

The conflict between Israelite prophecy and Babylonian astronomy in Isaiah 44:25 and 47

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Abstract: Isa 44:25 and 47 refer to astronomy and divination. On the basis of these references some theories place the anti-Babylonian polemic of Isa 47 in the atmosphere of Nabonidus' conflict with his priests over the moon goddess Šin. This article rejects that Deutero-Isaiah's authors had specific knowledge of either Babylonian cultic practices or the religious and political situation under the reign of Nabonidus. Instead, it is proposed that Deutero-Isaiah wrote its polemic against Babylonian ideas of communicating with the divine from a Judahite setting. This conflict between Israelite prophecy and Babylonian mantic practices can be reduced to four factors: only YHWH fulfills his plans; Babylonian instrumental divination versus Israelite intuitive prophecy; divinatory wisdom is foolish; YHWH saves.

Keywords: Isaiah 44:25; 47; Israelite prophecy; Babylonian astronomy; polemic.

Introduction

Within Deutero-Isaiah (henceforth DI) Isa 47 forms in a number of ways the pivotal oracle: in the preceding chapters the main theme is that of a down-trodden Israel in contrast to the descriptions of Zion/Jerusalem and her elevation and rejoicing in the following chapters. Chapter 47 is also pivotal in the sense of being the climax of polemic speech with its aggressive taunt against Babylon. It informs the people of Israel about YHWH's destructive omnipotence. The mantic implications of an astronomic, omen-based science (47:1-15) are sharply contrasted with the YHWH-prophecy (44:25; 47:9-13). These references to Babylon's astronomical practices have led commentators such as *Albani* and *Berges* to situate the anti-Babylonian polemic of Isa 47 in the atmosphere of the politic and religious propaganda for and against the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus. When the references in Isa 44:25 and 47 are studied more closely however, the question arises as to what extent Deutero-Isaiah actually reacted through these texts to Babylonian astronomy.¹

In order to formulate an answer to this important question the texts Isa 44:25 and 47:1-15 will be studied, as they are thematically connected in their allusions to (Babylonian) astronomy. Before going into the aforementioned texts some preliminary remarks have to be made in relation to the much-discussed Babylonian provenance of DI. This is necessary since some scholars are beginning to reject the notion that all (cf. *Tiemeyer*) of Isa 40-55 was composed in Babylon, despite its references to the city (43:14; 47:1, 5; 48:14, 20) or its deities (Isa 46:1).² Also, and perhaps this is a more pressing issue, presuppositions on the Babylonian provenance and thus the geographical whereabouts of the author(s) of Isa 40-50

¹ Gertz 2009: 146; Biddle 1996: 128-133; Oosting 2011: 69-70, 208-210; Tiemeyer 2010: 118-119, 124, 128.

² Tiemeyer 2010: 25, 51.

have implications for theories about what knowledge the author(s) of Deutero-Isaiah had. To do justice to this challenging subject, Isa 44:25 and 47:1-5 will first be considered exegetically. Subsequently, theories about what DI must have known about Babylonian astronomy, apotropaic magic and omens will be dealt with.

Babylonian provenance

Although it has been generally assumed that DI was composed within the Jewish exilic community in Babylon between roughly 586-539 B.C.E., there is some reason to question that assumption now. One reason for this question is that one of the bases for the assumption was that there was no significant community remaining in Judah after the exile in which DI could either have been produced or receive. This is important for the question of the provenance of DI. That is to say, the geographical background of a text is a crucial aspect of historical-critical exegesis. In order to understand the message that the author(s) of the texts which refer to (Babylonian) astronomy wants to communicate to his/her audience, it is necessary to locate both that author as well as his/her audience in time and place.³ This article takes its position in the ‘continuity school’ which stresses the continuity between the Iron Age and the Neo-Babylonian period, after the Babylonians defeated Judah, conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 587/6 B.C.E. It rejects the older, more traditional consensus that Judah was devastated at that time.⁴ *Tiemeyer*, argues for a semi-functioning territory of Benjamin (2 Kgs 25:22-26; Jer 40:7-41:18), and Jerusalem and the temple in ruins (Lamentations dated to ca. 540 B.C.E., e.g. 1:1-4). Mizpah then, might have served as an administrative centre. According to *Tiemeyer* it is reasonable to assume that life in the rural areas returned to some kind of routine after the destruction. She follows *Barstad*, who has been an important advocate regarding the Judahite origin of Isa 40-55, in the conclusion that the people of Judah had the necessary capability for composing texts of a high literary quality.⁵

On the basis of chapters 47-55 which predict the fall of Babylon and the return of the exiles, it is easy to conclude that the prophet lived in Babylon (47; 48:20-21; 52:7-10, 11-12). Although a prophet in Babylon could have written and spoken about Jerusalem, the reverse possibility is that a prophet in Jerusalem could have written and spoken about Babylon. The use of direct speech to address Jerusalem as found in the DI texts is a strong argument for this Judahite origin of DI. That Isa 44:25 and 47 seem to express some knowledge on Babylonian cultic practices does not directly imply a Babylonian setting. The passages could actually have been written from a Judahite setting.⁶

³ *Tiemeyer* 2010: 1-2.

