

## ISAIAH 40–66 IN LIGHT OF A NEO-BABYLONIAN BACKGROUND

### INTRODUCTION

Conservative commentators maintain that Isaiah 40–66 represents a futuristic prophecy designed to exhort and encourage the future Babylonian exiles. Chisholm observes, “In these chapters Isaiah assumes the perspective of the future exiles. Having announced the exile, he projects himself into the future and speaks to the exiles as if actually present with them in captivity.”<sup>1</sup> The primary literary device that Isaiah uses in this section of his book in order to accomplish his goals of encouragement and exhortation is known as a polemic. This device involves a deliberate comparison and contrast between Yahweh’s attributes and those of the Babylonian gods that the exiles would be tempted to follow after. The temptation to follow after other gods during the exile would have been a powerful one. Muilenburg notes, “The great processions like those on New Year’s Day, the display of the idols, the drama of the cult, the ancient myths, the impressive rituals, and the elaborate pantheon may have easily tempted not a few to abandon the ways of their fathers and to seek the help of such powerful gods as Marduk.”<sup>2</sup> Chisholm similarly observes, “The exiles may have thought that their God was restricted by time or space or limited in wisdom and power. Perhaps he was inferior to the Babylonian gods and his people were doomed to a life in exile.”<sup>3</sup> In order to admonish the beleaguered exiles to remain loyal to Yahweh, a deliberate contrast of Yahweh’s attributes with those of the Neo-Babylonian deities for the purpose of demonstrating the superiority of Yahweh would be necessary.

Unfortunately, the polemical nature of Isaiah 40–66 is not easily discernible through a surface reading of the text. The full dimension of the polemical aspects of Isaiah 40–66 only

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<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 92. Although Chisholm’s comments are made in the context of Isaiah 40–55, they are certainly applicable to Isaiah 40–66 as well.

<sup>2</sup> James Muilenburg, *The Book of Isaiah. Chapters 40–66*, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. G. Buttrick, vol. 5 (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 397.

<sup>3</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 96.

becomes visible through an awareness of ancient Near East (ANE) background material. Only when one compares Isaiah's description of Yahweh with what the background material reveals about the Neo-Babylonian pantheon is it possible to discern the fullness of the polemical aspects of Isaiah 40–66. The purpose of this paper is to surface the polemical nature of Isaiah 40–66 by highlighting the deliberate contrasts that Isaiah draws between Yahweh and what the ancient Near East sources reveal of the Neo-Babylonian pantheon.<sup>4</sup>

### YAHWEH'S CORE ATTRIBUTES

Isaiah 40–66 emphasizes seven key attributes of Yahweh. These attributes include Yahweh's monotheism, omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, eternity, immutability, and transcendence over man. An investigation of background sources demonstrates that Isaiah emphasizes these core attributes for the purpose of drawing parallels between Yahweh and Neo-Babylonian false gods. First, Isaiah repeatedly focuses upon Yahweh's monotheism.<sup>5</sup> He alone is God (Isa 44:6, 8; 45:5-6; 46:9). Although the Neo-Babylonian pantheon can hardly be described as monotheistic, the Babylonian god Marduk "had achieved solitary prominence to the extent that even YHWH's sole existence had come into question."<sup>6</sup> Such prominence can be seen in an Akkadian hymn to Marduk.<sup>7</sup> According to Merrill's translation, the hymn says, "Awesome lord, for whom there is no rival in the assembly of the great gods!"<sup>8</sup> Given Marduk's prominence, it would have been quite tempting for the exiles to begin to think that he had usurped the prominence of their own

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<sup>4</sup> Because this writer considers himself a beginner in the area of ancient Near East literature, he acknowledges that he was unaware of much of this material prior to reading Eugene Merrill's Columbia University dissertation. Thus, much of the background material presented in this paper was initially compiled in Merrill's dissertation. See Eugene Merrill, "The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1984). Moreover, because the present writer does not know the original languages that this background material was written in, he acknowledges his dependence upon English translations of these works. Whenever an English translator is relied upon, it will be acknowledged at an appropriate juncture.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 53-63.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>7</sup> Erich Ebeling, *Die akkadische Gebetserie "Handerhebung."* Berlin, 1956, 94, ll. 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Merrill, "The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic," 60.

God. Thus, against this backdrop, Isaiah places a consistent emphasis upon the fact that Yahweh alone is God and His position as the sole God had not been altered.

Second, Isaiah consistently draws attention to Yahweh's omniscience by emphasizing His ability to predict the future (Isa 42:9; 46:10).<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 48:3 seems to combine Yahweh's omniscience and omnipotence when it says, "I declared the former things long ago and they went forth from my mouth, and I proclaimed them. Suddenly I acted and they came to pass."<sup>10</sup> Repeatedly, the prophet contrasts Yahweh's capacity to declare the end from the beginning with the idols that had no similar ability (Isa 41:22-23; 44:7; 45:20-21; 48:5, 14). Yahweh's boasts in His ability to predict the future seem to reach their zenith when he foretells Cyrus as the specific individual who will lead the nation back from bondage (Isa 44:28-45:1). This emphasis upon God's omniscience makes sense against the backdrop ANE material indicating that to Marduk was attributed a similar characteristic. Merrill translates an inscription of Nabopolassar's sentiment of Marduk as follows: "Marduk who knows the mind of the gods of heaven and earth, who constantly examines the ways of men."<sup>11</sup>

Third, Isaiah presupposes Yahweh's omnipotence. Isaiah 40:27-30 promises renewed strength for those who wait upon the Lord. Such a reservoir of strength is only possible because an omnipotent Yahweh never grows weary. Isaiah's emphasis upon Yahweh's omnipotence must be understood against the background of the gods of the ANE who often grew tired. "In the ancient world the gods were viewed as having human weaknesses...The gods were not indefatigable. They were in constant need of food, drink and shelter. In fact humans were created to do the hard labor the gods preferred not to do."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 76-95.

<sup>10</sup> All Scripture quotations used throughout are taken from the NASB.

<sup>11</sup> Merrill, "The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic," 89.

<sup>12</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 627.

