

# *Doing Business in Babylon*

H. DENNIS TOLLEY

Several years ago I visited an isolated oasis deep in the Gobi Desert in China. Some 80 miles from the nearest town, the oasis was in a small canyon that had been occupied by a handful of Buddhist monks for hundreds of years. In this incredibly isolated spot, the monks could avoid the temptations of the world and focus only on Buddhist teachings. In Latter-day Saint terms, these monks were trying to flee Babylon.

Most of us have elected not to dwell in total isolation but to live in the civilized world. This decision requires us to interact daily with the world and to face the challenge of doing business in Babylon even as we attempt to follow the Lord's command to "go . . . out . . . from Babylon, from the midst of wickedness" (D&C 133:14).

## **Babylon the Great**

In the scriptures the Lord uses the words *Babylon* and *Zion* to refer to two archetypes of our temporal existence.<sup>1</sup> Babylon represents the world, and Zion represents the pure in heart. But how did Babylon become the name for the archetypal rival to Zion?

The city of Babylon predates Abraham. Located in modern-day southern Iraq, it was a thriving commercial center for more than

17 centuries. At its height it was the capital of a vast empire covering much of the Middle East. In about the fourth century B.C., the splendor and wealth of the city began to fade until, in about the second century A.D., Babylon ceased to exist. By ceased to exist, I mean it disappeared. Only piles of rubble and ruin remained. Until the last century, knowledge of the actual city was preserved only in the Bible and in a few references made by ancient historians.

In its prime, Babylon had two features that were, at different times, counted among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World—the Hanging Gardens and the city's great exterior walls.<sup>2</sup> The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were described as a series of arches arranged in a theater-like manner and ascending to the height of a seven-story building. This construction included 16-foot-long stone beams to bear the weight of the different tiers and a hydraulic system to pump water to the top of the structure, from whence it coursed through the gardens. The stone beams and parts of what scholars believe to be the hydraulic pump system were discovered about 100 years ago.<sup>3</sup>

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*H. Dennis Tolley was a BYU professor of statistics when this devotional address was delivered on 13 May 2003.*

The ancient historian Herodotus noted that the walls of Babylon were 335 feet high and 85 feet wide. The walls surrounded an approximately square city with a circumference of about 56 miles, according to Herodotus.<sup>4</sup> One could fit BYU, Mapleton, Benjamin, Pleasant Grove, Geneva Steel, and everything in between within the walls described by Herodotus. One could drive two full-sized Hummers side-by-side atop the wall.

Scholars today believe that the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar was a walled city the size of New York<sup>5</sup> with a population of 250,000 or more.<sup>6</sup> Scaling down Herodotus' dimensions, modern archaeologists say the walls were actually about five stories tall (about 50 feet)<sup>7</sup> and about 90 feet thick at the base,<sup>8</sup> while the inner city covered an area of about 2,100 acres.<sup>9</sup>

Herodotus also described the great temple Etemenanki, translated as "The House of the Foundations of Heaven and Earth," which many feel was the Tower of Babel.<sup>10</sup> "The sanctuary of the deity, on the top floor, had doors inlaid with ivory and beams lined with gold."<sup>11</sup> From the rubble heap representing the probable site of this great tower, the local residents have been removing the best brick for several centuries to build dams and more modern buildings. Even so, the rubble heap currently is a mound of broken brick and debris approximately seven stories high.<sup>12</sup> Evidence suggests that the tower was approximately 30 stories tall and could be seen from 60 miles away.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Babylonian Legacy**

A list of contributions of Babylonian culture gives us some sense of our legacy from this empire. Tablets indicate an ability for abstract mathematical thought, with calculations involving serial, exponential, and logarithmic relations. Babylon seems to be the only civilization in ancient times that used a positional system, where the value of a number was determined by its position and not its juxtaposition. Even the Roman system is juxtapositional.<sup>14</sup> The

Babylonians were deeply interested in astrology, and their detailed recordings and mathematical extrapolations of the heavens formed the foundation of modern astronomy. If we think of the Greeks as philosophers, we must think of the Babylonians as empiricists.

