing evidence that either of the two kings was imprisoned in the city as opposed to another part of the country. So translations that need to make it explicit might better opt for the safer choice and settle with the country Babylon, since that includes the city.

⁶ The quote for the “temple of Babylon” is Aramaic, from Ezra 5.14.

4.3.3 The daughter of Babylon. There are several places where we read of the “daughter” of Babylon or the “virgin daughter” of Babylon.⁷ David Clark writes in his Handbook on Zechariah that this expression is “a poetic way of referring to the city.” But he adds that translations like GNB take “the city to stand for the region of which it was the center” (Clark and Hatton 2002). If the city is taken to refer to the whole country, that would be a case of metonymy. The expression “daughter of Babylon” as a whole, then, refers to the city.⁸

4.3.4 The temple of Babylon. The “temple of Babylon” or the “temple in Babylon” is mentioned only a few times.⁹ There must have been quite a few temples in Babylon, but where did the temple stand that held the articles from Jerusalem’s temple for many years? The handbook does not offer a clear solution—there is no note regarding identification of the temple in Ezra 5.14, and only a comment on Ezra 1.7:

He took them to the house of his gods, which was the temple of the chief god of Babylon, Merodach who was also known as Marduk or Bel. (Clark and Hatton 2002)

Daniel 1.2 seems to offer the most helpful evidence for the location of the temple.

And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand,
along with some of the articles from the temple of God.

These he carried off to the temple of *his* god in Babylonia (וּבְיָמָם אֶרְיֹץ שֶׁנֶּגֶר בֵּית אֱלֹהֵיו) and put in the treasure house of his god. (NIV)

Nebuchadnezzar is described as carrying the articles from the Jerusalem temple off to the temple of *his* god in the country Shinar. The temple of his god would have been close to the king himself, hence in the *city* Babylon. This is a weak inference, however.

⁷ Daughter of Babylon: Ps 137.8; Jer 50.42; 51.33; Zech 2.7; (virgin) daughter of the Chaldeans: Isa 47.1, 5.

⁸ Note that the entity “Babylon” as such is the country. Assuming that the literal meaning of “the daughter of country Babylon” is not the correct meaning, the expression as a whole ends up as pointing to the city.

⁹ 2 Chr 36.7; Ezra 5.14 (twice). The Hebrew הֵיכָל (2 Chr) and the Aramaic הֵיכָל (Ezra) are translated as “temple” by some, but as “palace” by others. Daniel 1.2 solves that question, since it identifies the place as the “house of his (=Nebuchadnezzar’s) god.”

4.3.5 *Babylon has fallen*. The Lord pronounces punishment on Babylon in several places, and this punishment results in its downfall referred to in Isa 21.9. Before I turn to that verse, I would like to look at Isa 14.22-23.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>“I will cut off from Babylon her name and survivors, her offspring and descendants,” declares the Lord.</p> <p>“I will turn her into a place for owls and into a swampland”</p> | <p>וְהִכַּרְתִּי לְבָבֶל שֵׁם וְשָׂאָר וְגִזְוֹן וְנֶגְדַת נְאֻם־יְהוָה: וְשָׁמְתִיהָ לְמוֹרֵשׁ קַפְדַּ וְאֶנְגְמִי־מַיִם</p> |
|--|---|

The “place for owls” in v. 23 is most applicable to a city interpretation, and that would fit v. 22 too. The interpretation of 21.9 would then also be that of a city:

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>“Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!”</p> | <p>נִפְלָה נִפְלָה בָּבֶל וְכָל־פְּסִלֵי אֱלֹהֶיהָ שִׁבְרָ לְאַרְצָ: נִפְלָה נִפְלָה בָּבֶל</p> |
|--|---|

This interpretation very much fits the one provided for the first part of Jer 50 in section 4.2, which speaks about an attack on Babylon. The logical consequence of the attack is the downfall of what is attacked. The capital city Babylon, obviously, stands for the empire as a whole.

Even though the interpretation of Old and New Testaments should be kept separate, it is interesting to see that the city interpretation for the fall of Babylon finds its reflex in Rev 18.10:

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>“Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come!”</p> | <p>Ὁὐαὶ οὐαὶ, ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη, Βαβυλῶν ἡ πόλις ἡ ἰσχυρά, ὅτι μίᾳ ὥρᾳ ἤλθεν ἡ κρίσις σου.</p> |
|--|---|

The book of Revelation has several mentions of “Babylon.”¹⁰ The name seems to link the demonic powers associated with the idol gods of the ancient Babylonians with the eschatological demonic powers in Revelation. Even so, returning to the question of which entity type best fits “Babylon” in the “fallen” scenes of Isa 21 and Rev 14 and 18, the city interpretation is confirmed from all sides.