Fourth, Isaiah implies Yahweh's omnipresence by contrasting Him with finite creation.<sup>13</sup> For example, Isaiah 40:22 indicates that Yahweh sits above the circle of the earth and therefore its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. Isaiah 40:15 continues this theme by contrasting Yahweh with the nations. This verse notes that in comparison to Yahweh, the nations are but a mere drop from a bucket and a mere speck of dust on the scales. Interestingly, ANE background literature similarly infers omnipresence on behalf of pagan deities by comparing them to finite creation. An interesting parallel to Isaiah 40:22 can be seen in a hymn to the Babylonian sun god Šamaš<sup>14</sup>, which Lambert translates as follows: "You climb to the mountains surveying the earth. You suspend from the heavens the circle of the lands."<sup>15</sup> The hymn goes on to express the unhindered presence of Šamaš by comparing him to creation.<sup>16</sup> Lambert's translation says, "Regularly and without cease you traverse the heavens, every day you pass over the earth. The flood of the sea, the mountains, the earth, the heavens...you pass over them daily without cease."<sup>17</sup> Thus, Isaiah seems to have this background material in mind when he infers the omnipresence of Yahweh by comparing Him to finite creation.

Fifth, Isaiah presents Yahweh as an eternal or uncreated being.<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 40:28 describes God as, "...the everlasting God, the Lord, the creator of the ends of the earth..." Similarly, Isaiah 43:10 says, "...Before me there was no God formed, and there will be none after me." Isaiah 43:13 says, "Even from eternity, I am he." Of such verses Merrill notes, "It is everywhere assumed that he is uncreated and eternal."<sup>19</sup> Such an uncreated status stands in contradistinction to how the background literature portrays the creation of the Babylonian gods. The *Enuma Elish* prologue

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<sup>13</sup> Merrill, "The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic," 95-97.

<sup>14</sup> W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 126 ll. 21-22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 127 ll. 21-22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 126 ll. 127-30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 127 ll. 127-30.

<sup>18</sup> Merrill, "The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic," 118-33.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

(Tab. I: 1-16) portrays them as created entities arising from the primordial waters.<sup>20</sup> For example, some excerpts from lines 5-12 say, “Their waters commingling as a single body...when no gods whatever had been brought into being...then it was that the gods were formed within them. Lahmu and Lahmu were brought forth, by name they were called...Anshar and Kishar were formed...” Such background leads to the conclusion that Isaiah seems eager to contrast the uncreated status of Yahweh with the created status of the Babylonian deities.

Sixth, Isaiah emphasizes Yahweh’s immutability.<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 43:13 says, “...I act and who can reverse it?” Merrill explains how such a statement conveys Yahweh’s immutability when he observes, “...correlation between his predictive word and its historical fulfillment presupposes his immutability. He will not change nor can his purposes be thwarted by others.”<sup>22</sup> Isaiah’s emphasis upon Yahweh’s immutability may be a direct polemic against Babylonian gods who also claimed to have unalterable plans. *Enuma Elish* II: 128 says, “Unalterable shall be what I may bring into being.”<sup>23</sup> Of this phrase, Merrill observes, “This becomes almost a wearisome cliché in Akkadian religious texts.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, *Enuma Elish* III: 63-64 says, “let my word, instead of you, determine the fates. Unalterable shall be what I may bring into being. Neither recalled or changed shall be the command of my lips.”<sup>25</sup>

Seventh, Isaiah points out that Yahweh is distinct from man. Isaiah 55:8-9 teaches that just as the heavens are higher than the earth, the thoughts and the ways of God are higher than the thoughts and ways of man. Perhaps it was necessary for Isaiah to emphasize such a distinction between God and man in order to show Yahweh’s superiority to the Babylonian religious system where such a distinction had become blurred.

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<sup>20</sup> James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 60-61.

<sup>21</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 101-03.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>23</sup> Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 102.

<sup>25</sup> Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 64.

In the ancient Near East, there was considerable continuity between the divine and human realms. There was a hierarchy of divinity. For example, the Mesopotamian pantheon had a council of seven gods at the top of the hierarchy, followed by numerous other gods, descending to personal gods, angels, demons, heroes (humans who had attained a semidivine status) and lastly humans. Even the highest gods resembled humans in their character and behavior, and were subject to many of the same laws and limitations as their human counterparts. They were not elevated above the natural world nor transcendent in the way that Yahweh was understood to be. Instead they were part of the natural order.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, Isaiah focuses upon Yahweh's monotheism, omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, eternity, immutability, and transcendence in order to show the supremacy of Yahweh in comparison to the Babylonian pantheon. In every significant characteristic attributed to these deities, Yahweh's attributes were superior. Moreover, Isaiah emphasized other attributes, such as Yahweh's uncreated status, as a deliberate contrast against these deities who enjoyed no similar status.

### YAHWEH'S SOVEREIGNTY

In an attempt to show Yahweh's supremacy in comparison to Babylonian deities, Isaiah also draws attention to Yahweh's sovereignty. Isaiah emphasizes Yahweh's sovereignty in three ways. First, he consistently refers to Yahweh as "king" (Isa 41:21; 43:15; 44:6).<sup>27</sup> This again seems to be a deliberate parallel with Babylonian material that also depicts Marduk as "king." For example, *Enuma Elish* IV: 28 proclaims, "Marduk is king!"<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Grayson's translation of the Nabopolassar Epic<sup>29</sup> reads, "May the king of gods Marduk rejoice in you..."<sup>30</sup>

Second, Isaiah 40:22 depicts Yahweh as sitting above the circle of the earth. Yahweh's position over the earth would certainly demonstrate his sovereignty over what He has created.

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<sup>26</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 635.

<sup>27</sup> Merrill, "The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic," 108-12.

<sup>28</sup> Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 66.

<sup>29</sup> A. Grayson, *Babylonian Historical-Literary Texts*. Toronto Semitic Texts and Studies 3. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975, 84:17-18.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 85:17-18.

Interestingly, the notion of the “circle of the earth” seems to be a purposeful parallel with Babylonian cosmology.

