

# Isaiah 46-48

David H. Linden, revised August, 2021

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**Isaiah 46** The context is the defeat of Babylon by Cyrus. The fall of Babylon shows her gods were unable to deliver the city/nation from its enemies. In Isaiah 36 & 37, the God of Israel delivered Jerusalem from the greatest power then on earth when he killed the Assyrian army. That victory was one in which no arrow or sword of man was used; God did it directly (37:36). Now Babylon shall fall under the sword to the Medes and Persians (Daniel 5:28) and soon come under Cyrus the Persian. Babylon's gods cannot save (v.6).

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**46:1,2** Bel (note Belshazzar in Daniel 5:1) was Marduk, the chief god of Babylon. Nebo was another famous god, so much so his name appears in the name of some Babylonian kings. (Note Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 1:1.)

The picture 46:1 gives is of a fallen city; the gods are being evacuated. They have no power to save Babylon or themselves. They must be carried by beasts that are weary from the load. The gods these images represent do not come to rescue their physical representations. Babylon had carried Jerusalem into captivity; now her gods go into captivity. (See 1 Samuel 5:1-4 for Dagon falling before the ark of the Lord.)

**46:3,4** The contrast is vivid. Israel's God cannot be carried and needs nothing from anyone. He carries them. "The people I have upheld" uses the verb "loaded" to line up with v.1. The Lord not only keeps his nation alive, he is the Lord who made them a people in the past and who will carry them forever. Israel is supported by everlasting arms (Deuteronomy 33:27). A god who needs help cannot be a help. The promises of God are to all Israel and must be received by faith, but the eternal benefits are to the remnant. The concept of survivors is stated here as *all you who remain*.

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## Statements of God's Dealings with Israel which Appear to be Contradictory

"Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been *borne* by me from before your birth, *carried* from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will *carry* you. I have made, and I will *bear*; I will *carry* and will save" (46:3,4, ESV). This sounds like the care of Israel expressed in Deuteronomy 32:10,11.

God repeatedly asserts in Scripture and here in Isaiah 46 that it has been his commitment to carry and preserve his people Israel, but he often spoke in words of very stern rejection of them:

Numbers 14:22,23 " ... None of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it.

Psalms 95:10,11 For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways." Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest."

Jeremiah 5:29 Shall I not punish them for these things? declares the LORD, and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?"

Jeremiah 6:19 Hear, O earth; behold, I am bringing disaster upon this people...

Jeremiah 7:15 And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Jeremiah 7:20 Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground; it will burn and not be quenched."

Jeremiah 7:29 "... the LORD has rejected and forsaken the generation of his wrath.'

Jeremiah 9:15,16 Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will feed this people with bitter food, and give them poisonous water to drink. I will scatter them among the nations whom neither they nor their fathers have known, and I will send the sword after them, until I have consumed them."

There are many more texts like these examples from Jeremiah. One could collect a large number of both kinds. The severity of judgment does not wipe out the promise, “*I will not destroy you completely*” (Jeremiah 5:18). Many texts teach that there is a remnant, and no prophet does this more than Isaiah.<sup>1</sup> That is the case here in Isaiah 46:3. A new definition of Israel emerges. Israel in unbelief is destroyed, so that we may consider them not Israel at all. (See Romans 9:6.) In contrast, the remnant survives because the Lord has graciously intervened to save and preserve them. This remnant is called *the House of Jacob*. Then in 48:1, the House of Israel is spoken of as a group of hypocrites. The remnant is the Israel God preserved through the ordeal of the Babylonian Captivity and ever since. It is true that all who believe, including Gentiles, are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:29). There is more: eventually, the Lord will turn godlessness away from Jacob. Then, according to Romans 11:26, we will rejoice that *all Israel will be saved*. In Romans 11, I think that “*all Israel will be saved*” has reference to all of ethnic Israel who believe.

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**46:5-7** Some texts focus on the ability of the Lord vs. the inability of idols to predict or speak. This paragraph raises the matter of how wrong it is to make a comparison. Contrast is proper; comparison is wrong. The worshipper of God must recoil when comparisons are made with our Lord. We reject every suggestion of similarity. The only similarity between the gods and God is in the spelling. The name Michael is a rhetorical question, meaning, “Who is like God?” The answer is No one! In Daniel 12:1, Michael is a most appropriate name for the archangel.

There is nothing in all creation to which God can be compared. All attempts at a likeness for the Trinity, such as the analogy of water as ice, liquid, and steam, result in error. Liquid water and ice are different in nature; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are identical in nature. Failure to find a good analogy is wonderful! It shows he is transcendent, unique, and unlike us. A god who is like us is a mere reflection of us and is not the real God. In v.7 the gods cannot move, answer or save; they are a waste of good gold. Failure to worship the true God will always lead to an absurd replacement for him.