¹⁰ Rev 14.8; 16.19; 17.5; 18.2, 10, 21. The name is also used in 1 Pet 5.13, where “she who is in Babylon” is used in a cryptic way to refer to the church in Rome.

4.3.6 *The idols of Babylon.* The introduction contains a translation of Jer 50.38 that speaks about idols. I repeat the ESV translation and the *BHS* Hebrew text here.

A drought against her waters,
that they may be dried up!

חָרַב אֱלִי־מִמֶּיָּהּ וַיִּבְשׁוּ

For it is a land of images
and they are mad over idols. (ESV)

כִּי אֶרֶץ פְּסִלִים הִיא וּבְאֵימִים יִתְהַלְלוּ:

The possessive pronoun “her” and the subject “it” refer back to the antecedent “Babylon” in 50.35. There is no reference to “Babylon” to be interpreted in this verse itself, but the “land” mentioned in this verse does show that the influence of the idols was nationwide.

There are only two close collocations of “idols” and “Babylon.” The first one is Jeremiah 50.2.

Babylon will be captured;
Bel will be put to shame,
Marduk filled with terror.
Her images will be put to shame
and her idols filled with terror. (NIV)

Section 4.2 explored the first part of Jer 50, concluding that the primary entity “Babylon” referred to in those verses is the city. This means that the possessive pronoun “her” in lines 4–5 of the above must also point to the city. Such an interpretation is fitting. There is historical evidence of a temple dedicated to Marduk in the city Babylon. Note that even though the primary meaning of “Babylon” here is that of city, the country is implied by extension, since the capital of a country stands for the country as a whole (see metonymy in section 4.5).

The second collocation of “idols” and “Babylon” occurs in 51.47. The context here differs from that of the previous example.

For the time will surely come when I will punish the idols of Babylon;
her whole land will be disgraced and her slain will all lie fallen within her.
(NIV)

The “whole land” obviously refers to the country Babylon, but what about “Babylon” itself here, the antecedent of the possessive pronoun “her”? The best interpretation from a logical point of view would be that it stands for

the nation. It makes more sense for the second line to refer to the “whole land” of the *nation* Babylon rather than the whole land of the *city* Babylon.

4.3.7 The wise men of Babylon. The book of Daniel has several lists of wise men, astrologers, fortune tellers, and other varieties. The collocation “wise men of Babylon” occurs eight times.¹¹ The question is whether the “Babylon” in those references can be restricted to the city or whether it refers to the country at large. Most helpful for the disambiguation question is Dan 2.48.

| | |
|--|---|
| Then the king gave Daniel high honors | אָדָן מַלְכָּא לְדַנְיָאל רַבִּי |
| and many great gifts, | וּמִתְנָן רַבְרְבָן שׁוּגְיָאן יְהִב־לֵהּ |
| and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon | וְהִשְׁלִטָהּ עַל כָּל־מְדִינַת בָּבֶל |
| and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon. (ESV) | וְרַב־סַגְנָן עַל כָּל־חַכְמֵי בָבֶל: |

Daniel was made ruler over a larger geographical territory called “Babylon,” and also put in charge over all the wise men of “Babylon.”¹² If the second “Babylon” had been just the city, that fact would have been made explicit. So it is best to take “Babylon” to refer to the country at large.

4.4 Logical inferences

What would an article on Babylon be without referring to “the rivers of Babylon”? These words come from Psa 137.1, but have become well known to a larger audience through a popular song. The “rivers of” construction implies that “Babylon” here must be a geographic reference: either the city or the country. When I asked my wife for her opinion, she came up with a logical inference: rivers do not stop at one particular city, but run through a whole country, so “Babylon” here must refer to the country.

The Translator’s Handbook partly concurs with my wife’s logic, saying that “the use of the plural *by the rivers* will mean in many languages that the event took place many times beside many rivers.” Barnes’s notes on the Bible, however, offer a different kind of logic.

By the rivers of Babylon—The streams, the water-courses, the rivulets. There was properly only one river flowing through Babylon—the Euphrates; but the city was watered, as Damascus now is, by means of canals or water-courses cut

¹¹ Jer 50.35; Dan 2.12, 14, 18, 24 (twice), 48; 4.6; 5.7.

