

# Prisons in Ancient Mesopotamia with Nicholas Reid

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## Introduction

In today's episode of the podcast, we speak with Professor Nicholas Reid, author of, [Prisons in Ancient Mesopotamia](#). After introducing us to how Mesopotamians viewed and treated mental health, Reid talks to us about the earliest historical records on imprisonment in the history of the world.

In his book, Reid discusses the evolution of the modern prison system as it relates to ancient Mesopotamia. Together we discuss the commonalities that can be seen between the ancient and modern systems and the benefits that come from learning about past cultures' successes and weaknesses.

It may seem safely assumable to believe that because we are thousands of years removed from some ancient societies and their often barbaric methods of treating humanity, that we have automatically advanced into a superior, more humane society.

But with our reliance on solitary confinement and a loss of meaning, our system is missing what could be a more healing and transformative journey.

## What is Assyriology and how is it studied?

Assyriology is the study of the cultures and language of the ancient east, such as Assyria, but also includes other Mesopotamian civilizations such as Sumeria and Babylon.

The research of this time period consists mainly of information found inscribed on clay tablets. Because of the durable nature of clay, hundreds of thousands of these preserved tablets have been discovered and give us insight into many aspects of these civilizations.

## Assyriology and Modern Culture

The benefit of studying ancient history is not simply knowledge for knowledge's sake. Taking a look at ancient cultures provides us the opportunity to look at modern society through a different lens, providing insights into what it means to be human and discovering needs that thread through all societies, despite being separated by potentially thousands of years.

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There is often a temptation to view the past in black and white terms, either romanticizing it or dismissing it. Instead, there are supreme benefits in being able to see the nuance within history, recognizing there is both beauty and the need for change present in every civilization.

## Ancient Prisons and Spirituality

The Mesopotamian culture was heavily situated around spirituality, deities, and magic. As it pertains to the imprisonment system of the time, each person was believed to have their own deity that needed to be satisfied, by means of penance, for their misdeeds. In turn, their personal deity would appeal to the overseeing prison goddess on their behalf in hopes they would show the prisoner mercy.

Prisoners would work to satisfy the gods through the process of lamenting, a purifying and refining journey marked by enduring hardship and suffering, as described in literary texts. Through this, the person would eventually be made right with their personal deity. When the prisoner's personal deity had been satisfied, it was then that this deity would advocate for mercy.

## Stated Goals Versus Actual Practice

While the literary vision was about personal transformation, documents of practice demonstrate that so-called prisons were used for a variety of reasons, including the desire to coerce labor. Just as the stated goals of imprisonment need to be squared with actual practice in antiquity, the actual functionality of prisons of our day must be disentangled from the stated goals of correction and reformation.

## Group Mentality Among Prisoners Today

A negative element of incarceration is that it creates a homogenous population of individuals who are struggling and leaves them to continue to intrinsically govern themselves. This socially unexposed environment leaves prisoners confined to the influences of crime and harmful behavior. The lack of outside influence impairs their growth into new life patterns.

Outside influences, such as therapists and psychiatrists, can offer prisoners new life perspectives and help them prepare for ways to change their environment so they can successfully rejoin society upon release.

Hurricane Katrina displaced thousands of people. Research on this mass relocation event offered a unique opportunity to study recidivism rates. The rates of recidivism were found to be

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dramatically reduced among those who had both previously committed crimes and moved away, when compared to recidivism rates among those who did not move and had previously committed crimes. The individuals who moved away were afforded by circumstance the subsequent opportunity to build new social structures that offered growth beyond criminal activity. In short, they were taken out of their previous group mentality.

## Solitary Confinement

The environment of solitary confinement is one of complete deprivation. Children exposed to extreme levels of social deprivation are shown to have a brain one-third the size of their non-neglected peers. Among prisoners held in solitary confinement, research has shown levels of brain atrophy and damage consistent with the findings among children.

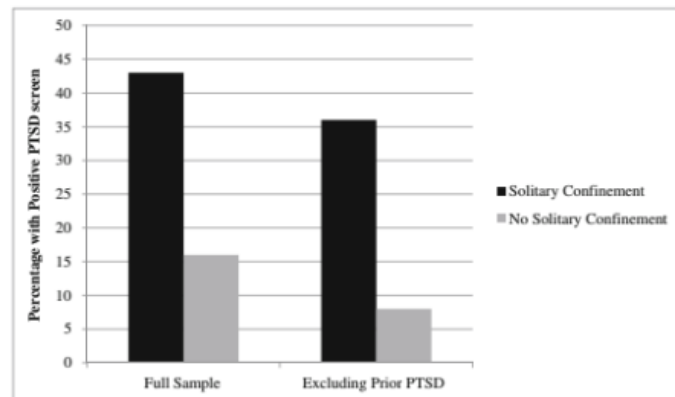
The study *Psychopathological Effects of Solitary Confinement* by Stuart Grassian reviews 14 inmates that were exposed to periods of solitary confinement and, thereafter, began to develop psychiatric symptoms (Grassian, 1983). Some of the changes included perceptual distortions, hallucinations, and derealization experiences. These changes were experienced by seven of the prisoners and five of them reported hearing voices. The specific psychiatric symptoms were similar across most of the inmates. Affective disturbances, such as anxiety associated with the physiological changes such as tachycardia, diaphoresis, feeling short of breath and dizzy, were experienced by ten of the inmates. Other problems included disturbances in thought content, trouble concentrating, and problems of impulse control. Overall, this study found that solitary confinement was associated with major psychiatric risks.

