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Bel Bows Down, Nebo Stoops Low and They Go Off Together to Captivity

46: 1-13

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HDIG: Bel and Nebo were the names of two principle gods in Babylon. What are they carrying? What happens to them? How does this compare with the LORD in 46:3-4? What do they do for the people that worship them? What things does God say He *has done* and *will do* for Isra'el? Who are the rebels in 46:8 and the stubborn-hearted in 46:12 (see 42:18-25)? How does this relate to the promises in 46:3-4? What will the people learn once more through the events that are soon to occur? The man in 46:11 is Cyrus. Although Isra'el is currently far from righteousness, how will God use Cyrus to bring righteousness near to them? Why is the LORD doing this?

REFLECT: Have you seen people today worn out and let down by the very idols to which they have devoted themselves? Has this happened to you? In contrast to the idols in 46:1-2, how have you experienced God as a Father carrying you when you were weak? Or as a Strong Man, sustaining you when you were tired? Or as a Warrior rescuing you when you were trapped? Isaiah concludes there is none like God. Based on your sampling of modern idols, what would you say comes the closest to, or even approaches God? How do you go about remembering the works of God in your life? Is there anything you could do differently to help yourself remember them? How has God brought His righteousness near to you (Rom 3:21-24; Eph 2:13)?

Throughout **his** prophecies, **Isaiah** has periodically prophesied about the city of **Babylon**. Sometimes **he** dwells on **the Babylon** of Nebuchadnezzar and sometimes the rebuilt city of **Babylon** of **the antichrist**. In this case **he** is talking about **the near historical Babylon** of Nebuchadnezzar and **her idols**. **Babylon** is the original source of all idolatry. It started with **the Tower of Babel** (see the

commentary on **Genesis**, to see link click [DI](#) - **The Tower of Babel**), and the rebellion of **Nimrod** (see the commentary on **Genesis DI** - **The Line of Ham**). Idolatry will end at the conclusion of the Great Tribulation where Jerusalem will become the religious capital of **the antichrist** and **he** will set **himself** up to be worshiped as **god** in the Most Holy Place (see the commentary on **Revelation Dr** - **The Abomination That Causes Desolation**), and **Babylon** will become his political and commercial capital (see the commentary on **Revelation Em** - **With a Mighty Voice He Shouted: Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great**).

In **44:24-28**, **Isaiah** called **Cyrus His Shepherd**, and **45:1-8** saw **him** launch into **his** dazzling career. Now the heart of the matter, as far as **Isra'el** was concerned, was at hand - the fall of **Babylon**. What makes this prophecy remarkable is the fact that at the time of **Isaiah's** writing, **Babylon** was a very small and insignificant kingdom. It would be almost a century before it would become a world power. We are given a bird's-eye view as the phony gods of **Babylon** are unceremoniously carted off from the doomed city. Of course, it did not happen that way. **Isaiah** used figurative language while dealing with pictures and principles. **His** purpose is not to describe but to expose. There is no recorded evacuation of **Babylon** either before or after **Cyrus'** assault, but in a strikingly visual way **Isaiah** presents the truth that **Babylon's** false **gods** could not save **her**.

Because they could not save, Babylon's **idols** are pictured as being taken into captivity. **Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low; their idols are borne by animals, beasts of burden. The loads you yourselves were carrying are now burdening tired animals (46:1 CJB)**. **Isaiah** exposes the two key **Babylonian** gods as being worthless and unable to help **the Jews** in any way. Behind **the idols** of that day was satanic worship, which is becoming more and more popular in our own day. The Word of **God** repeatedly warns us that **our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world and against the forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, we need to defend ourselves by putting on the armor of God (Ephesians 6:13-18)**.