¹² The Aramaic מְדִינָה means “province” here.

from the main river, and conveying the water to different parts of the city. For a description of Babylon, see the introductory notes to Isaiah 13. If the reference here is to Babylon proper, or the city, the allusion would be to the Euphrates flowing through it; if to Babylonia, the allusion would be to the Euphrates, and the other rivers which watered the country, as the Tigris, the Chaboras, and the Ulai. As it is most probable that the captive Hebrews were not scattered through the empire, but were concentrated in one or a few places, it is, perhaps, not improper to understand this of Babylon itself. (Barnes 1834)

Barnes hesitates between two options and then, it seems, opts for “Babylon itself,” that is, the city, on the basis that the Hebrews must have been “concentrated in one or a few places.” As Barnes himself writes, this is an assumption he makes, but it is not founded on anything in the text. Is there any information in the Bible that states that the captive Hebrews were kept in one particular place, i.e., in the city Babylon? On the contrary, the book of Esther says that Mordecai and his cousin Hadassah worked and lived in Susa, which was several hundred kilometres east of Babylon city.¹³ And Est 3.8 has Haman stating that there is a “certain people, dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces” of the Persian Empire, the successor to the Babylonian Empire.

I would agree with my wife’s reasoning and with the handbook’s choice, and offer one more solid piece of evidence. The Hebrews sat down at the rivers of Babylon, where Babylon is the place to which they had been exiled. The song is about their exile. Jeremiah 24.5 says that the people were exiled to the “country” Babylon. And since there is no indication in the text itself that it should be taken otherwise, the rivers of Babylon refer to the rivers of the “country.”

4.5 Personification and metonymy

Leafing through the news today, I found this statement: “Brussels says US departure from Paris agreement won’t affect other climate work.” While “Brussels” is a city without any doubt, its use here is metonymic: it stands for a larger whole. The larger whole in this case is the European Union, which has its seat in Brussels.

Several verses about Babylon speak as if it were a living person. Jeremiah 29.10 says, “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place” (NIV). It is as if Babylon is receiving a slot of seventy years to do what needs to be done as an instrument of the Lord. A second case of personification comes

¹³ Google maps gives a distance of 360 km from Hillah (Iraq) to Shush (Iran).

in Jer 50.24, where the Lord says, “I set a trap for you, O Babylon, and you were caught before you knew it; you were found and captured because you opposed the Lord” (NIV).

Two of the three entity types (city and country) are primarily geographic, while the third one, that of “nation,” is more human (a nation consists of people). So where a target language allows for personifications, and where a choice needs to be made to overtly specify the entity type of “Babylon,” it seems best to regard it as a nation. If a language does not allow for personification, the translation should use other means to convey the same meaning. One option for Jer 29.10 would be to switch to a locative and speak of seventy years *in Babylon* (NLT).

Isaiah 14.3-21 does not, strictly speaking, involve personification, but it comes very close. The person being addressed here is the “king of Babylon” (v. 4). The king stands for the whole of the country and the nation of Babylon, so that is a case of metonymy. But as David Clark pointed out to me several years ago when I asked him for advice on this text, v. 12 could be interpreted as symbolizing the king as the devil. Languages like Chechen are not at liberty here to keep the matter ambiguous to the reader because of the noun-class system. Many verbs in the translation of this section require noun-class agreement with the subject, and if the subject is a king, then the agreement prefix is *v-*, while if it is the devil, then the agreement prefix is *d-*.

Another figurative use of Babylon is found in Isa 13.19.

Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms,
the glory of the Chaldeans' pride,
will be overthrown by God
like Sodom and Gomorrah.

וְהִיְתָה בְּבֶל אֶבֶי מַמְלָכוֹת
תְּפָאֲרַת גְּאוֹן כְּשָׂדִים
כְּמַהֲפֹכֶת אֱלֹהִים
אֶת־סֹדֶם וְאֶת־עֲמֹרָה:

The first half of this verse compares “Babylon” with kingdoms (nations), but the second half compares it with the cities Sodom and Gomorrah. Since the capital city usually is the epitome and representative of the culture and society as a whole, it would make sense to see “Babylon” as primarily referring to the city, while it refers to the nation by metonymy.

A situation where “Babylon” is depicted as an instrument of God’s judgement is found in Jeremiah, e.g., 50.23:

How broken and shattered
is the hammer of the whole earth!
How desolate is Babylon
among the nations!