Solitary confinement has been shown to be related to significant effects in regards to PTSD-related symptoms, psychotic experiences, mood related and self-injurious symptoms. A study by [Hagan et al.](#) aimed to review the relationship between solitary confinement and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. The study consisted of 119 participants, and after collecting data it was found that 28% of the participants screened positive for post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Individuals that reported solitary confinement were three times more likely to report PTSD symptoms after adjusting for potential confounders, 43 vs. 16%,  $p < 0.01$ .

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**Fig. 1** Prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms by solitary confinement history among former prisoners seeking primary care ( $N = 119$ )



The study also found that other factors, such as previous trauma exposure and current substance use, were also associated with increased risk of PTSD symptoms. The authors suggest that their findings highlight the need for policies and interventions that aim to reduce the use of solitary confinement in prisons, as well as the need for trauma-informed care for individuals who have been incarcerated, particularly those who have experienced solitary confinement.

One of the consistent findings related to solitary confinement are that a large number of self-harm incidents and suicide attempts occur among prisoners that are placed in environments of restriction and isolation. A study by [Kaba et al.](#) reviewed the medical records from the New York City jail from 2010-2013 and found that of the 1,303 incarcerations, 7.3% of the admissions were included in some sort of solitary confinement. Of those individuals within solitary confinement, “53.3% of acts of self-harm and 45.0% of acts of potentially fatal self-harm occurred” ([Kaba et al., 2014](#)). Self harm was significantly associated with solitary confinement with an odds ratio of 10.15 in individuals older than 18 with no serious mental illness and an odds ratio of 5.89 in individuals younger than 18 with no serious mental illness. This finding supports how strongly solitary confinement is linked to self-harm, independent of a history of mental illness.

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**TABLE 3— Multivariate Analysis Results for Predictors of Self-Harm in New York City Jails, With Interactions: January 1, 2010–January 31, 2013**

Variables	OR (95% CI)
Self-harm	
Solitary confinement and not SMI and aged > 18 y	10.15 (8.53, 12.08)
Solitary confinement and not SMI and aged ≤ 18 y	5.89 (4.80, 7.20)
Solitary confinement and SMI and aged > 18 y	4.03 (3.10, 5.24)
Solitary confinement and SMI and aged ≤ 18 y	2.34 (1.65, 3.31)
SMI and solitary confinement	4.71 (3.72, 5.97)
SMI and not solitary confinement	11.68 (9.78, 14.40)
Aged ≤ 18 y and solitary confinement	5.73 (4.85, 6.77)
Aged ≤ 18 y and no solitary confinement	9.88 (8.21, 11.89)

France is known to have “one of the highest prison suicide rates among high-income countries.” [Vanhaesebrouck et al.](#), assessed the sociodemographic, health characteristics, and circumstances of suicide of French prisoners who died by suicide. There were 236 suicide cases between 2017 and 2018, 94.9% were males. The study found that of the individuals that died of suicide, 80 individuals had a history of psychiatric disorder, meanwhile 110 developed some kind of psychiatric problem during their stay in prison ([Vanhaesebrouck et al., 2022](#)). Results found that 60% of the prisoners that died of suicide visited the health unit one week prior. This is a significant finding that allows healthcare workers and psychiatrists to understand when to intervene. Anxiety and depressive-related disorders were found to be three times more likely during individuals' stay in prison (24.6%) versus prior to prison (8.2%) ([Vanhaesebrouck et al., 2022](#)). Humans are not meant to be isolated, they need connection with other human beings who can help them move towards prosocial life choices, including employment training, educational services, or connection with a larger meaning and purpose.

Healthy levels of human connections are essential for survival. A suggested alternative to solitary confinement has been a variety of social programs to bring prisoners into communities and groups.

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## The Common Goal of Transformation

From what we can derive from studying the ancient Mesopotamian culture, a common goal of the prison system then and the prison system today is the idea of transformation. Ancient cultures pursued transformation by means of lamenting to the gods and acts of penance, while the governing powers benefited from the free labor.

Today, the prison system still ideally exists as a medium of transformation for the imprisoned, but falls short of this goal. Solitary confinement remains an all too common form of punishment, as does the issue of group mentality, and the use of prisoners for very low cost labor is still in practice ([around 50 cents per hour](#)).

While it may be difficult to envision the giant prison system functioning differently, the search throughout history has been to build a just prison system that is a mode of regeneration for society. If the true goal of an incarceration system is to produce transformation in prisoners for the overall benefit of society, solitary confinement is traumatizing, and we largely lack a spiritual and meaning foundation that would lead to a lament or transformation.

Just as we look back on these now extinct societies and label many of their methods of punishment as barbaric, taking a closer look at our current system reveals that we may be functioning under an illusion of progress. Future societies may look back at us with the same fascination at our attempts to create individual change with systems proven to lack basic efficacy at enacting lasting regeneration in prisoners.

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