

ISAIAH

ISAIAH 46:1-4, BABYLON'S IDOLS; ISRAEL'S SALVATION, PART 1

In this chapter, worthless Babylonian idols, made of wood and stone, that cannot save anyone or anything, are contrasted with the greatness of the Creator God who will bring about the salvation of Israel. Israel's salvation is evident throughout history in terms of the believing remnant of Israelites, that is, individuals, but it will be fully realized when national Israel is saved and both the nation and the believing remnant will be saved to enjoy the fulfillment of the unconditional covenants in the land of Israel that God will reestablish. Israel's enemies will be vanquished and all of the covenant promises and blessings will be realized at that time.

I discovered what I think is an excellent description of idolatry, the human mindset that leads to idolatry, and the consequences that flow from it. “[O]nce the all-important distinction between Creator and creation is blurred, the end is entirely predictable: creation becomes deified; purpose cannot be defined; existence is meaningless; and transformation is impossible. Make God human, and human God, and all is lost” [[John N. Oswalt, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 229].

Chapter 45 dealt with rebellious Israelites, which is, of course, a situation that exists on a very wide scale with Gentiles as well, and chapter 46 also deals with rebellious Israelites. In the end, however, God's providential care for Israel is expressed and their salvation is assured. God has a plan and a purpose for Israel that the Bible says over and over and over cannot be thwarted or prevented. He promised and He will deliver. These chapters also deal with the fact that idols are worthless and there is only one Creator God—who is no wooden idol.

The two gods mentioned here are Bel and Nebo, both of which were Babylonian deities. They seem to represent the totality of Babylonian religion. The state was certainly intimately involved with them. However, we should not think that these particular pagan gods are limited to Babylon because they assume other names in other times, places, and cultures. The name changes, but the god the name represents appears to be the same across the spectrum of pagan nations and cultures. These two gods were synonymous with the Babylonian pagan religious system.

Bel, בֵּל, also known as Enlil and later as Marduk who was called Merodach by the Israelites, is the Babylonian name for the Canaanite god Baal. “As a sun-god his festival was celebrated in the spring at the beginning of the year, since the sun's rays were then most potent in reviving nature” [Merrill F. Unger, s.v. “Bel” *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, ed. R. K. Harrison, 486]. Marduk was considered to be the god of creation. Belshazzar's name was derived from this god.

Herodotus described the Babylonian temple to Bel as a huge, magnificent building. “The temple is a square building, two furlongs each way with bronze gates, which was still in existence in my time. It has a solid central tower one furlong square, with a second

erected on top of it, then a third, and so on up to eight... On the summit stands a great temple... In the temple there is a second shrine lower down in which there is a great sitting figure of Bel, all of gold on a golden throne, supported on a base of gold, with a golden table standing beside it. I was told by the Chaldeans that to make all this, more than twenty-two tons of gold were used. Outside the temple is a gold altar... The golden altar is reserved for sucklings only" [Herodotus, quoted by Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah: A Commentary*, 368].

Nebo, נְבוֹ, also known as Nabu (Accadian language), is related to the Hebrew נְבִיא which is the word for prophet. Nebo was the son of Marduk and he operated as the spokesman of the gods. In other pagan systems, he was called Mercury (Latin) and Hermes (Greek, cf. Acts 14:12). There was a temple dedicated to him in Borshippa which is south of Babylon. He was the god of interpretation, wisdom, writing and literature, and learning. The pagan intellectuals were smitten with this particular god. In the Babylonian New Year's Festival, Nebo and Bel were celebrated together in the parades. Together, the father son god duo wrote the "Tables (or Tablets) of Destiny" for the city state in the upcoming year. The Babylonian king's names Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar, and Nabonidus are all derived from Nebo. This suggests that the ruling class of Babylon favored the god Nebo. It is somewhat ironic that these two gods supposedly prophesied the future of Babylon, but their future was controlled by the one true God of Israel.