Bel bows down (46:1a). **Bel**, the same title as **Ba'al**, or **lord**, is the shortened form of **Bel Marduk**, the **Babylonian god** of light. **Bel** is also found in the first part of **Beelzebub** - one of Satan's names (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ek - It is only by Beelzebub, the Prince of Demons, that This Fellow Drives Out Demons**). There is an apocryphal book named **Bel and the Dragon**. The Church fathers did not include it with the canon of inspired Scripture, but it is interesting reading in a historical sense. Later, **Bel Marduk** became known as Jupiter in the Roman Empire. **Bel** was the title originally given to Enlil, the so-called father of **the gods** whose center was at Nippur. But **Marduk**, the city god of **Babylon** and hero of *Enuma Elish* (**the Babylonian** creation story), eventually became the chief god of southern Mesopotamia, and the title became his. But now these two most important **gods** of **the Babylonian** pantheon were seen to be **stooped low** as if **they** were in carts to be carried away. The judgment of **God** fell upon these **gods** through **Cyrus**.

Nebo stoops low (46:1b). **Nebo**, **Bel's son**, was worshiped by **the Babylonians**, the Assyrians, and the Sabians in Arabia. **He** was their **god** of wisdom, and was carried annually to **Babylon** to accompany **his father** in the New Year processions. There **he** supposedly wrote on "tablets of destiny" what the coming year would hold for **Babylon** (but apparently he wasn't so prophetic when it came to **Cyrus**). **He** corresponds to the Latin Mercury, the Greek Hermes, and the Egyptian Thoth. The name **Nebo**, or *Nabu*, was supposedly derived from *nabah*, meaning *to prophesy*, and the office of this deity was that of interpreter for the **gods**. **His** symbol was a simple wedge or arrowhead and the name of the planet nearest the sun, Mercury. The popularity of this **god** is seen in the combination of **his** name with the names of ancient kings: for example: *Nebu-chadnezzar*, *Nebu-zaradan*, *Nebu-hashban*, *Nabonedus*, *Nabo-nassar*, *Nabu-rianius*, *Nabo-abus*, *Nabo-polassar*. In light of the prominence of *Nabu* in these names it seems likely that **Nebo**, or *Nabu*, was the

title that the kings of the Babylonian Empire chose to identify themselves with. **He was the patron of the art of writing and patron-god of the Babylonian city of Borsippa, some ten miles south of Babylon.**

The expressions, **bows down** and **stoops low**, evidently refer to the downfall of these idols, and of the system of idolatry of which they were the symbols. According to the prophecy this was to be accomplished by the Persian power. It is, therefore, proper to remark here, that though the Persians worshiped the sun, the moon, the earth, etc., images of **gods** were entirely unknown among them. Herodotus says of them, “they have no images of **the gods**, no temples nor altars and consider the use of them a sign of folly” (Book 1, chapter 131). Thus, it was in perfect accordance with their own customs that the Persians should destroy the graven images of other nations. To **Cyrus** the Persian monarch is this work of destruction **(46:1)**.

When all was said and done, **Babylon’s** mighty **gods** were reduced to being dependent on pack animals. **Their idols are borne by animals, beasts of burden. The loads you yourselves were carrying are now burdening tired animals (46:1 CJB).** **These two** were not only the most prominent of the Babylonian **gods**, but also especially appropriate for **Isaiah’s** denunciation because they were carried in the annual New Year’s Festival procession in **Babylon**. This picture of worshipers carrying **their gods** would be especially appropriate here and in **46:7**. It is as if **God** were saying, “How can a **god** that you have to carry around ever save you?” **The impotence of the gods of Babylon is contrasted with the supreme power of the God of Isra’el. The former are carried away from their country into exile, while God carries His people from captivity into freedom.**

They stoop and bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but they themselves go off into captivity (46:2 CJB). So utterly helpless are **Nebo** and **Bel**, that they cannot deliver **themselves** from captivity, and so worthless that **they** are counted only as **burdensome images that are carried about by beasts of burden.**¹⁷⁷ **Isaiah** says that **they** are **burdensome, a burden for the weary.** Furthermore, **he** tells us that they were **unable to rescue the burden.** These **gods** could not deliver **Babylon** from the invasion of **Cyrus** and the Persians. Now, **they themselves go off into captivity**, the property of **Cyrus** the Great. It is important to see here that **the gods** of **Babylon** were **gods** that needed to be **carried**. That is his main point. But in the rest of the chapter, **ADONAI** gives **three warnings.**