**46:8-11** The many references to idols in the Old Testament show that devotion to them was a persistent occurrence in Israel. In this paragraph the Lord now tells how he is to be known. A blind man cannot see the glittering presence of an idol, but to know the Lord, his handicap is no hindrance. He too, may follow the commands of these verses. The exhortation is sharp. They are ordered to remember, fix it in the mind, and take it to heart. They are called rebels! This opens two subjects: 1) How is God known if not represented by an image? 2) What is the sin of rebellion being addressed?

God is known by his record – by what he has done. His people must remember their history and his long, merciful, and gracious dealing with them. These are referred to as *the former things*. Cultures enthralled with the present and in disdain of the past are dangerous. This is a key feature in our surrounding culture. We must reflect on the history of God’s deeds, a theme that often appears in the worship of the Psalms (78, 105,106). The Lord refers often to the Exodus as the model of future and greater acts of salvation (10:26; 11:16; Jeremiah 23:7). He is the same Lord. God is known by: his words, deeds, creation and image. The only true image of him is the exact likeness that Jesus is of his Father, yet even that image is not the physical body of Christ but what he is as a Person (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). To fix in mind and remember is a commandment to all his people in every age. We are commanded to remember what God has done and to believe him for what he will do. The command to remember occurs 15 times in Deuteronomy. Repeatedly it is, “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt” (for example: Deuteronomy 24:22).

God’s policy and practice is to make known the end from the beginning. Does any other religion do such a thing? In Eden, he told of a Person to come who would crush the devil (Genesis 3:15). This announcement was made right at the beginning of the human rebellion! He promised in Abraham’s day that all peoples would be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:3). In David’s day, he promised a son of David would rule over his people in a perpetual dynasty (2 Samuel 7:11-16). Though the world is very wicked, in Isaiah 11:9

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<sup>1</sup> See in my notes on Isaiah 2-4 Appendix A: The Impact of Remnant Doctrine on Current Controversies

he says the entire earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. God says what he will do when there is nothing else that would make us think it could ever happen.

**God's sovereign decision** His people complain about his decision to rescue by means of Cyrus (45:9-11). God's people fretted at the wisdom of God's providence. Nevertheless, God does not buckle, note: "*My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please*" (v.10; see also 14:24-27). The Jews, not surprisingly, wanted a restoration of their nation in the likeness of the reign of David and Solomon. The Lord was not granting them the glory they craved, namely, independence from other nations with the visible throne of David restored. Such a desire will be fulfilled only at the Second Coming in a way beyond imagination (Ephesians 3:20,21). God's purpose that the Jews should live under Gentile power, prepared the way for the Diaspora. It also prepared the way for our own time in which the church exists in the context of governments that do not know the Lord. In every nation, and not limited to the restricted borders of Israel, God calls for a people for his Name (Acts 15:12-18), i.e., a people who are his.

**God's sovereign right** God has made his decision and announced it. He does not back down from it. It is true that Cyrus was a foreigner, a frightening bird of prey, yet in the authority of God as God, he summoned this man to do his will. Pilate reminded people of his authority in similar words, "What I have written, I have written" (John 19:22). Sinful man resists God's assertion of sovereignty. If the Lord gave up his sovereignty, he would not be the God he is, and there is no other. We would like to do what we please, and that is evil; God does what he pleases, and that is wonderful. He is not in need of, nor subject to our opinion.

**46:12,13** In v.8 his people were called "rebels". Here their moral resistance to his will is mentioned again. Resistance or not, God will do what he will do. He does not consult with man; he announces to us, and yet he will hear our prayers. In spite of their sin against him, he will act in righteousness for their benefit. The kind of salvation that comes through Cyrus will happen, but Cyrus cannot liberate from sin. That will take another Deliverer. Chapter 48 will say more of their sin, and in that chapter Christ as Messiah will speak for the first time in Isaiah.

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**Isaiah 47** The Lord anointed Cyrus to subdue nations and specifically to act for the benefit of captive Israel (45:1-4). To liberate Israel means Babylon itself, the greatest of all the nations, must be defeated. Chapter 47 describes the humiliation of Babylon, why God used them against his people, and why he now judges them for their sin, pride, and sorceries.

