Assyria and Babylon in the Oracles against the Nations Tradition: The Death of a King (Isa. 14:5–20; Isa. 30:27–33)

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I attempt to make a fresh start on the subject of the interaction between the Isaiah prophets and Mesopotamian culture. The results will probably surprise and even alarm, since they threaten to overturn a great deal of previous scholarship and to gore a number of sacred cows. First is the idea that 1st Isaiah is either the work of the historical prophet or was composed, along with the rest of the Hebrew Bible, in the Persian or Hellenistic period. I have no doubt that some passages are to be connected with the historical prophet, but not merely one or two but indeed the bulk of 1st Isaiah's prophecies, albeit often pre-exilic in origin, are, in my view, too late to be contemporary with Isaiah himself.

INTRODUCTION

I am not sure I would describe anything in Biblical Studies as the current consensus, but there is a growing tendency to extend the Josianic redaction from the Deutonomic History into 1st Isaiah. Here I need to acknowledge the work in particular of Marvin Sweeney, who must be honored for following Hermann Barth in helping to open up this door. I say "open," since, while I concur with Clement's assignment of Isa. 37:36 to Josiah,[1] I find it hard to imagine that the prophecy of Isa. 39:5–7 is a reference to anything other than the campaign of Nebuchadnezzar II that brought Zedekiah to the throne (2 Kings 24:10–17). Indeed, a careful examination of all passages reveals that the prophecies that attempted to advise Zedekiah for and against his revolt against Babylon not only far overshadow those generated or reworked for the benefit of Josiah but are sufficiently numerous to entitle the former to be considered, if not the primary redactor, at the very least among the redactors of 1st Isaiah.[2]

Demonstrating this point in its entirety would require a book. For the moment, I propose to deal with the passage Isa. 14:5–20 to a demonstrate what may be gained by approaching prophetic verses from a totally different perspective.

SETTING THE STAGE

Isa. 14:1–22 sets out the following scenario: The faithful of Israel are destined to return home, bringing with them "aliens" who will serve them in Israelite territory, just as Israelites once served the "aliens" in alien territory (14:1–2). Subsequently, they are to take up a taunt song against the king of Babylon (14:3–4):

Author's note: Abbreviations to Assyriological literature are those of *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*.

1. R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 18–19.

2. For more on this issue, see J. A. Scurlock, "Prophecy as a Form of Divination; Divination as a Form of Prophecy," in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, ed. A. Annus (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2010), 287–311.

> When the Lord has pity on Jacob and again chooses Israel and settles them on their own soil, the aliens will join them and be counted with the house of Jacob. The house of Israel will take them and bring them along to its place, and possess them as male and female slaves on the Lord's soil, making captives of its captors and ruling over its oppressors. On the day the Lord relieves you of sorrow and unrest and the hard service in which you have been enslaved, you will take up this taunt-song against the king of Babylon. (Isa. 14:1–4[3])

The "aliens" in question are, fairly clearly, one of the imperial powers—Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon—among whom Israelites did indeed live as "aliens," and Egypt's demise is contemplated as precipitating a similar return of exiles in Isa. 19. Since Israelites are going to be enslaving their former oppressors (14:2), the return is presumably to take place after the fall of Assyria and the defeat of Egypt by Babylon. One might therefore expect the taunt to be directed against Assyria and/or Egypt rather than Babylon, which would appear in this scenario to be the agent of deliverance rather than an appropriate object of derision.[4] The text as we have it, however, says "Babylon," and we must consider the possibility that this is what it actually means. This would, of course, mean that the contemplated time-frame of these events is imagined as after the fall of Babylon otherwise much predicted in the prophets (e.g., Jer. 50–51).[5]

DIVINE KING OR DIVINELY ASSISTED KING?

To decide which imperial power, Assyria or Babylon, is being taunted, it is necessary to puzzle out the rest of the narrative and in particular the troublesome 14:12–15, which appear to refer not to a person but to a god:

> How have you fallen from the heavens, O Shining One, son of the Dawn! How are you cut down to the ground, you who mowed down the nations! You said in your heart: "I will scale the heavens; above the stars of God I will set up my throne; I will take my seat on the Mount of

3. This and all other Biblical passages are quoted from the *New American Bible* (*NAB*).

4. Indeed, it has been argued by more than one scholar that Isa. 13:1–22, the "judgment against Babylon," which immediately precedes these verses and which delights over the horrific vengeance that is to be perpetrated on them, must originally have been directed against Assyria (Grimme and Erlandsson) or Israel—but at the hands of Assyria (Kissane; citations apud H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27: A Continental Commentary* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997], 13, 16). Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 132–33, dissociates the bulk of the passage from an original Assyrian referent, but still insists that Isa. 13:1–3 is not only directed against Assyria but original to the prophet Isaiah. It alludes to Babylon under the leadership of the Chaldean Merodach-baladan achieving its "destiny to conquer and achieve greatness." Similarly the "tyrant" of Isaiah 14 is often assumed to originally have been a reference to an Assyrian king (Erlandsson, Kissane, Barth, and Clements—for references, see M. A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988], 11 n. 7). These views are quite ably dismissed by Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 12–18. See also D. Vanderhooft, *The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Latter Prophets* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 124–29.

5. In many quarters, including those who do and those who do not believe in an original anti-Assyrian version, this is hardly a revolutionary statement. So, for example, Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 33–39; W. Beuken, *Jesaja 13–27* (Freiberg: Herder, 2007), 83, 107–9; J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 281–82; Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 138–39. This does not, however, mean that it is undisputed. With one salient exception (Isa. 19:18–25), M. A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39: With an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 58–59, 205, 350–52, dates all references to the return of exiles to Josiah. It is, to my mind, inconceivable that Josiah would have welcomed exiles from Assyria and Egypt (pace Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 350–51), many of whom would have fled to Assyria and Egypt in the first place in the face of his cultic reforms. Josiah is even less likely to have welcomed those exiles to his celebration of Passover (pace Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 58–59). Nor would refugees from the Northern Kingdom have been thrilled by his destruction of Bethel (pace Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 352).

> Assembly, in the recesses of the North. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will be like the Most High!" (Isa. 14:12–15)

Despite much ink spilt to the contrary,[6] no Assyrian or Babylonian king could ever have been described as appearing in the heavens as "O morning star, son of the dawn," a claim to divinity which, by the by, is not actually disputed by Isaiah.[7] However, already at the very beginning of Mesopotamian civilization, conflicts between Sumerian city states were not understood as strictly human conflicts, but quarrels in which the gods of the respective cities were physically involved. So, for example, on the Stele of the Vultures, one side shows the ensi of Lagash defeating Umma in battle and the other what is really happening—Lagash's god Ningirsu catching the men of Umma, who are shown as naked corpses in his net.[8]

A conflict then, between Jerusalem and a Mesopotamian imperial power could readily be envisaged as an attack on Judah's god by the god of that power alongside the actual actions of the human army of that imperial power in Judah. Note also that Aššur (as we know from the Assyrian coronation ritual)[9] and Marduk (as we learn from the Babylonian Creation Epic, the *Enūma eliš*)[10] were the actual kings, respectively, of Assyria and Babylon.[11] To put it another way, Nabopolassar and Marduk were equally kings of Babylon and anything Nabopolassar did was in some sense done by Marduk, as expressed in one of Nabopolassar's inscriptions:

> Any king at any time … (and) whose name Marduk will call to the rulership of the country, do not be concerned with feats of might and power. Seek the sanctuaries of Nabû and Marduk and let them slay your enemies.[12]

A similar relationship existed in Judah between the divinely anointed yet still fully human ruler and Yahweh, the true king of Israel, as referenced most prominently in the debates over whether Israel should have a human king at all. Thus an imagined juggernaut of Mesopotamian god and king acting in concert is, perhaps unsurprisingly, contemplated as being derailed in the Isaianic text. On the one hand there is the (human) "oppressor" of Isa. 14:4–11, who ends up actually being buried, and on the other the (divine) "king" of Isa. 14:16–20, who was not. Indeed, Isaiah 14 repeats this distinction three times lest we not realize that two different personages are being referred to. It is *the* king (i.e., the national god) who is unburied, unburied, unburied:

6. This includes an article by E. Frahm to which I intend to respond in a short article entitled "The Sun King's Rotting Bodies."