The Code of Hammurabi, celebrated as one of the first written codes of law, originated sometime in the 18th century B.C. with the great king Hammurabi. The property stake and personal seals, keeping track of who owned what, originated in Babylon.<sup>15</sup> Babylonian business was based on the notion of private property. King Nebuchadnezzar instituted a monetary system based on the silver standard so that all could do business together throughout the empire. We also find in Babylon the notion of interest rates. These rates were simple interest rates for short periods of time and entailed an involved penalty system that amounted to compound interest over longer periods of time. This system is very similar to that used by banks today.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that Babylon was the first empire where anyone could do business and where the business of the king was business itself. It was a place where religious temples and sects were active in commerce to the point that commerce became part of the religion. As in previous empires, there was a marriage of religion and military power to enable a king to rule over many.<sup>17</sup> But a subtle shift took place with Babylon. Power became a commodity that could be obtained through economic success, and laws were built up to protect these successes.<sup>18</sup>

Babylon was an extravagantly beautiful place with numerous gardens and parks. Some people were very rich. Babylon was a commercially successful, seductively exciting place to live and do business.

### **Babylon Versus Zion**

The Babylonian empire seems to have initiated many things we now feel are necessary in our everyday business of living. What,

then, caused it to reach the stature of an archetypal antithesis of Zion?

Babylon's status as a foil for Zion seems to be based on more than just wickedness. For out and out wickedness we have other candidates, such as Sodom and Gomorrah. The best assessment of the archetypal Babylon, the one we are admonished to flee, is as described by the Lord in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants:

*They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall fall. [D&C 1:16; emphasis added]*

The Babylon I have described seems to have encouraged each individual to walk in his own way, to trust in and be rewarded by the strength of his own arm. It allows one to set up his own image and worship that image through the vitality of his body and the power of his own hand. Indeed, the attainment of power, whether through wealth, priestcraft, or political intrigue, appears to be the mainspring of Babylonian life.

It is easy for us to identify the debauchery and decadence of Sodom and Gomorrah. Comparing these cities with the teachings of God is like comparing black and white. Babylon, on the other hand, does not offer such a black-and-white comparison. Though we are taught to flee Babylon, the line between Babylon and Zion is much more subtle.

As we read in Moses 7, the Zion of Enoch had many characteristics in common with Babylon. For example, Zion was a strong military power that "all nations feared greatly" (verse 13). It "did flourish" in the land (verse 17), presumably because of great commercial success. The city of Zion built

by Enoch (see verse 19) lasted for 365 years (verse 68).

However, below the surface, important differences appear. Zion had no poor (see verse 18), while Babylon made individual wealth and power the goal of all. The people of Zion were "of one heart" (verse 18), while Babylon was a collection of individuals, each optimizing his or her own circumstances.

The key difference between Zion and Babylon is in their foundational premises. By "foundational premises" I mean the very core postulates one uses. The fundamental premise of anyone who "walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god" is power for self. Phrases typifying this premise include *mine, it belongs to me, I did it my way, and I deserve it*. To operate with this power premise is to operate in Babylon. For some the power sought is simply survival; for others it is wealth; and for others it is to have dominion over people and things.

At the other end of this scale is the Zion premise of stewardship. It is based on beliefs and convictions that Heavenly Father loves us, that His Son has provided the Atonement, and that all we have is His. Phrases that spring to mind describing the Zion premise are *giving, sharing, loving, and purity of heart*.

### **Premises in the University**

How does this apply to a student at BYU? First, what is a university about? Famed economist E. F. Schumacher states that "the key factor of all economic development comes out of the mind of man. . . . In a very real sense, therefore, we can say that education is the most vital of all resources."<sup>19</sup> Education at a university entails learning to engage two types of problems. The first is the convergent problem.

Convergent problems are ones for which a rational answer can be obtained through logic and scientific research. I teach statistics at BYU, and in my courses the problems have explicit answers. If you work hard enough,

you can get them. And you know when you have the right answer (despite what some of my students say). Convergent problems can be solved by the rational use of your five senses. Scientific experiments gather data to address specific hypotheses. These hypotheses represent convergent problems. Sometimes we don't obtain enough data, so we must make a leap to arrive at a conclusion. But, in principle, with enough time and money, we can solve any convergent problem.

The second type of problem we engage at the university is the divergent problem. Divergent problems entail resolving irreconcilable differences. There is no absolute, correct answer based on logic and formulas alone. By their definition, these are problems for which a rational or logical solution cannot be universally derived; different people will come to different solutions. Current examples are seen in the debates over cloning and stem-cell research.