⁴ *Faust* 2012: 1, 3, 9. E.g. of scholars of the “continuity school”: *Carrol, Barstad and Lipschits*. E.g. of Scholars of the “traditional school”: *Shiloh, Stager and, Faust*. See for a more complete overview of the two different schools, *ibid.*, pp. 3-10 ‘Study of the Neo-Babylonian Period: Summary of Previous Research’.

⁵ *Tiemeyer* 2010: 53-67; *Barstad* 1997: 89-93 for arguments on the *degree* of (dis)continuity of life in Judah following the Neo-Babylonian destruction in 587/6 B.C.E.

⁶ *Tiemeyer* 2010: 32-37, 42, 47.

Lady Babylon loses her security

The author of 47:1-15, including the parallel in Isa 44:45, unfolds his argument against an overwhelming political power represented by the Babylonian empire in the midst of a triptych. The fall of virgin Babylon (47) follows the fall of Babylon's most important deities (46). The feminine personification of cities like Babylon, Jerusalem, Nineveh and Sidon (Isa 23:12) is common. In the Ancient Near East important capital cities were seen in strict relation to the gods who protected them. Cities were considered as the throne of the divine order and culture: awe for the gods and for the past were expressed in respect for the city. The contrast in Isa 47 thus obtains more depth, for Babylon, the imperial metropolis, which is under protection of Marduk, shares its fate with her deity: they must both leave their throne.

The fate of virgin daughter Babylon is reminiscent of Nah 3:4-6. The Assyrian capital of Nineveh is described as a harlot, a master in divination who is stripped and displayed in public. This does not differ much from Babylon who is ordered to sit in the dust (v.1); she will be stripped of her clothes (v.2) and her nakedness will be uncovered (v.3). The author of the poem continues to accumulate parallels and phrases of intense humiliation and degradation. The dethroned queen Babylon is ordered to do the work of a slave: she has to take millstones and grind flour. The use of the verb טָהַן 'grinding' in Isa 47:2 has a sexual connotation (Job 31:10). The increasing exposure of the nakedness shames Lady Babylon greatly: first she has to uncover her veil, then her robes, thighs and legs. For the use of this violent sexual language for Lady Babylon⁷ in Isa 47:3 can be found parallels in other texts such as: Jer 13:22; Nah 3:5; Eze 16:36-37; 23:10; 29; Hos 2:12.⁸

In the context of the revelation of the holy name of God אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֱהִיָּה (Ex 3:14), Babylon's exclamation "For eternity I shall be (אֱהִיָּה) (mistress)" in Isa 47:7 is blasphemy, which is confirmed by the double "I am, and there is nothing besides me" in vv. 8 and 10 (cf. Isa 43:10-11; 44:6; 46:9). The consequences of this *hybris* turn out to be grave for her. The two biggest catastrophes a woman can go through, loss of children and widowhood (1 Kgs 17:8-24),⁹ fall upon Babylon in one moment (v. 9).¹⁰

There is a thematic relation between Babylon's false sense of security in vv. 8 and 10 (A/A') and her magic and divination in vv. 9 and 11 (B/B'): v. 8b 'security', בִּטְחָה; 10a 'you trust in', וַתִּבְטְחִי; 8c—10e 'to say in the/ones heart', אָמַר בְּלִבִּי; 8d—10f 'I am, and there is no one besides me', אֲנִי וְאֵפְסִי עוֹד. In vv. 9 and 11: 9a, d—11a, e 'to come over/upon', עָלָה; 11c: 'fall upon', נָפַל עָלָה; 9e, f—11b, d 'sorcery and spells'; 9b—11e 'suddenly'.

⁷ In the context of war violence against cities the verb גָּלָה (Nifal) 'to uncover', 'to be uncovered' indicates the uncovering of all her defences. This is analogue to forced unclothing before rape, which women and girls underwent during military raids of enemies.

⁸ Blenkinsopp 2002: 280; Berges 2008: 478, 482-486, Childs 2001: 366.

⁹ This situation of Babylon is countered by prophetic assurances that Jerusalem/Zion is no longer bereaved, barren or widowed: Isa 49:20-23; 54:1-8.