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**47:1-4** Babylon no longer sits in a throne. God in vengeance has acted against her; she has been deposed and sits in dust. Her dainty life, pictured as a young dainty woman with a life of ease, is now the life of a slave. Her elegant life is over. Worse, Babylon is a girl who has been violated (v.3). Later verses will speak of her massive pride; these speak of her glory gone, her humiliation at the hand of the Lord. This is a great reversal; the captor is crushed and the captive goes free (14:1-4).

**47:4** This happens because God is the Redeemer who assumes Israel's burden as his. He is the Lord Almighty with such strength that the might of Babylon is a drop in the bucket (40:15-17). He is the Holy One of Israel, committed to his covenant; he cannot break his promise to this most undeserving nation. Isaiah 46:8 and 48:8 speak of Israel as rebels. This is their ungrateful nature even after their release from Babylon! The Lord is still committed to them in his covenant.

**47:5-10** The next three paragraphs quote Babylon. She speaks of herself as the eternal queen that will continue forever (v.7), "I am, and there is none besides me," (two times, vv.8,10) and "No one sees me!" (v.10). This is the kind of speech that is only proper for God. (See 14:13,14)

**47:5-7** Babylon sits silent, imprisoned in darkness, and no longer giving orders. God had used them as his tool to punish his people, just as he did the Assyrians in chapter 10. It is justice that Jerusalem received severe judgment from God's hand after many warnings from prophets like Jeremiah. When that judgment

came, Babylon was ruthless with the helpless such as the elderly. Babylon did not bother to think about their actions or their consequences from the hand of the Lord. Now under Cyrus, it is Babylon's turn to be punished for its cruelty.

**47:8,9** There are consequences. Babylon was complacent and careless, confident of its security, yet it fell in one day! (Daniel 5; see also Revelation 18:7,8,10,17,19). It had very large walls to protect it, but here Isaiah mentions only the failure of its sorceries to help.

**47:10,11** In v.10 Babylon speaks of itself in language appropriate to the Lord. They said, "I am and there is none beside me." (See 43:10-13.) Babylon's trust included the self-confidence in the fear/disaster they could instill in others, but disaster came back on them (v.11). They were deluded to think their city was impregnable. When sudden disaster came, there was no way to respond and no ransom could be paid. Babylon gave much attention to astrology in order to know the future (v.13), but had a sudden downfall with no forewarning.

The Medes and Persians entered into Babylon secretly by diverting the river. Once they were inside, it was too late; the enemy was quickly into the palace itself; they captured and killed the king. Babylon fell in one night while it was having a drunken party. (See Daniel 5).

**47:12-15** Idolaters turn to their gods to save them. Babylon's gods did not. They turn to soothsayers, astrologers, and those who make incantations, because they want to secure the future. Those in this religious trade had the uncertainties of the human heart for their market, yet when the crisis came they gave no advance warning or help. In time of trouble, the experts on the future forsook their clients and ran off to save themselves. All the time, effort, and money Babylon's citizens had devoted brought weariness without benefit. The real Savior reminded Babylon that the ones they trusted could neither save from nor tell of what was coming. In great contrast, the real God told all this in the days of Isaiah more than 150 years before it happened. And the real God did save his people from the power of Babylon.

**Isaiah 48 is a very grim chapter.** After the command to "comfort my people" (40:1), Isaiah spoke often of Israel's sin. In 40:27 they complain that the Lord does not know their trouble – a false and sinful thing to think. They refused to obey (42:24), were spiritually blind and deaf (43:8), and burdened the Lord with their sins (43:24). When they learned the merciful provision of the Lord to deliver them from Babylon through the Gentile conqueror Cyrus, they again complained (45:9) and questioned God (45:11). The Lord called them rebels (46:8). Though the Lord answered their rebellion by proclaiming his sovereign right to decide how he would save from Babylon (46:9-11), they had no change of heart. He says they were stubborn-hearted and far from righteousness (46:12). In chapter 48 the sinfulness of Israel receives even more attention. (One of the worst things the New Testament can say of the people of Israel is that they were just like their fathers (Acts 7:51-53; 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16). Since they were so incorrigible, why would God delay his wrath? Why did he not just cut them down (v.9)? Isaiah 48 tells why. The glory of God was on the line. He would glorify himself by showing himself as the Savior of terrible sinners. It also has the beginning of God's ultimate answer to their sin. Here for the first time in Isaiah, the Lord Jesus Christ speaks (vv.16,17). Often the Bible takes the approach of this chapter: to understand salvation, one must first face up to sin. And so the grim chapter, ending with no peace for the wicked, also turns our attention to Christ.

**48:1,2** This paragraph is a blunt accusation of hypocrisy. They are called by the name of Israel, and they take oaths in the name of the Lord, but their profession is false. If they believe their own propaganda, they only fool themselves not God. They are citizens of the holy city in name but not heart; they rely on the God of Israel in pretence, not reality.