Isaiah 46:1–2 ¹Bel [בֵּל] has bowed down [כָּרַעַ], Nebo [נְבוֹ] stoops over [קָרַסַ]; Their images [עֲצָבִים] are consigned to the beasts and the cattle. The things that you carry are burdensome [עֲמָסָ], A load for the weary beast. ²They stooped over, they have bowed down together; They could not rescue [מָלַטַ] the burden, But have themselves [נָפְטַ] gone into captivity.

This is a picture of the destruction of Babylon's gods which happened when the nation was conquered at the hands of Cyrus and his Medo-Persian Army, and it will happen for the final time at the end of the Tribulation, although the gods of that time will not necessarily be Bel and Nebo, and they will be even more sinister and evil. Remember, the fact of Cyrus and the Medo-Persian Army conquering Babylon was not known at the time of the prophecy. This could also be referring to the defeat of Babylon in general terms, because the city-state was defeated a number of times in ancient history as various powers raged across that part of the world. Because it is so ambiguous when revealed, we cannot discount the eschatological significance of it, because conquering Babylon by Cyrus was a type of the final liquidation of the Babylonian system at the end which will be a worldwide system of evil. Due to the way it is revealed, we can't get dogmatic about exactly which conquest is in view.

Smith articulated the dangers about getting too specific with a prophecy that is not specifically identifying the agents involved. We know Babylon and Israel are the subject nations, but specifics beyond that are scant. We also know that Cyrus was identified as the Lord's anointed one although that didn't mean anything to the people at the time. "Although every piece of information is helpful, two major problems have developed because many interpreters have read later fulfillments into these prophecies. These are the problems of (a) the historicization of the prophecy and (b) the falsification of the prophecy. When a text is treated as fulfilled history, unidentified people are identified by name,

general information about what will happen is applied to specific events, and the non-temporal generalities about the future are focused on specific date.... [H[e [Goldingay] simply warns against treating broad prophetic prediction as a completed historical account in which everything is spelled out in detail exactly as it happened. Interpreters should not turn prophecy into history" [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 284 also citing J. Goldingay, *Message of Isaiah, 40-55*, 303].

Oswalt does not believe this is a specific prophecy. Instead, he believes it is presenting a general truth that gods fashioned from the creation need humans to make them and move them around; therefore, they are of no help when the situation requires divine assistance. Idols are carried around in honor during processions and other celebrations, but they are carted off in dishonor whenever they are defeated and taken into captivity. "Were mighty Bel and Nebo different from any of the other gods? No. Like them, Bel and Nebo were merely personalized forces of the creation, no more free than any other, without consistent purpose or direction, and thus unable to rise above anything that might be happening in the course of creation or historical events" [John N. Oswalt, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 229].

Young also thinks this is simply a generic prophecy concerning the fall of man and man's idolatry. At least Young has an eschatological outlook on the issue, which has much to commend it. "This passage, however, is not to be understood as a description of the fall of Babylon but as a figurative statement of the truth that the religion of the kingdom of man will come to a final end. Bel and Nebo were the chief representatives of that religion; and when, like Dagon in the temple at the time of Samuel, they had fallen down, that religion of hostility to God was also done away. The picture is that of the carting away of these images so that they will no longer be honored or seen" [Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: A Commentary*, vol. 3, 3:221].

While I agree that this prophecy is not naming names or specifying a time-frame, we cannot simply divorce the context in these chapters concerning Babylon and the fact that Cyrus is identified as God's anointed. Bel and Nebo do specifically identify Babylon. If this about the destruction of Babylon at some point in history, this isn't the first time in Isaiah that subject has been broached (cf. Is. 43:14). I have a hard time relegating these verses to being figurative speech. They are revealing a defeat of Babylon without specifically revealing the who, the how, and the when. These things have to have some bearing on the issue at hand while, at the same time, they must have some eschatological significance given the prominent role of Babylon at the end. I don't think we can simply say that these verses are presenting some well-known timeless truths and leave it at that.

What we certainly know from these Scriptures is that Israel was in rebellion against God which, in part, manifested itself in the worship of idols. We also know that at some point, Babylon is going to be conquered and the Israelites are going to experience salvation. Isaiah also confirms the truth that there is only one God, the Creator God, and all other so-called gods are worthless and they can do nothing god-like at all.