אֵיךְ נִגְדַע וַיִּשְׁבֵּר
פְּטִישׁ כְּלֵי־הָאָרֶץ
אֵיךְ הִיְתָה לְשִׁמְהָ בְּבֶל
בְּגוֹיִם:

Since “Babylon” is compared to other nations, it should be regarded as a nation here. The same goes for Jer 51.7, which also has Babylon as an instrument of punishment in God’s hands:

| | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Babylon was a gold cup in the LORD’s hand; | בוֹסֵזֶהָב בְּבֶל בְּיַד־יְהוָה |
| she made the whole earth drunk. | מִשְׁכַּרְתָּ כָּל־הָאָרֶץ |
| The nations drank her wine; | מִיַּיִנָּה שָׁתוּ גוֹיִם |
| therefore the nations have gone mad. | עַל־כֵּן יִתְהַלְּלוּ גוֹיִם: |

Again Babylon is on the same level as “the nations,” so Babylon itself must refer to the nation and not primarily to a physical entity. Note that the nation Babylon is personified. It is seen as a woman making other nations of the world drunk.

5. Conclusion

Disambiguating the entity type of “Babylon” is required by those languages where the grammar dictates that the translator make a choice. One example is a language that uses noun-class prefixes on the verb and that has different noun-classes for “city,” “country” and “nation.” Languages that use entity labels to distinguish foreign names also benefit from disambiguation.

Rather than visiting all the 278 places where “Babylon” occurs in the Bible, I have illustrated a number of principles that can be applied to arrive at a good interpretation:

1. *Immediate context*: Look at the immediate context, noting reasons it gives for the choice. This includes *parallelism*, though caution should be taken.
2. *Larger context*: Look at clues in other passages about the same historic event in the same or in other books that shed light on the choice in the passage under consideration.
3. *Collocations*: Be alert for collocations (e.g., “the king of Babylon,” “the daughter of Babylon”) and see if there are good grounds to translate a collocation always in the same way.
4. *Logical inferences*: Use text-based inferences to determine the type of the entity.
5. *Note style figures*: Note whether personification or metonymy is used, and treat those instances in a systematic way.
6. *Textual clues*: Base conclusions on clues from the text (or context).
7. *Commentaries*: Check what others have written.

I have not treated the last two principles separately. They apply all the time, and I hope I have demonstrated them sufficiently in the illustrations of the first five principles. The commentaries that I have used are the UBS Translator's Handbooks, NICOT, and whatever other material I could lay my hands on.

I have not heard much on the disambiguation issue from others, while I would have expected this problem to be one occurring in many African languages. So I'm looking forward to reactions and follow-up articles on this topic.

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Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|--|
| BDB | Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1907 |
| BGT | Bijbel in Gewone Taal (2014) |
| BHS | <i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> (1977) |
| CEV | Contemporary English Version (2006) |
| ESV | English Standard Version (2001) / US version (2016) |
| GNB | Today's English Version / Good News Bible (1992) |
| HSV | Herziene Statenvertaling (2010) |
| NBG | Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap (1951) |
| NBV | Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling (2007) |
| NICOT | New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans) |
| NIV | New International Version (1984) |
| NLT | New Living Translation (2004) |
| T4T | Translation for Translators (2008) |

Appendix

Table 3 contains a summary of the choices that I have made, using the procedure explained in this article. I have not spelled out all verse references in this table, but all choices can be derived from the references listed. The label “all” means that all references to “Babylon” in the book of a row refer to the entity type of the column in which “all” resides. The label “remainder” indicates that all other verses except those explicitly mentioned in another column contain the entity type of that column.

Table 3. Classification of Babylon by book

| | City | Country | Nation |
|-------|---|-------------------|--|
| Gen | all | | |
| 2 Kgs | 17.24, 30; 20.17; 24.15, 16; 25.7, 13 | remainder | |
| 1 Chr | | all | |
| 2 Chr | remainder | 9.1; 32.31; 36.6a | |
| Ezra | 4.9; 5.14, 17; 6.1, 5; 7.6, 9 | remainder | |
| Neh | | all | |
| Esth | | all | |
| Pss | 137.8 | 87.4; 137.1 | |
| Isa | 14.22; 21.9; 47.1 | remainder | |
| Jer | 27.18, 20, 22; 28.3, 4, 6; 29.1, 3; 32.5; 34.3; 39.7; 50.1, 2, 8, 9, 13, 14, 29, 42, 45, 46; 51.1, 2, 6, 8, 11, 12, 33, 35, 37, 41, 44, 54, 55, 56, 59, 60, 61; 52.11, 17, 32 | remainder | 50.23, 24; 51.7, 9; 51.24, 29a, 47, 48, 49, 53, 64 |
| Ezek | 17.12b, 16, 20 | remainder | |
| Dan | 1.2; 4.29, 30 | remainder | |
| Mic | | all | |
| Zec | 2.7 | 6.10 | |
| Matt | | all | |
| Acts | | all | |
| 1 Pet | all | | |
| Rev | all | | |