

Isaiah 46: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 46. Bel bows down, Nebo stoops. Their idols are on beasts and livestock. These things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts. They stoop, they bow down together. They cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity. Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been born by me from before your birth, carried from the womb. Even to your old age I am he, and to grey hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear, I will carry, and will save. To whom will you liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god. Then they fall down and worship. They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it. They set it in its place, and it stands there. It cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble. Remember this, and stand firm. Recall it to mind, you transgressors. Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other. I am

God, and there is none like me. Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose. Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass.

I have purposed, and I will do it. Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness. I bring near my righteousness. It is not far off, and my salvation will not delay. I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory. At the heart of the argument of chapters 40-55 of Isaiah, the most sustained and powerful argument for monotheism in the Old Testament, is the uniqueness of the Lord over against all of the claims of the idols of the nations. It is important to recognize here that the point of the prophecy is not the more abstract claim that there is only one God, but that the Lord alone is God. The gods of the nations and their idols are nothing. The Lord is unique as the creator, as the master of history, and his uniqueness and supremacy will be so manifested in history that all will have to acknowledge him as God over all. All of his supposed rivals will be shown to be no gods at all, and utterly humiliated. We might here think back to other events within the history of Israel. One of the effects of the plagues during the exodus from Egypt was to demonstrate the Lord's supremacy and power in each of the realms of which the Egyptian gods were supposed to be the Lord's. Likewise, in 1 Samuel chapter 5, when the Ark of the Covenant was taken into captivity by the Philistines, it was placed in the temple of Dagon their god as a sort of prize, supposedly demonstrating the supremacy of the Philistine god over the god of the Israelites.

[2 : 5 8] However, Dagon's idol ended up falling prostrate before the Ark of the Covenant, and after they had raised it up again, it fell over once more, its head and its arms breaking off. Here once again, the Lord is declaring and demonstrating his supremacy over the gods and the false idols.

In chapter 41, the Lord summoned the nations for a trial, in which the competing claims of the gods were to be tested. Israel are the witnesses of the Lord's power and sovereignty, and can, even as they suffer for their sinful rebellion, testify to the fact that he foretold what was to occur long in advance, and that now it is coming to pass. The chapter begins with a depiction of the false gods and their idols. They are seemingly bowing in humiliation, being taken away as a burden upon animals as they have been defeated. Bel means Lord, and refers to the chief of the gods. Its meaning was similar to that of Baal, a title originally used of the god Enlil. It came to apply to Marjuk instead.

The connection between Marjuk and Bel can be seen in Jeremiah chapter 50 verse 2. Declare among the nations and proclaim. Set up a banner and proclaim. Conceal it not and say, Babylon is taken. Bel is put to shame. Meridak is dismayed. Her images are put to shame. Her idols are

dismayed. As in Jeremiah, the defeat of the city of Babylon is seen as a humiliation of its gods, and the taking of the idols is another form of humiliation of them. As the idols had come to stand for the false gods with the worship that was accorded them, so in the humbling and removal of the idols, the gods themselves would be humbled. Nebo was another important god, the son of Marjuk, and the importance of these two gods can be seen in the way that many of the Neo-Babylonian emperors were named after them. Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar, Nabonidus, and evil Meridak all had these gods as parts of their names. Perhaps we could see the bowing of these idols as related in some way to the bowing of the idolaters in chapter 45 verse 23, where the Lord declares that every knee will bow to him. These false gods and idols have become a burden to be borne by their worshippers. Far from actually bearing the burdens of their people, they themselves have just become more weight to be carried away into captivity. This could not contrast more with the Lord's relationship with his people.

The house of Jacob has been borne by the Lord from their first origins, and the Lord will continue to bear them for the rest of their existence. He is the one that made them, and he is also the one who will redeem them. Once again the Lord underlines the point in words similar to those found at several other points in this trial against the gods. To whom will you liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? Once again the Lord speaks of the manner of the idol's construction, the materials of which they are made, and the ways in which they are set up. The manner in which the idol has to be carted around and then lifted up and set in its place, is an illustration of how helpless the gods are to bear those that worship them. Their images must be borne around by their worshippers. They cannot bear up their worshippers in the time of their distress. Once again the Lord's declaration of his uniqueness, followed by a polemic against the gods and their images, is followed by a summing up of the argument, calling the people to remember who God is and their relationship to him. Once again the people are to take confidence in the fact the Lord can declare what is to take place before it has happened. There is no other God like him. His supreme authority stretches from the dawn of creation itself, and his purposes will stand to the end. As in a number of the other points of this trial against the gods, the Lord's stirring up of Cyrus is seen as evidence of his supremacy and his authority in history. Chapter 41 verses 2 to 3. Who stirred up one from the east, whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot. He makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. He pursues them and passes on safely. By paths his feet have not trod. The message of this chapter is addressed to a people who are unfaithful, a stubborn and rebellious people who are said to be far from righteousness. The meaning of the term righteousness in verse 12 is most typically understood in relationship to the righteousness spoken of in verse 13, the righteousness that, in contrast to that which seems far off in verse 12, is brought near.

This righteousness is the righteousness of the Lord, the salvation that he brings in fulfillment of his covenant, setting the world to rights. This could be taken either in a literal sense that they are not experiencing the salvation of the Lord because of their unbelief, or, in an ironic sense, that they think themselves far away from the Lord's righteousness, but the Lord's righteousness and salvation is in fact near at hand. John Oswald, unpersuaded by these readings, argues that it's more likely to refer to the fact that they are not righteous in believing the Lord. This then is a reference to their faithlessness, not to the distance, whether seeming or real, of the Lord's salvation from them. In this way, it might be a contrast between the Lord's faithfulness to the covenant and his commitment to set things to rights, and the deep unfaithfulness of the people, and the fact that far from setting things to rights, they are committed to injustice. However, the Lord's salvation does not ultimately depend upon the faithfulness of his people. Out of the Lord's unilateral initiative, the Lord is going to bring about his salvation. He's going to re-establish Jerusalem and the nation for his glory. All of this will be for his own name's sake, as a demonstration of his character before the eyes of the nations. A question to consider. The specific gods, Bel and Nebo, are mentioned in this chapter, not just the generic gods and idols that have been mentioned in previous ones. Where else in scripture do we see the humiliation of specific gods that are mentioned within the text? What might we learn more generally about the place that the false gods and their idols have within the larger story of redemption?