

THE DESTRUCTION OF BABYLON IN ISAIAH 46–47

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I. INTRODUCTION

Isaiah 46:1–2 announces the astonishing news that the gods of Babylon (Bel and Nebo) will bow down in defeat and will be forcibly taken away into captivity on the backs of weary animals. Isaiah 47:1–15 provides additional images to this picture of humiliation by describing the personified woman Babylon sitting on the ground in the dirt because she will be driven from her royal throne (47:1). She will be shamed, deprived of her kingdom, no longer a queen, and working like a commoner or a slave.¹ These rhetorical claims suggest that this will happen to Babylon because God will punish this city for oppression, excessive pride, wickedness, love of pleasure, delusions, and a false sense of security (47:1–11). This destruction will come suddenly (47:11), and she will be helpless and impotent, with no one to save her from the enemy (47:14–15). The spells of her priests, the astrological wisdom of her star-gazers, and her magicians will not be able to rescue Babylon from this terrible fate. Thus Babylon will be childless, without allies, and destroyed (47:12–15).

This study will investigate: (1) when this prophecy was fulfilled; and (2) how this message about the fall of Babylon fits into the surrounding context of Isaiah 40–55.² Do these graphic descriptions of the defeat of Babylon portray a dramatic change in the physical stature of the city, the loss of its political status, and the useless abilities of Babylon’s religious authorities, or something quite different from the images of defeat found in Isaiah 46–47? Many commentators suggest that the destruction of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47 was fulfilled when Koresh (Cyrus) the Persian “subdued nations” and “stripped kings of their robes” (Isaiah 45:1),³ although

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¹ P. A. Kruger, “The Slave Status of the Virgin Daughter Babylon in Isaiah 47:2: A Perspective from Anthropology,” *JNWSL* 23 (1997) 143–51.

² This announcement of Babylon’s defeat appears to be something similar to the “oracle against a foreign nation” in Isaiah 13–23 and is unlike other chapters in the context of Isaiah 40–55. J. Goldingay (*The Message of Isaiah 40–55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* [London: T&T Clark, 2005] 301) believes these chapters may serve as a complement to 44:24–45:25 (Cyrus’s defeat of the surrounding nations). The victory of Cyrus and the defeat of Babylon are necessary preludes to the later exaltation and restoration of Zion in the following chapters. B. Childs (*Isaiah* [OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001] 358) claims that this “chapter seems consciously to repeat themes and formulae from Chapter 45,” so it has some connection to its context. S. M. Paul (*Isaiah 40–66* [ECC; Grand Rapids, 2012] 275–77) lists themes, plus words and phrases that appear in both chaps. 45 and 46.

³ Biblical texts are from NASB.

this connection with Cyrus is never stated in these chapters.⁴ In spite of this, many commentators identify Cyrus as the “bird of prey” (46:11) who will come from the east and accomplish God’s purposes, including the destruction of Babylon.⁵ But if this is the actual fulfillment that the prophet intends in these two chapters, then the historical accuracy of this prophecy is questionable because the prophecy of destruction in Isaiah 46–47 and Cyrus’s relatively peaceful occupation of Babylon in the Cyrus Cylinder do not tell the same story. R. N. Whybray’s reason for questioning this as the fulfillment of Isaiah 46–47 is that “the total devastation of Babylon envisaged in this song [Isaiah 46–47] did not in fact occur when Cyrus took the city.”⁶

This seems to be the conclusion one might naturally deduce from reading the description of Cyrus’s rather non-violent account about his occupation of Babylon in the Cyrus Cylinder. According to this cylinder, the Persian king Cyrus responded to the call of the Babylonian god Marduk (Bel), entered Babylon unopposed, restored the regular worship of Marduk, treated the people of Babylon with kindness, and the Babylonian people welcomed him with great rejoicing. Since Cyrus entered Babylon as a friend in order to restore the worship of Marduk, it is evident that he did not come with the purpose of destroying the city or removing its gods. Instead he came to reverse the religious policies of earlier Babylonian rulers (i.e. Nabonidus and Belshazzar) who did not worship the god Marduk and left his temple in disrepair. Thus Cyrus did not fulfill two important aspects of the prophecy in Isaiah 46–47 (the destruction of the city of Babylon and the sending of Babylon’s gods into captivity). In fact Cyrus says of Marduk (Bel), “we all [praised] his great [godhead]

⁴ Although the conquering nation and king are not named in Isaiah 46–47, many assume it is Cyrus, the powerful king over the Persian Empire. So C. T. Begg, “Babylon in the Book of Isaiah,” in *The Book of Isaiah* (ed. J. Vermeylen; BELT 81; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989) 121–25; Childs, *Isaiah* 361–62; F. Delitzsch, “The Prophecies of Isaiah,” *Commentary on the OT*, vol. 7 (trans. J. Martin; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1969) 231–32; D. N. Freedman and R. Frey, “False Prophecy is True,” in *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of H. B. Huffmon* (ed. J. K. Kaltner and L. Stulman; JSOTSup 378; London: T&T Clark, 2004) 82–87; J. Goldingay and D. Payne, *Isaiah 40–55* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2006) 2:65; R. Kratz, *Kyros im Deuterokönig-Buch* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991) 217; J. L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (AB 20; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) 87; H. C. Spyerboer, *The Structure and Composition of Deutero-Isaiah* (Meppel, The Netherlands: Krips, 1976) 145; D. S. Vanderhoof, *The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Latter Prophets* (HSM 59; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) 179; C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 180.

⁵ Some of those who view Cyrus as the “bird of prey” are: K. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 263; J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–45* (AB 19A; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 273; C. Franke, *Isaiah 46, 47, and 48: A New Literary-Critical Reading* (Biblical and Judaic Studies 3; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 62; J. L. Koole, *Isaiah III*, vol. 1: *Isaiah 40–48* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1997) 515; J. Goldingay, *Message of Isaiah 40–55* 311–12; McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* 87; J. N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, 1998) 237; H. Schaudig, “‘Bēl Bows, Nabū Stoops!’ The Prophecy of Isaiah xlvi 1–2 as a Reflection of Babylonian ‘Processional Omens,’” *VT* 58 (2008) 557–72; Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* 185; J. D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66* (WBC 25; Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 166, 170; R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 117; M. J. Chan, “Cyrus, Yhwh’s Bird of Prey (Isa 46:11): Echoes of an Ancient Near Eastern Metaphor,” *JSOT* 35 (2010) 113–27; Paul, *Isaiah 40–66* 284.

⁶ Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* 118.

joyously, standing before him in peace.”⁷ Although it is possible that the report on this cylinder may contain some political propaganda or exaggeration about these events in order to persuade the Babylonian citizens to support the rule of Cyrus; nevertheless, it seems evident that Cyrus preserved the city of Babylon and restored the worship of Marduk. Since sparing the city and restoring Marduk worship would be a wise political tactic that would likely gain Cyrus respect from the people of Babylon, there is good reason to accept these core ideas as authentic.