The pagan thought of the time was that a nation rose and fell with the fortunes of its gods. If Bel and Nebo were defeated in Babylon, then not only the religion but the nation was

destroyed. It was a big deal when another nation came into a country and was able to cart off the images of its gods which was the standard operating procedure at the time. For example, capturing the Israelite's Ark of the Covenant was a major victory for the Philistines in 1 Samuel 4-5. That was such a shock that Eli the priest fell over and died when he received the news of the Ark's capture (1 Sam. 4:18).

Bowed down, כָּרַע, means to bow down, to bend one's knee with the sense of getting into a prostrate position as in submission, homage, humility, or grief among other things. In this context, it is the picture of a defeated god.

Stooped over, קָרַס, means to bend down, to stoop, to crouch, to bow oneself means to bend over, that is, to bend forward from the waist.

The reference to the beasts and the cattle refers to hauling the idols away by beasts of burden. History suggests that the Babylonians of Daniel's day had no fear of defeat, and therefore had no reason to remove their idols from the security of the city. They thought they had enough food stored to eliminate starvation as a threat, and that they had an army that was strong enough to withstand a siege and the attacks on the walls related to it. When the Medo-Persian Army entered the city, the Babylonians were having a banquet with no apparent concern of falling to the invading enemy army at that time (Dan. 5). Buksbazen suggests that "At the approach of the victorious Persians, the worshippers of these gods sought to save them by loading them on beasts of burden (camels and elephants) and on cattle (horses, asses, and oxen)" [Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah: A Commentary*, 368]. Other commentators suggest that there is no record of the Babylonians attempting to take their gods out of harm's way. While the citizens of the city of Babylon seemed to be unconcerned about the danger marching towards them, the Scripture certainly raises the possibility, although probably quite remote, that there was an attempt to remove Babylonian gods from danger. It is probably more likely that the outlying cities of Babylon, where they were more or less defenseless against the invaders, hauled their idols on beasts of burden into the city of Babylon where there was no concern about defeat and the subsequent loss of their gods.

There is a historical Babylonian precedent for removing the images of the gods from danger when threatened with an invasion. "In 703 BC when Sennacherib attacked Babylon, Merodach-Baladan organized just such an evacuation of the 'gods.'" [J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary*, 294]. That was when Babylon was much weaker as a city-state, and the difference is that during the Medo-Persian invasion, the then much stronger Babylonians saw no reason to flee the city.

Whether the Babylonians thought they could be defeated or not is immaterial; they were going to be defeated by God's anointed one, Cyrus. Whether or not this pericope actually pertains to Cyrus, the Babylonian gods could not save anyone and when they were really needed, whatever the situation, they were helplessly hauled away on beasts of burden like some garbage. Therefore, this Scripture could be referring to the conquering Medo-Persian Army hauling the conquered idols away from Babylon. I'm reluctant to say that they were not hauled off at all, in any way, for any reason, since this Scripture strongly suggests they were, but it may probably be understood as removing them from harm's

way or their removal by a conquering army, or both. If both, they may have been carried into the city for safe-keeping and then hauled away by the conquering army.

One other view suggests that this Scripture pictures the burden laid on the beasts of burden during the New Year's processions the Babylonians held each year. I think the context argues against that view, because it seems to present more of an image of defeat rather than that of the joy of a community gathering to celebrate the coming of a new year. Bowing and stooping suggest the presence of someone superior to them and more powerful such as the general and his army that defeated and captured them.

The idols are burdensome, *סמך*, which means a load or a burden referring to lifting up objects onto a transport person, animal, or vehicle to make linear movement implying the movement will take a relatively high amount of effort compared to not having the weight to transport. The burden here is the gods themselves, and they are a heavy load that taxes the animal carrying the load. These gods are a burden to the animals carrying them, but in contrast, God is a God who gives strength to the weary and power to those who lack might (Is. 40:29). One of the points to be made here is that if you have to carry the gods, then they are not gods at all; instead, they are merely man fashioned hunks of natural materials deified by the fallen mind of mankind.