The picture of the universe described here is the common cosmological view of the ancient Near East. The sky was a dome that arched over the disk of the earth, which sat on top of a primeval ocean. Under the ocean was the netherworld, virtually a mirror image of the space above the earth. Thus, the entire universe was an enormous sphere, cut in the center by the earth. Nevertheless, here it is the earth itself that is described as circular. In Babylonian literature Shamash is praised as the one who suspends from the heavens the circle of the lands. Likewise in a prayer to Shamash and Adad Adad causes it to rain on the circle of the earth. The circle simply reflects the curvature of the horizon (thus, disk shaped) rather than a sphere (for which Hebrew uses another word). In the ancient world the earth was consistently regarded as being circular.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, ANE literature communicates Babylonian deities sovereignty over creation through utilization of the “circle of the earth” motif. By proclaiming that Yahweh sits above the “circle of the earth,” Isaiah deliberately uses Babylonian cosmology to demonstrate that Yahweh is the one who is truly sovereign over His creation.

Third, Isaiah emphasizes that God’s purpose cannot be thwarted. In Isaiah 46:10, God says, “My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish my good pleasure.” This statement may be a direct jab at ANE deities whose purposes at times could be thwarted.

The gods of the ancient Near East were not capable of controlling the destiny of the world without help. In Mesopotamia there existed the “tablets of destiny,” texts which contained the destinies of all things (including the gods) in the universe. Whoever controlled these tablets controlled fate. Occasionally these tablets came into the “wrong hands,” and chaos ensued. Some gods, including Enki wore sorcerer’s hats, showing that they had the ability to control and predict the future, but only by way of spells and incantations. Conversely, Yahweh controlled all things without resort to superficial means of tablets and spells.<sup>32</sup>

The way that the purposes of ANE deities could be thwarted finds ample illustration in the Myth of Anzu. In this myth, Anzu, a lion/bird creature, sets out to steal the Tablet of Destinies from the chief god Enlil. Because the gods used these tablets to rule the world, possession of the tablets would allow Anzu to exercise authority over the world. In lines 12-15, Anzu says, “I will take the divine

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<sup>31</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 626-27.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 631.

Tablet of Destinies. I, and the decrees of all the gods I will rule! I will make firm my throne and the master of the norms. I will direct the totality of the Igigi-gods” (lines 12-15).<sup>33</sup> In sum, Isaiah shows that in the areas of kingship, power over creation, and unhindered purposes, Yahweh’s sovereignty is superior to that of the Babylonian pantheon.

### YAHWEH’S CREATIVE ACTIVITY

Isaiah also appeals to how Yahweh created in order to demonstrate that Yahweh’s creative activity is superior to the Babylonian pantheon. First, Isaiah emphasizes that Yahweh is the creator of all things.<sup>34</sup> “In the famous interrogation of 40:12-26 ׀ is used not fewer than six times in order to establish the incomparability of YHWH as omniscient and omnipotent creator.”<sup>35</sup> Such a claim of creative uniqueness would have been necessary against the background of pagan deities who were making the same claim. One such inscription<sup>36</sup> as translated by Merrill says, “My holy god, creator of all mankind are you.”<sup>37</sup>

Second, Isaiah stresses that Yahweh acted independently in creation.<sup>38</sup> When describing God’s creative acts in Isaiah 40:13-14, the prophets asks, “Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge, and informed Him of the way of understanding?” Such a unilateral emphasis stands in stark contrast to ANE deities who could not engage in substantive action without the approval of other members of the divine counsel. Jacobsen cites numerous examples from the Mesopotamian background

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<sup>33</sup> Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 112-13.

<sup>34</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 39-41.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> W. Lambert, “Dingir. Ša. Dib. Ba Incantations,” *Journal of Near East Studies* 33 (1974): 276:55.

<sup>37</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 40.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-65.

literature conclusively demonstrating the reality of corporate decision-making among the gods.<sup>39</sup>

Such corporate decision-making is common in the Babylonian background material.

In the ancient Near East the major decisions were all made in the divine council. There the gods would consult with one another and share their information and opinions. In the Babylonian creation epic *Apsu and Tiamat*, the gods from whom spawned all living creatures, had as their trusted advisor Mammu, who often rebuked them. When the high council of the gods assembled to determine how to attack Tiamat, they drank themselves into a stupor and subsequently chose Marduk as their king, accepting his harsh demands of absolute rule.<sup>40</sup>

Corporate decision-making was especially true regarding the realm of creation. “The fact that the Bible portrays Yahweh as having no pantheon means that all divine activity is carried out by him. This is in contrast to many of the traditions of the ancient Near East, where various deities were involved with different aspects of creation.”<sup>41</sup> In *Enuma Elish*, Marduk is promoted by the other gods of the pantheon and assigned the obligation of creating heaven and earth after defeating Tiamat. “According to Babylonian myth, the god Marduk received advice from Ea, the god of wisdom, when he created the world.”<sup>42</sup> No similar council usurping Yahweh’s independent prerogatives exists in Scripture. Whybray observes, “All the texts which speak specifically of the divine council clearly regard Yahweh as alone possessing absolute power, and in no case is any member of the council given a name or a distinct personality.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, Isaiah stresses Yahweh’s capacity to unilaterally create in order to demonstrate His supremacy to the Babylonian gods who enjoyed no similar freedom but rather were beholden to other assembly members.

Third, Isaiah notes that Yahweh’s ordering of the cosmos was part of His creative activity. Isaiah 40:12 says, “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and marked off the

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<sup>39</sup> T. Jacobsen, “Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Journal of Near East Studies* 2 (1943): 167-72.

<sup>40</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 626.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 629.

<sup>42</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 96. See also R. Whybray, *The Heavenly Counselor in Isaiah xl 13-14: A Study of the Sources of Theology of Deutero-Isaiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 64-77.

<sup>43</sup> Whybray, *The Heavenly Counselor in Isaiah xl 13-14: A Study of the Sources of Theology of Deutero-Isaiah*, 42.

heavens by the span, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance, and the hills in a pair of scales?” Similarly, the Babylonian creation epic attributes a near identical type of ordering of the cosmos to Marduk.<sup>44</sup> Enuma Elish IV: 140 explains that Marduk, after defeating Tiamat, “crossed the heavens and surveyed the regions; he squared Apsu’s quarter, the abode of Nudimmund, and measured the dimensions of Apsu.”<sup>45</sup> Marduk “continued to organize the constellations, the divine astral images and other heavenly bodies.”<sup>46</sup> Perhaps Isaiah mentions Yahweh’s ordering of the cosmos in order to show that He and not Marduk is the one true God who is really responsible for the ordering of the universe.