¹⁰ Berges 2008: 490-494; Blenkinsopp 2002: 282; Childs 2001: 366; Biddle 1996: 130.

Babylon has the illusion that she lives in security (A/A'), but she is not able to deflect the evil as divine punishment through her mantic techniques (B/B'). Babylon's wickedness, the many sorceries, the great power of enchantments (v. 9) is met with evil in v. 11 (הוה; רעה; שואה). In addition, in spite of her knowledge (v. 10), Babylon is not able to שחרה 'charm away [by magic]', כפרה 'to propitiate' for (v. 11), or stand fast in her חבר 'enchantments' and many כשף 'sorceries' (v. 12) against the catastrophe ordered by YHWH. Not only the insufficiency of these practices in vv. 9-12 is shown, but also the impotence of the specialists in v. 13 is portrayed with their 'many councils', who 'divide the heavens', who 'gaze at the stars', and 'who make known at new moons what will come over her [Babylon]'. In the end it is YHWH in Isa 44:25 who 'turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish', and it is YHWH who makes fools of קסמים 'diviners'.¹¹

What kind of magic and astronomy?

From this short overview DI leaves the impression that it is in debate with the Babylonian astronomical divination practices and the religious systems connected to it. The authors, however, betray no specific knowledge of particular Babylonian cultic practices. The terminology they use is the common, non-specific vocabulary that can be found throughout the Old Testament. For חבר, כשף and קסמים parallels can be found in Dtn 18:9-12, where these practices are considered foreign and forbidden. In spite of this prohibition, kings tried to fathom the course of history apart from YHWH with divination (Ex 7:11; Jer 27:9; Mi 5:11; Dan 2:2.). Despite the frequent references in the Hebrew Bible to the Israelites' inclination to worship the celestial bodies, this does not suggest that there was a developed astronomical tradition in ancient Israel comparable to the other cultures of the Near East, like Mesopotamia (pace *Wright*¹²). Since Hebrew belongs to the group of 'Canaanite' languages, it can be expected to find the Israelite-Jewish terms for magic and divination reflected in the languages of the peoples around Israel from the close of the second millennium to the first half of the first millennium. The terms which concern this article, שחרה, חבר, כשף, הברו שמים, לחדשים and קסמים however attest to a domestic vocabulary with some slight connections to Mesopotamia, despite their Babylonian or foreign connotations.¹³

שחרה, 'to cause to disappear by magic' is probably directly from the root *šhr*. Perhaps it has been borrowed, like the Arabic *šāhir* ('sorcerer', 'enchanter', 'magician', 'charmer') from Akkadian *šāhiru(m)*.¹⁴ חבר means 'association', 'society' or refers to Babylonian

¹¹ Berges 2008: 493-498.

¹² Wright 2008: 59-60, is however right in arguing that the worship of the astronomical elements was present in ancient Israel, e.g.: Ex 20:4; 2 Kgs 17:16; Jer 7:18.

¹³ Cryer 1994: 231, 256, 261, 321; Albani 2000: 119; Berges 2008: 495.

¹⁴ "שחר", HALOT 1466; "שחר", BDB 1007.

magic, and the verb חָבַר: to ‘associate’, ‘join’, ‘unite’ or ‘charm’.¹⁵ No other useful parallels for the verb *hbr* or its translation with ‘charming’ can be found in Hasmonaean (‘community’), Ugaritic (‘companion’, ‘vessel’) or Old Aramaic. The meaning ‘charm, spell, enchantment’, or for the verb ‘to bewitch, charm’¹⁶ seems to be Biblical Hebrew, derivable from Dtn 18:11, Ps 58:6 and Isa 47:9, 12.¹⁷ The next noun, כְּשָׁף, derives from the Akkadian root *kašāpu*, noun *kišpu*, and designates ‘sorcery’.¹⁸ It is unattested in Ugaritic, Phoenician, Punic and Old Aramaic, but richly attested in Rabbinic literature ‘to conjure, cast a spell’.¹⁹ The verb in the phrase הִבְרֹ שָׁמַיִם, an Hebrew *hapax legomenon*, could derive from Arabic *habbara* ‘cut into large pieces, cut up’. In combination with ‘heavens’ the phrase can be translated as ‘they that divide the heavens’.²⁰ Only the addition of “... who gaze [חִזְהוּ] at the stars, who at new moons make known what shall come over her [Babylon]” allows, not the term in itself, for the interpretation of *Brown, Driver, and Briggs* that Isa 47:13 refers to the distinguishing of the signs of the zodiac, or an astrological division of the sky.²¹ Like חִזְהוּ and שָׁמַיִם²², לְחֻדְשֵׁי is copiously attested in Hebrew scripture²³ (Ugaritic: *hdt, hudāši*), the noun can be translated as ‘new moons’, ‘months’. לְחֻדְשֵׁי designates temporal repetition, chronological order and astronomical arrangement of the year by reappearance of the different phases of the moon.²⁴ קַסְמִים ‘practitioner of divination’ or קָסַם ‘to practice divination/magic’, ‘to conjure’ is well attested in Palmyrene Aramaic, Syriac, Ethiopic, Mishnaic Hebrew, the Talmud, the Aramaic of the Targums, Mandaic, and Arabic in the meaning of ‘divide, distribute, deal out, determine (of God or fate)’. The word is unattested in this or any other meaning in Ugaritic, Phoenician-Punic, Old Imperial Aramaic or Akkadian. The term seems to have been used to describe and refer to foreign practices of divination in general, not specifically Babylon (cf. Dtn 18:14; Jos 13:22; 1 Sam 6:2; Eze 21:34), and might also have been a domestic practice. In view of the lack of any of the specific language of Babylonian astronomy, it must be asked how much the authors of DI actually knew about Babylonian astronomy and magic.²⁵