7. For a discussion, see Beuken, *Jesaja 13–27*, 91–95. We certainly need not consider the Greek myth of Phaeton (P. Grelot, apud Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 237; Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 64–65; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 288; and J. Jensen, "Helel ben Shaḥar [Isaiah 14:12–15] in Bible and Tradition," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah*, ed. C. C. Broyles and C .A. Evans [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 342) as a comparand.

8. See A. Parrot, *Sumer: The Dawn of Art* (New York: Golden, 1961), 134–37.

9. S. Parpola, *Assyrian Royal Rituals and Cultic Texts*, State Archives of Assyria 20 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2017), 14–18, no. 7: Royal Coronation Ritual.

10. *Enūma eliš* IV 28. For an edition of this text see P. Talon, *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth Enūma eliš* (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Test Corpus Project, 2005).

11. For further references, see *CAD* Š/2 103b s.v. *šarru* 1m1'.

12. P.-A. Beaulieu, "Nabopolassar's Restoration of Imgur-Enlil, the Inner Defensive Wall of Babylon," in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 2, ed. W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 308. The sentiment expressed is curiously evoked by S. Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 13:2–14:23* (Lund: Gleerup, 1970), 125–27, who argues that Isa. 13:19–22 are a reference to Sennacherib's destruction of Babylon, which he understands as God's punishment for tempting Judah to rely not on God but on human allies (163) and for attempting to perform a task which God had reserved for himself alone (166).

> All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb. But you are cast forth without burial, loathsome and corrupt, clothed as those slain at sword point, a trampled corpse. Going down to the pavement of the pit, you will never be one with them in the grave. (Isa. 14:18–20)

The "oppressor" (his human counterpart) is buried, buried, buried. He has reached his end (14:4) and is laid to rest (14:9), going down to the Netherworld to be greeted by former kings seated on their thrones (14:9)—a vivid image of a natural death followed by regular royal Mesopotamian burial, culminating in arrival at the court of Ereškigal, which deceased Mesopotamian monarchs were imagined to join:

> How the oppressor has reached his end! How the turmoil is stilled! … The nether world below is all astir preparing for your coming. It awakens the shades to greet you, all the leaders of the earth. It has the kings of all nations rise from their thrones. All of them speak out and say to you: "You too have become weak like us; you are the same as we. Down to the nether world your pomp is brought, the music of your harps. The couch beneath you is the maggot, your covering the worm." (Isa. 14:4, 9–11)

So when we want to know which foreign enemy is contemplated here, what we are really asking is not merely Who is the enemy here, Assyria or Babylonia? Rather, we seek to learn whether it is Aššur and a certain human king who is acting for the god, or whether it is Marduk and a particular king losing a direct conflict with Yahweh.[13] We are also asking: At the end of the day, which of the national gods could legitimately be described as having been killed and left unburied? However, since the distinction between man and god in Isaiah 14 is a new insight that has not so far entered into the discussion, let us begin by examining previous identifications suggested for the human king.

WHO COULD THE TYRANT BE?

A number of human kings have been suggested as the referent for Isa. 14:1–23. The prime candidates[14] are two Babylonian kings: Nabonidus[15] and Nebuchadnezzar II,[16] and

13. For Erlandsson, *Burden*, 67–105 and passim, the evil enemy of God and mankind can only be Assyria. Which particular king is singled out for special opprobrium is of little relevance, although Tiglath-pileser III gets a half-hearted vote, more due to the fact that he took the title King of Babylon than anything else (164). Curiously, H. L. Ginsberg, "Reflexes of Sargon in Isaiah after 715 B.C.E.," *JAOS* 88 (1968): 47–53, 49, uses an identical argument to finger Sargon II as the referent.

14. See Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 285–88.

15. So, inter alia B. Duhm and S. Langdon (apud Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 55). Although he is not arguing for Nabonidus, Beuken, *Jesaja 13–27*, 58–59, 75–76 does argue for setting Isa. 13 at Cyrus's conquest of Babylon, which would logically seem to go with the identification of the king of Isa. 14 as Nabonidus. This would also be consistent with propaganda commissioned by Cyrus against his Babylonian predecessor. The problem is that Cyrus (who was an Elamite) might work as the desired destroyer of Babylon in Isa. 21:2 (cf. Beuken, *Jesaja 13–27*, 221), but in Isa. 13:17–22 it is specifically the Medes as a group, with no leader mentioned, who are to give Babylon a taste of its own medicine.

16. In the older generation, most notably F. Delitzsch (apud Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 55) and now Beuken, *Jesaja 13–27*, 59. Beuken, ibid., 96, 108 also points to a pun on Nebuchadnezzar II's name in Isa. 14:20 as striking evidence for the accuracy of his identification. Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 53, 55, is not enthusiastic about this piece of evidence, but does nonetheless lean in the direction of Nebuchadnezzar II. D. S. Vanderhooft, *Neo-Babylonian Empire,* 129, makes the interesting observation that the title "king of Babylon" refers to Nebuchadnezzar in 118 out of 132 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible and never to any Assyrian king.

two Assyrians:[17] Sennacherib[18] and Sargon II.[19]

SARGON II?

The least likely Assyrian candidate for the "oppressor" of Isaiah 14 is Sargon II. At the moment, he seems to be the choice of most scholars, but it needs to be said that this is not always for the best of reasons. Sargon was introduced into this picture in the first place at the dawn of the twentieth century by Hugo Winckler,[20] who had just discovered the fact that Semitic Sargon II of Assyria had died in a battle against the "Indo-Germanic" Cimmerians, and that his body had never been recovered. Winckler saw in this defeat the miraculous triumph of his own values over the anti-values of Oriental Despotism as epitomized in Assyria,[21] a rather nasty combination of the Clash of Civilizations and anti-Semitism distressingly typical of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship.

Of those who opt for Sargon II as the king whose unburied demise is allegedly described in Isaiah 14, the most ingenious set of arguments are those of Christopher Hays, seconded by several articles of Eckart Frahm. There is no room here to deal with these arguments in full, a matter that awaits future publication. We pause only to note one of Hays's arguments, which might with justice be described as purgative, since it destroys Hays's own argument along with the one it was intended to refute.

This is Hays's favorable citation of H. Tadmor's suggestion that the Assyrian eponym chronicle means to say only that Sargon's demise resulted in a "burial not according to the law."[22] If this be so, then the entire argument about Sargon's lack of burial as the clincher for his identification with the king of Isaiah 14 falls. Whether you agree with Tadmor that the reference is to cremation or, as I would argue, to burial on the actual field of battle—a custom

17. Tiglath-pilesar III, whose only crime was to rescue Judah from the joint attack of Israel and Damascus, also gets a few votes (most notably J. A. Hayes and S. A. Irvine, *Isaiah the Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times & His Preaching* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987], 227–34). This is partly due to a serious misreading of Hosea (whose referent is Josiah's cultic reforms and his re-conquest of Samaria from which refugees did indeed flee to Egypt and Assyria). This misreading has been compounded by the insistence of biblical archaeologists that the Syro-Ephramite war was responsible for destruction levels that can readily be proven on the basis of archaeological evidence to date to Nebuchadnezzar II. More bizarrely, there is a vote for Aššur-uballiṭ II (L. Rost, apud Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 54–55). We should also mention that Alexander the Great has been suggested as a possibility, doubtless due to the apparent deification elements—see Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 55; Beuken, *Jesaja 13–27*, 59.

18. Most notably S. Schiffer (apud Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 53).

19. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 215, 232–38; Ginsberg, "Reflexes of Sargon"; Erlandsson, *Burden*, 161; Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 139–40 (quoting also Barth). This is allegedly part of worldwide rejoicing over the death of Sargon II in battle, an event that is not mentioned in either Kings or Chronicles, despite the fact that one was allegedly the work of that arch-enemy of Assyrians, Josiah, and the other written in exile when there were no Assyrians left to object.

20. H. Winckler, *The History of Babylonia and Assyria* (New York: Scribners, 1907), 255.

21. Echoes of these attitudes resound in such statements as Grimme's placement of Isa. 13:1–22 in "the days of agitation that followed immediately after Sargon's death which opened the possibility for the peoples of the Near East that they might be able to be free from the Assyrian yoke for the near future" (apud Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 16). Compare Ginsberg, "Reflexes of Sargon," 50–51: "who but Isaiah could have felt so strongly that Sargon's fate was a punishment for wrongs done to all nations … to fail to be moved by our ode to admiration of Isaiah's fidelity to the championship of the rights of all people (10:7) and to his hope for the crushing of Assyria as a liberation of all nations (14:24–27) is not a little Philistine." The alleged revolt in question, supported by M. Mallowan's misdating of the destruction levels of the palace of Sargon II at Kalḫu by a century, is actually *based* on the presupposition that Sargon II is the referent of Isa. 14 and confusion between Sennacherib's undisputed and Esarhaddon's disputed succession (Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 233). Note also Sweeney, ibid., 214–16, where the evil deeds of Sargon II are made right at last by the arrival on the scene of the Persians.