In light of the contrast between the picture of destruction painted in Isaiah 46–47 and the peaceful occupation of Babylon described in the Cyrus Cylinder, Whybray concludes that “this is a further example of a prophecy which was not fulfilled; in the event Cyrus proclaimed himself a follower of Marduk and actively promoted the worship of Babylon’s gods.”⁸ Whybray squarely addresses the inconsistency between the Cyrus Cylinder and the usual interpretation of Isaiah 46–47, but is his conclusion the only option available when interpreting this passage? Since the accounts in Isaiah 46–47 and the Cyrus Cylinder are so completely divergent, it may seem almost impossible for any interpreter to bridge the gap between them. Nevertheless, three alternative explanations are employed by commentators to account for the contrast between this prophecy and Cyrus’ report about what happened in Babylon in 539 BC.

The first approach tries to explain away the problem by saying that this prophecy was given some time before the event, so some conflicts between the prophecy and the fulfillment should be expected, but most of these conflicts are rather insignificant.⁹ J. McKenzie recognizes that the events described in Isaiah 46–47 did not happen when Cyrus entered Babylon, but he claims, “the prophet would have said that such details are not relevant to the judgment of Yahweh.”¹⁰ D. N. Freedman and R. Frey conclude that the descriptions of the destruction of Babylon “are excellent examples of true/false prophecy ... the actual capture of Babylon is entirely different in detail from the prophecies. The only explanation to account for such differences is that these chapters must have been written before anything happened.”¹¹ C. Westermann affirms that Deutero-Isaiah was speaking before these events were fulfilled and that “things did not turn out exactly as he here proclaimed they would,” but this does not “in any way detract from their intrinsic significance.”¹² None of these authors deals seriously with the significant conflicts between the picture of the fall of Babylon in the prophecy of Isaiah 46–47 and the peaceful occupation of Babylon in the Cyrus Cylinder. Those who follow this approach seem to assume that it is somewhat expected and not a major problem for a

⁷ James Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Related to the OT* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011) 282–84.

⁸ Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* 114.

⁹ McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* 87–92; Franke (*Isaiah 46, 47, and 48* 83, 143, 146) justifies this inconsistency with the idea that the author wrote before those events had taken place.

¹⁰ McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* 87–92.

¹¹ D. N. Freedman and R. Frey, “False Prophecy is True” 82–86.

¹² C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* 180.

prophecy to get the essential facts wrong when the prophecy is given before the event actually happens.

The second approach suggests that the conflicts between these documents are explainable because prophecy is not a second-sight description of exactly what will happen in the future, but an imaginative rhetorical portrayal, more like preaching. G. A. F. Knight says, "DI's purpose here is to preach. . . . He is not concerned to try to be a foreteller of the future like a Babylonian stargazer."¹³ B. S. Childs realizes that Cyrus did not destroy Babylon in 539 BC, but he claims that "Isaianic prophecy interprets the effects of God's entrance into human history . . . which only in part coheres with empirical history."¹⁴ J. Oswalt recognizes that Cyrus did not do what Isa 46:1–2 describes, but he maintains that "we have little reason to think that this was intended to be a specific prophecy."¹⁵ This leads Oswalt to interpret the prediction of the fall of Babylon in Isaiah 47 as a general theological truth that teaches about the power and grace of God. But how can one take Cyrus' role in Isa 44:24–45:8 as a specific prophecy about what will happen in Jerusalem and then turn around and not take Isaiah 46–47 as a specific prophecy about what will happen in Babylon? While we accept the view that preaching is not an historical genre, even rhetorical preaching has to have some basis in reality and a general consistency with what happens or its message and messenger will be discredited.

The third approach to this problem admits the seriousness of the conflict between Isaiah 46–47 and the account in the Cyrus Cylinder; consequently, these authors conclude that the conflict between these two accounts cannot be glossed over as if this were just a minor or insignificant problem. They find the discontinuity between these two accounts to be so serious that it can only be removed by concluding that Isaiah 46–47 is not prophesying the occupation of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BC. Since the contrasts between these accounts are so extensive, Isaiah 46–47 must be a prophecy about some other conquest of Babylon by some other conqueror. R. Albertz's study of this problem led him to connect the fall of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47 to Darius' conquest of Babylon in 522 BC. He believes the one aroused in righteousness in 45:13 is Darius, not Cyrus.¹⁶ J. Blenkinsopp also rejects the connection between Isaiah 46–47 and the account of Cyrus's defeat of Babylon in the Cyrus Cylinder,¹⁷ but he suggests that these events possibly refer to the con-

¹³ G. A. F. Knight, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Theological Commentary on Isaiah 40–55* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965) 148.

¹⁴ Childs, *Isaiah* 361–62.

¹⁵ Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* 229, 237.

¹⁶ R. Albertz ("Darius in Place of Cyrus: The First Edition of Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40.1–52.12) in 521 BCE," *JSTOT* 27 [2003] 371–83) maintains that it makes much more sense to connect the fall of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47 to the conquest by Darius in 522 BC. Albertz places the first return of exiles under Darius (instead of Cyrus) and the first edition of Isaiah in the reign of Darius, thus the one aroused in 45:11–13 is Darius.

¹⁷ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* 267.

quest of Babylon by Darius (522 BC) or by Xerxes (482 BC). P. R. Davies connects Isaiah 46–47 to the conquest by Xerxes in 482 BC.¹⁸

This final approach opens the door to examining an alternative way of easing the conflict that is created by interpreters who identify Isaiah 46–47 with Cyrus's occupation of Babylon as reported in the Cyrus Cylinder. If one can find an alternative event which exhibits characteristics more consistent with the description of the fall of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47, then some of the problems with interpreting Isaiah 46–47 as a false prophecy may be resolved.¹⁹ Although no one would expect a poetic prophetic account of a future event to give anything close to a detailed historical account of exactly what happens, this does not mean that a prophecy will provide general or broad themes that have little relationship to the historical fulfillment of the prophecy. Even if a prophecy is given before an historical event and even if it does cast general images about the future that are not precise historical descriptions, these metaphors create mental pictures that represent a perception of reality that is different from other possible poetic pictures that the prophet might create by using other images. A prophet who chooses rhetorical images of humiliation, the exile of a city's chief gods, the loss of royal power, burning, no deliverance, and destruction is painting an imaginative poetic picture that does not correspond to the peaceful occupation of Babylon by Cyrus. Therefore, this study will follow the lead of those who look for some other explanation of Isaiah 46–47 that will be more consistent with the images of destruction portrayed in this prophecy.

II. WHICH CONQUEST OF BABYLON?

A comparison of the prophetic images of the fall of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47 with other ancient Near Eastern sources²⁰ may make it possible to identify historical accounts of the conquest of Babylon that come much closer to matching the description of the poetic picture of defeat and humiliation in Babylon in Isaiah 46–47. This section will briefly survey the historical reports of eight different attacks on Babylon between 710–480 BC in order to see if another devastation of Babylon might come closer to the description of the fall of Babylon found in the imagery contained in Isaiah 46–47.