Fourth, Isaiah specifies that Yahweh is the one who created and named the starry hosts (Isa 40:26). Again, we find similar activity by Marduk in the Babylonian creation epic.

Marduk in the Babylonian creation epic is given the power of creation by the assembly of the gods, and he tests it by destroying and recreating a constellation. After defeating Tiamat, he set up the positions of the great gods and establishes the constellations...In the Babylonian creation epic Marduk constructed stations for the gods in the heavens in the heavens and fixed their astral likenesses (i.e., heavenly bodies) as images for them. Thus, although he did not actually name the stars, he appointed a deity for a respective star.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, it would seem that Isaiah desires to set the record straight regarding the creation and naming of the starry hosts in order to dissuade the exiles from attributing that act to Marduk rather than Yahweh. In sum, Isaiah details the creative activity of God in order to demonstrate His creative supremacy against the backdrop of the Babylonian pantheon. Although Babylonian deities may make claims to the contrary, Yahweh created everything, ordered the universe, and created and named the starry hosts. Moreover, His creative work is superior as it emanates from his own initiative rather than from the decree of a divine assembly.

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<sup>44</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 626.

<sup>45</sup> Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 626.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 627.

## DEITY AS KING

As mentioned earlier, Isaiah routinely designates Yahweh as “king” (Isa 41:21; 43:15; 44:6).

This identification may be a subtle polemic against ANE gods that were typically designated by the same formula.

Many of the polities in the ancient Near East considered the god as the true king of the land; the earthly ruler was merely a viceroy to the god. For example, the Assyrian kings were the regents for the god Ashur. Marduk was king at Babylon, as was Baal in many Canaanite states. Even in ancient Sumer, Enlil was king of the gods. In fact, kingship itself was described in Sumerian as “Enlilship” (Enlilutu).<sup>48</sup>

Because the deity as king formula is well attested in the ANE in general and Babylon in particular, Isaiah may be deliberately applying the same concept to Yahweh in order to demonstrate to whom such a formula should be legitimately applied to. Thus, the exiles are not to be impressed with classification of Marduk as king because this title rightfully belongs to Yahweh.

## COMMON LITERARY DEVICES

Isaiah uses at least two literary devices to illustrate the magnificence of Yahweh.<sup>49</sup> Isaiah’s rationale for using these devices becomes clear upon recognizing that they were commonly used in the ANE to communicate the greatness of various deities. The first device is known as the rhetorical question. By using this device, the question is framed in such a way that the only possible answer is “Yahweh” and in this way He is glorified. An example occurs in Isaiah 45:21 when God says, “Who has announced this from old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the Lord?” Other similar uses of the rhetorical question can be found in Isaiah’s writings (Isa 40:26; 41:2, 4; 42:24). Isaiah’s consistent employment of the rhetorical question is not random but rather seems to be a deliberate parallel with ANE background material that also uses the rhetorical question to magnify

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 628.

<sup>49</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 38-51.

various gods. For example, the self-laudatory hymn to Inanna says, “My father gave me heaven, gave me the earth. I, the queen of heaven am I! Is there a god who can vie with me!”<sup>50</sup>

The second device is known as self-predication. A self-predication occurs when one founds or bases an argument upon himself. Isaiah uses this several times to depict God’s greatness. An example of a self-predication can be found in Isaiah 44:26 which says, “...It is I who says of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be inhabited!’ And of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be rebuilt,’ And I will raise up her ruins again.” Other examples of such self-predications are found in Isaiah (Isa 43:1-7; 44:24-25; 45:6-7; 48:12-13; 50:2-3). Perhaps Isaiah used this device because it was also used to depict Neo-Babylonian gods. According to Westerman, “We can be certain that he adopted it from his Babylonian environment, for there (as also in Egypt) the self-glorification of the gods was a form in common use...Predication was not confined to Israel; there were many forms of it in the Gentile world, including Babylon...What Deutero-Isaiah here says receives striking confirmation from the astonishing wide knowledge which we now possess of the Babylonian literature of this period.”<sup>51</sup>

### SABBATH

Isaiah also mentions the Sabbath as the Lord’s holy day (Isa 58:13). Mentioning the Sabbath may also be a deliberate parallel with the Babylonian religion, which also set aside special days. “Though Mesopotamians did not divide time into seven-day periods, there were particular days of the month that they considered unlucky and that were often seven days apart (that is, the seventh day of the month, the fourteenth day of the month, etc.). In addition a similar term was used in Babylonian texts as a full moon day when the king officiated at rites of reconciliation with deity,

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<sup>50</sup> Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 578.

<sup>51</sup> Claus Westerman, *Isaiah 40-66* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 156.

but it was not a work-free day...”<sup>52</sup> Thus, Isaiah’s mentioning of the Sabbath may be designed to show the exiles that God’s special day is superior to the Babylonian holy days.

## IDOLS

Isaiah includes material designed to ridicule the Neo-Babylonian idols. At one point Isaiah engages in a direct polemic against these idols by naming them expressly. Isaiah 46:1 says, “Bel has bowed down, Nebo stoops over; their images are consigned to the beasts and the cattle. The things that you carry are burdensome, a load for the weary beast.” “Bel” means “Lord” and was an epithet or title for Marduk. Nebo, the deity of Borsippa, was Marduk’s son.<sup>53</sup> By naming Marduk directly, Isaiah boasts in Yahweh’s superiority by predicting that He will dethrone and take into captivity the most important deity in Babylon. This prediction may also be a subtle reminder of Marduk’s historical vulnerability since he had been taken captive during battle several times in the past. “There are many examples of images of Mesopotamian deities taken captive during battle. Marduk the god of Babylon was taken captive and removed from Babylon on a number of occasions. The Hittites in 1595 B.C., Tukulti-Ninurata I of Assyria (r. 1244-1208 B.C.) and Sennacherib (r. 705-681 B.C.) all plundered Babylon and took the Marduk statue, which was eventually returned in all three cases.”<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, when Isaiah attacks the Neo-Babylonian idols, he includes descriptive phrases of what they actually looked like.<sup>55</sup> For example, Isaiah describes these idols as made of wood and plated with precious metals (Isa 40:19). Weisberg testifies that this is an accurate description of ANE idols. He explains that wood was used “as the core for figurines which were plated with

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<sup>52</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 638.