¹⁵ “חָבַר”, BDB 288; and “חָבַר”, *ibid.*, 287.

¹⁶ “חָבַר”, HALOT 288; and “חָבַר”, *ibid.*, 287-288.

¹⁷ Cryer 1994: 259; Jeffers 1996: 33-34.

¹⁸ “כְּשָׁף”, BDB 506; “כְּשָׁף”, HALOT 503.

¹⁹ Cryer 1994: 258.

²⁰ “הִבְרֹ”, BDB 211; “הִבְרֹ”, HALOT 237.

²¹ Jeffers 1996: 154-155.

²² Interestingly enough שָׁמַיִם occurs 17x in DI. Except for 5 occurrences, all references to the heavens have YHWH as object: YHWH is creator of the heavens.

²³ E.g.: Gen 29:14; Num 11:20; Neh 10:34.

²⁴ “חֻדֶשׁ”, BDB 294; “חֻדֶשׁ”, HALOT 294-295.

²⁵ “קָסַם”, BDB 890; “קָסַם”, HALOT 1115-1116; Cryer 1994: 256-257.

What did the authors of Deutero-Isaiah know?

On basis of these references to Lady Babylon's divination, magic and astronomical practices and knowledge, Albani, with Berges following him, places the anti-Babylonian polemic of Isa 47 in the atmosphere of the politic and religious propaganda for and against the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus.²⁶ In the negative propaganda of the 'Verse Account of Nabonidus', Nabonidus is portrayed as boasting about his astronomical and mantic wisdom and god-given dreams, which surpassed even the famous astronomical compendium '*Enūma Anu Enlil*'. Clearly, Nabonidus is ridiculed for he does not master the art of writing and reading. According to Albani Isa 47 can be seen as the Israelite pendant of the 'Verse Account': both poems propagate against the existing reign of the Neo-Babylonians, which was considered as a heavily oppressive. In addition, both poems mock Nabonidus' pride (represented by Lady Babylon) in his mantic wisdom. It seems that Nabonidus' conflict with the Babylonian priests and astronomers centered around his efforts to reform Babylonian religion by promoting the cult of the moon goddess Šin over against the other, more important Babylonian gods like Marduk and Nabû and by ordaining his daughter as a Šin priestess. Albani, following *Vanderhooft*, suggests that שחרר is a polemic allusion to Nabonidus' lunar omen visions and his revelations from Šin. Interestingly enough, Albani perceives a religious conflict between the traditional worship of Marduk with its henotheistic theology, because it was still reconcilable with Babylonian polytheism, and Nabonidus' elevation of the astral goddess Šin to a universal god. In Nabonidus' religious program the concept of 'sin against Šin', the rejection of the moon goddess as universal god of gods, and 'the deed of Šin', the goddess' benevolence for Babylon and her universal actions, played an important role. Albani notices a parallel with 'the deed of Šin' in DI: the emphases on YHWH's actions in creation and history, e.g. 40:12-26; 44:24-28; 45:1-25 passim. In this situation of religious conflict, according to Albani, the authors of DI formulated the monotheistic confession "I am God, and there is none like me" (46:9).²⁷

From the above given sketch of Albani's theory as to what the authors of DI had in mind when they wrote their anti-Babylonian polemic, it can be concluded that Albani bases his theory on the presupposition that DI's authors indeed had specific knowledge of the religious and political situation under the reign of Nabonidus, as if they were present in Babylon. But since the text of Isa 47 gives no references to the person, reign or religious and political program of Nabonidus, it might as well have its origin in Judah. In addition, if Albani is right, one would expect to find in Isa 47 and 44:25 clear Akkadian loanwords denoting Babylonian magical and astronomical practices, but this is hardly the case as has been concluded above. Given the general and non-specific use of generally Hebrew