22. C. B. Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II and Isaiah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 39.

well known to us from ancient Greece—the description of the unburied king in Isaiah 14 cannot possibly refer to Sargon. The Assyrian king would not, in such a case, be joining his royal ancestors in the court of Ereškigal, a quite traumatic fate for any king and quite enough to exclude his identification as the buried king in combination with unburied god for which I am arguing. However, he would still be safely buried. In other words, Sargon II of Assyria is off the table whichever way you interpret Isaiah 14.

THE RECEPTION OF SARGON II IN JUDAH

In fact, Sargon II was never really a viable candidate for the unnamed oppressor of Isaiah 14. This malefactor must have been an implacable enemy of Judah, and this Sargon II was demonstrably not. It is generally accepted that 2 Kings was redacted by Josiah, no friend of Assyria, who would not have been shy about expressing his feelings on the subject of this alleged cosmic enemy of God, Yahwism, and Judah. Why then, is this prophecy not incorporated into the narrative of 2 Kings 17? In fact, not only is there no anti-Assyrian prophecy, but no unkind word is said about Sargon II or, for that matter, about Shalmanesar V.

The anger here is exclusively directed at Israel (2 Kings 17:1–23, 34–41). I find the persistent modern myth that imagines Judah to have been more concerned over the fate of Israel than its own, enraged at the conquest of Israel by Assyria, and essentially unconcerned about the fate of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar endlessly puzzling. In fact, Israel and Judah were mortal enemies throughout most of their history, and the reaction in Judah to the fall of Samaria as recorded in the text can only be described as gloating.[23]

And there's more: What is Sargon II portrayed as doing? Incorporating Israel into his country and attempting to give his new subjects knowledge of the true religion—and by this I mean Yahwism:

> The king of Assyria gave the order: "Send back one of the priests who had been deported, to go there and settle, to teach them how to worship the God of the land." So one of the priests who had been deported from Samaria returned and settled in Bethel, and taught them how to venerate the Lord. But these people began to make their own gods in the various cities in which they were living; in the shrines on the high places which the Samaritans had made, each people set up gods … They also venerated the Lord, choosing from their number priests for the high places, who officiated for them in the shrines on the high places. But, while venerating the Lord, they served their own gods …. (2 Kings 17:27–33)

What was Josiah's program? To incorporate Israel into his own country and to impart to his new subjects knowledge of the true religion. Is this congruence an accident? Throughout the narrative of Kings, a persistent topos of unfinished business links pairs of historical figures after whom Josiah appears to be modeling himself as a new, improved, version, minus all the mistakes. Moses and Joshua, David and Solomon, Elijah and Elisha. This is, of course, not a purely secular consideration but a burning desire to be the ideal king as God's agent on earth. It is thus hardly surprising that a number of Josiah's models became Messianic figures, or that Christian commentators have long added John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth to Josiah's models.

23. I do not concur with attempts to apply 10:5–34 to Sargon II (Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 59, 138–39, 205–11, 232–33; Beuken, *Jesaja 1–12* [Freiberg: Herder, 2003], 280–81) in order to manufacture a completely imaginary campaign against Jerusalem, either in connection with the fall of Samaria or the Ashdod revolt (pace Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 450–58 and *Isaiah 13–27*, 81–82). Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 252–54 gives a very noncommittal date of 722–701 for the initial referent, but leans to Sennacherib only for Isa. 10:15 (p. 256).

It is well known that a number of Mesopotamian kings appear in biblical tradition as weapons of God. This is for the simple reason that God did not often punish directly in this world, but instead gave victory to Israel's enemies. Though these people were foreigners and thus disqualified from being ideal kings (or Messiahs), their actions could still be interpreted as signs from God as to what he wanted and thus qualify as models for what an ideal king (or Messiah) would do. And, again as with the Judahite candidates, Josiah plays an important role in designating particular Mesopotamian kings as (unwitting) weapons of God.

As presented in 2 Kings 16, Tiglath-pileser III forced Ahaz to remove one of the latter's cultic innovations from the Temple of the Lord:

> King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria. When he saw the altar in Damascus, king Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest a model of the altar and a detailed design of its construction. … (he took the old bronze altar for his own private use …) (But) in deference to the king of Assyria he removed from the temple of the Lord the emplacement, which had been built in the temple for a throne, and the outer entrance for the king. (2 Kings 16:10–18)

Here was a precedent for Josiah to remove of the Chariot of the Sun and furthermore a second king to provide the usual paired models typical of the Josianic narrative. In other words, father (Tiglath-pileser) and son (Sargon) would appear to have started a process that it was Josiah's destiny to complete, making Sargon in Josiah's eyes a weapon of God.[24] Moreover, if Psalm 72, fairly clearly a paean to Sargon II and his crown prince Sennacherib, was in origin Josiah's coronation hymn, then Josiah aspired to be an ideal king on an Assyrian as well as an Israelite model—with the wisdom of Solomon and the social conscience of Sargon II. In short, God's message via Sargon II, as enshrined by Josiah, was that Assyrian attempts at reform of religion and Assyrian models of kingship were pleasing to God. This again essentially rules out Sargon II as the "oppressor" of Isaiah 14.

SENNACHERIB?

A promising Assyrian candidate for the evil tyrant is Sennacherib, who was an enemy of Judah and Jerusalem, and who—from Josiah's perspective—weighed in on the wrong side of the question of high places. We may also safely assume, with Clements, that Josiah was responsible for the Isaianic verses that describe the devastation of the Assyrian army by the Angel of the Lord as punishment for Sennacherib's hubris (Isa. 37:36).[25] However, if Sennacherib was indeed the tyrant, why was Isaiah 14 not included when Isaianic prophecies were mustered against him? And this is by no means the only problem.

Sennacherib was not an *implacable* enemy of Judah; in fact, he was an unworthy adversary who let himself be bought off. Isaiah 36–37 is the biblical proof text usually cited in support of alleged Assyrian unmeasured violence in general and of the "catastrophic" nature of Sennacherib's 701 campaign in particular. Indeed, it is this and not any actual passage in Sennacherib's annals that inspired Sweeney's assertions that Sennacherib claims to have *destroyed* the cities of Judah and that, having turned it into a smoking ruin, Sennacherib

24. Note also the very curious Isa. 8:23, which refers to Naphtali and Zebulon as "degraded" and the three Assyrian provinces created by Tiglath-pileser III from those very regions as "glorified" (with *NAB, RSV, JPS*, Beuken, *Jesaja 1–12*, 234; Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 185–86; Wildberger *Isaiah 1–12*, 384; and the Hebrew against *NAB*, Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 104–6 and Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 245). In view of the fact that Isa. 8:23 is directly quoted in Matthew 4:14–16 to claim Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, the second action by God *must* have been regarded as favorable. For discussion of this passage, which goes back to E. Forrer, see Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 184–87; Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 394–95; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 247; and Beuken, *Jesaja 1–12*, 239, 244–45.

25. See Scurlock, "Prophecy," 301–2, 309; cf. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 18–19.

made Judah an Assyrian province.[26] This is in defense of the dating of the bulk of Isa. 1:2–31, a clear reference to the last days of Jerusalem under Zedekiah,[27] instead to Sennacherib.[28] This argument has never made a great deal of sense. What was so miraculous about Hezekiah's deliverance in 701 if all that was left of the Southern Kingdom was "daughter Zion like a hut in a vineyard" (Isa. 1:8)?