<sup>53</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 109; Helmer Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. J. Sturdy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 67.

<sup>54</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 630.

<sup>55</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 65-76.

precious metals” by the craftsmen.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, “According to an Akkadian ritual, stones and gold are given to the woodworker, metal worker, and stone cutter for the purpose of making two statues of human beings in a substitution ritual. These statues must have been made of wood, plated with gold, and inlaid with precious gems...”<sup>57</sup> Also, “In the eighth century copies of the Epic of Erra and Ishum, Marduk speaks of the manufacture of his image. It starts with the wood of a sacred tree with its top brushing heaven and its roots in the netherworld. The roles of the skilled carpenter and the metal worker using millstones are featured, and the craftsmen are praised for their skills.”<sup>58</sup>

### DIVINATION

Isaiah also ridicules the Neo-Babylonian gods by indicating that the power they possess through pagan divination is no match for the power of Yahweh. Such divination will be incapable of successfully averting the judgment that Yahweh will send upon Babylon. For example, in Isaiah 44:25, God proclaims that He is capable of “Causing the omens of boasters to fail, making fools out of diviners...” Similarly, in Isaiah 47:13, He says, “...Let now the astrologers, those who prophecy by the stars, those who predict by the new moons, stand up and save you from what will come upon you.”

Isaiah 47:13 furnishes two phrases that adequately describe specialized astrological science that became prominent during Neo-Babylonian times.<sup>59</sup> The first phrase is “those who divide the heavens.” Smith provides the Neo-Babylonian meaning of this phrase: “Marduk was in fact one kind of year-god, with a cycle that is recognizable, birth, vigorous youth, success over other powers, recognition as supreme, marriage, eclipse, re-arising. This cycle is reflected in his identification

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<sup>56</sup> David Weisberg, *Guild Structure and Political Allegiance in Early Achaemenid Mesopotamia* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967), 57.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>58</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 629.

<sup>59</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 94-95.

with heavenly bodies through the months of the year.”<sup>60</sup> The second phrase is “those who gaze at the stars.” The meaning of this phrase can be illustrated through Reiner’s publication of a star gazing text.<sup>61</sup> Merrill translates the text as follows: “you recite the incantation 3 times, turned toward the wagon star, if a (shooting) star passes from your right to your left: favorable, if the star passes from your left to your right: unfavorable, if the star passes in front of you toward your back: unfavorable, if the star passes from behind your back to in front of you: favorable, if the star passes through by the wagon: favorable, if...it enters into the constellation wagon: favorable.”<sup>62</sup> Regarding this notion of stargazing, it is interesting to note, “The Babylonians appear to have invented the twelve signs of the Zodiac about 500 B.C...”<sup>63</sup>

Isaiah 47:11 also describes Neo-Babylonian divination when it says, “But evil will come on you which you will not know how to charm away; and disaster will fall on you for which you cannot atone...” Chisholm explains how this verse relates to Neo-Babylonian divination: “Omen reading was indispensable to Mesopotamian religion and society. By observing casual phenomena, examining animals’ inner organs, and making astrological observations, the Babylonian omen readers believed they could discern the will of the gods and control the future. They catalogued omens and concocted counter omens to ward off disaster.”<sup>64</sup>

There are thousands of omen texts in which the Babylonians attempted to predict and control future events. The common person hired an omen priest before he or she made any important decision. The priest then recited the proper omen, which told the individual what to expect in the event of a certain action. The omens were related to historical events the way that symptoms are related to the onset of the disease. Thus the individual who was fearful of a portended calamity avoided it by not participating in a particular activity that was harmful. For example, there were certain days in which a husband and wife were not to engage in sexual relations, since these days portended disaster (including death). In other

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<sup>60</sup> S. Smith, “The Practice of Kingship in the Early Semitic Kingdoms,” in *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship*, ed. S.H. Hooke (Oxford, 1958), 41.

<sup>61</sup> Erica Reiner, “Fortune-Telling in Mesopotamia,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 19 (1960): 34.

<sup>62</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 95.

<sup>63</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 632.

<sup>64</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 107. For informative discussions on Mesopotamian divination, see A. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 206-27; Robert Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1942), 90-110.

instances, the individual would hire an incantation priest to utter a spell or incantation that would neutralize the dreaded event. Best known are the *namburibu* avoidance rituals in which ritual acts were used in conjunction with formalized prayers to the gods. Such procedures could not be sought if there had been no indication of impending danger.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the divination prevalent in the Neo-Babylonian period, Isaiah 47:11 indicates that it would not be able to divert the judgment Yahweh predicted that He would bring upon Babylon. Chisholm explains how this judgment became a reality despite the attempts by the Babylonian diviners to ward off judgment.

In 539 B.C. Yahweh made this threat a reality. A partial eclipse of the moon occurred on June 13, 539 B.C., which must have been interpreted as a bad omen by the moon worshipper Nabonidus and his astrologers. About that same time Nabonidus, aware of the rising Persian military threat, gathered huge quantities of idols into Babylon to prevent their being captured by the invaders and to ensure the protection of the land. His efforts failed for Yahweh, the ruler of the world, had signaled and decreed that Babylon would fall and all the idol gods and astrologers in the world could not change that decision. Shortly thereafter Belshazzar saw Babylon's fate announced by the mysterious "handwriting on the wall." Cyrus conquered the neo-Babylonian empire and decreed that God's exiled people could return to their homeland.<sup>66</sup>

### **GOD'S EFFECTUAL WORD**

Isaiah also focuses on the power of God's word. For example, according to Isaiah 40:8, God's word will stand forever. Furthermore, Isaiah 55:11 teaches that God's word will not return empty. Such an emphasis upon God's effectual word seems to be a deliberate parallel with Babylonian literature that also attributed power to the words of various deities.<sup>67</sup> *Enuma Elish* IV: 20-27 attributes power to the word of Marduk when it says: " 'Lord, truly thy decree is first among the gods. Say but to wreck or create; it shall be. Open thy mouth: the images will vanish! Speak again, and the Images will be whole!' At the word of his mouth the images vanished. He spoke

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<sup>65</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 631.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Chisholm, "To Whom Shall You Compare Me?": *Yahweh's Polemic Against Baal and the Babylonian Idol-Gods in Prophetic Literature* (an unpublished paper presented to the 46th National Conference of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 17-19, 1994), 9.