²⁶ An example of negative, hostile propaganda regarding king Nabonidus from the viewpoint of the Babylonian clerics is "A Persian Verse Account of Nabonidus", see: Smith, S. 1924. *Babylonian historical texts relating to the capture and downfall of Babylon*. London: Methuen, 27-97. An example of positive propaganda regarding Nabonidus is his own account, an inscription found in Harran: H2. See for the Harran Inscriptions: Gadd, C. J. 1958. "The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus." Pages 35-92 in *AnSt* 8. London: The British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara.

²⁷ Albani 2000: 103, 105, 109, 112, 116-118; Berges 2008: 495-496. 19 other references to or paraphrases of the incomparability of YHWH in DI, e.g.: 40:18; 45:3; 48:12.

descriptions of the Babylonian astronomy and magic in combination with the fact that Babylon was widely known for its knowledge of the stars, it is more probable that the authors had only a general knowledge of the Babylonian astronomical and magical practices.²⁸

That is to say: underlying the Babylonian astronomy was an understanding of and arithmetical control over the variable ‘velocities’, i.e. progress in longitude over a certain period, of the sun and planets in the planetary theory (or sun and moon in the lunar theory). Also observations of the variable inclination between ecliptic and horizon throughout the year (a problem of the spherical astronomy) and the visibility conditions near the horizon where most of the synodic appearances occur, were important. The prime interest therefore was the ‘synodic arc’, which is the distance in degrees of longitude travelled by the moon (or planets) between consecutive phenomena of the same kind, e.g.: from first visibility to first visibility.

Although the authors of Isa 47:13 do not demonstrate any insight into the arithmetical discipline of Babylonian astronomy, it seems that they were aware of the systematic recording of both ominous celestial as well as terrestrial occurrences subject to nightly gazing at the stars and planets, imagination or day to day experience. These observations were an intellectual expression of an assumption that the gods were not only inseparable from all possible natural phenomena on the basis of their cosmology, but were also responsible for the associations between phenomena in nature and events in human society. The ominous occurrences were not only seen as the products of the agency of the gods or their manifestations, they were also the divine authorities and origins behind the texts in which the omens were compiled. The importance of the heavens as a great field against which the gods wrote their will as form of divine communication, such as the welfare of the king, the state, and its people as a whole is part of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian culture. This is attested by the omens of the official compilation of celestial omens, *Enūma Anu Enlil*, placed in the library of Nineveh and in the royal correspondence between Sargonid kings Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.E.) and Aššurbanipal (668-627 B.C.E.) and their learned advisors who used the handbook *Enūma Anu Enlil*.²⁹ However, it ought to be observed that astronomical divination was by no means limited to Mesopotamia, and that the kinds of general reference made in Isa 47 do not require intimate knowledge of Mesopotamian practices.

DI’s authors mention not only the very important nightly observations, but also describe vaguely by means of a hapax that Babylonian astronomers ‘divide the heavens’. The authors may have known of the characteristic way the Mesopotamian astronomers catalogued and systemized a wide variety of celestial phenomena, like relative positions of fixed stars in the sky, lunar visibility schemes, *ziqpu* (zenith) stars that cross the zenith of the observer, (dis)appearances of the five planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and

²⁸ Tiemeyer 2010: 104-105, 117-118.

²⁹ Rochberg 2011: 2, 4, 24-25, 166, 181, 190; Wright 2000: 39. See also Parpola, S. 1970-1983. *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*. AOAT 5. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker Neukirchener Verlag; Hunger H. 1992. *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings*. SAA 8. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press; Parpola S. 1993. *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian scholars*. SAA 10. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Saturn), length of daylight and lunar visibility scheme etc. It is probable, however, that DI's authors were only broadly aware of the practice of arranging the stars in groups according to the 'paths' on which they are seen to rise and set. There is no evidence that DI knew in detail of fixed star-schemes as represented by the 'Astrolabe' texts, which consisted either of a circular table or vertical column in which the thirty-six stars are divided into the three paths of Anu, Enlil and Ea and identify when each star appears on the horizon in the course of a schematic 12-month calendar.³⁰