¹⁸ P. R. Davies, "God of Cyrus, God of Israel: Some Religio-Historical Reflections on Isaiah 40–55," in J. Davies et al., eds., *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honor of J. F. E. Sanjer* (JSOTSup 195; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1995) 207–25. H.-J. Hermission, *Denterojesaia* (BKAT 11/9; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1987) 99–101 prefers to connect these events to the conquest by Xerxes.

¹⁹ G. V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* (NAC; Nashville: B&H, 2009) 283–85. I argue that the evidence in Isaiah 46–47 does not fit Cyrus's conquest in 539 BC, thus interpreters need to connect these prophecies to something else.

²⁰ It is unlikely that a Hebrew prophet would have access to any royal documents or would adopt the slanted propaganda of a Babylonian scribe, but he would have access to earlier Hebrew traditions about the defeat of Babylon (Isaiah 13–14; 21). Interestingly, Franke, in *Isaiah 46, 47, and 48* 72–124, and in her "Reversals of Fortune in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the Babylon Oracles in Isaiah," in *New Visions of Isaiah* (ed. R. F. Melugin and M. A. Sweeney; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 104–23, mentions numerous literary connections between Isaiah 47 and 14, suggesting some level of dependence or coordination with Isaiah's earlier oracle.

Some of the general factors to look for in these historical reports would be: (1) the removal of the gods Bel (Marduk) and Nebo from the city of Babylon into captivity by an enemy nation (46:1–2);²¹ (2) the end of the royal status of the city of Babylon as head over her kingdom (47:1, 5); (3) shame and humiliation (47:1–3), (4) the loss of citizens and loyal vassals (47:8–9); (5) evil, disaster, and destruction (47:11); (6) burning by fire (47:14); and (7) no one will deliver Babylon (47:15). These graphic images of defeat and humiliation describe a major change in the physical vibrancy, the social status, and the political power of Babylon. Thus minor conflicts over Babylon can be eliminated rather quickly and attention can be given to the major military conflicts that lead to an extensive change in the power, vitality, and status of Babylon.

1. *The conquest of Babylon by Sargon II in 710 BC.* Sargon II became king over Assyria in 721 BC, shortly after the death of Shalmaneser V.²² While Sargon was consolidating his power during the first few years of his reign, Merodach-baladan (Marduk-apla-iddina), the leader of the Chaldean tribe of Bit-Yakin in the southern marshes, proclaimed himself king of Babylon and established himself as a successful ruler over the area for around ten years.²³ In 710 BC Sargon II finally turned his attention to the goal of taking control of the city of Babylon and the tribal areas surrounding it to the south. When Sargon came to the territory of Babylon, Merodach-baladan and his troops were quickly overrun.²⁴ Then Merodach-baladan secretly retreated to the nearby country of Elam, so the nobles in Babylon invited Sargon II into the city without any resistance.²⁵ There is no evidence that Sargon destroyed Babylon or exiled its gods as suggested in Isa 46:1–2. Instead, Sargon lived there for some time, declared himself king of Babylon, participated in the New Year's festivals that honored the Babylonian god Marduk, and oversaw the rebuilding of a new Assyrian fortification (Dur-Nabu) and the destruction of the fortifications at Dur-Yakin.²⁶ The main Babylonian gods were not taken away, but were honored, so there seems to be little about this description of these events that

²¹ Baltzer (*Deutero-Isaiah* 255) thinks the gods were being carried joyfully in the New Year's procession, but Childs (*Isaiah* 359) believes these gods were being carried into exile. Being exiled would support the claim that these were not gods. This gives the dramatic contrast: God "carries" his people (46:3–4) but an enemy was able to "carry" away Babylon's defeated and powerless gods.

²² It appears that Sargon's rise to power involved a struggle. For more on this conflict, consult the interpretation of the Borowski Stele (II.5–12) in W. G. Lambert, "Portions of Inscribed Stela of Sargon II, King of Assyria," in *Ladders to Heaven: Art Treasures from the Land of the Bible* (ed. O. W. Muscarella; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981) 125.

²³ J. A. Brinkman, "Merodach-Baladan II," in *Studies Presented to A. L. Oppenheim* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968) 6–53; A. K. Grayson, "Assyria: Tiglath-pileser II to Sargon II (744–705 BC)," in *Cambridge Ancient History, Volume III, Part 2: The Assyrian and Babylonian Empires and Other States of the Near East, from the Eighth to the Sixth Centuries B.C.* (2d ed.; ed. J. Boardman et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 71–102. These accounts summarize the key historical events of this era.

²⁴ A. Fuchs and S. Parpola, *The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part III. Letters from Babylon and the Eastern Provinces* (State Archives of Assyria 15; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2001) xiv.

²⁵ A. Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargon II aus Khorsabad* (Göttingen: Cuvillier, 1994) 399–405.

²⁶ J. A. Brinkman, *Prelude to Empire: Babylonian Society and Politics, 747–626 BC* (Philadelphia: Occasional Publication of the Babylonian Fund 7, 1984) 52–53.

would lead one to connect these military, political, and religious activities with the prophetic description of the complete fall of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47.

2. *The defeat of Babylon by Sennacherib in 703 BC.* A few years later life in Babylon changed significantly when Sargon II was killed in a military campaign in 705 BC. Although there was some confusion about the chronology of events in the Assyrian sources,²⁷ within a year Babylon revolted and Marduk-zakir-shumi II became king for about one month, but then Merodach-baladan quickly returned to power over Babylon.²⁸ In response, Assyrian generals attacked the Babylonian army at Kish, but they did not have a great deal of success at that time. Later when Sennacherib and his division of the army reinforced the Assyrian forces, the Babylonians were defeated. Consequently, the gates of Babylon were opened for Sennacherib to enter,²⁹ so the city was spared his wrath and devastation. Sennacherib states, “Into his palace, Babylon, I entered. I opened his treasure-house: gold, silver, vessels of gold and silver, precious stones of every kind (name), goods and property without limit (number), heavy tribute, his harem ... I brought out as spoil,”³⁰ but there was no reference to any destructive activities by Sennacherib.³¹ Thus these events do not reflect the prophetic picture in Isaiah 46–47.

3. *The control of Babylon by Sennacherib in 700 BC.* In his fourth campaign, Sennacherib turned his forces against the Bit-Yakin area to address the problems in southern Babylonia. Sennacherib reports that Merodach-baladan “gathered together the gods of his whole land in their shrines and loaded them into ships and fled like a bird.”³² There is no mention of any military action against the city of Babylon, although Sennacherib did place his oldest son Assur-nadin-shumu on the throne in Babylon where he ruled for six years (700–694 BC).³³ This change of rulers does not match what is described in the prophecy in Isaiah 46–47, although there is a curious movement of the gods of Babylon, as in Isa 46:1–2. Nevertheless, the two accounts are not identical, for Merodach-baladan moves the gods before this attack by Sennacherib; they are not taken into captivity by a foreign nation after a humili-

²⁷ Brinkman (*Prelude to Empire* 55) discusses the conflicting dates and explains them as being due to the lack of precision among Assyrian scribes (similar mistakes are found in the dating in some of the scribal records of Sargon’s reign). A. K. Grayson (“Assyria: Sennacherib and Esarhaddon (704–669 BC),” in *Cambridge Ancient History, Volume III, Part 2* 105) discusses these chronological problems.