<sup>67</sup> Merrill, "The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic," 103-08.

again, and the images were restored.”<sup>68</sup> Another ancient inscription that is translated by Langdon says:

When Marduk utters his word below, it causes shuddering below. I am the word of the Lord, over its evil power I preside. At his word the heavens above are stilled of themselves, his is a word of majesty. Now as in the days of long ago where shall I go? The word destroys the folds, rends the stalls, my gardens are rent, my forests are despoiled of leaves. Like a lone rush reed, behold the mighty one has brought me low, even me. Like a lone tamarisk in the storm he has made me.<sup>69</sup>

Attributing power to the word of a god seems to have a parallel with ANE deities in general and Babylonian deities in particular. “The claim of sovereignty represented in order and commands that cannot be countermanded and are effective without exception is made for the gods of the ancient Near East as well. As early as the Sumerian myth *Lugal-e*, Ninurta is praised as one whose orders are not changed and whose decisions are faithfully carried out.”<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, “The concept of a word standing forever is paralleled in the fixing of destinies. In the Gilgamesh Epic Enkidu uses a curse to ‘fix the destiny’ of Shamhat forever. Assyrian inscriptions also refer to gods whose orders cannot be changed and whose words are valid forever. In *Enuma Elish*, the rebel leader Kingu and Marduk each have their destiny fixed so that their command will not be changed and their word will be eternal.”<sup>71</sup> There can be no doubt that Isaiah was aware of this background material when he spoke of God’s powerful word. Merrill nicely sums up the matter when he says, “Again it is difficult to believe that DI was unaware of this and that he did not deliberately construct a part of his polemic around the concept of the word of YHWH, a word ineffably superior to that of the Babylonian gods because of its evident fulfillment in the historical experience of the people.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 66.

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Langdon, *Sumerian and Babylonian Psalms* (Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1909), 49-51.

<sup>70</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 635.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 626.

<sup>72</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 108.

Here, DI refers to deuterio-Isaiah.

## DIVINE PROTECTION

The theme of divine protection is dominant in Isaiah's writings. Isaiah illustrates the theme in at least three ways.<sup>73</sup> First, in Isaiah 41:10, Yahweh tells His people to "not fear" because He is with them. We find this identical pattern in the ANE background material. Banks furnishes several examples from the Arbela oracles.<sup>74</sup> One notable example is when the goddess tells the king of Assyria "do not fear!" because she will destroy the enemy.<sup>75</sup>

Second, in Isaiah 41:10, Yahweh explains to the exiles "...surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand." Apparently the notion of a god holding the hand of a person was a common manner of conveying divine protection. In Gilgamesh XI: 189-90, we read, "Thereupon Enlil went aboard the ship. Holding me by the hand, he took me aboard."<sup>76</sup> However, Merrill explains why the Isaianic notion of God holding the hand of a person is a superior description of protection in comparison to what is conveyed in the background material. "Contrary to Mesopotamian literature, there is nothing in DI of men holding the hand of God in order to lead him along in a procession or settle him in a temple."<sup>77</sup>

Third, Isaiah portrays Yahweh as a divine warrior who goes out to fight against Israel's enemies (Isa 42:13; 63:3-6). One finds this identical motif throughout the ANE literature, including Babylonian literature. "In the divine warrior motif the deity is fighting the battles and defeating the deities of the enemy. In Assyria Nergal is the king of the battle, and Ishtar is viewed as a war goddess. The Canaanite Baal and the Babylonian Marduk are divine warriors."<sup>78</sup> In sum, when one compares ANE background material with the various themes that Isaiah weaves together to illustrate Yahweh's promise to protect His people, it becomes apparent that Isaiah is drawing

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 155-67.

<sup>74</sup> E. Banks, "Eight Oracular Responses to Esarhaddon," *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 14 (1897-98): 267-77.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>76</sup> Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 95.

<sup>77</sup> Merrill, "The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic," 159.

<sup>78</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 628.

deliberate parallels between Yahweh and the Babylonian deities in order to demonstrate Yahweh's supremacy.

### ELECTION

The theme of election is replete in Isaiah's writings (Isa 41:8, 9; 43:10, 20; 44:1, 2; 45:4; 49:7). A similar theme is also found in ANE literature.<sup>79</sup> For example, one finds the election motif in the ŠU-ILLA prayer.<sup>80</sup> King translates part of this prayer in the following way: "O Lord! O Lord! O Lord! Father of the great [gods?!]! The Lord of destinies, the [god?] of charms! The ruler of heaven and earth, the lord of the lands! Perfect in judgment, whose word is not altered! Director of destinies..."<sup>81</sup> Isaiah continues the election theme in the Cyrus oracles (Isa 41:2-5, 25; 45:13; 46:11; 48:14-15). These passages make it clear that God elected Cyrus in order to accomplish a divine purpose. Interestingly, the notion of kings being divinely chosen from the womb was a common one in the ANE. Paul cites several examples.<sup>82</sup> Some of these examples are taken directly from the Neo-Babylonian period. For example, one royal inscription, as translated by Paul, says, "I, Nabonidus...whose fate Sin and Ningal (while yet) in the womb of his mother had destined for dominion."<sup>83</sup> Texts such as these cause Merrill to conclude, "...that destiny and predetermination played a significant role in Mesopotamian religious thought."<sup>84</sup> Thus, Isaiah emphasizes Yahweh's elective prerogative in order to reiterate that He, rather than Neo-Babylonian deities, sovereignly controls the affairs of the universe.

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<sup>79</sup> Merrill, "The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic," 133-49.

<sup>80</sup> L. King, *Babylonian Magic and Sorcery*. London, 1896, 74, n. 19, ll. 4-9.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 75, n. 19, ll. 4-9.

<sup>82</sup> Shalom Paul, "Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99 (1968): 184-85.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>84</sup> Merrill, "The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic," 137.