In fact, assignment of this latter text to Sennacherib is simply impossible precisely *because* of the mention of wasted countryside and burnt cities in Isa. 1:7. As I have argued elsewhere,[29] Isaiah 36–37 is a prophecy issued to the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, that makes a direct reference to the campaigns of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II as horrifically violent, including most strikingly mention of the Babylonian destruction of Harran in 609 (Isa. 37:8–32).[30] This is in stark contrast to the relatively uneventful ("not so much as an arrow shot") arrival of Sennacherib at Jerusalem (Isa. 36:1–37:7, 38:33–38)[31] with Judean cities taken and plundered but not destroyed, knocked down, or burnt, a picture fully consistent with the description of this campaign in Sennacherib's own annals.[32]

Recent excavations at Lachish and analysis of the clay of the Lachish Letters[33] fully confirm this picture of a diminished but certainly more than just surviving Judah and the Shephalah, leaving more than a little wasting and burning for Nebuchadnezzar to inflict. The purpose of this juxtaposition of Sennacherib's campaign with Nebuchadnezzar's was to ensure that the latter, despite all appearances to the contrary, would ultimately prove as unsuccessful in damaging Judah and besieging Jerusalem as Sennacherib.[34] Here was a miracle to be hoped for!

In the process of Zedekiah's redaction of the Isaianic narrative, Isa. 10:5–15 was removed from its original position in an early version of what is now Isaiah 36–37[35] in order to make

26. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–4*, 126–27.

27. Isa. 1:5–7: "Where would you be struck, you that rebel again and again … Your country is waste, your cities burnt with fire" could not be a clearer reference to Jerusalem's persistence in embroiling itself in the fall of Assyria with devastating consequences. At this point, Jerusalem itself seems still to have been hanging by a thread, which would suggest a date in Zedekiah's reign. The passage would have been intended to give some last rays of hope to the faithful. On this point, see also Beuken, *Jesaja 1–12*, 68–69, for the general setting, but without specific reference to Zedekiah or to Nebuchadnezzar II. As such, it does indeed connect to Isaiah 36–39 (so, for example, C. R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39* [Louisville: John Knox, 1993], 23), which I would also date to Zedekiah.

28. In Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 59, 74, 77, 80, 85, and 87, Isa. 1.2–18, refer to Sennacherib's campaign or to its preparation (cf. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 3, 21, 26–32, 55, 63; Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 28–38; M. K. Y. H. Hom, *The Characterization of the Assyrians in Isaiah: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives* [New York: T. & T. Clark, 2012], 13–16), and Isa. 1:21–31 is more or less thrown as a bone to those who insist that the entire passage belongs to the Syro-Ephramite war. Since Assyria was on the Judean side of this particular conflict, this is wildly implausible. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 183–84, 249, also opts for Sennacherib. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 23, 31–38, argues for Sennacherib but from the perspective of Manasseh's reign. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 32, 36–37, identifies 1:9 and 1:27 as post-587 additions.

29. Scurlock, "Prophecy," 287–311.

30. See Scurlock, "Prophecy," 291–95.

31. See Scurlock, "Prophecy," 295–97, 301.

32. Sennacherib was not a soft touch, and the phrases "I destroyed, knocked down, and burnt" appear frequently in his annals but *not* in his description of this campaign. Instead, we have "I took and I plundered"—full stop, end of sentence (D. D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1924], 31 ii 68–72, 32 iii 6–7, 32/33 iii 18–27, 31–34). For more on this subject, and the correct re-dating of Sennacherib's reliefs alleged to show the destruction of Judah but instead depicting Sennacherib's fifth campaign, see J. Jeffers, "Fifth-Campaign Reliefs in Sennacherib's 'Palace without Rival' at Nineveh," *Iraq* 73 (2011): 87–116.

33. For details, see J. A. Scurlock, "Seeing Double: The Alleged Two Sieges of Jerusalem by Sennacherib" (in preparation).

34. See Scurlock, "Prophecy," 302–4.

35. See Scurlock, "Prophecy," 295, 308–9.

room for an anti-Nebuchadnezzar prophecy that predicted the latter's failure and the fall of Babylon on analogy with Sennacherib's demise and the fall of Assyria.[36] When this had been done, Isa. 10:5–15 was apparently re-contextualized along identical lines, that is to say, it was attached to verses (Isa. 10:16–34) referring to the fall of Assyria. A Nebuchadnezzar verse (Isa. 10:7) was added[37] to link once more Sennacherib with Nebuchadnezzar and to form a ring structure for the resulting narrative.[38]

Understood in this way, Sennacherib becomes a peaceful, if unusually thorough,[39] plunderer, an impression fully substantiated by Mic. 5:4–5, which refers to Sennacherib's invasion of Judah as "treading upon our land/borders." Neither is it the case that Sennacherib was *an* enemy, let alone the *major* enemy,[40] of Yahweh. It was Assyrian policy to present themselves not as opponents but as friends of local gods who were enlisted in support of Assyrian rule[41] and, indeed Sennacherib claims to worship Yahweh, not to fight him:

> But if you say to me: "We rely on the Lord our God," is he not the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, commanding Judah and Jerusalem to worship before this altar? … Was it without the Lord's will that I have come up to destroy this land? The Lord said to me: "Go up and destroy that land!" (Isa. 36:7, 10–11)

Sennacherib was anathematized in the original Isaianic narrative[42] not for attacking Yahweh, but for having no idea who Yahweh actually is, which yields a very distinctive Sennacherib topos of the hubristic and clueless weapon of God:[43]

> Will the axe boast against him who hews with it? Will the saw exalt itself above him who wields it? As if a rod could sway him who lifts it, or a staff him who is not wood! (Isa. 10:15)[44]

36. See Scurlock, "Prophecy," 302–3, 309–11.

37. That this verse, also often cited as proof of Assyrian unmeasured violence (see for example, H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 417–18), is intrusive is readily apparent from the disjunction between Isa. 10:7, in which everyone is exterminated, and Isa. 10:13, in which merely the high are brought low—there is no mention of dying at all. Who is supposed to be "chirping" (Isa. 10:14) if everyone is dead? And then there is the comparison that the text draws between the future treatment of Jerusalem by Assyria and her past treatment of Samaria (Isa. 10:10–11). If Assyria had genuinely "annihilated" Samaria (Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 92), who would constitute the ten lost tribes of Israel? Curious also is the phrase "nations not a few," a reference to the extent to which Nebuchadnezzar's ravages affected "the whole earth" (Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 123–24, 127–38). It would seem that Isa. 10:7 does indeed represent someone exceeding his commission, but that someone is Nebuchadnezzar II. For that reason, it was hoped, Nebuchadnezzar II would prove to be another Sennacherib.

38. For the striking correlations between Isa. 10:5–27 and 36–37, see also Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 253–54.

39. Usually, Assyrians replaced the people they had deported. In this case, however, Judah survived as an independent political entity, which meant that replacing people was Hezekiah's problem, which he seems to have solved by depopulating Benjamin. It is certainly *not* the case that the Benjaminites who left their graffiti in the Siloam tunnel were refugees from the Northern Kingdom. Assyrians made sure that refugees fleeing their campaigns were sent back. On the other hand, what the new owner did with territory he had been awarded as his share of the booty on joint campaigns was his business.

40. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–4*, 12.

41. See J. A. Scurlock, "Josiah: The View from Mesopotamia," *BibRes* 51 (2006): 16–17; Scurlock, "Prophecy," 297.

42. As I see it, the original redaction of this prophecy cannot be assigned to the historical Isaiah, although it would be close enough in time (Esarhaddon's reign) to have been authored by one of Isaiah's disciples. See Scurlock, "Prophecy," 295, 308–9.

43. For a full discussion of these matters, see Scurlock, "Prophecy."

44. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 59, 138–39, 205–11, 232–33, assigns 10:5–34 to Sargon II. Beuken, *Jesaja 1–12*, 279–81, takes Isa. 10:5–19 to be an Assyrian mishmash with no particular referent but concurs that 10:27–34 is a reference to Sargon II. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 415, lists eleven other scholars who have suggested Sennacherib, but himself prefers Sargon II in connection with the revolt of Ashdod (cf. *Isaiah 1–12*, 450–58 and *Isaiah 13–27*,

The rod and the "staff" are the rod and ring, which Aššur wields as symbol of kingship over gods and men. The axe is shown on the seal of Tukulti-Ninurta I, with which Esarhaddon sealed his succession treaties,[45] and among Mesopotamian gods the saw belongs only to Šamaš,[46] whom Aššur is shown riding as a winged disk in such a way that Aššur's body forms the rod which passes through a ring in the center of Šamaš's wings. The reference is therefore to the symbols of the god whom Sennacherib supposed to be named Aššur and to be the god of Mount Ebiḫ and the city of Aššur. But according to Isaiah, and as confirmed by the manner of Sennacherib's death,[47] his true name was Yahweh and he was actually the god of Mount Zion and Jerusalem.