With שחרה Albani thought to have found a reference to Nabonidus' Šin cult. It is nevertheless more plausible that the term is nothing more than just a general ridiculing allusion to the efforts the Babylonians put into charming something away by magic that YHWH has ordained. Given Albani's kind of argumentation one might imagine that לחדשים could refer to the Šin cult, simply because (metaphoric) references and descriptions of the moon in Babylonian literature relate to the moon goddess Šin.³¹ On the basis of the extensive attestations of לחדשים in Hebrew scripture this allusion cannot be allowed for. Presumably the term refers to the pre-eminence of the moon in Babylonian astronomy because of its importance for the calendar. From the viewpoint of celestial divination, the most important synodic moments of the moon's cycle were the day of the first lunar crescent or the first day of the month, and opposition, the day of full moon was considered ideally to fall on the 14th day. The close watch of the moon was thus, before methods to predict first visibility were construed, essential for declaring the first day of a month. The authors of DI must have known this, although the Israelites themselves utilized calendars differing from 360, 364, and 365 days. The celestial omen corpus attests to the important role of the moon for astrology as well: many aspects of the moon's behavior were scrutinized as omens of future events in the world, as can be seen in a letter from the Babylonian scholar *Nabû-iqiša* reporting on a new moon on the 1st day.³²

"1. If the day reaches its normal length: a reign of long days. 3. – The 30th day completes the measure of the month. 4. If the moon becomes visible on the 1st day: reliable speech; [the land] will become happy. 6. If the moon at its appearance [wears a crown]: constantly the harvest of the land will prosper; [the land will dwell] as if in

³⁰ Rochberg 2011: 6-7, 129; Albani 2000: 108-109; Wright 2000: 38-39; Berges 2008: 500-501.

³¹ An example of a metaphoric description of the moon goddess is a Babylonian letter by the scholar Nergal-etir reporting on Mercury being near the new moon "1. *If the moon becomes visible on the 1st day: reliable speech; the land will become happy.* 3. *If the moon at its appearance wears a crown: the king [will reach] the highest rank.* 4. *If its horns are equally clear: enemy kings will be reconcil[ed].* 6 – *It will be seen together with the sun.* 7. [...] *at the appearance [.....] will become long [...].* *Rev.1 Well-being will come down on the land. The moon-god will smite the enemy.*" Hunger 1992: 144 (letter 258). An Assyrian report from the scholar Akkullanu reporting on the presence of Gemini and Perseus in the lunar halo: "Rev. 3. *[If] the moon rid[es] a chariot in the month of Sililiti: the dominion of the king of Akkad will prosper; and he w[ill capture] his enemies.*" *Ibid.*, p. 69 (letter 112).

³² Rochberg 2011: 111, 134, 165-181; Cryer 1994: 321.

pastures near the city; the king [will re]ach the highest rank. r. 2 This is good for the king my lord. 3. From Nabû-iqiša of Borsippa.”³³

Furthermore, contra Albani, Isa 46:1-2 reveals a conception of the Babylonian gods that does not fit the situation in Babylon during the last years of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. A prophet living in Babylon would have been familiar with Nabonidus’ attempt to replace the worship of the traditional Babylonian chief deities Marduk (Bēl) and Nabû (Nebo) with that of Šin. This unfamiliarity with the cultic struggles of Nabonidus’ reign suggests that the authors of DI lived at some distance (geographical and/or temporal) from Babylon and thus had only general knowledge of the Babylonian astronomy.³⁴

As stated before both the impotence of the astronomical specialists, the *tsupšarru* ‘scribe-diviner’ and *tsupšar Enūma Anu Enlil* ‘celestial diviner’, as well as the insufficiency of the Babylonian magic practices are ridiculed in Isa 47:9-13. Notwithstanding the fact that שחרר, חבר, כשף, and קסמים do not describe precisely what kind of Babylonian magic the authors of DI had in mind, the use of different magical terms could indicate that they were aware that the Babylonian scholars acknowledged various divination professions like the *āšipu* ‘magician-exorcist’, the *šā’lilu* ‘dream interpreter’, and the *bārû* ‘haruspex’. These diviners, scholars and wise men were in command of more than one branch and were trained in the omen literature. They interpreted provoked and unprovoked omens. The former came about through techniques such as lecanomancy, libanomancy and extispicy. The latter were taken from the many observations of the behavior of animals, birds, insects, human beings and heavenly bodies.³⁵ Contrary to Albani’s statement that the Babylonians did not really believe that they could change their fate, expressed by the term *šīmtu*, i.e. the course of life, determined by divine decree, it was a Babylonian conviction that the predicted or diagnosed consequence of the omen protasis was avoidable or changeable by means of an appeal to the deity or deities with prayers and ritual acts.³⁶ The prayers and rituals necessary to counteract bad omens were written in ‘*namburbū*’ texts, meaning literally ‘it’s (the omens) undoing’. It is possible that the use of שחרר, חבר, כשף, and קסמים in Isa 44:25 and 47 might relate to these NAM.BUR.BI rituals, that were designed to dispel or avert the evil decisions of the gods predicted in omen apodosis of both public and private effect. The reliance on incantation and apotropaic ritual magic, like the namburbi rituals, was a thoroughly religious act with which humans effectively asked the gods, who were the givers of the signs, to undo the connection between the omen and its prediction:

³³ Hunger 1992: 161 (letter 290).