²⁸ M. Copan, “Sennacherib’s First Campaign: Against Merodach-baladan,” *COS* 2.119A:300–302. On Sennacherib’s first campaign he portrays his enemy in this way: “Merodach-baladan, king of Babylonia (whose heart is wicked), an instigator of revolt, plotter of rebellion, doer of evil, whose guilt is heavy.” D. D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005) 48.

²⁹ M. Cogan, “Sennacherib’s First Campaign: Against Merodach-baladan,” *COS* 2.119A:300–302; Luckenbill, *Annals of Sennacherib* 10, 51–52, 56, 67. Each of these copies of his annals provides a slightly different account of these events.

³⁰ Luckenbill, *Annals of Sennacherib* 24. M. Cogan, “Sennacherib’s First Campaign: Against Merodach-baladan,” *COS* 2.119A:302.

³¹ A. K. Grayson, “Assyria: Sennacherib and Esarhaddon (704–669 BC)” 106. This showed that Sennacherib’s goal was to kill Merodach-baladan, not to destroy Babylon.

³² Luckenbill, *Annals of Sennacherib* 35.

³³ *Ibid.* 35, 71, 76. Different annals give slightly different accounts of the fourth campaign.

ating defeat as implied in Isa 46:1–2. There is no report of the exiling of most of the people or the devastation of the city of Babylon.

4. *The total destruction of Babylon by Sennacherib in 689 BC.* In 694 BC, the Elamites removed Sennacherib's son Assur-nadin-shumu from power and put Nergal-ushezib on the throne of Babylon. After one year of rule the tribe of Bit-Dakkuri was able to remove him and place Mushezib-Marduk on the throne.³⁴ In 689 BC, in his eighth campaign, Sennacherib attacked Babylon and “captured Shuzubu [Mushezib-Marduk] king of Babylon ... my men took the (images of the) gods who dwelt there and smashed them.”³⁵ In addition, he sent the Ekallate gods Adad and Shala, which Marduk-nadin-ahe had seized during the reign of Tiglath-pileser III, back to their original home. Kingship in Babylonia was abolished³⁶ and the city of Babylon was treated very harshly. The devastation of the city was complete according to the Assyrian records.

I destroyed and tore down and burned with fire the city (and) its houses, from its foundations to its parapets. I tore out the inner wall and outer wall, temples, the ziggurats of brick and earth, as many as there were, and threw them into the Arahtu river. I dug canals through the city and flooded the place with water, destroying the structure of its foundation. I made its destruction greater than that of “the flood.” So that in future days, the site of that city, its temples and its gods would not be identifiable, I completely destroyed it with water and annihilated it like inundated territory.³⁷

Although it is certainly possible that there may be some scribal exaggeration in this record of the conquest of Babylon,³⁸ a later text from the time of Esarhaddon essentially substantiates this picture for it “describes in detail how the city was destroyed and turned into a swamp.”³⁹ Esarhaddon's scribe portrayed Babylon as a “ruin ... wasteland ... abandoned ... its gods and goddesses left their shrines and went up to heaven, its inhabitants were distributed as slaves among foreigners.”⁴⁰

³⁴ G. Frame, *Babylonia 689–627 BC: A Political History* (Netherlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut Istanbul 69; Istanbul: Netherlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, 1992) 53; Brinkman, *Prelude to Empire* 62.

³⁵ M. Cogan, “Sennacherib: The Capture and Destruction of Babylon,” *COS* 2.119E:305–6, or the similar translation in Luckenbill, *Annals of Sennacherib* 17.

³⁶ Frame, *Babylonia 689–627 BC* 1.

³⁷ M. Cogan, “Sennacherib: The Capture and Destruction of Babylon,” *COS* 2.119E:305–6, or see Luckenbill, *Annals of Sennacherib* 84 for a similar translation.

³⁸ A. K. Grayson “Assyria: Sennacherib and Esarhaddon (704–669 BC)” 109. He states, “As usual, allowance must be made for the extravagance of Assyrian prose and the actual destruction was probably not nearly as bad as the description.” Nevertheless, from our vantage point today it would be impossible to quantify what was exaggerated and how much it was exaggerated.

³⁹ Brinkman, *Prelude to Empire* 68. J. A. Brinkman, “Through a Glass Darkly: Esarhaddon's Retrospect on the Downfall of Babylon,” in *Studies in Literature from the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. M. Sasson; New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1984) 35–42. In Esarhaddon's inscription the fall of Babylon, its demise was attributed to Marduk's wrath because treasures were taken from the Esagila to bribe Elam.

⁴⁰ J. A. Brinkman, “Through a Glass Darkly: Esarhaddon's Retrospect on the Downfall of Babylon” 35–42. Esarhaddon did not blame his father for the terrible fate of Babylon, he blamed it on a flood that ruined the city and made it a wasteland.

After these events Sennacherib's annals are silent about Babylon; it does not exist as a city or nation.⁴¹ In general, these accounts sound somewhat similar to the extensive destruction of Babylon described in Isaiah 46–47. Later records confirm that the gods were moved from the city of Babylon because a text from early in the reign of Esarhaddon reports that the images of six gods from Babylon spent time in the town of Issete. A royal official, Shamesh-shumu-leshir, found them there and sent them (including Bel) back to Babylon.⁴²

In the process of Sennacherib's conquest, Babylon was completely leveled and made powerless. It no longer had any existence, much less any royal status. Its people were taken into captivity, plus its vassals ceased to pay tribute to Babylon. Although Sennacherib's account was much more detailed and described issues not mentioned in Isaiah 46–47 (the removal of walls and temples, flooding, and the digging of canals), the physical destruction generally corresponds to the political destruction found in Isaiah 46–47.⁴³ Thus, it seems that Isaiah 46–47 could be a prophecy about Sennacherib's conquest of Babylon in 689 BC.

5. *The contest for control of Babylon in 648 BC.* After Babylon was revived (some time after 681 BC) and the former gods of Babylon were returned from Assyria,⁴⁴ Esarhaddon decided to put his son Ashurbanipal in charge of Assyria in the north and another son Shamash-shum-ukin in charge of Babylon and the south. Although relative peace was maintained for some years, from 652–648 BC Shamash-shum-ukin rebelled against his brother and war ensued. Babylon remained under siege for over two years, but in 648 BC Babylon finally fell shortly after Shamash-shum-ukin was killed.⁴⁵ Little data survived concerning what happened to Babylon, other than the confiscation of riches and people from the royal palace.⁴⁶ After killing some remaining rebels, "the Assyrian king now extended the velvet glove, in contrast to Sennacherib's earlier behavior."⁴⁷ Although Ashurbanipal did defeat Babylon's allies and humbled the reigning king, the king's "extension of the royal glove" suggests that this attack on Babylon did not match the destructive images found in Isaiah 46–47.

