

from history. In John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (ca. 1390) Nebuchadnezzar's descent into bestiality as he eats grass marks the onset of a psychomachia in which the king makes the transition from vainglorious tyrant to penitent. Alongside such rewritings there developed an analogue of the Nebuchadnezzar story in the shape of the legend of King Robert of Sicily, a short version occurring in the *Gesta Romanorum* and a much more elaborate version in the Middle English poem *King Robert of Sicily*, where the repentant monarch admits that he has "acted like Nebuchadnezzar and Holofernes." A play of around 1612, *Nebuchadnezzars Fierie Furnace*, turned the story into an extremely witty court burlesque. Later on Solero's libretto for Verdi's opera *Nabucco* (1842) bowdlerized the story, turning the main protagonist into a Macbeth figure before subsuming him within the romantic love plot figuring his daughter Ferena and the Captain of the Guard. Pirandello in his great play *Enrico Four* (1922) used the biblical paradigm to form the basis of the story of a deranged aristocratic fantasist who actually remains imprisoned in his mental fixation.

Salvador Espriu's short story, "Nebuchadnezzar" (1935), part of a collection of baroque tales about characters with exotic names, recounts the life of a proud artisan who professes caution about taking a wife but then to his shame marries Evangelina, who within six months gives birth to the first of three daughters by another man, a local grandee. Nebuchadnezzar is however blessed by God in that his daughters prove adept at commerce, enabling him to spend more time than ever in the local bars. By the time he dies, comforted by his adoring family, a new generation has come to regard his story with admiration, though the tale's well-to-do audience regard the story as vulgar.

In S. Y. Agnon's novel *Only Yesterday* (1945, *Temol shilshom*) the main protagonist Isaac Kumer emigrates from Galicia to the Hebrew homeland in the 1930s and discovers the strange propinquity of the past in Jerusalem where on the Sabbath people stroll around such places as the Gate of Flowers "where Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon camped when he came to destroy Jerusalem." (Agnon: 241) Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play *An Angel Comes to Babylon* (1957, *Ein Engel Kommt Nach Babylon*) is an exuberant romp on the theme of tyranny, with Nebuchadnezzar finally becoming the builder of the tower of Babel. In Amir Gilboa's Holocaust poem "Under Siege" (1973) there is the temporary fantasy of a vain appeal to the prophet Jeremiah to assassinate Nebuchadnezzar (Hitler) before the full effects of his policies are brought to bear.

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VI. Visual Arts

The historical King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon reigned from 605 to 562 BCE, but any existing depictions of him were lost, as they were of no use for the Persians who conquered Babylon shortly after his death. But proof of his reign does survive in one example of Babylonian architecture, namely the Ish-tar gate, part of the walls of Babylon and one of the original Seven Wonders of the World. Its original inscription, in which "Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, prince appointed by the will of Marduk" explains his motives for building the gate, can be admired in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.

The biblical Nebuchadnezzar is generally depicted in one of three ways: as a tyrant, a man having prophetic dreams, or a madman. By the 14th century, Nebuchadnezzar had become a symbol of despotic leadership, and it comes as no surprise that he appears on the fourth capital of the Palazzo Ducale in Venice, which is dedicated to "Virtue and Vice," as a representative archetype of the tyrant ruler. Ruthless and cold is also how Gustave Doré chose to portray him in his illustrations for *La Grande Bible de Tours*, published in 1866. Nebuchadnezzar features in two of Doré's wooden engravings, *Slaughter of the Sons of Zedekiah before their Father* (Jer 39), and *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the Fiery Furnace* (Dan 3), which have the punishment of Judeans by Nebuchadnezzar as their theme. In both pictures Nebuchadnezzar appears almost detached from what is happening; he hovers above his suffering victims, looking on with the neutrality of a man for whom inflicting pain and misery has become routine.

The imagery of Nebuchadnezzar having prophetic dreams is primarily based on Dan 2. These depictions tend to be more neutral towards the Babylonian king, as they often also include the council he seeks of Daniel. One early visualization of this occurs in Beatus of Liébana's *Las Huelgas Apocalypse* from 1220, the largest surviving medieval manuscript of Spanish tradition which contains, amongst others, a commentary on the book of Daniel. The illumination of Nebuchadnezzar's council with Daniel and the other wise men and his dream of the statue show the Babylonian king as a dignified ruler with European attributes rather than Oriental ones. It is also interesting to note that the illustrator of the work chose to give the statue in the dream Nebuchadnezzar's features, which has no precedent in the Bible, where the statue is a symbol of Nebuchadnezzar's ultimately doomed kingdom rather than himself (see → plate 16).

