EBS4 Isa 46-47

**Lesson 4: Isaiah 46-47**

**Babylon does not work**

**Objectives:**

1. The student will understand the bankruptcy of Babylonian theology.
2. The student will understand the bankruptcy of Babylonian polictics.

**Preparation:**

1. Using a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, read a brief description of the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo.
2. Look up the New Year’s Day or Akitu Festival in a Bible dictionary.
3. Read a short article on the history of the neo-Babylonian empire of the 7th-6th centuries B.C.

**Theme:** The God of hope and history sends a servant.

**Background:**

1. Isaiah writes to those in Babylonian captivity.
   1. The people question God on two levels:
      1. They do not think God is powerful enough to rescue them.
      2. They do not believe God cares enough about them to rescue them.
   2. Isaiah repeatedly responds with two central points:
      1. God is powerful enough to rescue them because he is the creator, the only, the one who causes all things to happen.
      2. God is their redeemer and savior who reassures them of his love and protection.
2. Isaiah 46-47 show the emptiness of Babylonian theology (ch 46) and politics (ch 47). The message is not directed at the Babylonians but at the Israelites who seem more taken with Babylonian theology than Israelite thought and who are more dependent on the Babylonian rulers than their own powerful God.
3. Isaiah uses words to paint powerful images. This method is particularly true in this section. Consider using a power point presentation with verses from these chapters and contemporary photos that mirror the description in the passage. One such power point presentation is available on [www.haroldshank.com](http://www.haroldshank.com).