6. *The occupation of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BC.* There were two ancient sources which describe Cyrus's occupation of Babylon. According to the scribe who wrote the Cyrus Cylinder, Babylon was taken by the Persians because Marduk was not being properly worshipped and other gods left their cities and were brought to Babylon.⁴⁸ In his anger, Marduk searched the horizons for a righteous ruler who

⁴¹ Frame, *Babylonia 689–627 BC* 60.

⁴² S. W. Cole and P. Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* (State Archives of Assyria 13; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1998) 162 (letter 190).

⁴³ S. Erlandsson (*The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 13:2–14:23* [Lund: Gleerup, 1970] 91–92) connects this event with the prophecy in Isa 21:1–10.

⁴⁴ A. K. Grayson, "Assyria: Sennacherib and Esarhaddon (704–669 BC)" 149.

⁴⁵ Frame, *Babylonia 689–627 BC* 153.

⁴⁶ D. S. Vanderhoof, *The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Latter Prophets* 132.

⁴⁷ Frame, *Babylonia 689–627 BC* 156–67.

⁴⁸ Paul, *Isaiah 40–66* 274–76 understands the background to 46:1–2 to be about the Babylonians taking the gods out of Babylon before the invasion by Persia, but 46:2 appears to describe the gods

would lead him in the annual procession of the gods. The text claims that Cyrus was chosen by Marduk and he was ordered to march against Babylon. Without a battle Cyrus entered Babylon and was happily greeted by the people of Babylon. The Cylinder account records that Cyrus daily worshipped Marduk and that Cyrus did not allow any of his troops to terrorize the people of Babylon. The text claims that Cyrus strove to have peace with the people of Babylon and returned various gods, which Nabonidus had brought into Babylon, to their rightful cities.⁴⁹

This description of events does not match the later claims of the Greek historian Herodotus. He says that Cyrus marched against Babylon in the spring, causing the Babylonian army to withdraw within the defenses of the city walls.⁵⁰ Cyrus placed a portion of his army at the point where the river entered and left the city and ordered the army to march into Babylon through the bed of the stream as soon as the water receded. He then withdrew a portion of his army and turned the Euphrates River in another direction by constructing a canal. Then the river in Babylon sank to such an extent that the natural bed of the stream became fordable,⁵¹ so the Persian soldiers waiting by the river side went through the stream and entered Babylon. Owing to the vast size of the city, the inhabitants of the central parts of the city of Babylon were not aware of a problem until a large part of the town was under Persian control.⁵² Nothing is said about destroying the city, its walls, its temples, or taking its gods into captivity. Neither the Greek account nor the Persian description of the occupation of Babylon in 539 BC conform closely to the account of the destruction of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47.⁵³

7. *The conquest of Babylon by Darius around 520 BC.* The Greek text of Herodotus describes Darius besieging Babylon for over a year and a half. Finally a man named Zopyrus cuts off his nose and ears, shaves his head, and scourges himself. Then he surrenders to the Babylonians inside the city and gains their trust by blaming Darius for his bloodied condition. He then asks for an army to defeat Darius's forces, but this is all part of a plot Zopyrus and Darius have agreed to beforehand. After two decisive victories by Zopyrus over the army of Darius, the Babylonians make Zopyrus captain of their armies, but at that point Zopyrus betrays them and opens the gates to allow Darius and his Persian troops into the city. Herodotus claims that Darius defeated the city, destroyed some walls and gates, and impaled about 3,000 rebels.⁵⁴ In contrast to this account, Edwin M. Yamauchi cast doubts on the idea that Darius destroyed any walls or gates because Darius continued to live in the city

going into captivity. On the first point see S. Zawadzki, "The End of the Neo-Babylonian Empire: New Data concerning Nabonidus's Order to Send the Gods to Babylon," *JNES* 71 (2012) 47–52.

⁴⁹ Pritchard, *ANET* 282–84, or M. Cogan, "Cyrus Cylinder," *COS* 2.124:314–316.

⁵⁰ *Herodotus* 1.190 (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921) 237.

⁵¹ *Herodotus* 1.191.

⁵² *Herodotus* 1.191, this was due to the fact that the people of Babylon were celebrating a joyful feast.

⁵³ P. R. Davies ("God of Cyrus, God of Israel: Some Religio-Historical Reflections on Isaiah 40–55" 207–25) does not think this event refers to Cyrus's conquest of Babylon; instead, he believes it refers to Xerxes' attack on Babylon in 482 BC.

⁵⁴ *Herodotus* 3.151–159, 185–195

and would want to be in a secure city. In addition, Herodotus himself does not find the city destroyed when he visits the city some years later.⁵⁵

The Behistun Inscription also describes this event by mentioning a certain Babylonian named Nidintu-Bêl who said: “I am Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Nabonidus,” thus causing the Babylonians to rebel in 522 BC. Darius marched against Nidintu-Bêl, but the waters of the Tigris River were impossible to cross. Later he claims that with Ahura-Mazda’s help, he and his troops crossed the Tigris and defeated Nidintu-Bêl’s army on the plains. Then Darius marched against the city of Babylon and claimed that by the grace of his god Ahura-Mazda, he took Babylon and killed Nidintu-Bêl.⁵⁶

Although there is a brief reference to the destruction of some walls and gates in the Greek account, neither account mentions the enslavement of the people, taking their gods into captivity, or burning their buildings with fire.⁵⁷ The meager evidence from these historical documents would lead to the conclusion that this conquest has some similarities to Isaiah 46–47 but is far from being fully parallel to the destruction of the fall of Babylon in Isaiah.

8. *Xerxes’ action at Babylon in 484 and 482 BC.* Relatively little information survived about Xerxes’ dealings with the city of Babylon, though with the aid of Megabyzus he did put down two revolts,⁵⁸ one led by Bel-shimanni and the other by Shamash-eriba. Herodotus claims that Darius was afraid to take the golden statue of Zeus (presumably the statue of idol Marduk) from the temple, but Xerxes did take it.⁵⁹ “However, Xerxes’s alleged sacrilege has repeatedly been contested,”⁶⁰ so it is hard to know how to evaluate this evidence. If Xerxes did move the gods, this would fit Isa 46:1–2, but there are few other factors that would confirm any connection with events in Isaiah 47.

The results of this examination of eight different times when Babylon was attacked suggests that the poetic imagery used to describe the fall of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47 is not consistent with or reflective of what happened in Babylon when Cyrus peacefully occupied the city of Babylon in 539 BC. The accounts of other attacks on Babylon indicate that sometimes the city was spared any serious destruction because it willingly surrendered to an attacker, while other conflicts primarily involved the changing of the person ruling the city, not the destruction of the city or the removal of its gods. It seems that Sennacherib’s devastation of Babylon in 689 BC is the one account that comes closest to matching the bold images of de-

⁵⁵ Herodotus, *Histories* 1.178–200. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 173.