³⁴ Tiemeyer 2010: 123.

³⁵ Celestial phenomena were collected in the series *Enūma Anu Enlil* ‘When Anu and Enlil’ (see above); the terrestrial phenomena in the series *Šumma ālu* ‘If a city’; dreams in the series *Ziqīqu* ‘Dream god’; human physiognomical traits in the series *Alamdimmū* ‘The form’; anomalous animal births in *Šumma izbu* ‘If the anomalous newborn’; and medical symptoms in the series *SA.GIG* ‘Symptoms’. See the survey in: Rochberg 2011: 66-98.

³⁶ Albani 2000: 110-111.

“1. To the king, my lord: your servant Nabû-nadin-šumi. Good health to the king, my lord! May Nabû and Marduk bless the king, my lord! 6. Concerning the apotropaic ritual [NAM.BUR.BI, CE] against evil of any kind, about which the king wrote to me: "Perform it tomorrow" – the day is not propitious. We shall prepare it on the 25th and perform in on the 26th. 12. Anyway, the king, my lord, should not be worried about this portent. Bēl and Nabû can make a portent pass by, and they will make it bypass the king, my lord. The king, my lord, should not be afraid.”³⁷

A more specific example of which evil sorcery (kiš-pi = כִּשְׁפִי) could be averted with a namburbi ritual can be found in a report from Nabû-nasir:

“10. [Concerning] the rites about which the ki[ng, my lord], wrote to us, in Kislev (IX) we performed "To keep ma[laria], plague and pestilence away from a man's home" and numerous counterspells; in Shebat (XI) we performed 'hand-lifting' prayers, an apotropaic {NAM.BUR.BI HUL kiš-pi, CME} ritual to counteract evil sorcery and a ritual against malaria and plague. On the 1st day we initiated the rites (to be performed) in Adar (XII).”³⁸

The resort to prayer and magic depicts the omen statements in the order of the lawlike statement: ‘if *x*, then (also expect) *y*, if and only if not *z*’: where *x* is the protastis, *y* the apodoses and *z* the namburbi ritual. In the case of Isa 44:25 and 47 none of this sorcery is capable of predicting, changing or diverting the abundant disasters, such as dethronement, sexual violation, humiliation, the loss of children and widowhood, that was about to fall on Babylon. The diviners could not predict the disasters by means of omens of the heavens, or dispel YHWH’s decisions by means of namburbi magic. All of Babylonian knowledge, apotropaic instruments, magic and astronomy are simply surpassed by YHWH’s will, and is thus characterized negatively by DI’s authors.³⁹

It is therefore very important argument in Isa 44:25 and 47 that it is neither possible to predict at any given time from terrestrial and/or celestial omens the will of YHWH; neither is it possible to deflect his will by virtue of namburbi rituals. YHWH is at no one’s disposal, YHWH’s contingent proceedings in history are not a matter of predictability. This is opposed to the Babylonian belief in an alterable personal (and public) fate: omens predicting unlucky *šimtu* were susceptible to undoing by namburbi rituals addressed to particular gods. The authors of DI believed that the celestial elements were created by YHWH, and that he established the courses of their daily and annual travels. More important, for those who believed in YHWH, the celestial bodies were not gods, but merely objects created by God and under his control.⁴⁰

³⁷ Parpola 1993: 217 (letter 278).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238 (letter 296).

³⁹ Rochberg 2011: 45-50, 55, 59-60, 200-202; Parpola 1993: xiii-xiv; Berges 2008: 497, 499; Albani 2000: 110-111.

⁴⁰ Rochberg 2011: 51, 202-203; Albani 2000: 111 (note 439); Wright 2000: 60, 235 (note 38-40, 42). Cf. YHWH as almighty creator in DI, e.g.: 40:12; 44:24; 51:13.