**Learning Experiences:**

1. Isa 46:1-4—A Babylonian Parade
   1. In Isa 44:9-20 and 44:21-45:7 Isaiah set up a contrast between the process of idol making and the work of Israel’s God. This passage echoes that one theologically.
   2. The opening two verses describe a sort of parade in which the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo are being carried.
      1. Scholars report that on the annual New Year’s Day festival in Babylon gods were paraded through the streets.
      2. Others suggest that the approach of Persian general Cyrus prompted the keepers of the Babylonian gods to carry them to safety (“into captivity”).
      3. Whatever the setting the Babylonian gods travel in a humiliating way. The passage echoes the taunt song in Isa 44:9-20.
      4. The stress is that the gods cannot even carry themselves, they are burdens to the beasts that bear them and on their journey they cannot even steady themselves.
   3. In contrast, Israel’s God does not need to be carried, but has carried Israel.
      1. Note the words for carry or bear used first with Bel and Nebo and then with Israel.
      2. The book of Isaiah regularly refers to the remnant (Isa. 10:19ff; 11:11, 16; 14:22, 30; 15:9; 17:3; 28:5; 37:4, 31f; 46:3) indicating a subsection of the Israelite nation who remains faithful. In Isa 49-55 the prophet will call this group Zion.
      3. The theme of the section “The God of hope and history sends a servant” comes to the fore again as God stays with Israel throughout all their personal history.
2. Isa 46:5-13—Remember the Things of Old
   1. Isaiah uses the trial image to establish the superiority of Israel’s God over the Babylonian gods.
   2. Isa 46:5-7 describe the manufacture of idols (see 40:18-20; 44:9-20). The point seems to be that despite the substantial financial investment in making an idol, the idols must be carried and never achieve movement or speech and cannot save their makers. Isaiah argues there is not much return on such an investment.
   3. Isaiah calls the Israelites to remember two things:
      1. First, the “this” of v 8 seems to be the disparity between the Babylonian idols which require great expense and must be carried and cannot speak or save, and the God of Israel who carries them, speaks regularly and stands ready to save.
      2. Second, the “former things” refers to God’s work in history of announcing events before they occur and then making them happen.
   4. Isaiah mentions at least 8 things that God does. Make a list. Note the claim for absolute monotheism. The chapter theme is the bankruptcy of polytheism and idol worship. The real choice is the one true God.
   5. The “bird of prey” likely refers to Cyrus. See Isa 44:21-45:7. The “I will bring it to pass” may refer to the fall of Babylon.
   6. Isa 46:10 offers a snapshot of the theme of the entire Bible. It is the Bible in miniature.
      1. God announces and rules all things.
      2. God’s word is true and is accomplished.
      3. God’s purpose which includes salvation and redemption is achieved.
   7. Isaiah’s argument for God is addressed to Israel. Here he calls them
      1. “you transgressors” (v8) referring not to the sins leading to the fall of Babylon, but the sin of idolatry in exile.
      2. “you stubborn of heart” (v 12) referring to their resistance to accept God’s offer to bring them home. This stubbornness will come to a head in Isa 48:4.
   8. The striking point of the section is that while Israel continues to resist, God continues to make plans to save them. He does it not for Israel’s sake, but for the sake of his own glory.
3. Isa 47:1-15—The failure of Babylonian politics.
   1. Isa 47:1-7—change in circumstances
      1. These verses describe the fall of Babylon in highly symbolic terms.
      2. Just as Jerusalem referred to the exiles in Isa 40:1, so now the virgin daughter of Babylon refers to the nation of Babylon. Cities were regarded as feminine and Isaiah uses that fact to develop the image of the fall of a refined princess.
      3. Isaiah describes at least eight changes in the circumstance of the Babylonian princess. List them.
         1. Princess becomes a slave girl.
         2. Throne becomes the ground.
         3. Tender becomes coarse.
         4. The one who was served meals made by others now makes her own.
         5. Robes become nakedness.
         6. The one carried over rivers now wades through the river.
         7. The things once hidden by wealth are now exposed to all.
         8. Light becomes darkness.
      4. The one who brings about the change is the LORD.
         1. God frequently uses violence in Scripture (from the destruction at Noah’s flood to the New Testament descriptions of hell). This violence satisfies God’s justice and the human demand that the oppressors suffer. This aspect of God was explored more fully in the study on Isa 1-39. See lesson 11.
         2. Although Isa 40-48 repeatedly points to the role Cyrus plays in the fall of Babylon, Isaiah makes it clear that the ultimate power is the Holy One of Israel.
      5. Isa 47:6 gives clear reason for the exile and the end of Babylon.
         1. Not only will God bring down Babylon, he also sent his own people into captivity and used Babylon to bring down unrepentant Jerusalem.
         2. God intended for Babylon to end the wickedness in Jerusalem but to also wanted Babylon to treat Israel with mercy. They did not.
         3. See descriptions of Babylonian cruelty in Lam 1:19; 2:21; 5:12.
         4. Babylon did not consider or remember the work they were doing for God but simply proclaimed, “I will be mistress forever.” It was not to be.
   2. Isa 47:8-15—Breach of security
      1. Isaiah lists several qualities of ancient Babylon which God now removes:
         1. Loved pleasure—v 8
         2. Trusted their security—v 8
         3. Thought themselves invincible—v 8
         4. Used sorcery and enchantment to know the future—v 9, 12
         5. Wicked—v 10
         6. Above reproach (“no one sees me”)—v 10
         7. Great knowledge—v 10
         8. Many counsels—v 12
         9. astrology—v 13
      2. Isaiah describes the arrogance of Babylon which assumed that they alone ruled the world—vv 7, 8, 9
      3. Isaiah describes the end of Babylon in several ways
         1. Continuing the image of Babylon as the delicate princess, she will become childless and widowed—v 9
         2. Evil will come that cannot be removed—v 11
         3. Disaster will come that they cannot forestall—v 11
         4. Unexpected ruin will come—v 11
         5. Fire will consume their resources—v 14
         6. No one will be able to save them—v 15
      4. The Babylonian claim “I am, and there is no one besides me” (vv 8, 11) mirrors the claim of Israel’s God in Isa 45:8, 21; 46:9. God tolerates no rivals.
      5. Babylon experienced one of the world’s first information ages. Much literature of their culture has survived giving evidence of their intellectual life. Isaiah knew about their:
         1. Wisdom—vs 10
         2. Knowledge—v 10
         3. Enchantments—vs 12
         4. Sorceries—vs 12
         5. Counsels—vs 13
         6. Star gazers—vs 13
4. Isaiah announces to Israel, now living in Babylon and largely rejecting God’s offer of deliverance, that Babylonian theology (Isa 46) and politics (Isa 47) are bankrupt and not to be trusted. The Babylonian system does not work and based on Isa 48 neither is Israel’s current way of thinking.

**Continuities:**

1. Many think that Isa 46-47 describe an hour of crisis in Babylon as the Persian general Cyrus approached with his army. Compare their response to crisis to how Americans respond to crisis. After the events of September 11, 2001, churches reported a temporary increase in attendance. Why did people not continue to seek out God after the crisis?
2. Isa 46 describes God caring for his people from birth to death. Do you believe that God still cares in that way? What evidence is there for his caring?
3. The latter part of Isa 46 urges the people to consider what God has done in the past. Make a list of what God has done in the past for: 1—your city; 2—your congregation; 3—your family; 4—you.
4. Do idols still exist? What evidence would you give?
5. Babylon trusted in its knowledge and its military. Compare the feelings of security in Babylon with the feelings of security in America.
6. Do people in power often think that what they do in secret will never become known? Give examples of times when their private deeds did become known. Are there things done in secret in companies, congregations and families that you know that might one day be exposed?

**Assignment:** Read Isa 48

**Additional Study:**

1. The OT contains many oracles against Babylon. Compare and contrast Isa 47 with
   1. Isa 13-14
   2. Isa 21
   3. Jer 50-51
2. Compare what the rest of the OT says about enchantments and sorceries
   1. Enchantments-- Deut. 18:11; Ps. 58:5; Prov. 21:9; 25:24; Isa. 47:9, 12; Hos. 6:9
   2. Sorceries-- 2 Ki. 9:22; Isa. 47:9, 12; Mic. 5:12; Nah. 3:4