“His main point is that these beautiful images, so recently paraded with reverent pomp, are now a matter for oxcarts and donkeys. What a decline—how the mighty gods are humiliated and ashamed. But one wonders if the prophet is not also suggesting that the idols are now seen for what they really are: simply part of creation, even human creation; not better and no more significant, indeed nothing other, than the patient beasts of burden that must carry them” [John N. Oswalt, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 228].

The word “together” in verse 2 probably suggests that the people of Babylon, together with their gods, are bowing and stooping before someone more powerful.

Rescue, *קלט*, means to save someone, to rescue, or to deliver referring to delivering one from danger and so cause one to be safe resulting in the sense of escaping or successfully running away from or avoiding confinement or danger. The people could not rescue the burden which also suggests the presence of a more powerful entity that was able to overcome both the people and the gods. Both entities have therefore been taken captive.

These two verses identify a difference between the idol itself which is made of lifeless metal or wood, and the beings the idol represents identified with the word “themselves.” The Hebrew word used here is *נפש*, which means breath, soul, or living being. It refers to the part of a person, the inner self, (or animal) that thinks, feels, wills, and desires. The beings that are the force behind the idol itself are malevolent, evil beings, and while they are spiritually dead, they are nevertheless living beings. Keil and Delitzsch have an incorrect view of the meaning here. “... they are going into captivity, even ‘their ownself,’ since the self or personality of the beingless beings consists of nothing more than the wood and metal of which their images are composed” [C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Isaiah, vol. 7*, 7:452]. This is incorrect because these idols

do represent a living being, albeit, an evil being. They are not simply wood and stone in terms of who and what they represent. By suggesting that they are "beingless beings," the dark forces they represent are somewhat masked and minimized.

Image, *עִצָּב*, means an image or images of idols, or a false god. It has the sense of a pagan and material effigy that is worshiped as a representation or in lieu of a deity. It is a formed and fashioned object believed by its maker to contain or represent a deity, and so an object of worship and reverence. The image is separate from the being it represents.

The reflexive pronoun [themselves] is first in the clause which is a point of special emphasis in this verse. Isaiah is referring to the soul which refers to the dark being, the essential nature, that is the unseen force the image represents. "Into captivity" is also emphasized. This is saying that their individual selves are going into captivity. A literal rendering is, "They themselves in the captivity go." That means the souls of these dark, living beings are being taken into captivity which suggests an eschatological meaning when the demonic forces are locked up at the end of the Tribulation until their final judgment.

Smith suggested that these verses cannot be referring to Cyrus and his defeat of Babylon because Cyrus was a worshiper of Marduk and he did not replace that god with another pagan Persian god once he became the ruler of Babylon [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, Isaiah 40-66*, 288]. That's true and, in my mind, that makes the case that this has an eschatological meaning to it stronger. Perhaps this is not about Cyrus at all, as most commentators assume, and it is eschatological in nature. Perhaps it is not simply referring to some defeat in time that Babylon experienced in what is now the ancient past. In the sense that Bel and Nebo represent the false religion of Satan's world system as it has existed since the Fall, and particularly in Babylon of old which is a type of end times Babylon future, false gods like them also represent the religious system of end times Babylon which will have a one-world, pagan, satanic religion of some sort. Whether the world worships the antichrist and Satan in unison led by antichrist and Satan, or whether the world's religions co-exist within some sort of amalgamated, ecumenical framework with antichrist worshiped as the grand pooh-bah of all, it does not matter. There will be some sort of one-world religious system at the end, pagan in nature, worshipping antichrist and Satan, that will perish in defeat at the hands of Christ Jesus. Bel and Nebo and all they represent as false gods in Satan's world system will only be finally destroyed at that time. The last verse of the chapter concerns Zion's salvation which also has eschatological meaning. I think this Scripture has more of an eschatological meaning to it than most people give it credit for having.