Now **God** turns the tables. The focus of **His** ire is not on the false **gods** of **Babylon**, but on the fragile faith of **the Israelites (46:3-7)**. **The first warning** is to **listen to Me, O house of Jacob, all who remain of the house of Isra'el, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth (46:3)**. **God's** admonition to the Israelites to **listen to Him** is frequently seen in the prophecies of **Isaiah (44:1, 46:3 and 12, 47:8, 48:1, 12, 14 and 16, 51:4, 52:8, 55:2)**. In contrast to the false **gods** that had to be **carried** in ritual procession, **ADONAI** is seen as **carrying Isra'el** from the beginning and will continue to do so until the end. **Carrying** brings three images to mind: a father carrying his child (**Deuteronomy 1:31**), a shepherd carrying his lamb (**Psalm 28:9**), and an eagle carrying its young (**Exodus 19:4; Deuteronomy 32:11**).

Even to your old age and gray hairs I Am He, I am He who will [carry] you (46:4a). In **46:3 God carried His children since birth**, in **46:4 the LORD** says **even** when you are **old I will carry you**. The contrast is even more precise and vivid in the Hebrew text. The carts and the carriages were *loaded* with the weight of **the idols (46:1)**; but we are *loaded* upon **ADONAI**. **Idols** are a *burden*, a thing to be **carried**; but **the LORD** has gladly **carried** us **since** our **birth**. **Isra'el** has changed, from the child in the womb, to the infant growing through adolescence to adulthood, to the onset of gray hairs in old age. But one thing had not changed - the *burden-bearing God*, who **carried His people**.

*There will never come a time when we outgrow our dependence on **the LORD**. We are as dependent on **Him** in our old age as we were when we were infants (Psalm 71:9 and 18). Nor will there ever be a time when a wobbly **old grandfather God** will somehow need to lean on us, or we will need to find a young, virile **God** in the future. **He** is not subject to history; in every age **He** is the unchanging **I Am He**. The **I Am** is self-existent, self-dependent. **He** is above the changes, the limitations, the unforeseen of time and space. **ADONAI** can surely **carry** us through whatever may come our way in this life.*

I have made you and I will carry you: I will sustain you and I will rescue you (46:4b). Nothing could be more comforting, for our **Father** loves and cares for **His children**. **He** carries every care and worry that comes our way throughout our lifetime. The Word of **God** encourages **you** to **cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you (First Peter 5:7)**. The reason they needed to **listen** was to understand that **God** is the One who carries, and does not need to be carried. In contrast to **the Babylonian idols** that needed to be **carried**, **the God of Isra'el** is a **God** who carries **the Jews** from the cradle to the grave.

To whom will you compare Me or count Me equal? To whom will you liken Me that we may be compared (46:5)? And the reason it is so difficult to explain is because **He** is infinite and we are finite and live in a finite universe. There is nothing to compare **Him** to. **He** cannot be reduced to our vocabulary without losing all meaning. **He** cannot be translated into human language. This is why **Jesus** became **a man**. The only way we can know **ADONAI** is through **Yeshua**. **He** revealed **God** to us. As **He Himself** said: **Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father (John 14:9b).**

To reinforce the foolishness of any attempt at comparison, **Isaiah** launches into the fourth and last exposure of the contradictions of **idol** worship (**40:19-20, 41:6-7, 44:9-20** and here). **Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it (46:6).** Here **God** challenges all to compare **Him** with **the Babylonian idols**, all of which were made by human hands. **They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move (46:7a).** **Isaiah** includes a bit of sarcasm here. This is one of several times that **Isaiah** belittled **idols (40:18-20, 41:7, 44:9-20, 45:16 and 20, 46:1-2)**. All the false **gods** had to be carried **and set** in their **place** because they could not **move**. Some **god!** They lugged it around on **their shoulders** and when **they** got home, **they** put it in the corner. In other words, they are unable to save anything. **Though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save him from his troubles (46:7b).** **This shows the absolute absurdity of idolatry.** Though they might give it all their love and attention, but when all was said and done, a thing that could not help itself, could not help others.

The second warning (46:8-11). The second warning is to **remember the works of God**. **He** challenges **the Israelites** to **remember** their past and reminds them that the Jewish prophets had predicted everything that has happened to them so far. Thus, **ADONAI** had shaped the past and revealed the future, not **the idols** of **Babylon**, but **the God of Isra'el**. The real question was this: Given the astonishing nature of **His** claims and promises, would **Isra'el** believe **the LORD** or remain **stubborn-hearted** (see **46:12** below)?