Yet for all their inconsistency God still speaks of himself as ‘the God of Israel’, showing he has not disowned them. Here is the patience of God. He is also ‘the Lord Almighty’, indicating his ability to change this terrible situation.

**48:3-6** The Lord shows why he accused them of gross insincerity. He had shown them through Isaiah a number of former things well established in the record of Isaiah: the announcement of Cyrus, the fall of Babylon, and the return from captivity. These things written in the time of Isaiah were foretold “long ago” (vv.3,5). The words were written by Isaiah, yet God says it was he who announced and made them known. Jews in Babylon reading this years later would see that God had spoken clearly long ago of the fall of Babylon.

Part of God’s strategy in this case was to predict long in advance, but in fulfillment to act very suddenly. No one but God saw or said that Babylon would fall. There were no prior indications of Babylon’s danger. No one had time to make a prediction in the name of an idol. Unlike the siege of other cities, the fall of Babylon was not obvious; it came as a shock. This is why God acted suddenly. If someone had had the opportunity to give credit to an idol, that is what would have happened. This shows how obstinate they were in their unbelief. It also shows how amazing it is that God would still claim Israel as his. The Lord presses his point; they are challenged to admit that what he says here is true. He called on them to hear and see; the predictions had been in their possession longer than that generation lived. They were a people who when they saw, could not perceive (6:9,10). Sin does more than corrupt conduct; it destroys the mind (Colossians 1:21; 2 Timothy 3:8).

**48:6,7** A major change of perspective occurs at this point. Previously the declaration of a former thing might be a reference to the Exodus (43:16-18), and the future matter would be concerning Cyrus (41:23-25 & 43:14). By chapter 48, Isaiah has progressed beyond that. In vv. 3-6 God called on them to admit that certain predicted things had already been fulfilled. They could see the word had been carried out. Now the Lord is about to announce things still new, things still hidden from them and unknown to them. Some predictions had been in existence for many years. Some are about to be created fresh, a revelation never given to anyone before. God is about to reveal the unknowable, things known only to him. The Spirit of the Lord was upon the prophet to open up new mysteries, God’s secret wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:6-14). The attention will change from redemption out of Babylon to redemption from sin. Cyrus was God’s anointed for the lesser salvation; none other than the Lord God himself in human flesh will be the Redeemer from our sin.

**48:8-11 The great mystery of grace** There is no saving grace unless it is in the context of sin. That sin results in judgment is a clear connection in Scripture. This paragraph speaks of God’s amazing restraint in judgment against his people. Vv.1-6 make clear that their claim of being his people is a false claim on their part, but God’s seriousness about that covenant with Israel was a genuine commitment on his part.

In v.7 they claimed to have understanding. In v.8 God says they have never been a people with open ears. (Note the contrast: in 50:4,5 Christ’s ears are open to the Word of God.) The rebellion of Israel is not recent; it had always been that way, as Ezekiel 20 shows. After receiving the Ten Commandments, they worshiped the Golden Calf. Before he died, Joshua pleaded with them to put away their foreign gods (Joshua 24); the Book of Judges shows they did not. There is no time in the Old Testament in which Israel was proven to be faithful. They were rebels from birth, and God knew this. Why would he choose them? Why did he endure them? The answer is given in v.9. God’s reasons were only in God

himself. He deliberately chose a covenant-breaking people he would have to transform in order to make the covenant formula true, "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

The continued existence of Israel has two profound aspects. 1) God, for his own glory restrained his wrath (v.9). 2) God acted to remove the sin that deserves his wrath, a subject Isaiah will develop later. God cannot suspend his justice; he can restrain wrath only if that justice is satisfied. The only reason God can restrain wrath is the sacrifice of Christ. Soon Isaiah will reveal that Christ will be abhorred in 49:7; he will offer his back to those who beat him in 50:6, and he will be pierced for their transgressions in 53:5. God restrained wrath on people he was determined to save, because he did not hold back justice on their Savior for their sin! The *basis* of sin forgiven is only the sacrifice of Christ.

