

Andrew Perry, author of the commentary series Isaiah 40-46, Isaiah 49-57, Isaiah 58-66, (Willow Publications) records below in an email:

Scholars typically treat Isaiah 13-14¹ (“the burden of Babylon”) as exilic or post-exilic and about the Babylon of the Babylonian empire. However, the king of Assyria was at times during the eighth/seventh centuries the “king of Babylon” (e.g. 2 Kgs 17:24), and he boasted of this status.² Accordingly, Isa 14:4 could be about the king of Assyria, and this identity is suggested by Isa 14:25, which uses the term “the Assyrian” of this king.³

Tiglath-Pileser III first assumed the title around 729-728 B.C.E. , and introduced the institution of the “dual monarchy” over Assyria and Babylon. He was succeeded by his son Shalmaneser V who reigned until 722 B.C.E. Around this time, in the confusion following Shalmaneser’s death and the succession of Sargon II, Merodach-Baladan, an Aramean tribal lord, assumed control of Babylon until Sargon II took Babylon back in 709 B.C.E. and once more assumed the crown. Merodach-Baladan accepted Assyrian rule until the death of Sargon II in 705 B.C.E.

When Sennacherib, Sargon’s successor, installed a puppet king over Babylon, around 703 B.C.E. , Merodach-Baladan overthrew him and was again king of Babylon for a brief period until 702 B.C.E. Sennacherib retook the southern half of Mesopotamia in a campaign in 702 B.C.E. and installed another puppet king who was unable to assume effective control.⁴ Eventually, one of Sennacherib’s sons took the title of king in 700 B.C.E. , reigning on behalf of his father. Sennacherib eventually sacked Babylon in 689 B.C.E. , after an uprising by Elamites who had killed his son and taken the city.

Following the lead of Isa 14:25, the “king of Babylon” of Isa 14:4 could well be Shalmaneser, who invaded Northern Israel. This identification fits the dating superscription for the next oracle in Isa 14:28, which dates that oracle to ca. 715 B.C.E. (Ahaz’ death). Further, this king “boasts” that he will exalt himself above the “stars of God” (Isa 14:13), which is a figure for the tribes of Israel, and a suitable piece of propaganda supporting a programme of conquest for Israel and Judah. On this basis, we suggest the king is Shalmaneser and that the context of the oracle is the invasion of Northern Israel in 722/721 B.C.E.

The imperial policy of the Assyrian kings towards Israel and Judah causes Yahweh to declare that he will “break” (שבר) the king of Babylon (Isa 14:5), and that he will “break” (שבר) the Assyrian (Isa 14:25) upon the mountains of Israel. The intention is declared and spoken against Shalmaneser, but it is not “fulfilled” until 701 B.C.E. against Sennacherib .⁵ The oracle is not spoken against the individual Assyrian monarch, but rather the Assyrian monarchy.

On this reading, it cannot be assumed that Isa 13:17 refers to a Median conquest of the city of Babylon. For instance, Cyrus’ peaceful capture of Babylon in 538 was a conquest by Persians and not Medians. Cyrus had earlier in his reign over Persia taken control over Media, but this does not make his conquest the action of a Mede. Rather, it is just as possible that since the Israelites were transported

to Media (2 Kgs 17:6) by Shalmaneser, this caused unrest in that region, with the result that their places of settlement were attacked by the Medes. The Medes are brought against “them” (עלייהם)—the displaced people, not against “it”—a city.

Similarly, it cannot be assumed that the oracle is predicting a destruction of the city of Babylon in Isa 13:19. There were several sackings of the city prior to its rise as the capital of the Babylonian empire, and the Persian conquest of the city did not result in its destruction. The prediction does not describe an *event* of destruction, but rather the eventual desolate *state* of Babylon. This changes the rhetorical purpose of the oracle. The eventual desolate state of Babylon is contrasted with the favour to be bestowed on Israel (Isa 14:1, כִּי).

The prediction is that the city would become a “possession” for animals (Isa 13:20-22, 14:22-23), and the rhetoric here is a contrast: it will become a possession for animals instead of being a “possession” of the king of Assyria.⁶ Babylon was “the glory of kingdoms” (KJV), which conveys the idea of a glorious possession of the kingdoms (2 Sam 1:19, Jer 3:19, Ezek 20:6), but it changed hands several times during Isaiah’s lifetime between the Chaldean tribes and Assyria.

The point in declaring that Babylon would be a possession for animals is to discourage Judah from making alliances with the Chaldeans. During the eighth century overtures were made to Judah by the Chaldean tribes for strategic purposes (Isaiah 39). As such, the prediction may have had the intended function of deterring those in Judah from seeking an alliance with Babylon against Assyria. There was no basis for security in such an alliance, because the “glory of the kingdoms” would be a possession for animals.

For these reasons, we locate Isaiah 13-14 in an Assyrian context, although it is possible to re-apply the oracles (in a secondary, typical, sense) to Babylon.

¹ For a study of the oracle’s form as a parody of a lament see C. A. Franke, “Reversals of Fortune in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the Babylonian Oracles in the Book of Isaiah” in Melugin & Sweeney, eds., *New Visions of Isaiah*, 104-123.

² There is a comparison to be struck between the king of Babylon and Nimrod (Gen 10:9-10) in echoes such as: the motif of a city (Gen 11:4, Isa 13:9), ascending to heaven (Gen 11:4, Isa 14:13), a name (Gen 11:4, Isa 14:22), filling the face of the world with cities (Gen 10:9-11, Isa 14:21), and the mighty man (Gen 10:9, Isa 14:16).

³ Accordingly, some scholars see the mention of Babylon in Isaiah 13-14 as a “Babylonizing” of earlier Assyrian oracles; see C. T. Begg, “Babylon in the Book of Isaiah” in *The Book of Isaiah*, (ed., J. Vermeylen; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), 121-125.

⁴ It was presumably in 701 B.C.E. that Merodach-Baladan sent envoys to Hezekiah (Isa 39:1), before Sennacherib’s son assumed the kingship of Babylon. He was looking for an ally that had recently defeated Assyria, to bolster his intentions for retaking Babylon. This seems a preferable sequence of events to the usual suggestion that Merodach-Baladan was seeking allies to bolster his defence of Babylon against Sennacherib in 702 B.C.E. Hezekiah is able to show him the envoys his kingdom (Isa 39:2), which would not have been possible in 701 B.C.E.; he is also able

to show them a healthy treasury, which was depleted during the invasion and siege, but replenished after the defeat of Assyria; finally, he asserts that there will be peace in his days, a sentiment unlikely in 701 B.C.E. (Isa 39:8). For the more usual approach, see J. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 291-297.

⁵ This means that the Book of Isaiah contains historical records of competing claimants to the throne of Babylon—the Assyrian kings and Chaldeans like Merodach-Baladan.

⁶ For a detailed interpretation of Isaiah 13-14 in an Assyrian context, see J. D. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 187-188; for a review of the history of the period see J. Oates, *Babylon*, (London: Thames Hudson, 1986), 115-120, J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, (London: SCM Press, 1977), ch. 7.