Idols have to be carried around by people, but God's people are carried along by Him. He does not get burdened down by carrying His people as do the pagans and their beasts of burden that carry the lifeless pagan idols made of heavy wood and stone. Furthermore, God has been constantly carrying the nation whether they realized it or not. The nation never has to carry God as the pagans have to carry their idols wherever they want them to be. Israel never tells God where He has to be; He tells them where they will be. Another interesting contrast here is between the destinies of idols and Israel. Where pagans carry around idols, the end is destruction. The end result of Israel's safe passage under the care of God is deliverance.

Isaiah 46:3–4 ³“Listen [שמע] to Me, O house [בית] of Jacob, And all the remnant of the house of Israel, You who have been borne [עמס] by Me from birth And have been carried [נשא] from the womb; ⁴Even to your old age [זקנה] I will be the same, And even to your graying years [שיבה] I will bear [סבל] you! I have done *it*, and I will carry you; And I will bear you and I will deliver you.

This verse represents the entire history of Israel which also serves to make it eschatological in nature. The timeline moves from conception to birth to adulthood to old age and to deliverance. Conception possibly relates to the call of Abraham and birth relates to the formation of the nation in Egypt and the exodus out of it. Deliverance refers to the nation's salvation and subsequent entrance into the Messianic Kingdom.

Of course, this could also characterize individual lifespans, and many theologians limit it to that meaning involving the individual believers who make up the remnant, but because the nation and the remnant as a collective group are the subject, my interpretation is that God is referring to the nation and her history. All along the way, the Lord will be with them carrying them which implies care, sustenance, and protection, whether or not the nation is faithful or in rebellion, as they are delivered to the time and place that has been their destiny from the beginning. National Israel has yet to realize the deliverance promised here, but individual Jews who come to faith have been saved throughout the nation's history. Those are two different issues.

There is a differentiation here between the nation as a whole and the remnant. Israel the nation consists of believers, the remnant, and unbelievers. Some theologians claim that this command is limited to the remnant, but that is not possible. God is speaking to the nation which includes the believing remnant, but which also includes those Israelites who are unbelievers. God has carried both groups along throughout the nation's history. It is not until the end of the Tribulation that the unbelievers will be removed from the nation as depicted in the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt. 13:24-30). Only believers will enter the Messianic Kingdom.

God is telling the Israelites something very important here that should be very comforting to them, and He wants them to listen. He is going to be with them throughout their history as a nation. However, the sad fact is that the Israelites tend not to believe that God is carrying them along and caring for them. If they really understood the promises contained in the Scriptures of blessing and cursing, they would know exactly what is going on with them throughout history, but they don't get it yet. They think that the fact that they have had to undergo expulsion from the land, worldwide dispersion and persecution is a sign that God is not carrying them along. That is not true. They are, in fact, undergoing the process of divine temporal discipline while, at the same, being supernaturally preserved as a nation. They are continually under the protection of God who has made promises to Israel by means of the unconditional covenants that He must and will fulfill.

Listen is an imperative verb, a command from God, but listening to God seems to be one thing the Israelites have not been very good at doing throughout their history. It is not just anyone to whom they are supposed to be listening, it is God Himself to whom they are supposed to be listening. Listen, שמע, means to hear or to be heard, to listen, to pay close

attention to, but it also has elements of understanding and obedience. It has the sense of heeding by listening, hearing, or paying close attention to and usually responding in conformity to the message heard. The concept of listening is particularly pertinent when it is God doing the talking.

Jacob and Israel are linked together once again as the identifying name for the nation. This term should bring to their minds the incredible history of national Israel from supernatural creation to supernatural preservation as a people group. It is a reminder that the nation is the heritage of that ancestor originally named Jacob and renamed Israel. House, *בַּיִת*, is a metaphor using a house as a representation of all the people of a nation, tribe, clan, or other group referred to generally and collectively. The entire nation is the subject of the command to listen.

Some theologians want to limit "house of Jacob" and "house of Israel" to being a reference to Judah since the Northern Kingdom, Israel, had already gone into captivity. That is an unnecessary assumption to make. Many of the people in the north had fled the idolatry of Israel for the Temple worship in Judah which means the tribes of the Northern Kingdom never entirely disappeared. "Israel" and "Jacob" appear together 179 times in 80 verses in the Old Testament. The two names together always seem to refer to Israel as a national entity. If they mean only Judah here, I think that would be the only verse where that is the meaning which is highly unlikely.