⁵⁶ <http://www.livius.org/be-bm/behistun/behistun03.html>. Column 1.16–20.

⁵⁷ R. Albertz, “Darius in Place of Cyrus” 371–83. His arguments for identifying this conquest as the fulfillment of Isaiah 46–47 (1) are largely circumstantial (Darius helped build the Hebrew temple); (2) are based on his hypothetical date for the redaction of these chapters of Isaiah in 520 BC (the time of Darius); and (3) rest on his identification of the one whom God will arouse in righteousness (45:13) as Darius (not Cyrus). These points have persuaded few.

⁵⁸ Herodotus, *Histories* 7.4.

⁵⁹ Herodotus, *Histories* 1.183.

⁶⁰ H. Schaudig, “Bêl Bows, Nabû Stoops!” 557–72 (esp. 570).

struction found in Isaiah 46–47, although two other conquests have a few similarities to Isaiah 46–47.

If this conclusion is accepted, it raises a further question: Why was this prophecy about the fall of Babylon in 689 BC placed at this location in Isaiah 40–55? Or to put it in another way, how does the placement of Isaiah 46–47 in this location impact the theological arguments the author is making in this part of the book?

III. THE PLACEMENT OF ISAIAH 46–47 IN ISAIAH 40–55

There must be some reason for placing this description of the fall of Babylon in this location rather than in Isaiah 13–23 with the other oracles against the nations. One would assume that these chapters were put here because Isaiah 46–47 contributes to the purpose or the theological message of Isaiah 40–55 in some important way. Hypothetically, the prophecy in Isaiah 46–47 could be related to: (1) the preceding prophecy concerning Cyrus's conquest of many nations and his plan to rebuild Jerusalem in Isa 44:24–45:8; (2) some broader themes in Isaiah 40–48; or (3) to issues in the prophecies after Isaiah 46–47. By focusing attention on several of the themes in Isaiah 46–47, it is possible to propose several suggestions about the theological purpose of placing this prophecy here.

First, the placement of these chapters at this point significantly adds to the contrast between the powerlessness of the impotent idol gods and the vastly superior power of the Hebrew God, a key theological emphasis throughout Isaiah 40–48. This concept is addressed in Isa 46:1–9 when the text points to a radical contrast between the gods of Babylon and Israel's God. The two chief Babylonian gods, Bel and Nebo, will be "carried" away in shame into exile as a burden because they will not be able to defend the city of Babylon from its enemies.⁶¹ In addition, in 45:20 the people will "carry about their wooden idols, and pray to a god who cannot save" and this theme is picked up again in 46:7 where the prophet claims that after a man-made god is crafted, the people "lift it upon their shoulders and carry it," they call on the idol god to save them, but the idol will not answer a word or save them. In sharp contrast to this picture of the impotent Babylonian idol gods is the totally different presentation of the Hebrew God who powerfully "carried from birth ... and will carry ... and will deliver" (46:3–4) the people of Israel year after year. Isaiah 46:5–13 extols the glory of the incomparable Hebrew God as he is contrasted with the craftsmen who lavished their man-made idols with gold and silver to make them look good (46:6). Yahweh is a God and there is no other god like him and no god equal to him (48:8–9), for he makes plans according to his purposes, speaks those plans so they are known, and then carries them out (46:10–11), even the salvation of Zion (46:13).

⁶¹ Paul, *Isaiah 40–66* 274–77 believes 46:1–2 refers to "the removal of the city's idols on the eve of an invasion so as to prevent them from falling into the hands of the pillaging conquerors, who often would carry off the idols from their temples and display them in their native lands." We interpret 46:1–2 to refer to the pillaging conquerors carrying off these idols.

These ideas support and supplement the broad theme of the powerlessness of the idol gods that is mentioned earlier in Isa 40:11–31. The Hebrew God can measure the waters on the earth in the palm of his hand and mark off the width of the heavens by stretching out the fingers of his hand. The nations are nothing to him, and the inhabitants of the earth are like grasshoppers. He is the one who stretches out the heaven like a curtain and who controls, names, and keeps track of all the stars in the heavens (40:22, 26). Can one actually compare this glorious exalted God to a man-made idol of wood covered with gold and silver (40:18–20)? In the disputation in 41:21–24, God challenges the idols to prove that they have divine power by declaring both what has happened in the past and what will happen in the distant future, but these idol gods are not able to do either of these things. Consequently, this disputation concludes that these gods amount to nothing and that it would be foolish to worship them. In contrast, God has knowledge about everything that has happened in the past (the former things) and is able to reveal his plans for the future (41:25–26). Later in Isa 44:6–20 the prophet adds another long oracle which contrasts Israel’s King and Redeemer, the first and the last, the only one who deserves the title “God the Rock” (44:6–8), with the impotence of idols made from a tree that a man plants. Some years later when the tree has grown large these foolish people will cut down this tree and burn the wood from one part of this tree in order to keep themselves warm and cook food. Then they take another section of that same tree and worship that piece of wood as if it is a powerful god (44:9–17). This makes no sense and demonstrates that these people are deceived and do not understand the powerlessness of their graven images (44:18–20). Isaiah 45:16–17 also contrasts the shame that will come on those who trust in idols with the lack of shame that will come on those who trust in God’s everlasting salvation, for he is the Maker of heaven and earth, the Holy One of Israel (45:9–12).

This contrast between the Hebrew God and the man-made gods is further enhanced by the question, “To whom will you liken me, and make me equal and compare me?” (46:5) which picks up the similar question that is used in Isa 40:18, 25. The fact that the idols are man-made objects of gold and silver that cannot move, answer, or save anyone (46:6–7), points to the central theme that these idol gods are just pieces of lifeless wood and completely powerless (Isa 40:19; 41:7, 22–26; 44:12–17; 45:20). Their impotence is contrasted with Israel’s powerful God who accomplished many impressive “former things” by declaring things to his people before they happen, and by successfully accomplishing his purposes (46:8–13; cf. 14:24–25; 37:26; 41:26; 45:5, 21).⁶² The inclusion of several verses on the superiority of Israel’s God in 46:5–13, right in the midst of these two chapters on the fall of Babylon, brings attention to one of the primary purposes for placing Isaiah 46–47 here. The prophet argues God’s case that “I am God, and there is no other” and he proves this by showing that the Babylonian gods have no divine power; thus, God will destroy Babylon’s claim that “I am and there is no one be-

⁶² C. A. Franke, “The Function of the Satiric Lament over Babylon in Second Isaiah (XLVII),” *VT* 41 (1991) 408–18 finds these chapters closely connected to the anti-idolatry chapters in 40–45.

sides me” (47:8). These interconnections with the theme of the superiority of Israel’s God over all the man-made idols illustrates the relationship Isaiah 46–47 has with what precedes in 40–45. But this prophecy against Babylon in Isaiah 46–47 advances and narrows the earlier arguments against all idols of wood by specifying that the two most powerful Babylonian gods Bel (Marduk) and Nebo are no stronger than any of the other powerless man-made idols of wood and gold. They will not be able to save Babylon or even themselves from the power of an enemy army that will destroy Babylon.