The issue at the center of this question was not merely a matter of what you call your god or where you situate him. If the equation with Yahweh had been linked with any other god of the Assyrian pantheon, there would have been no problem. However, although one could worship Aššur anywhere one pleased, needing only to set up his symbol in a small shrine or even in the open air, he had only one full-fledged temple. So, if Aššur and Yahweh were a single god, that would mean that—from the Assyrian perspective—he could be worshiped in Judah only in one of the numerous high places scattered about the countryside. Therefore, the Temple in Jerusalem, albeit hardly illegitimate, could not be a temple of Yahweh but of some other god.

This is the bite of the remark about Hezekiah and the high places. If it was true that Yahweh was worshiped exclusively in these high places that Hezekiah had destroyed, he was essentially all but declaring war on the deity and we might understand that Yahweh might have become seriously angry and want the land to be "destroyed."

It is hard to imagine just what a can of worms this will have opened among the intellectuals of Judah. We know from archaeological as well as textual sources that the earliest places of Yahwist worship in Judah were indeed those high places and that the kings, whose position was itself an innovation based on imitation of the peoples around them, were responsible for establishment of the Temple. This Temple had been built in a surviving Jebusite city (2 Sam. 5:6–9) over the objections of its future occupant (2 Sam. 7:1–7). The interior decoration was entrusted to Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 7:13–47), and the first temple servants were Canaanites (Josh. 9). Worse, the legitimacy of the cult places destroyed by Hezekiah was something about which feelings were so strong in Judah outside of Jerusalem that the issue was still very much alive in the Hellenistic period.[48]

There is no reason to suppose that Josiah had any quarrel with the equation of Yahweh with Aššur nor indeed with understanding Sennacherib as a weapon of God. The issue of the high places was, however, of burning importance and, I would argue, it was this that motivated the addition of the supplemental verses. Josiah's re-reading[49] will have left Sennacherib as the chosen weapon of God sent to Judah—as any good weapon should have been—to

81–82; Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 109–13). Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 91–95 (cf. Hom, *Characterization*, 36–44), is one of those who recognize that Isa. 10:15 is a reference to Sennacherib.

45. See S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (Helsinki: Helsinki Univ. Press, 1988), 28.

46. This is the Mesopotamian god of justice, which is why Isaiah, in a classic miscarriage of justice, is supposed to have been sawn in half by Manasseh.

47. See Scurlock, "Prophecy," 298–301. There is no such god as Nisroch (pace Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 93). For a suggestion that the term is a Hebrew wordplay on the Akkadian word "divine standard/weapon," see Scurlock, "Nisroch," *NIDB* s.v.

48. See J. A. Scurlock, "167 B.C.E.: Hellenism or Reform?" *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian Hellenistic and Roman Periods* 31 (2000): 125–61, esp. 135, 137, 153–57.

49. See Scurlock, "Prophecy," 301–2, 309; cf. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 18–19.

eradicate pagan worship. However, Sennacherib completely misunderstood his commission and thought he was supposed to be defending the high places rather than getting rid of them.

When a ruler makes a mistake of this magnitude, his people suffer the consequences, which provided a ready explanation for why they were, in Josiah's time, going down to defeat at the hands of Babylon, of all people, and gave reassurance that this situation was to continue. The Angel of the Lord who destroyed Sennacherib's army, according to Josiah's understanding, would return to finish the job. Sennacherib remained, however, a more than usually hubristic and clueless weapon of God.

It is highly problematic that this Sennacherib topos is absent from Isaiah 14. Moreover, as with Sargon II, whether we take the entire passage as referring to a single human king or to a god and king duo, Sennacherib's murder by his own sons, a spectacular demise to which reference could hardly be omitted, essentially disqualifies him from consideration as our tyrant.

NABONIDUS?

This exclusion probably also holds for Nabonidus, who died in exile, having lost everything, a fate that would certainly have been mentioned. Indeed, Nabonidus is, by any measure, the least likely Babylonian candidate. Isa. 14:4–22 requires an unrepentant adversary guilty not merely of oppression but of acts of violence against Judah: relentless blows struck in wrath, mowing down of nations, worlds made into deserts, and cities razed. Nabonidus is guilty of none of these things against anyone, let alone Judah.

Nabonidus dedicated a good part of his reign to undoing damage wrought by his predecessors. He returned Marduk to the fold, incorporating him as a minor member of the pantheon, a cultic reform that had been much better received in Babylon than Cyrus's propaganda would have us believe.[50] He also rebuilt Harran to please the Arameans, and there are indications that some in the Jewish community were actually expecting Nabonidus to approve restoration of the Temple as well (Baruch 1:1–12).

Neither was Nabonidus remembered as unrepentant. Judeo-Aramaic tradition goes so far as to understand him as a convert to Judaism. Finally, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, Nabonidus does not receive criticism from the prophet Daniel. Indeed, the stories in Daniel that feature Nebuchadnezzar, but that may in fact be references to Nabonidus, are conversion narratives in which the king is driven out into the desert (i.e., Tayma) to find God. In any case, Nabonidus was a friend, not a foe, and a more obvious candidate for God's anointed than for evil tyrant. Indeed, in many ways, Cyrus II of Anšan, who receives the palm of God's anointed (Isa. 44:24–28), was simply continuing the policies of Nabonidus.[51]

NEBUCHADNEZZAR II?

For Isaiah 14, this elimination of possibilities leaves us with Nebuchadnezzar II as the sole remaining candidate for tyrant. Indeed, there is a passage in Isaiah that more or less confirms this:

50. A. Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JSOT* 25 (1983): 83–97, points out the extent to which Cyrus modeled himself after the Assyrian king Aššurbanipal for cogent political reasons, namely to take advantage of the Assyrian king's popularity in Babylonia—even in the city of Babylon itself. Nabonidus's similar attempts at emulation were unsuccessful less because his religious policies were unpopular in and of themselves than due to his failure to appear for the Babylonian New Years' Festival year after year. Curiously, the revolts in Babylon against Darius and Xerxes involved princelings who claimed to be sons of Nabonidus, a good indication that he was not hated there, at least in retrospect.

51. As suggested by Kuhrt, "Cyrus Cylinder," 93.

> Make ready to slaughter his sons for the guilt of their fathers, lest they rise and possess the earth, and fill the breadth of the world with tyrants. (Isa. 14:21)

Nebuchadnezzar II died a natural death, leaving it to the sons to pay for the sins of their father. And paid they did. The Neo-Babylonian period is the sorry story of one assassination after another. What seems to be contemplated in Isa. 14:21 is a revolt on the part of Judeans in Babylonia with or without the participation of native Babylonians against the sons of the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar. Considering that both Nebuchadnezzar's son, Amel-Marduk, and his grandson, Labaši-Marduk,[52] succumbed to assassination plots, there is ample motive for a united effort, with restoration to Jerusalem as the price for cooperation. Cyrus, of course, rendered all this plotting and scheming unnecessary, and so may provide a *terminus ante quem* for the oracle.

Quite apart from these considerations, Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II, once roused, were implacable enemies who quite literally did make the world a desert and raze its cities:

> When they see you they will stare, pondering over you: "Is this the man who made the earth tremble, and kingdoms quake? Who made the world a desert, razed its cities, and gave the captives no release? (Isa. 14:16–17)

According to the Babylonian chronicles,[53] Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II spent year after year "marching around victoriously," a euphemism for total and permanent destruction.[54] Also included in the chronicle accounts are references to burning cities with fire,[55] leaving them with "not one man alive,"[56] and turning them into ruin heaps.[57] In no year is there any mention of appointing governors, resettling refugees, or rebuilding apart from the installation of garrisons and, of course, the installation of a puppet king in Jerusalem.[58] Excavations at Kalḫu have turned up evidence for mass graves, the most disgusting being some 180 bodies of young men who had been chained together and then thrown into the palace wells to drown.[59] Or, as Nabopolassar puts it in summarizing his manly deeds: "I killed the Subarean and turned his cities into heaps of ruins."[60]

Moreover, Babylonian religious policy was in striking contrast to that of Assyria. Not only did Neo-Babylonian kings attribute their enemies' deeds to the actions of enemy gods in a direct and literal way, but they also targeted the cult centers of their enemies by literally killing gods who were considered to be Marduk's divine enemies.[61] And any god who did agree to submit in total and abject terms, allowing Marduk the first fruits of every sacrifice to which he or she would otherwise have been entitled, was considered an enemy of Marduk.[62] Jeremiah warns of the imminent campaign of Nebuchadnezzar II against Egypt in the following words:

52. W. Röllig, *RLA* VI (1983): 409.
53. A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustin, 1975), no. 3:53–65 (611–610 in Assyria), no. 5:12–23, 1'–7' (605–601 in Hatti).
54. See Scurlock, "Josiah," 18–19.
55. Grayson, *Chronicles*, no. 3:71; no. 4:3, 10.
56. Grayson, *Chronicles*, no. 3:57.
57. Grayson, *Chronicles*, no. 3:45; no. 5:20.
58. Grayson, *Chronicles*, no. 5:11–13.
59. See Scurlock, "Josiah," 18–19.
60. S. Langdon, *Die neubabylonischen Königsinschriften* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1912), no. 15, 29–31.
61. See below.
62. See Scurlock, "Josiah," 15, for the Babylonian explanation of what happened to the Gutians.