Divergent problems cannot be solved simply by the logical application of the data we get from our five senses. There is an additional ingredient needed to resolve the irreconcilable issues. We might call this ingredient assumptions, postulates, or axioms. Whatever we call it, it is a set of fundamental premises or values we hold at the very center of our being. In the end, solutions to the divergent problems rest on our individual premises, our deep-down values. We may present our solutions to divergent problems with a dialectic charm that would warm Aristotle's heart. Our logic may be tight, and our thinking may be impeccable. Nevertheless, fundamentally we must use our basic premises to complete the resolution of any divergent problem.

Most problems we encounter in life contain both convergent and divergent components. It is our premises at the center of our being that give us the ability to solve the divergent aspects of these problems. If these premises are based on moral beliefs, they are called moral values. People may be without moral values, but they

still must have a set of premises that they use to resolve divergent problems.

Happily, many BYU students have been prepared to form moral premises. This preparation has come from the teaching of parents, Sunday School classes, sacrament meeting talks, seminary courses, scripture reading, and private tutorials received from the Holy Ghost. However, a great number of students do not recognize that they have at the center of their being the ingredients to form these premises. They lack confidence that the truths they learned in Young Men and Young Women classes are in fact worthy of being their premises for solving the problems of life.

Let's try a few divergent problems. Is claiming personal bankruptcy an acceptable method of attaining financial stability? Most of us have learned of examples on either side. I heard a rumor describing individuals who plan to claim bankruptcy every seven years, and they schedule credit-based purchases accordingly. I have also heard of young couples shackled with huge debts from medical emergencies for which they could not even begin to pay the interest. Most personal bankruptcy cases fall between these extremes. Though the financial planners have data-driven models on the cost of such bankruptcies and on the amount of extra premiums that should be attached to each individual credit purchase, these models do not answer the primary question. No amount of data and sophisticated financial modeling will provide an answer. Additional premises must be used to reach a conclusion.

Should you date individuals who do not belong to the Church? How close a friendship should you maintain with those who do not live up to your standards? Should you seek a temple marriage? What kind of dress should you wear to the prom or to your wedding reception after the temple ceremony? There are arguments on both sides of these issues. These arguments appear logical because they

are. But these problems are divergent, and the different arguments rest fundamentally on different premises. Your solution depends on your premises.

At BYU the faculty members help students solidify their fundamental premises and assist them in implementing these premises in addressing divergent problems. We do that by first teaching solutions to convergent problems and then linking these problem-solving techniques to a general syllogism that can be applied to the divergent problems of life. We examine case studies of problems that have both convergent and divergent pieces. Students learn how a variety of divergent problems have been solved in the past and where the premises fundamental to their solution enter.

I remember taking a history class at BYU in which we reviewed some of the many quotes by Christopher Columbus attesting to his belief that he was inspired in his discovery of the New World. My professor was a great scholar on Columbus and reviewed with care and precision what was written and what scholars believed and why. He also referred to the well-known passage in 1 Nephi 13:12, but he read it exactly, imputing no additional meaning. We had the data and the scholarly view. We had the premises by which the scholars had reached their conclusions. With care and tenderness, the professor then showed us how his personal premises allowed him to embrace Columbus' testimonial and to thank Heavenly Father for guiding the explorer. I could see how my premises were at the core of the solution, and I could enjoy the facts and appreciate the scholar's view.

The principal asset of an economy, a source of educated individuals who can solve problems, has been referred to as human capital. Many believe that such human capital is the basis for growth in technology and economic productivity as well as the basis for solving the ecological and social problems of mankind. To contribute

to the human capital of society, students must be capable of solving both convergent and divergent problems. They must have established a set of premises and the ability to use them. If these premises are those of a steward of God, the individuals could be referred to not simply as human capital but as Zion capital.

### Two Kinds of Education

Thus we have two kinds of university education—Zion's and Babylon's. In both, the syllogisms, formal logic, and mathematical equations for convergent problems are the same. The tools used in putting together rational arguments are the same. In either case, one studies a selection of divergent problems and how they were resolved. But the underlying premises are very different. The Babylonian bachelor's degree holder will base his or her premises on self-interest and trust in the arm of flesh. The Zion bachelor's degree holder will use the principles of stewardship in Zion as premises, and he or she will praise God for the trust of such a stewardship.