A second important way that Isaiah 46–47 contributes to the theological message of 40–55 is by initiating a significant theological contrast between the terrible destruction that will fall on the strong city of Babylon and the astonishing rise of Zion, God’s chosen people. John Goldingay recognizes that “the two negatives, the fall of Bel and Nebo and Babylon itself ... are necessary preludes to the two positives that are the prophet’s more intrinsic concerns, the exaltation and restoration of Zion.”⁶³ C. Seitz concludes that the negative presentation of the Daughter of Babylon serves as a foil to introduce a positive picture of salvation for the Daughter of Zion in the following chapters.⁶⁴ C. Franke claims that, “It is in ch xlvi that the theme of the downtrodden Israel is replaced by the prophecy of downtrodden Babylon.”⁶⁵ Yes, Jerusalem was attacked (41:8–15) and plunder was taken because of God’s wrath on his sinful people (42:22–25), but this would not be the end of God’s plans for his people. In contrast to the past weakness of sinful and blind Jerusalem, the author introduces God’s positive plans for the future salvation and restoration of Zion in 46:13. God promises that his salvation will not be delayed because he plans to grant “salvation in Zion and my glory for Israel” (46:13). Franke demonstrates that God’s destructive ways of dealing with the failing Virgin Daughter of Babylon (47:1) emphatically contrast with his gracious reversal of the destiny for the rising Virgin Daughter of Zion.⁶⁶ R. Lack recognizes a connection between the defeat of Babylon in Isaiah 47 and the rise of Jerusalem in Isaiah 54,⁶⁷ and M. E. Biddle finds literary connections between the negative things the text says about Babylon in Isaiah 47 and the positive things later texts say about Jerusalem (49:14–26; 51:17–52:10; 54:1–17; and also 57:6–13).⁶⁸ These contrasting connections are evident in the following examples. (1) The personified Daughter Baby-

⁶³ Goldingay, *Message of Isaiah 40–55* 301.

⁶⁴ C. Seitz, “Isaiah 40–66,” *NIB* 6 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 410.

⁶⁵ C. A. Franke, “The Function of the Satiric Lament over Babylon in Second Isaiah (XLVII)” 411.

⁶⁶ C. A. Franke, “Reversals of Fortune in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the Babylon Oracle in the Book of Isaiah,” in *New Visions of Isaiah* 104–23. Goldingay (*The Message of Isaiah 40–55* 301) believes these chapters may serve as a complement to 44:24–45:25 (Cyrus’s defeat of the surrounding nations) because the victory of Cyrus and the defeat of Babylon would be necessary preludes to the later exaltation and restoration of Zion in the following chapters. Another recent study of the concept of Daughter Zion is *Daughter Zion: Her Portrait, Her Response* (ed. M. Boda, C. Dempsey, L. Fleisher; Atlanta: SBL, 2012) where this image is analyzed from its use in several biblical books.

⁶⁷ R. Lack, *La symbolique du livre d’Isaïe: Essai sur l’image littéraire comme élément de structuration* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1973) 111.

⁶⁸ M. E. Biddle, “Lady Zion’s Alter Egos: Isaiah 47:1–15 and 57:6–13 as Structural Counterparts,” in *New Visions of Isaiah* 124–39. He finds some of these themes in Isaiah 57:6–13; 60; 62; and 66:6–13.

lon will come down from her throne and in humiliation sit in the dust (47:1), but the personified Daughter of Jerusalem will shake off the dirt and rise up from the dust (52:2). (2) Initially, Judah was weak, forsaken, and hopeless without any children (Isa 49:14, 20), while Babylon was strong and powerful with many citizens, but soon Babylon will be destroyed and desolate without children (47:8–9) while Zion will become strong and inhabited by so many people there will not be room for them all (Isa 49:20–21; 54:1–3). (3) God will be Zion’s Savior (46:13) and Redeemer (47:4), but none of the religious officials or gods of Babylon will be able to save Babylon or deliver it from utter destruction (47:12–14). (4) Lady Babylon arrogantly responded to God’s plans to destroy her with claims that “I am and there is no one beside me” (47:7, 10), but Zion humbly responds with astonishment at God’s plans to restore her (49:21) and believes the claims of the Hebrew God who said “I am God, and there is no other, I am God and there is no one like me.” (46:9). Similar contrasts are evident when comparing God’s plans for the destruction of Babylon in Isaiah 47 with God’s comfort to Zion, for he promises to make Zion like the Garden of Eden, and his plan is to fill Zion with joyful people (chaps. 51–52; 54). Zion will arise (51:17; 52:2), God’s salvation will go forth to Zion (51:5–8), and many ransomed children will return to Zion (51:11). In Isaiah 52, God will reign in the joyful city of Zion over his redeemed people and 54:1–5 pictures the joy and shouting of those who will return to God their Redeemer. The placement of Isaiah 46–47 at this point in 40–55 naturally leads to a major change in the conversation from describing the destroyed Babylon in chapters 46–47 to emphasizing God’s salvation of his people and Zion’s glorious future in Isaiah 49–55. It seems safe to conclude, therefore, that this prophecy about the fall of Babylon had something of a pivotal function in describing the changing destiny of Babylon from being a great power to becoming a powerless nation. This picture of Babylon’s devastation prepares the reader to believe God’s promises about the glorious destiny of Zion because of God’s great work of salvation (Isaiah 49–55).

A third reason for placing Isaiah 46–47 here is that it is needed to support the prophet’s arguments at this point in the book. The author of Isaiah 40–55 frequently uses an event (in the past or in the future) to support or argue for the legitimacy of a theological conclusion he is defending. On some occasions this common method of argumentation in the book of Isaiah refers to important people, places, or events (creation in 42:5; 44:24; 45:7, 12; the Garden of Eden in 51:3; the flood in the time of Noah in 54:9; Abraham in 41:8; 51:2; 63:16; some aspect of the exodus or wilderness wanderings in 43:16–17; 48:21; 51:10; 52:12; the Davidic covenant in 55:3; a war in 41:11–12; a rising conqueror in 41:2, 25; the future building of Jerusalem by Cyrus in 44:26–28)⁶⁹ that legitimate or support the theological point the author is making.

⁶⁹ R. E. Watts (“Echoes from the Past: Israel’s Ancient Traditions and the Destiny of the Nations in Isaiah 40–55,” *JOT* 28 [2004] 481–508) says Isaiah’s vision of the future is “informed and shaped by earlier traditions.”