> He shall set fire to the temples of Egypt's gods, and burn the gods or carry them off. As a shepherd delouses his cloak, he shall delouse the land of Egypt and depart victorious. He shall smash the obelisks of the temple of the sun in the land of Egypt and destroy with fire the temples of the Egyptian gods. (Jer. 43:12–13)

In the ancient Near East this treatment of statues and temples was understood generally as deicide. Or, to quote Aššurbanipal in reference to his Elamite campaign: "Its gods and goddesses, I counted as *zaqīqu*'s," that is, one level down in existence even from ghosts.[63] There is no question that the burning of the Temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II was understood by the latter as a direct attack on, defeat, and execution of a recalcitrant Yahweh by Marduk. Or to quote the Isaianic narrative, ostensibly talking about Sennacherib but actually referencing Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II's religious policy: [64]

> Truly, O Lord, the kings of "Assyria" have laid waste all the nations and their lands and cast their gods into the fire. (Isa. 37:18–19)

I hasten to add that it was intended that the deceased gods be brought back to life after they had agreed to Marduk's terms, a subtlety not accepted in Judah.[65] This brings us to consideration of the implications of the conception of warfare as a battle in which both humans and gods were involved, of the apparent separation between oppressor and king in Isaiah 14. Assuming that the "king" is referring to a god, does this allow us to argue that the god in question is Marduk, which would have to be the case if Nebuchadnezzar II is the referent of Isaiah 14? Yes it does.

MARDUK OR AŠŠUR?

We have already argued that the intellectuals of Judah essentially accepted the equation of Aššur with Yahweh along with the terrible headaches that this equation will have caused them. This would make it virtually certain that Marduk was the object of vituperation here. There are a number of remarks made in Isaiah 14 that specifically reference Marduk and not Aššur, and that from a purely Mesopotamian perspective.

Aššur was a universal god, while Marduk was the god of the city of Babylon alone, but according to the Babylonian Creation Epic, the complex of Sumer and Akkad (i.e., Babylonia) was under his sole, very autocratic authority delegated to him by the divine assembly and by Aššur himself.[66] So Akkad was, in some sense, Marduk's own land,[67] the implication of Isa. 14:21 (as well as Isa. 37:18): "For you have ruined your land, you have slain your people."

This claim may sound absurd on the surface of it. However, included among the targets of Marduk's wrathful destruction of the cult centers of other gods, as we know from Nabonidus, were those of the cities of Akkad (that is, Babylonia), which had sided with Assyria:

> (Marduk) provided him (Nabopolassar) with helpers … (And) he (the king of the Ummanmanda) swept on like a flood storm … avenging Babylon in retaliation. The king of the Ummanmanda … demolished the sanctuaries of all the gods of Subartu (Assyria). He also demolished

63. See Scurlock, "Josiah," 17–18, 21–22.

64. See Scurlock, "Josiah," 19–20.

65. "You are gods, all of you, sons of the Most High; yet like men you shall die, and fall like any prince. Rise, O God, judge the earth, for yours are all the nations." Ps. 82.6–8.

66. *Enūma eliš* VI 68–VII 162.

67. This attack on Akkadian cities and Akkadian gods that had defied Marduk was actually celebrated in the school curriculum of Neo-Babylonian scribes. See Scurlock, "Josiah," 20–21.

> the towns within the territory of Akkad (Babylonia) which were hostile to the king of Akkad and had not come to his assistance (in fighting Assyria). None of their cult centers did he omit, laying waste their towns worse than a flood storm.[68]

More to the point, Aššur was an eternal god; Marduk was merely immortal. The difference is that eternal gods never die, whereas immortal gods could go to the Netherworld and come back again as if nothing had happened. This might be on their own terms, but they could also be killed by other gods. Usually, but not always, it was a case of Marduk killing other immortals. Once a year Marduk and Ninurta killed each other and both ended up in the Netherworld to be rescued only through the intervention of the goddess Gula.[69]

Once Marduk had very nearly died for good. The city of Babylon was completely destroyed with the intention of its never being rebuilt, with its rivers diverted over it. This included the destruction of Marduk's sanctuary and the smashing of his cult statue, bits of which were kept in a storehouse until Aššurbanipal fashioned him a new physical body, described in Assyrian sources as the literal rebirth of the god.[70] Thus, not only did he die, but he was quite literally left unburied, as reiterated in Isaiah 14. Particularly apt from the perspective of Judah was the fact that Babylon's destroyer was none other than Sennacherib, the same king who miserably failed to take Jerusalem, a sign from God if there ever was one.

And again there's more. It has long been recognized that Isaiah 45–47 constitutes a sort of pair with Isaiah 14.[71] In Isaiah 45–47, there is undisputedly a confrontation between gods, and the enemy divinity is clearly identified as Marduk, who along with Nabû, is carried off into captivity (46:1–2):

> Bēl (Marduk) bows down, Nabû stoops; their idols are upon beasts and cattle. They must be borne on the shoulders, carried as burdens by the weary. They stoop and bow down together, unable to save those who bear them, they too go into captivity. (Isa. 46:1–2)[72]

This would make Marduk a prime candidate for the divine half of the human/divine pair in Isaiah 14.

AND WHO IS THE SHINING ONE, SON OF THE DAWN?

The idea, exclusively based on Isaiah, that there was a West Semitic myth of Helel has a long history in biblical scholarship, going back at least to Hermann Gunkel. Various suggestions have been made to identify this myth, but there is currently no consensus as to which—if any—of these potential comparands has any connection with Isaiah 14.[73] I believe that I have found the missing original. It is neither West Semitic nor indeed part of the general mythic tradition of mankind. It is not even particularly mythological. It has no color or spark; it features no monsters or dramatic events. It explains nothing about the natural world;

68. See Scurlock, "Josiah," 20.

69. For details, see Scurlock, "Feasting in the Garden of God: Ramat Rahel and the Origins of Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur," in *What Difference Does Time Make? Papers from the Ancient and Islamic Middle East and China in Honor of the 100th Anniversary of the Midwest Branch of the American Oriental Society*, ed. J. Scurlock and R. Beal (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2019), 44–74.

70. See G. Frame, "Aššur in Babylonia," in *Assyria 1995*, ed. S. Parpola and R. Whiting (Helsinki: Helsinki Univ. Press, 1995), 64 n. 50.

71. So, for example, Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 288. For a discussion of the parallelisms between Isaiah 14 and Isaiah 47, see C. A. Franke, "Reversals of Fortune in the Ancient Near East," in *New Visions of Isaiah*, ed. R. F. Melugin and M. A. Sweeney (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1966), 104–23.

72. For a discussion of this passage, see Vanderhooft, *Neo-Babylonian Empire*, 175–80.

73. For a full discussion, see Hays, *Death*, 211–15.

neither does it stand alone. Instead, we are imagining a cosmic conflict between the gods Marduk and Anu taking place "off stage" while more obviously mythological events occur in the course of the Babylonian New Years' Festival.

In Mesopotamian terms, the attack of the Day Star in Isa. 14:12–13 would come out something like:

> How have you fallen from the heavens, O Shining One, son of the Dawn! … You said in your heart: "I will scale the heavens; above the stars of Anu (the highest heaven and the equivalent of El Elyon) I will set up my throne.