## CYRUS ORACLES

Isaiah's Cyrus Oracles parallel the way divinely elected kings are depicted in the ANE. Such a deliberate parallel becomes obvious upon comparing Isaiah's description of Cyrus with material from or near the Neo-Babylonian period. At least seven parallels can be seen.<sup>85</sup> First, just as Cyrus was elected, Neo-Babylonian kings were also chosen to rule from the womb. This parallel was covered in the previous section of this paper. Second, both Cyrus and ANE kings are called by name by the deity who chose them. Cyrus is called by name in Isaiah 44:29-45:1. Similarly, Paul's translation of a royal inscription of Aššurbanipal (669-632 B.C.) says, "I, Aššurbanipal, am the creation of Aššur and Bēlit...whom Aššur and Sin, the lord of the crown, already in the distant past had called by name for ruling, and who had created him in his mother's womb for shepherding of Assyria."<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Paul's translation of a royal inscription of Šamašsumukin (652-648 B.C.) says, "...in the place of forming (= womb) of the mother who bore me, Erua, the queen of the gods favorably called my name for lordship over mankind."<sup>87</sup> Thus the calling of Cyrus as well the callings of Aššurbanipal and Šamašsumukin emphasize the naming of the individual ruler by the electing deity.

Third, both Cyrus and the ANE kings are anointed. Cyrus is referred to as the Lord's anointed in Isaiah 45:1. Similarly, coronation ceremonies for Mesopotamian kings typically involved anointing with oil.<sup>88</sup> Fourth, both Cyrus and ANE kings had their hands grasped by the deities empowering them. Isaiah portrays Yahweh grasping Cyrus' right hand (Isa 42:6; 45:1). Similarly, a Neo-Babylonian inscription portrays Bel grasping Nebuchadnezzar's hand.<sup>89</sup> Wiseman

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 140-49.

<sup>86</sup> Paul, "Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions," 185.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Cyril Gadd, *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient East*, Schweich Lectures (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 48-49; Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature*, Oriental Institute Essay (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 246-47.

<sup>89</sup> D. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (646-556 B.C.) in the British Museum*. London: British Museum, 1961, 68, l. 14.

translates this inscription as follows: “In the month of Nisan he [Nebuchadnezzar] took the hands of Bel and the son of Bel and celebrated the *Akitu* (New Year) festival.”<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, in this passage Nebuchadnezzar grasps Bel’s hand while in the Isaianic passage Yahweh grasps Cyrus’ hand. Perhaps Isaiah is introducing a direct polemic against Bel by showing that while men lead him, Yahweh leads men. Fifth, both Cyrus and Babylonian kings are referred as “shepherd.” Cyrus is called a shepherd in Isaiah 44:28. Similarly, the prologue of the *Code of Hammurabi* (I: 49) says, “Hammurabi, the shepherd, called by Enlil, am I...”<sup>91</sup> Moreover, the previously alluded to Aššurbanipal (669-632 B.C.) royal inscription, as translated by Paul, says, “I, Aššurbanipal, am the creation of Aššur and Bēlit...whom Aššur and Sin, the lord of the crown, already in the distant past had called by name for ruling, and who had created him in his mother’s womb for shepherding of Assyria.”<sup>92</sup>

Sixth, bird imagery is used to describe both Cyrus and ANE gods. In Isaiah 46:11, Cyrus is called a “bird of prey.” Similarly, Marcus provides extensive documentation demonstrating that the military activities of ANE kings are consistently analogized to various flying mammals including birds, falcons, doves, partridges, bats, and pelicans.<sup>93</sup> Seventh, the success of both Cyrus and ANE kings is attributed to an empowering deity. Isaiah 41:25 recognizes Yahweh as the source of power behind Cyrus’ success (2 Chr 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). Similarly, ANE literature recognizes that kings were empowered by deities.<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, in the Cyrus Cylinder, Cyrus attributes his success to Marduk. Yamauchi dismisses the historical accuracy of these statements on the grounds that it represents “primarily...a propagandistic effort to manipulate public opinion and to legitimate Cyrus’s authority over Babylon.”<sup>95</sup> It would almost seem that Isaiah anticipated what would be

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 69, l. 14.

<sup>91</sup> Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 164.

<sup>92</sup> Paul, “Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions,” 185.

<sup>93</sup> David Marcus, “Animal Similes in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions,” *Orientalia* 46 (1977): 94-98.

<sup>94</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 628.

<sup>95</sup> Edwin Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 88.

recorded in the Cyrus Cylinder. Consequently, he gives proper recognition to the true source behind Cyrus' success. In sum, these parallels are designed by Isaiah to demonstrate that Yahweh, rather than the Neo-Babylonian pantheon, will be the one who will fulfill His purposes through his elected regal instrument.

### SUFFERING SERVANT

The notion of an innocent king being battered and restored that is found in Isaiah 52–53 might have a parallel in the Babylonian New Year festival.

During the Babylonian Akitu festival (at the New Year), the king was required to “take the hand of Bel” (Marduk) and proclaim his innocence as a righteous monarch. On the fifth day of the eleven-day festival the king was taken before the high priest, who stripped the monarch of his royal insignias (mace, loop, and scepter) and struck him on the cheeks. The priest then dragged the king by his ears and forced him to bow to the ground before Marduk, again proclaiming his innocence.<sup>96</sup>

According to Frankfort, the declaration of innocence uttered by the king was, “I have not sinned, O lord of the lands, I have not been negligent regarding thy divinity, I have not destroyed Babylon...”<sup>97</sup> Frankfort continues the description of this ritual as well as comments on its meaning.

The priest then took up the insignia and gave them back to the king, striking his face once more in the hope of drawing tears—which were counted as a favorable omen and proof of the god's good will...What is the meaning of this painful scene. It is clear that by ...his renewed investiture with the insignia of royalty signified a renewal of kingship...in addition, the humiliation of the king brought him into harmony with the conditions under which the great ceremony of renewal started.<sup>98</sup>

Merrill explains how this Akitu ceremony actually represented the death and resurrection of the god. “The major plot is the death and resurrection of the god. Communal lament for the god was accompanied by a ritual humiliation of the king who, as vice regent of the god, must share in the

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<sup>96</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 633.

