

Bel and Nebo and the man from the East

Many Scholars argue that Deutero-Isaiah (40-55) is later in origin than the preceding chapters predominately because 45 mentions Cyrus and 46 mentions the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo taken together with 47 which is a prophecy against the “virgin daughter of Babylon” this makes the case virtually unassailable. The “man from the east” (41.2-4; 46.8-13) is therefore Cyrus who conquered Babylon.

Thirtle, Whitaker *et al* have argued that Cyrus (Koresh) was a deliberate misreading of Charash (carpenter or artificer) a term that is used seven times in this section even in the “Cyrus chapter”(40.19,20; 41.7; 44.11,12,13; 45.16). It is quite clear that this section of Isaiah lent itself to manipulation by certain of the exilic Jews in order to push for an early return from exile and the unpointed text was read in such a way to favour Cyrus as God’s anointed temple builder. The problem is that Cyrus was neither a temple builder nor a Yahweh worshiper. These two facts alone make the mention of Cyrus untenable.

What then do we make of the mention of Babylon etc and the “man from the east” in the Isaiah prophecy? Firstly, we know that Babylonian envoys were sent to Hezekiah after Assyria was defeated at Jerusalem; the prophecy might relate to that period. Secondly, Isaiah was supposedly murdered by Manasseh who we know introduced idol worship and the prophecy concerning Babylonian idols may come from that period. It is entirely possible that Bel and Nebo were introduced to Judah even earlier, namely during the reign of Ahaz (as he did with the Damascus altar). It does not necessarily follow that because Babylonian gods are mentioned they are being worshipped in Babylon. Perhaps Judah under Ahaz adopted the Babylonian New Year festival.

The Babylonian feast of the New Year known as Akitu was also celebrated by the Assyrian Kings who had conquered Babylon and was also celebrated by the Persian king Cyrus. According to the encyclopaedia:¹

The fact that the Assyrian kings, who aspired to the Babylonian crown, emphasized in their inscriptions that they had taken part in the festival and taken the hand of the god tends to support that this act legitimized power in Babylon.

¹ "[Akitu](#)." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. . *Encyclopedia.com*. 23 Jun. 2019

The *Enuma elish* poem links the institution of kingship with the divine world. The dream of Babylon, of being the cultural and spiritual center of Mesopotamia, the overwhelming logic of which pervades the poem, became reality. A new star, the most resplendent, appeared in the mythological Mesopotamian sky. Henceforth he was recognized as the supreme god of the Babylonians and Assyrians, and in the divine Babylonian world he was known to the Greeks by his name Bel, which means "Lord." Marduk was indeed the preeminent Lord, the ruler of the gods, and Babylon was his only home. The Babylonians had no intention of forgetting their cultural heritage and celebrated the triumph of Marduk every year in the festival of the New Year. This festival, undoubtedly the most important of Babylonian festivals, could only take place in the presence of the legitimate sovereign, who led the procession after he had "taken the hand" of Bel and Nabu. The deep significance of this act, which many Assyrian kings would have willingly undertaken but were prevented from doing by the sacred defenders of authentic Babylonian tradition, is beyond question. Only a legitimate king of Babylon could take the hand of the god, so the festival was not celebrated if the king was absent.

Assyrian kings become Babylonian Kings

Wikipedia sums the situation up as follows;²

"Sennacherib's grandfather Tiglath-pileser III had made himself king of Babylon, creating a dual monarchy in which the Babylonians retained a nominal independence. This arrangement was never accepted by powerful local leaders, particularly an important tribal chief named Marduk-apla-iddina (the Merodach-baladan of the Bible). Marduk-apla-iddina paid tribute to Tiglath-pileser, but when Tiglath-pileser's successor Shalmaneser V was overthrown by Sargon II (Sennacherib's father) he seized the opportunity to crown himself king of Babylon. The next thirty years saw a repeating pattern of Assyrian reconquest and renewed rebellion. Sargon dealt with the Babylonian problem by cultivating the Babylonians; Sennacherib took a radically different approach, and there is little sign that he cared about Babylonian popular opinion or took part in the ceremonial duties expected of a Babylonian king, notably the New Year ritual. His relations, instead, were predominantly military, and culminated in his complete destruction of Babylon in 689 BCE. He destroyed the temples and the images of the gods, except for that of Marduk, the creator-god and divine patron of Babylon, which he took to Assyria. This caused consternation in Assyria itself, where Babylon and its gods were held in high esteem. Sennacherib attempted