Nebuchadnezzar's dream of himself going mad to "live with the wild animals [and] eat grass like

the ox” (Dan 4:32) and its subsequent fulfillment is certainly the most iconic and recognizable image associated with the Babylonian king. In the late 1790s, William Blake adapted his previous etching of Nebuchadnezzar from his book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to be a monotype print. The Nebuchadnezzar of the prints has lost all dignity; he is naked, crawling on all fours like an animal, his nails having become claws, his beard bushy and overgrown. His horrified facial expression suggests that he is slowly realizing his own dismal state. Almost two centuries later, in the 1960s, Australian painter Arthur Boyd made the figure of Nebuchadnezzar the central piece of a series of expressionist paintings. The madness that befalls Boyd’s Nebuchadnezzar moves away from the biblical text and is instead inspired by the real horrors of the time period, in particular the senseless violence of the Vietnam War.

Works: ■ Beatus of Liébana, *Nebuchadnezzar Dreams of a Statue*, illustration in *Las huelgas apocalypse* (1220, New York/USA, The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.429, fol. 151). ■ Blake, W., *Nebuchadnezzar* (1790s, colour monotype print, copies in Tate Britain, London/UK; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston/USA; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis/USA). ■ Boyd, A., *Fallen Nebuchadnezzar on Fire* (ca. 1966–68, oil on canvas, private collection). ■ Boyd, A., *Nebuchadnezzar Being Struck by Lightning* (1969, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra/Australia). ■ *Capital IV* (14th cent., Istrian stone, Palazzo Ducale, Venice/Italy). ■ Doré, G., *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the Fiery Furnace* (1866, wooden engraving in *La Grande Bible de Tours*). ■ Doré, G., *Slaughter of the Sons of Zedekiah before their Father* (1866, wooden engraving in *La Grande Bible de Tours*). ■ *Ishtar Gate* (ca. 575 BC, brick, Pergamon Museum, Berlin/Germany).

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VII. Music

The character of Nebuchadnezzar seems to have intrigued artists in most Western arts traditions, and the Babylonian king receives attention in various musical genres. Most significant is probably Verdi’s opera *Nabucco* (premiered in 1842; cf. fig. 32) which, even if it were not performed regularly in the modern era, would be notable even if only for the fact that Verdi called it “the opera with which my artistic career really begins” (Werfel/Paul: 92). Musical reception at every level of renown, including such lesser-known works as American composer James Monroe Deems’s oratorio *Nebuchadenezzar* (1850) and George Dyson’s four-part 1935 composition, *Nebuchadenezzar*, for orchestra, choir, and bass-baritone and tenor soloists (Foreman), most often focuses on the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s decree to



Fig. 32 “The Hebrew Slaves” from *Nabucco* (1979)

worship a golden idol, the refusal, attempted punishment, and divine rescue of three Hebrew youths, and the madness of the king described in Dan 4. Both the Dyson composition and Benjamin Britten’s *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966) also highlight the “Benedicite” – a hymn of praise included in the Septuagint version of the book of Daniel, various musical prayers in Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican services, and the Protestant Apocrypha (see also “Daniel [Book and Person] VIII. Music” and “Fiery Furnace VI. Music,” both mentioning further musical reception).

In the realm of modern popular music, specifically rap and hip hop, Kanye West surprised fans and critics alike by writing and staging a hybrid opera or cantata focused on King Nebuchadnezzar. West’s *Nebuchadnezzar* premiered on November 24, 2019 at the Hollywood Bowl and combined opera singers and gospel choir, segments of his own hip hop and R&B songs, narration from the book of Daniel, and assorted staging with masks, costumes, and props.

A prominent example of the musical reception of Nebuchadnezzar in jazz is the opening piece on pianist Marcus Roberts’s 1990 album *Deep in the Shed*. However, other than using the name as the title of the song, and a vaguely “Middle Eastern” evocation of a minor blues tonality, the connection to the biblical figure is unclear. The most widely heard jazz reception, however, is probably the Louis Armstrong performance of the song “Shadrack” (composed by Robert MacGimsey) on his 1958 album *Louis and the Good Book*. The lyrics paraphrase the story of Nebuchadnezzar and his attempts to execute Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Dan 3 – substituting trombone, clarinet, and horn (trumpet) for the “horn, flute, zither, lyre, and harp” which were to signal the command to worship the king’s golden idol in the biblical account.

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