<sup>97</sup> Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature*, 320.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

tragedy.”<sup>99</sup> These parallels between the suffering servant of Isaiah 52–53 and the Babylonian Akitu festival allow Isaiah to demonstrate that the servant that Yahweh will send will accomplish far more than what the Neo-Babylonian system could ever envision.

### REDEMPTION

Isaiah also emphasizes Yahweh as redeemer. Isaiah brings three themes together to communicate such redemption.<sup>100</sup> First, Isaiah consistently uses light/darkness motif to juxtapose future redemption with the present bondage of the exiles (Isa 45:7; 47:5; 49:9; 51:4). Such a motif is also found in Babylonian literature. Lambert provides the following translation of a hymn to the Mesopotamian sun god Šamaš: “Brightner of gloom, illuminator of darkness, dispeller of darkness, illuminator of the broad earth.”<sup>101</sup>

Second, Isaiah uses the language “light of the nations” to depict Yahweh’s role in redemption (Isa 42:6-7; 49:6). This notion finds a parallel in Mesopotamian thought. In the prologue of the *Code of Hammurabi* (1:30-50), Hammurabi indicates that Anum and Enlil called him “to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak, to rise like the sun over the black-headed (people), to light up the land.”<sup>102</sup> A prayer to Sin from a text written sometime in between 668-633 B.C. describes Sin as the one “Whose light goes from the base of heaven to the Zenith, who opens the door of heaven and gives light to all people.”<sup>103</sup>

Third, Isaiah also depicts Yahweh as the redeemer by describing Him as the liberator of prisoners (Isa 42:7). We again find this identical concept in Babylonians thought. A hymn to Marduk, as translated by Lambert, says, “...you reclaim, who is thrown into prison you show

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<sup>99</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 174.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-55.

<sup>101</sup> Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 136-37 ll. 176-77.

<sup>102</sup> Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 164.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

light.”<sup>104</sup> Because of these parallels, Isaiah again seems to be deliberately juxtaposing Yahweh’s capacity for redemption against the background of Babylonian gods who were making the same promise.

## RESTORATION

Isaiah also reiterates Yahweh’s promises to restore His people. The theme of restoration is also replete in Babylonian literature. Because Isaiah’s description of restoration bears a striking resemblance to how it is described in Babylonian material, it is evident that Isaiah is deliberately comparing and contrasting Yahweh’s restoration with that promised by the Neo-Babylonian deities. For example, Isaiah paints a utopian picture of what the world will be like after Yahweh restores His people (Isa 54:11-17; 65:17-25). These promises include a regathering to their land and city, prosperity, and a new created order. Similar themes can be found in the Marduk Prophecy.

...Marduk projects a king who will arise and “draw the plans of heaven and earth” in the shrine Ekursagil. He will gather the scattered peoples, bring prosperity to the land and show compassion to the people, and society will function properly. Beyond this...it is clear that the heavens and the earth, the cosmos, is God’s temple. The creating of the New Heavens and the New Earth may then be equated to the making of new sanctuaries or renewing sanctuaries in the ancient Near East. This was a very common activity. The New Jerusalem is the new capital city, which also represents God’s chosen dwelling place. Similarly, Marduk orders that the new holy city of the gods, Babylon, will be rebuilt...In *Enuma Elish*, after Marduk has defeated the enemy Tiamat, he proclaims that he will make a house for himself, which he names Babylon, that will serve as a resting place for the gods. At the end of tablet five a somewhat broken section relates to Marduk’s creating of the earth and his authority over it.<sup>105</sup>

After reviewing how Babylonian material describes restoration, Merrill concludes, “The sublimity of the Holy City is to the prophet yet another evidence of the superiority of YHWH to the relatively bland efforts of the Babylonians and their gods.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> W. Lambert, “Three Literary Prayers of the Babylonians,” *Archiv fur Orientforschung* 19 (1959-60): 66.

<sup>105</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 641.

<sup>106</sup> Merrill, “The Language and Literary Characteristics of Isaiah 40-55 as Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” 170.

In addition, Isaiah 66:19-20 indicates that in the restored state the sun and the moon will become obsolete because the Lord's presence will furnish everlasting light. This description of restoration may be yet another polemic against the Babylonian pantheon.

Both the sun and the moon were important deities in the Babylonian pantheon. The sun God was Shamash, god of justice. As the god of justice, Shamash gave Hammurabi, the Babylonian lawgiver, the authority to make laws. Sin, the moon god, was the lord of the calendar and the god of vegetation. His consort was Ningal, the mother of Shamash. Though his main centers were at Ur and Harran, he played a fundamental role in Babylon during the role of the last Babylonian king, Nabonidus. Since these gods were so central in the religious system of the ancient world, there is no suggestion in other texts that they would become obsolete or cease to function.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, the point of Isaiah 66:19-20 is that while the sun and the moon occupy a place of prominence in the Babylonian system, Yahweh will one day make these luminaries obsolete.

Finally, at the restoration of all things, "...the Lord will come in fire and His chariots like the whirlwind..." (Isa 66:15). This statement may represent another attack upon the Babylonian material. "Restoration is described in similar terms in Babylonian literature. In the ancient Near Eastern imagery major deities are at times accompanied by charioteers...In Akkadian literature Bunene, the advisor to the sun god Shamash, is designated the charioteer. The charioteer would be responsible for transporting the deity, especially into battle."<sup>108</sup> In sum, these parallels indicate that even in restoration itself, the Lord will do a similar yet superior work in comparison to what is offered by the Neo-Babylonian pantheon.

## CONCLUSION

God anticipated the vulnerability of the future Jewish exiles in Babylonian captivity. He understood that these exiles would be tempted to think that God had forsaken them. He also understood that they would be enticed to follow after the impressive Babylonian pantheon that they would be subjected to on a daily basis. Thus, God through Isaiah projected Himself into the future

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<sup>107</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 639.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 641.

and began to speak to that future generation. In Isaiah 40–66, He admonishes them to remain faithful by comparing and contrasting Himself in a polemical style to the Neo-Babylonian pantheon. By employing this method, God proved Himself superior to the Babylonian gods in every way. This paper has sought to highlight polemical thrust of these chapters by comparing God's revelation of Himself to what the ANE background material reveals about the Neo-Babylonian pantheon.

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