² Wikipedia contributors. (2019, May 28). Sennacherib. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 06:29, June 24, 2019, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sennacherib&oldid=899203101> See there for footnotes.

to justify his actions to his own countrymen through a campaign of religious propaganda. Among the elements of this campaign he commissioned a myth in which Marduk was put on trial before Ashur, the god of Assyria—the text is fragmentary but it seems Marduk is found guilty of some grave offense; he described his defeat of the Babylonian rebels in language of the Babylonian creation myth, identifying Babylon with the evil demon-goddess Tiamat and himself with Marduk; Ashur replaced Marduk in the New Year Festival; and in the temple of the festival he placed a symbolic pile of rubble from Babylon. In Babylon itself, Sennacherib's answer to the Babylonian problem sparked an intense hatred that would eventually lead to a war for independence and the destruction of Assyria”.

Babylonian gods

It is clear then that the Assyrian kings (capital Nineveh) coveted the title “king of Babylon”³ that they often partook of the Akitu festival where they “held the right hand of Bel” and that they even appropriated the Babylonian gods.

The idol was brought to the Babylonian Temple via canal by a barge. It seems that during the reign of Ahaz a similar event happened at the New Year the difference being that it was carried on a cart; “Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope” (Isa 5.18). The prophet depicts sin using a metaphor of an idol (Bel) sitting on a cart being drawn with a rope during the temple procession.

Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth, their idols were upon the beasts, and upon the cattle: your carriages *were* heavy loaden; *they are* a burden to the weary *beast*. (Isa 46.1)

This is not directed at Babylon because the idol is depicted as cart-drawn. It is therefore possible that the mention of Bel and Nebo is directed at Judah, or possibly at the Assyrians (Sennacherib). There is no need to posit a prophecy made during the exile (150 years later).

³ In Isaiah 14 they are called “king of Babylon” (v.4) and “the Assyrian” (v.25). It was possible therefore to be king of Assyria and king of Babylon.

Held by the right hand

Isaiah 41:10 I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.

Isaiah 41:13 For I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee.

Isaiah 42:6 I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles;

Isaiah 44:20 He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, *Is there* not a lie in my right hand?

Isaiah 45:1 Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to **Cyrus**, whose right hand I have holden...

Yahweh declares that **He holds the right hand (not Bel or Marduk)** however Cyrus boasted of holding the right hand of Marduk in Babylon (not the right hand of Yahweh).....in his own words;

He took under his hand Cyrus, king of the city of Anshan, and called him by his name, proclaiming him aloud for the kingship over all of everything.⁴

So.....let me get this straight....

Cyrus boasts about holding the right hand of Bel-Marduk in Babylon

Yahweh condemns Bel-Marduk and all idols in Isaiah 46 and 47

Yahweh holds the right hand of Cyrus???

One of these statements is clearly wrong. Cyrus is a pagan idol worshipper who holds the right hand of Bel-Marduk. Cyrus actually **holds a lie (e.g., an idol) in his right hand** (Isa 44.20). Conclusion.....Cyrus is not the anointed the original text had charash *not* Koresh. The “workman”(charash) was the “suffering servant” of Isaiah 53 (faithful Hezekiah, who typified the messiah). The messiah was the one who would be the “workman” (the carpenter from Nazareth) – Jesus would not make an idol but would build the true temple of Yahweh.