Maintaining your premises in school and in business and not adopting those of a Babylonian business associate requires constant attention. There is a powerful temptation to use the Babylonian premises at certain times and Zion premises at other times, particularly on Sunday. Why? Because the way of Babylon appears successful. There is glitz and excitement. It looks fun. After all, can't we use our wealth to build Zion, regardless of our premises?

Like entropy, the Babylonian temptation is always pushing us. Starting out with the right set of premises is only the beginning. We must keep track of our fundamental premises, the ones God has helped us form as we have pondered the scriptures, participated in church activity, and prayed for guidance. But this requires constant attention. We can practice here at BYU, where many of the faculty—Latter-day Saints or not—have

formed wholesome premises at their very center. I know that there are endowed faculty members who have sought guidance in the development of these premises in the celestial room of the temple. Such faculty would never enter “tutored by God” on their résumé. Such an experience is too dear. But this gift is so wonderful that each faculty member so blessed is anxious to share it with students.

We may draw a parallel to the Lord’s parable of the wheat and the tares discussed in Doctrine and Covenants 86:

*The field was the world, and the apostles were the sowers of the seed;*

*And after they have fallen asleep the great persecutor of the church, the apostate, the whore, even Babylon, that maketh all nations to drink of her cup, in whose hearts the enemy, even Satan, sitteth to reign—behold he soweth the tares; wherefore, the tares choke the wheat and drive the church into the wilderness. [D&C 86:2–3; emphasis added]*

Enticing us to adopt the premises of Babylon is a subtle strategy Satan uses to sow tares. Individuals who take the premises of Babylon as their fundamental basis for solving the divergent problems of life, of business, or of everyday activity are tares. Their logic may be consistent, but at the root, the solutions are based on premises that Satan has provided. Though they may resemble wheat in the early years, their genetic code—their core premises for growth—yields a poisonous outcome. The Lord continues in section 86:

*Behold, verily I say unto you, the angels are crying unto the Lord day and night, who are ready and waiting to be sent forth to reap down the fields;*

*But the Lord saith unto them, pluck not up the tares while the blade is yet tender . . . lest you destroy the wheat also.*

*Therefore, let the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest is fully ripe; then ye*

*shall first gather out the wheat from among the tares, and after the gathering of the wheat . . . the tares are bound in bundles, and the field remaineth to be burned. [D&C 86:5–7]*

Before you decide that you are genetically programmed to be a Babylonian scholar or businessman, remember that the good news of the gospel is that your heart—and your premises—can be changed by the Savior. Whereas we may feel programmed to be a tare, we can overcome this.

May we all form our premises based on God’s teachings and have the courage to implement these premises in problem solving. One can’t help but speculate what would have happened to Enron, WorldCom, and Andersen Consulting had each of these organizations had more Zion capital around the corporate tables. A steward representing Zion capital would have seen that misrepresenting earnings and losses does not create overall surplus. It only creates the illusion of gain. Creating such an illusion may result in profit-taking opportunities for the Babylonian businessman but does no good for the steward in Zion.

The environment on this campus is provided for students to master the convergent tools and learn to use this mastery in bringing Zion premises to focus on daily problems at home, at the office, and in the community.

May we follow the Lord’s teachings and take the precious time we have here at this university to develop the tools we need to create Zion capital in us.

## Notes

1. Compare Moses 7:53 with D&C 86:3; see also D&C 1:16.
2. See James Wellard, *Babylon* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 154.
3. See Wellard, 156–57.
4. See Bible Dictionary, “Babylon,” 618.

5. See Charles Seignobos, *The World of Babylon: Nineveh and Assyria*, trans. David Macrae (New York: Leon Amiel, 1975), 69.
6. See Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 390.
7. See Wellard, 154.
8. See Joan Oates, *Babylon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 148.
9. See Roux, 390.
10. See Wellard, 158, 161.
11. See Seignobos, 82–84.
12. See Wellard, 161.
13. See Wellard, 160.
14. See Roux, 363.
15. See Morris Silver, *Economic Structures of the Ancient Near East* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 18.
16. See Roux, 404.
17. See Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967), 163–87.
18. See Henry W. F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon: A Survey of the Ancient Civilization of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley*, rev. and updated (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1988), 176–203.
19. Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered* (New York: Perennial Library, 1975), 79.