On the surface, this would seem to come out of left field. According to the Babylonian Creation Epic *Enūma eliš*, which was recited before Marduk every year during the Babylonian New Years' Festival, Marduk presented the Tablet of Destinies, which he had wrested from the evil usurper Qingu, to his grandfather Anu, with whom he was apparently on the best of terms.[74]

Assyrian cultic commentaries, however, reveal that, in the ritual of the Babylonian New Years' Festival, Qingu was equated with Anu, and not only that, but Marduk, as revealed in the commentaries on other events of the yearly cultic calendar, bloodily defeated not only Anu and Enlil but even his own father Ea with distressing regularity throughout the year. In the eleventh month (Šabaṭu), for example, Qingu was thrown from a roof, Enlil's eyes were torn out, and Anu had his neck slashed, his head cut off, and his hide flayed.[75]

In other words, the Babylonian Creation Epic recounted one myth with a rosy picture of the relationship between Marduk and the rest of the pantheon, while the accompanying ritual was founded upon a different myth with a rather darker vision of the actual relationship between Marduk and the other gods, particularly those above him in the divine pecking order. But what does any of this have to do with the Day Star?

Key here is the realization that the "Shining One, Son of the Dawning Day" (*helel ben šahar*), as was recognized already by some of the classic commentators,[76] is not, in fact, the planet Venus.[77] The Mesopotamian Ištar (Venus) was both morning and evening star, but she was feminine in the East as the morning star and masculine only in the West as the evening star. So, too, in Greek mythology, is Dawn (Aurora) female and Evening (Hesperos) male. The "Son of the Dawn" is what is usually referred to as the Day Star, i.e., the planet Mercury. Similarly, at Ugarit, Attartu is variously the planet Venus (Hurrian Attartu = Ištar of Nineveh) and the Bow Star (*Attartu ša šadi* = Ištar of Arbela), whereas *Attaru* (*ša šadi*) is the planet Mercury.[78]

74. *Enūma eliš* V 69–70. Talon, *Enūma eliš*, has mistakenly interpreted the divine name $^{d}60$ as Ea rather than Anu. For the correct translation, see A. K. Grayson, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), 502.

75. A. Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* (Helsinki: Helsinki Univ. Press, 1989), no. 40.

76. H. Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 90.

77. Ironically, the connections with Athar's ascendency at Ugarit (Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 237; Beuken, *Jesaja 13–27*, 89–91; Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 142–43; Jensen, "Helel," 342) still hold. To be completely discarded, however, are Sweeney's outdated comments on Tammuz (*Isaiah 1–39*, 237–38)—the wailing for this god of shepherds takes place at the beginning of summer, i.e., the dry season, and rains do not come in this part of the world until the fall.

78. Like the planet Mercury, Attaru was visible in the spring and summer (which is when we always encounter him in the epic and in ritual) and his small size is consistent with the relative size of the planet. He is wise, as is Nabû; he is known as "Athar of the Star [MUL]" and at Emar he is equated lexically with Ninurta, Nabû's avatar and a god of warfare (M. S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle 1* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994], 24). Compare also the pre-Islamic Arabian divinity Attar *šarqan* ("Eastern Attar"), who was a male warrior god.

Mercury, like Venus, is both a morning and an evening star, since it always appears in close proximity to the sun as seen from the earth, and disappears when the sun is too high above or too low below the horizon. The Greeks originally thought that the morning and evening star were two separate planets. Even after contact with the Near East straightened out this misapprehension, they continued to use the term Phosphoros (Latin Lucifer) to refer to either Mercury or Venus when seen in the morning and Hesperos to refer to either planet when seen in the evening.[79] Thus the appearance of Phosphoros in the Septuagint and Lucifer in the Vulgate does not compromise the identification of this planet with Mercury.

A statement that a planet is rising and setting up its throne above the stars is a clear reference to what is termed in astronomy a heliacal rising and the fall from heaven a heliacal setting. The planet Mercury's first heliacal rising of the year was noted by ancient astronomers as ideally occurring in Nisannu,[80] the month of the Babylonian New Year's Festival, which was held in this month because Marduk's own planet (Jupiter) also had its first annual heliacal rising then.[81]

The height of the Babylonian New Years' Festival was on the fifth of Nisannu, as described in a Seleucid copy of instructions for the performance of the festival, which may be fleshed out by consultation of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian cultic commentaries.

The ritual instructions for the evening of the fifth of Nisannu read:

> Forty minutes after sunset, the high priest ties forty straight reeds of three cubits each, which have been neither cut nor broken, into a bundle with a palm frond. In the great courtyard, they open up a pit, and he puts (them) into the pit. He puts in honey, ghee, pure oil (and) … They … a white ox ⌜before⌝ [the planet Mercury].[82] The king [introduces] an ignited fire into it by means of a reed. The king and [high priest say] this *naqbītu*-prayer: "Shining Mercury[83] that ⌜brightens⌝ [the darkness …] burner of Anu."[84]

To summarize, in the Esagila shortly after sunset the high priest used a palm frond to tie forty straight reeds of three cubits each, which had been neither cut nor broken, into a bundle. They dug a pit in the great courtyard of the Esagila and put the reed bundle into it. Honey, ghee, and pure oil were poured over it and a white ox was placed into position. The king used a reed torch to set fire to the contents of the pit, while he and the high priest uttered a *naqbītu*-prayer invoking the planet Mercury as "burner of Anu."

As noted in Neo-Assyrian cultic commentaries: "the bundle of reeds which one prepares is Bel (i.e., Marduk), treading on the necks of his … relentless enemies,"[85] which is doubtless why they are specifically said to be those "which have been neither cut nor broken," that is to say they are symbolically undefeated. The invocation of Mercury doubtless has to do

79. See M. A. van der Sluis, "Who are the 'Attendants of Helios'?" *JAOS* 129 (2009): 173–77.

80. See J. A. Black, "The New Year Ceremonies in Ancient Babylon: 'Taking Bel by the Hand' and a Cultic Picnic," *Religion* 11 (1981): 45, 51. Note also: "If a planet becomes visible in Nisannu (this refers to) Jupiter, variant: Mercury" (*SpTU* 1.90:1); and "Pleides, Mercury, [Venus?,] you are the stars of the early morning" (*KAR* 69:7, apud *CAD* Z 50b). Intercalation was meant to ensure that cultically significant astronomical events fell more or less at the appropriate times.

81. See previous note.

82. The name of the planet Mercury is *šiḫṭu* from *šaḫāṭu*, for which the Sumerogram is GU_4.UD. Taken another way, however, the Sumerogram could mean "white ox" (GU_4.BABBAR), hence the choice of offering.

83. The interpretation follows Black, "New Year Ceremonies," 45, 51, but it should be noted that the copy has a clear ZÁLAG in l. 461 where an UD would be required.

84. F. Thureau-Dangin, *Rituels accadiens* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1921), 145/146: 453–62. This also appears in M. J. H. Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon: The Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practices* (Leiden: Brill-Styx, 2004): 223/231 with different restorations and interpretation.

85. Livingstone, *Poetry*, no. 38, 10–11.

with the visibility of this planet in the sky at the time in which the rite was to be performed. If all was as it should be, and calculations based on Neo-Assyrian astronomers' sightings indicate that in most years it was,[86] the planet would have been visible in the night sky at sunset and then again as the sun rose. Mercury rises before and sets after the sun when it is visible,[87] thus metaphorically rising up into the heavens to attack Anu. The ox that was singed in the course of the rite, then, represented Anu, who was imagined as being "burned" by Mercury.

Since a deity became in some sense the god he defeated, the result of such a triumph would have been the assumption of the Anuship (mastery of heaven) by Marduk. In fact, Marduk borrowed the pit fire sacrifice and apparently great swaths of the Babylonian New Years' Festival itself from the cult of Nippur, where it originally celebrated the defeat of Anu and the assumption of Anuship by the local chief god, Enlil. This is confirmed by a cultic commentary from Nippur, which describes the rites performed in that city on the same day as the pit fire sacrifice:

> [In the month] ⌜Nisannu⌝, day five, when the *akītu*-festival of Marduk is held, [and a brush fire] is kindled [in] the gate of the Ekur, (it is) because Enlil entered the uppermost heaven and drew near [to …], put on the crown of Anu (and) sat down on the throne of kingship, and Nusku was consecrated with him. DN sacrificed a […] of greeting to Enlil (and) Enlil was raised to the rites of Anuship.[88]

This pit fire sacrifice was, then, originally Enlil's defeat of Anu, which the Babylonians seem to have borrowed from the cult of Nippur. But for which god? The planet Mercury was originally the planet of Enlil's son Ninurta, who is the obedient and filial warrior who defeated Anu for his father Enlil. With the absorption of Ninurta's functions by Marduk's son Nabû, this defeat should have come along, allowing Nabû to take on Anu while his father Marduk was busy fighting Tiamat. Nonetheless, in the ritual of the Babylonian New Years' Festival as we can reconstruct it, this was not the course events, but it was rather the other way around.