⁴ The Cyrus Cylinder (Museum number 90920)

https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=327188&partId=1

The man from the East

Isaiah 41:2-4 ² Who raised up the righteous *man* from the east מִזְרַח (*mizrach*), called him to his foot, gave the nations before him, and made *him* rule over kings? he gave *them* as the dust to his sword, *and* as driven stubble to his bow. ³ He pursued them, *and* passed safely שָׁלוֹם (*shalom*); *even* by the way *that* he had not gone with his feet. ⁴ Who hath wrought and done *it*, calling the generations from the beginning? I the LORD, the first, and with the last; I *am* he.

Isaiah 46:8-13 ⁸ Remember this, and shew yourselves men: bring *it* again to mind, O ye transgressors. ⁹ Remember the former things of old: for I *am* God, and *there is* none else; I *am* God, and *there is* none like me, ¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times קְדָמָה (*qedem*) *the things* that are not *yet* done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure: ¹¹ Calling a ravenous bird from the east מִזְרַח (*mizrach*), the man that executeth my counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken *it*, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed *it*, I will also do it. ¹² Hearken unto me, ye stouthearted, that *are* far from righteousness: ¹³ I bring near my righteousness; it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry: and I will place salvation in Zion for Israel my glory.

Even though the first and second passages (above) mention the east and are addressing different questions they both draw on the Abrahamic narrative:

Isaiah	Genesis
..... the seed of Abraham my friend (41.8)	Abraham called (12.1)
....from the east מִזְרַח (<i>mizrach</i>).... (41.2)	[Abraham] removed from thence unto a mountain on the east קְדָמָה (<i>qedem</i>) of Bethel (12.8)
...virgin daughter of Babylon (47.1)	king of Shinar (14.1)
He pursued them	[Abraham] perused them (14.14)
passed safely שָׁלוֹם (<i>shalom</i>) (41.3)	And Melchizedek king of Salem שָׁלוֹם (14.18) King of righteousness king of Peace
Who raised up the righteous	...and he counted it to him [Abraham] for righteousness.(Gen 15.6)
From the east I summon a bird of prey (46.1 NIV)	And when the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.(15.1)
.... gave the nations before him (41.2)	Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates (15.18)
....calling the generations from the beginning? (41.4) he that shall come forth out of thine [Abraham] own bowels shall be thine heir.(15.4)

In Isa 41.2 the word man (*italics*) is not present in the text and the KJV has supplied the ellipsis. Note that the word for east in Genesis is different but the passage in Isaiah 46 employs both Hebrew words translated as “ancient times” (same root form used for east in Genesis) and as “east”. In the first passage the “righteous” is Abraham (my friend) who is camped on the mountain to the east of the “House of God” (Bethel) and this is directed at the descendants of Abraham (in the first instance Hezekiah who typified the Messiah). However, in the other direction of Abraham’s encampment was destruction (Hai). Therefore the second passage is meant to induce repentance---- shew yourselves men is from 1 Sam 4.9 where the Israelites treated the Ark of the covenant as a talisman (idol) but the Philistines exhorted each other to “quit yourselves like men” and take no notice of the Israelite “gods” (Cherubim on the Ark). Here the wicked Judahites are exhorted to repent and not be afraid of Bel-Marduk etc. The one who comes down like a bird of prey on the covenant sacrifice is Sennacherib. It is appropriate that God has called on the Assyrians to fulfil his will to abate (temporarily) the land covenant made with Abraham in Genesis 15. However, even with the inevitability of the coming punishment *the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand* (Isa 53.10). My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure (Isa 46.10). It would prosper (despite the devastating circumstances) because the counsel of the Lord was embodied in the suffering servant.

Therefore, the first passage (Isa 41.2-6) is not about Cyrus but the descendant of Abraham (Hezekiah/Christ) and the second passage (Isa 46.8-13) is also not about Cyrus bringing destruction on Babylon (Babylon surrendered peacefully to him) but about Sennacherib destroying the Abrahamic land covenant particularly with regards to Judah.

Conclusion

Cyrus does not belong in the Isaiah passages. The Jews were misreading prophecy to appeal to the vanity of a powerful leader to show favour to them.



Coin depicting Trump as the New Cyrus