The *motive* God has in saving sinners goes far beyond our danger and need. The reason he lavished the riches of his grace on undeserving rebels (v.8) is that we might be to the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:3-14). Isaiah 48 does not refer to any element in the sinner to explain why God did not kill them immediately. Three times God refers to himself (i.e., his sake) as the full reason. Israel thought they understood (v.7) what are really the unsearchable depths of the wisdom and knowledge of God (Romans 11:33-36). God never found a favorable response in Israel that would sway him to preserve them. Instead, he found his reasons in himself to save them. All needed response to the Lord, such as faith and repentance, are gifts to his people (Philippians 1:29; Acts 5:31). This shows up also in the covenant-keeping response prompted by the Spirit in the new covenant. God said he would pour his Spirit on the House of Israel (Ezekiel 39:29) and so cause them to be careful to keep his laws (Ezekiel 36:26). The faithful Lord produces faithfulness in his own (Galatians 5:22,23).

**48:12,13** The next paragraphs all open with "listen" vv.12,14,16. In v.1 the wayward house of Jacob called themselves by the name 'Israel', but it was a farce. Now God calls them by the name 'Israel' with the result that his call will produce the result. (For God's call see Romans 8:28-30; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Timothy 1:8-10). God's call is a summons, as in John 6:44. When he summons the stars and the heavens, they all stand at attention to do his will. With that same power he has called Israel to be his. No power on earth can stop him (Romans 8:38,39). God does not make a fool of himself by taking on a project in which he will fail, therefore all Israel really will be saved (Romans 11:26; Isaiah 59:20,21). He says, "I am first" – no one made him commit to Israel; it was his loving initiative. He says, "I am last" – looking to his finished accomplishments when all his own will be his people and he will be their God, (Revelation 21:3). Neither Babylon's nor Israel's sin can defeat him.

**48:14,15** This final statement of the Lord using Cyrus repeats that he was *called* (41:2,4) to his task. When he ruled Babylon and the entire region, the previously announced will of the Lord was fulfilled in the days of those reading Isaiah within the walls of Babylon. They joyfully found that the one God called to do this did it. So it will be with Israel's return to their land; God's call is irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

Cyrus was God's chosen ally. This meant that yet another Gentile power would subordinate the Jewish nation. They must accept that this is what God had decided. This was God's mighty arm against Babylon. (Later in 53:1, the *Arm of the Lord* to rescue will be Christ.) Israel had trouble submitting to God's wisdom in raising up Cyrus, and they would eventually reject Christ. Cyrus did not fit their national aspirations – one still evident when the disciples said, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jews of that day would have accepted Jesus as king if only he would had done their will (John 6:14,15).

**48:16** By now it should be clear that there is a greater need (salvation from sin) and a greater Deliverer needed for it, One who is the Servant of the Lord to save Israel. Isaiah says again that they should listen. Then another Person speaks in v.16. He was present for the first announcement and present for the fulfillment; in fact, he is the fulfillment. This Person is sent by the Sovereign Lord, and endowed with the Spirit just as in 61:1. (See also 11:2 & 42:1). The One so sent is the Lord Jesus who came from the Father (John 1:14). The Holy Spirit descended upon him (Luke 3:22). Wicked Cyrus was never filled with the Holy Spirit, nor was Cyrus an answer to sin. At this point in the discussion of redemption, the prophet introduced Christ the Redeemer as the Deliverer from the greatest danger of all, our sin.

We have all three Persons of the Holy Trinity in 48:16: the Sovereign Lord (the Father) sent me (Christ) with his Spirit. Likewise all three Persons appear in 61:1.
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**48:17-21** Sin remains a persistent theme. Israel paid no attention to God's commands and lost peace. Rivers flow all the time, but in a very dry climate streams flow only when there is rain. Obedience results in perpetual peace like a river constantly flowing. Israel lost peace; under God's chastening her descendants were not like the sand of the seashore (Genesis 22:17). If they had righteousness, they would never be destroyed. In the gospel of Christ, God gives full perfect righteousness as a gift to faith (Romans 5:1,17), plus righteousness in conduct as a work of the Spirit (Romans 8:1-4).

Israel needed to flee from Babylon and thereby learn where their redemption came from. Sadly, they are still in their sin, with no peace for the wicked. With that sobering review of sin the Cyrus page is turned. The need of a Savior is made clear in somber words – *no peace*. However, the very next words (49:1) will be from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ. Israelites may call themselves Israel and yet not be saved. They can even flee Babylon and not be saved. One can be baptized and in covenant with the Lord and never be a true covenant keeper. Another Person must enter Israel; he will be called Israel, because he is the only one worthy of the name. He alone has kept covenant and will be a covenant for us! (49:8, note 42:6). He will be born in the line of David, in David's village of Bethlehem. The Lord has called him to this great task of making something of sinful Israel. To accomplish this, the Father sent the Lord Jesus to his great task as Savior, as chapter 49 will elaborate. All who are joined to this Israel (Christ) become true Israel. In this great salvation God will be glorified (48:9-11).