Four factors of conflict

It is apparent that DI's authors intended to contrast YHWH's power with that of Babylonian magic and astronomy. With Babylon being the most important political and military power of the time, and in particular the nation who brought destruction upon Jerusalem, it can be expected to find a relatively large degree of Mesopotamian influence in the intellectual life of Israel and Judah. In view of the cultural and religious dominance of the Neo-Babylonian Empire it is possible to find references to Babylonian practices in DI (and in the Hebrew Bible in general), which have their origin from the eighth to the sixth centuries. At least DI's authors and possibly the rest of Judah had some rudimentary understanding of Mesopotamian religious ideas, and thus the capability to contrast their religious ideas with the Babylonian ideas of living and communicating with the divine. This contrast Israelite prophecy and Babylonian mantic practices can be reduced to four factors. Firstly the conflict is about the question of which god is able to foretell the future and fulfill his plans in history. By means of the keyword עצה in Isa 47:13 the many useless predictive and apotropaic 'councils' of the Babylonian specialists are contrasted with YHWH's own plans, which will be inevitably realized in history (nomen: Isa 40:13; 44:26; 46:10-11; verbum: 40:14; 41:28; 45:21).⁴¹ With YHWH there is only one council: the one proclaimed by his prophets. This leads to the second factor: there is a conflict between the Babylonian inductive-instrumental mantic and the Israelite intuitive, i.e. visionary-auditory mantic. Whereas the Israelite prophecy becomes conscious of future events through visions and auditions, the Mesopotamian omen science classifies omens in an inductive-instrumental way. An audition can apparently be found in Isa 40:3ff where the prophet/author becomes the aural witness of the voices in the council of YHWH. Thirdly, Babylon's perversity consisted of her trust in her knowledge (Isa 47:10), her astronomical compendia and namburbi rituals, this is false knowledge, especially when it is aimed at YHWH like a weapon. The verb יעל in Isa 47:12 indicates what does not avail against YHWH: foreign gods and their idols (Isa 44:9f; 57:12; 1 Sam 12:21; Jer 2:8, 11; 16:19; Hab 2:18); false prophets (Jer 23:32); deceit (Jer 7:8; Job 15:3); the help of Egypt (Isa 30:5f); injustice (Pro 10:2) and wealth (Pro 11:4). Only YHWH the redeemer is the one "...who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go." (Isa 48:17). YHWH makes divinatory wisdom foolish, and turns it on the practitioners themselves. It is the awe for YHWH, which is necessary for true wisdom, and salvation for Zion:

"And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD." (Isa 11:2)⁴²

Fourthly and lastly, magic, astronomy and the various Babylonian specialists are not able to save (ישע) Lady Babylon. The 'savior quality' can only be ascribed to YHWH (cf. e.g.: Isa 43:11-12). The verb נצל (Hiphil) in Isa 47:14 stresses in the whole of Isaiah the fact that

⁴¹ The theme 'plan' is also a *leitmotiv* in Isa 1-39, e.g.: 5:19; 19:11; 36:5.

⁴² See also: Isa 33:6; Pro 1:7; 2:6, 10; 8:12; 9:10.

only YHWH's actions are sovereign: only he saves, no one and nothing else. This theme has a very close connection with the polemic against idolatry in Isa 44:9ff, in which the orator falls down before an idol. In v. 20 this illusion becomes disillusionment, for the worship of idols cannot deliver him. The unique occurrence of אש 'fire' and גחלת 'coal' together in Isa 44:19 and 47:14 (the only other attestation: Eze 1:13; 10:2) suggests a correlation of Isa 44:19 with 47:14. With the correlation the authors of DI ironically suggest that the Babylonian divinatory science is even more useless than the manufacturing of idols, since the same wood used for making idols provides warmth and light when used as firewood. Whereas the manufacturer of idols sits near a warm fire, the diviner has nothing. Contrastingly: where the manufacturer and the diviner do not have salvation (Isa 47:15), Israel has everything in YHWH "For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior..." (Isa 43:3; cf. Isa 47:4).⁴³

Conclusion

Given general Hebrew descriptions of the Babylonian astronomy and magic in combination with the fact that Babylon was widely known for its knowledge of the stars, it is more probable that the DI's authors had only a rudimentary understanding of Babylonian astronomical and magical practices. Furthermore, DI seems to be unfamiliar with the cultic and political struggles of Nabonidus' reign. Thus, it seems likely that DI's authors formulated their polemic at some distance (geographical and/or temporal) from Babylon. They contrasted their religious ideas with the Babylonian ideas of living and communicating with the divine. From this conflict between Israelite intuitive prophecy and Babylonian instrumental divination can be concluded that DI's authors intended to make clear that YHWH is at no one's disposal. Not even for the once dominant Lady Babylon. YHWH's contingent proceedings in history will never be a matter of predictability. Mantic techniques devised to deflect the evil of YHWH's divine punishment fail, forever.

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⁴³ Tiemeyer, *Comfort of Zion*, pp. 79, 81-84, 116, 124; Albani, *Der Eine Gott*, pp. 114-115; Berges, *Jesaja 40-48*, pp. 496-497, 499-503.

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