For example, J. L. Koole takes 42:22–25 to be a description of the events surrounding the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 587 BC, which would fit the talk of plunder and war in 42:22–25.⁷⁰ Although these verses do refer to a war, it seems almost impossible to nail this description down to the war in 587 BC based on these general details, since almost all wars have spoils, plunder, prisoners, fierce battle, and destruction. Nevertheless, the theological and rhetorical point of referring to this historical event (the war) is to legitimate the theological idea that God has the power and ability to redeem his people from a terrible military situation. God's blind servants did not want to listen or believe his words (42:18–20, 24), so God planned to pour out his wrath on his servants in the form of this war (42:25) in order to show them his power and proclaim his divine nature when he defeats their enemy (41:11–12).⁷¹ God's historical action in this event is intended to produce a strong theological conviction when the people consider what God promises to do for them in the future.

If a similar method of argumentation based on past events is followed in Isaiah 46–47, the description of the fall of Babylon can be seen as another divine action in history that would support or legitimate the theological claims the author is making in this passage. The Babylonians worshipped useless gods of wood, gold, and silver and proudly thought that they were strong enough to determine their own fate. They assumed that their gods and the abilities of their many religious officials would enable them to avoid any future military disasters (47:11–14). This was a false belief, for Zion's God would use his great power to bring his destructive wrath on Babylon (47:3–6). Through these marvelous deeds God demonstrates to Babylon and the Daughter of Zion that he is the all-powerful God that people can trust. Thus this reference to the destruction of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47, like most of the other references to historical events, probably has a similar purpose of legitimating the main theological point the author was defending. The author supports his argument by pointing to God's divine nature based on his past or future acts in history.

Fourth, the theological implications of this devastating prophecy against Babylon may go even deeper, for it may also serve as a proof of the dependability of God's prophecy about Koresh/Cyrus in 44:24–45:8. If some Israelite people were quarreling with God (45:9), had questions about what God was doing (45:10), and were doubtful about the fulfillment of God's promises (45:12–12), this prophecy about God's plans for Babylon would remind those individuals that God does what he says he will do and he completes his plans as he promises. Readers of this prophecy against Babylon (Isaiah 46–47) after 689 BC would know that this prophecy against Babylon was already fulfilled when the great Assyrian king Sennacherib defeated and totally destroyed Babylon. Sennacherib was the same powerful Assyri-

⁷⁰ Koole, *Isaiah III*, vol. 1: *Isaiah 40–48* 275. Blenkinsopp (*Isaiah 40–55* 219) says that “the fury of the Babylonian onslaught was ignited and fueled by the anger of Yahweh against his people.”

⁷¹ This interpretation of this prophecy was based on the conclusion that the war in 41:10–12 was the same war that was mentioned in 42:22–25. Judah was attacked in 41:10–11, but their enemy will be defeated (41:11–12).

an king who was not able to conquer Jerusalem in 701 BC because of God's miraculous intervention when his angel struck down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (Isaiah 36–37). The point of this line of thinking at this location would be: if God can predict and fulfill his prophecies about the failures of Sennacherib and the Assyrian army at Jerusalem (Isa 14:24–28; 30:31; 31:8–9; 37:21–29) and if he can predict and fulfill his prophecies concerning Sennacherib's victory over Babylon (Isaiah 46–47), then by implication one should have no doubts about God's ability to fulfill his predictions about the rebuilding of Jerusalem by Koresh/Cyrus in Isa 44:24–45:7. The idea that another great king would arise, defeat many nations, and help rebuild Jerusalem may have seemed strange to some Israelites, but God's earlier control of the destiny of Sennacherib at Jerusalem (701 BC) and at Babylon (689 BC) would justify the idea that God is able to accomplish his will through his direction of a foreign king, even one who does not know God (45:4). Thus it is possible that the prophecy about the devastation of Babylon and its fulfillment in 689 BC serves as proof that God can successfully accomplish his future plans for Jerusalem through a foreign king like Koresh/Cyrus.

Finally, the placement of Isaiah 46–47 after Isaiah 45 enhances the emphasis on certain themes in Isaiah 45. B. Childs believes that chapters 46–47 seem “consciously to repeat themes and formulae from chapter 45,”⁷² and this applies even to the material in 44:24–28. For example, 44:25 claims that the predictions of those who interpret omens, the diviners' signs of what will happen in the future, and the knowledge of the wise men will fail. These failures are similar to the theme that the sorcerers, astrologers, and those who cast spells in Babylon will not profit or protect the Babylonians in the day of their destruction (47:12–13). Another strong connection between Isaiah 46 and its context in 45 is the announcement that “I am the LORD and there is no other; besides Me there is no God” which echoes these thoughts in 45:6, 14, 21; 46:9; 47:8, 10b (sometimes by the Daughter of Babylon). S. Paul identifies several verbal connections (he lists themes, words, and phrases) that are repeated in both 45 and 46.⁷³ Chapter 45 assures the reader that the makers of idols will be humiliated (45:16) because these idols cannot save anyone (45:20b) and that is just what happens in Babylon (46:1–2, 6–7). The results of God's action in both chapters is an explicit demonstration of God's power and justice (45:21, 24, 25; 46:12, 13). These examples illustrate how the author of this section purposely integrated various aspects of Isaiah 45 into the surrounding context of Isaiah 46–47 to draw out these significant contrasts and to emphasize his theological message.

IV. CONCLUSION

By comparing Isaiah 46–47 to various attacks on Babylon, it was concluded that Cyrus's peaceful occupation of Babylon in 539 BC did not fit the description

⁷² B. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 350, 358.

⁷³ In *Isaiah 40–66* 275–76, he highlights examples such as “call” in 45:3, 4; 46:11; “save/salvation/Savior” in 45:15, 17, 20, 21, 22; 46:7, 13; “Jacob” in 45:19 and 46:3; and “lift up/carry” in 45:20; 46:2, 3, 4, 7.

of the fall of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47, but that Sennacherib’s complete destruction of Babylon in 689 BC is closely aligned with the poetic description of the fall of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47. The author’s purpose for placing this prophecy at this location in Isaiah 40–55 was to support the theological arguments in other similar messages in Isaiah 40–55. God is all-powerful and the idols are powerless. In case after case, the author gives reasons to justify his pronouncements based on God’s past acts in history, so his destruction of Babylon is another example of his powerful control of history. But in the immediate context God promised to rebuild Jerusalem through Koresh/Cyrus (44:24–45:7), but what arguments could be brought forward to legitimate the truthfulness of the prophecy that a king would conquer many nations and rebuild Jerusalem (Isa 44:24–45:8)? A strong argument for readers would be to recall how God predicted the fall of Babylon (Isaiah 46–47) and had actually fulfilled his plan. The devastating destruction of Babylon in 689 BC would function as proof that God controls the destiny of that pagan nation. This supports the claim that Yahweh alone is God (not Babylon or Bel or Nebo), that God will rebuild Jerusalem (44:26–28), and that God’s salvation will cause Zion to arise from the dust (46:13; 52:2), possess Jerusalem, and have many children (54:1–3).