Some theologians also want to equate "house" with the remnant, but that is not correct either. The remnant, as it used in the Bible and pertains to Jewish people, is always a reference to the believing Jews alive at any one time in history. "The remnant is that part of Israel that believes" [Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, 777]. The remnant is always a subset of the Israelite population which primarily consists of unbelievers, but always has a group, however small it may be, of believing Jews, AKA the remnant.

The words "borne," "carry" and "carried," and "bear" all testify to the fact that God is always with Israel caring for them and ensuring their survival as a nation whether Israel knows it or not. They should know; the Scriptures reveal it time and again, but they have a problem with realizing that truth. They also have a problem living according to that truth. These words are used in a figurative manner to reflect the fact that God is always at work ensuring that His plan for history as it involves Israel is steadily moving towards the goal set for the nation.

Borne, *סָמַךְ*, means to take up, to lift, or to carry a load referring to lifting up objects onto a transport person, animal, or vehicle to make linear movement implying the movement will take a relatively high amount of effort compared to not having the weight to transport. It has the sense of being borne as something to be endured and unpleasant whether for oneself or on someone else which relates to the fact that this is the same word translated "burdensome" in verse 1. This is a passive participle meaning the Israelites do nothing to be borne by God; it is all about His decision to carry Israel along. Whether the Israelites are faithful or faithless, it makes no difference. God will be with Israel because it is His will to be with the nation. This word is used in connection with the birth of the nation which occurred in Egypt and carried on into the Sinai.

Carry, נָשָׂא, means to take up, to lift up, and to carry with the sense of moving something while supporting it. This is a passive participle carrying the same meaning that “borne” carries. This word is used in connection with the conception and gestation of the nation. My assumption is that this is a reference to God's divine dealings with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob which established the family that was later formed into the nation Israel in Egypt.

Bear, נָשָׂא, means to bear a load or carry referring to picking up or pulling and carrying an object. It has the primary meaning of bearing or transporting (a heavy load). The sense is to support someone conceived of as lifting or bearing them up. This word is used in connection with the old age and graying years of the nation, and with the deliverance of the nation.

Old age, זָקֵנָה, means old age referring to a person of great age in the oldest age category. It relates to the advanced stage of life with some focus on the physical limitations of that stage of life. It represents a time of increasing infirmity to which God's care extends.

Graying years, שֵׂיבָה, means hoary hair, advanced or old age, gray-headed referring to a state or condition of having a gray or white head of hair with the associated meanings of wisdom, weakness, or old age that is nearer to death. Even when the body fails, however, God will not forsake the elderly.

The truth being presented here is that God has always and will always carry His people throughout the nation's existence. He will never abandon His people and His nation. Even at the end in the furnace of the final act of His divine temporal discipline on the nation, He will save them in the end, delivering the remnant and safely bringing them into the Messianic Kingdom.

The grammar used in verse 4 is emphatically telling us that God will indeed do this. He is preeminent in His involvement with Israel. We noted that same truth above with the use of the passive participles, and here it is emphasized with the use of the personal pronoun “I” [אֲנִי]. Its placement before the verbs “bear,” “made,” “carry,” and “bear” are markers of special emphasis in Hebrew syntax.

Literal translation of verse 4: “Even to old age, I [am] He, and to grey hairs I carry, I made, and I bear, indeed, I carry and deliver” (LSV).

The verbs “bear,” “made,” “carry,” and “bear” all have the first-person personal pronoun embedded into the verb's grammatical construction. While we would not translate it this way into English, it is far too cumbersome, repetitive and, to our ears, makes little sense, it does highlight the emphasis of God's care for Israel.

“And even [to] old age, And even [to] gray hair, I [אֲנִי] I will bear, I [אֲנִי] I have made it, and I [אֲנִי] I will carry, and I [אֲנִי] I will bear, and I will deliver” [my translation].