It is quite clear from the ritual instructions and cultic commentaries that the annual defeat of Tiamat was sufficiently unimportant that Marduk actually delegated it to his son Nabû. Instead, Marduk's priority was Anu (i.e., Qingu), Tiamat's lover and a more obvious opponent for a manly warrior god like Marduk than a great-grandmother, even a monstrous one. Poor Anu had his hide removed, dying Orion red with his blood, after which Marduk trampled his severed head with one foot.[89] Nor was Anu the only divinity to be defeated annually by Marduk.

According to a Neo-Assyrian cultic commentary: "Meslamtaea is Marduk, who rises from and goes down to the underworld."[90] Equations of gods with Marduk in Neo-Assyrian cultic commentaries usually translate to defeats. If Marduk is Meslamtaea or vice versa, it is because one of the two of them had defeated the other and relegated him to the Netherworld. In this case, given that the latter is a known Netherworld divinity, it is obvious just who was whose victim. Presumably, at some point during his annual New Years' Festival, Marduk

86. S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal 2: Commentary and Appendices* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1983), 386–96, indicates that in most years Mercury would first be visible in the morning in Nisannu and again in Abu or in the evening in Nisannu and again in Abu as the cycle progressed.

87. KTU 1.2 iii—Smith, *Baal*, 210–59.

88. *OECT* 11 i 3'–8'.

89. Livingstone, *Poetry*, no. 38, 17–22.

90. Livingstone, *Poetry*, no. 39, 7–8; cf. no. 38 r. 19. Both texts contain a poetic description of Marduk (no. 39, 1–18; cf. no. 38 r. 9–17) and no. 38 r. 9 calls him "The Shining One," there mistranslated, but see the apparatus. For KÁR.KÁR = Akkadian *nabāṭu*, see *CAD* N/1:22–24.

defeated Meslamtaea and wrested from him the power to open the gates of the Netherworld at will, a power of Marduk's that is otherwise amply attested.[91] He then borrowed his son's planet for his attack on Anu to gain undisputed control of the heavens.

But when? Several hours before sunrise on the fourth of Nisannu, a series of prayers[92] were delivered to Marduk and Ṣarpanitum as "Shining Light" and "Most Brilliant of the Stars" and to the Esagila as the Iku-star.[93] The implication is that the gods and the temple itself are, at this point, in some metaphysical sense non-existent. This would certainly be the case, for Marduk at least, if he was imagined as having gone up into the heavens on the evening of the third of Nisannu with a view to defeating Meslamtaea. Alternatively, in the spirit of Ištar's invasion of the Netherworld, he may have pursued Meslamtaea down a hole, in either case with a view to becoming his lord.

By this scenario, Marduk would have been (metaphysically speaking) absent until the night following the fifth of Nisannu when he "rose as Meslamtaea," and indeed the prayers that were recited in the Esagila several hours before sunrise on the fifth were not only intended to appease the hearts of an apparently angry Marduk and Ṣarpanitum but were addressed to these gods as stars.[94] Additionally, we know that Marduk was served roasted meat on the fifth of Nisannu,[95] a sure sign that he was imagined as being in transit.[96]

If Marduk went up to the heavens or down to the Netherworld on the evening of the third of Nisannu, returning shortly after sunset on the fifth, he would have been out of his temple, metaphysically speaking, for three days inclusively, or exactly the length of Ištar's sojourn in the Netherworld, according to the legend of Inanna's Descent. Of course, Ištar spent her visit dead and hanging on a peg. Marduk, by contrast, never died on this particular visit but instead defeated death, the only divinity in the ancient Near East to have accomplished this feat, Ugaratic Ba'al having managed no better than a draw.[97]

Every New Year's ritual at Babylon involved the burning of Anu on the fifth of Nisannu, an act appropriated from the rites of Enlil at Nippur to symbolize the defeat of Anu and Enlil's—now Marduk's—triumph over him. Marduk rose into the heavens as Meslamtaea, whom he had spent the third to the fifth of Nisannu trouncing. From the ritual's point of view, it was this assault on Qingu/Anu that was the central event of Marduk's annual festival, and it is this event that Isaiah 14 was meant to answer.

The Jews in exile in Babylonia, whom Isaiah 14 shows to have had intimate knowledge of the ritual of the Babylonian New Years' Festival, were faced with an unprecedented challenge to their faith. Here was a new Imperial God, who accepted no syncretisms except by murder, and who had faced off in single combat with Yahweh and had apparently triumphed. Every year, these Jews were reminded of this defeat while witnessing the ritual performance of Marduk's defeat of Anu. If they were not to convert to the worship of Marduk—Neo-Babylonophile Assyriologists to the contrary notwithstanding—most did not convert, they needed an answer to this powerful attack on their religion. In this regard Isaiah 14 is truly

91. Opening the gates of the Netherworld unleashes the Flood.

92. Thureau-Dangin, *Rituels*, 133/136: 217–78.

93. For the importance of the sighting of the Iku-star at this point in the ritual, see A. L. Oppenheim, "A Babylonian Diviner's Manual," *JNES* 33 (1974): 200: 59.

94. Thureau-Dangin, *Rituels*, 136/140: 285–337. See Black, "New Year Ceremonies," 43.

95. Thureau-Dangin, *Rituels*, 142: 385–91.

96. See Scurlock, "The Techniques of the Sacrifice of Animals in Ancient Israel and Ancient Mesopotamia: New Insights through Comparison," *AUSS* 44 (2006): 38–40.

97. Ba'al is killed in round one, Anat kills Mot in round two, and both gods survive the final battle. D. Pardee, "The Ba'lu Myth," in *The Context of Scripture* 1, ed. W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 263–74.

brilliant and must rank with one of the finest pieces of religiously inspired rhetoric ever penned.

For this purloined festival of Enlil readily lent itself to a hostile midrash. Anu was the highest of Mesopotamian heavens, but he was also the lowest of Mesopotamian earths. Meslamtaea was similarly confusingly located both in the heavens and in the Netherworld. Thus when Marduk thought he was going up, he could always have been going down instead, down to defeat at the hands of Sennacherib to join the ranks of gods who died as men must die (Psalm 82).

Since, moreover, a deity in some sense became the god he had killed, it was always possible that he might unwittingly become the victim of his own sacrifice. It is in this light, I would argue, that we should understand Isa. 30:33, which speaks again of *the* king, as follows:

> For the topheth has long been ready, prepared for the king; broad and deep it is piled with dry grass and wood in abundance, And the breath of the Lord, like a stream of sulphur, will set it afire.[98]

This brings us full circle, for Isaiah 30 ends and completes Isaiah 13–14 in a perfect ring:[99]

> When the Lord has pity on Jacob and again chooses Israel and settles them on their own soil, the aliens will join them and be counted with the house of Jacob. The house of Israel will take them and bring them along to its place, and possess them as male and female slaves on the Lord's soil, making captives of its captors and ruling over its oppressors. (Isa. 14:1–2)

This day that brings an end to weeping (Isa. 30:19) and the gentle rain of God's mercy (Isa. 30:23, 25–26) is also a day of judgment on the nations (Isa. 30:27–28). The fall of Babylon so long predicted by the prophets (Isa. 30:30–32; cf. Isaiah 13) is to be completed by one last mocking celebration of the heart and soul of the Babylonian New Years' Festival, the pit sacrifice of the fifth of Nisan (Isa. 30:33). The faithful are to accompany this celebration with a song (Isa. 30:29):

> On the day the Lord relieves you of sorrow and unrest and the hard service in which you have been enslaved, you will take up this taunt-song against the king of Babylon. (Isa. 14:3–4)

98. For justification of this interpretation, see Scurlock, "A Burning Question" (in preparation).

99. For more on ring structure in Isaiah 14, see R. H. O'Connell, "Ironic Reversal through Concentric Structure and Mythic Allusion," *VT* 38 (1988): 407–18.