Isaiah had been fighting against the sheer stupidity of idolatry. **He** cautioned: **Remember this, fix it in your mind** (found only here in the Bible), literally *make yourselves firm* and **take it to heart, you rebels (46:8)**. **Isra'el** did and could know better – if only **she** would take a thoughtful account of things, as **she** should have already done. **She** needed to give it some serious thought. This is the same

theme found in **Deuteronomy**. What was the antidote to **her** unbelief? Memory. Moses and all the prophets should have reminded **her** that when **she** remembered **the former things, those of long ago** she would see **God** as **He** really is and know that **she** could believe in **Him**. Is this not true for us also? **He** says, even to us today: **I am EL and there is no other; I am ELOHIM and there is none like Me (46:9). He alone is God.**

I made known, or declared, **the end from the beginning, from ancient times, and what is still to come (46:10a)**. **He** is not only the revealer of the things in the past, **He** is the revealer of things in the future. **He** reveals the whole sweep of human history. **God** says: **My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please (46:10b)**. As in creation (**Psalms 33:9**), so in history, **ADONAI's** will cannot be hindered. Even when some particular experience sidetracks **God's** people, **His** desire will still be accomplished. It is unalterable. The difference between **Him** and the supposed **gods** of wood and stone should have been obvious.

Once again **He** refers to **Cyrus**. **From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose (46:11a)**. He pictures Cyrus (whose standard was an eagle) as **a bird of prey** because he will devour the nations that he comes up against. **What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that will I do (46:11b)**. His promises will be brought **about** because **God** Himself will be at work in human history to accomplish them.

There is a third warning (46:12-13). These two verses turn out to be **Isaiah's** final appeal to **Isra'el** to accept **ADONAI's** will in the matter of **Cyrus**. **Isra'el** needed to trust **Him** that **He** could and would deliver **them**. They were to **listen** and **respond to God's righteousness**. **Listen to Me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are far from righteousness (46:12)**. **God** first brings them to the spiritual reality that they are **stubborn-hearted**, or headstrong, **and far from Him** and **His righteousness**.

To continue to question **God** is no longer an absence of faith but a **stubborn-hearted** refusal to believe. We often consider **stubborn-heartedness** the result of arrogance, the attitude of those who do not think they need deliverance. But it may be just as much, as we see here, the response of those who recognize their need but cannot believe that **the LORD** can meet it. Here the unbelief seems to be focused on three questions: **Is God really strong enough to wrestle His people away from the gods of Babylon? Would He want to save them at all, since their sin has been so grievous? And is the conquest of Babylon by another**

pagan, Cyrus, really an acceptable mode of deliverance?

It is important to notice **Isaiah's** increasingly harsh tone that **he** uses to convince **the Jewish people** to take **his** words to heart. In **40:27** **he** simply asks why **the people** would even question **God**. By **42:18** **Isaiah** is calling them **deaf and blind** to the truth. In **45:9** **he** pronounces doom on those who presume to define what **God** can and cannot do. **He** calls **them rebels** in **46:8**, and then **stubborn-hearted** here. Finally, **Chapter 48** is a denunciation of **those** who have heard with **their** ears, but not **their hearts**. **They** have never heard the truth about **themselves** or about **God (6:9-10)**. **The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and He relents from sending calamity (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2)**, but there is an end even to that, as the generation in the wilderness and the destruction of Jerusalem should tell us.¹⁷⁸

I am bringing My righteousness near, it is not far away; and My salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, My splendor to Isra'el (46:13). The idolater makes **a god** in his own image; **ADONAI** intends to make **His people** in **His**. As a result, **God** calls **them** to **righteousness**. This is an evangelistic plea to believe and be saved. That has always been **His** will for all mankind. But **Isra'el** has always been the focal point of salvation. Whatever horrible things they have done, however **His** name has been defiled, it is through **Israel** that **He** has chosen to make **His** salvation known to the world. **He** has been faithful and a covenant keeper. Therefore, should we not believe **God**?