

GOD ACTS

Isaiah 46:1-13

The use of satire or even the use of made-up examples to make a point can often be misinterpreted. Sometimes exaggerations or hyperboles are used to grab attention or to stimulate thinking in a new direction. In the political realm in times leading up to people casting a vote for either an individual or a new way to do things, those who are advocates may use such things to encourage people to “see things” their way or to “reject” an opposing view.

There are several passages in the Bible that use satire. These include Isaiah’s ridicule of idol-makers (Isaiah 40:19-20), God’s taunting of Egypt (Jeremiah 46:11), and Elijah’s gibes directed at the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:27). Jesus Himself used satire in the form of hyperbole when He told His hearers to “take the plank out of your own eye” (Matthew 7:5). It is my guess that there are many other examples in the Scriptures that could be included in this list. The use of “made-up” stories which are called “parables” is an effective teaching technique that we have come to appreciate and the “characters” from these stories have even become part of our vocabulary. Just think how often we use such descriptions like “the prodigal son” or “the good Samaritan.” Such phrases as “go the second mile” and “turn the other cheek” are commonly used by people in our culture.

Just as political candidates use derisive terms to characterize their opponents, we find that God’s prophets did not hold back in their description and ridicule of the false pagan gods of the nations in the middle east. In Isaiah’s prophecy regarding the eventual downfall of Babylon that would happen immediately before the Jews who were in exile were released, the emphasis was pointedly about the inadequacy of the gods of the Babylonians. This was then followed by showing how the One True God is totally adequate and sufficient for the needs of those who worship Him.

The previous chapter in Isaiah (45) set the stage or background for what we will be examining in chapter 46. The Persia Empire led by Cyrus was going to overthrow the Babylonian Empire and be the predominate power in that part of the world. A change of philosophy was needed in the leadership of the captors of the Jews. The Babylonians were not likely to let the Jews return to their home land but the Persians were open to the idea. The rise of the Babylonian Empire was brought about by God because it suited His purposes regarding the chastisement of Judah. The fall of the Babylonian Empire and the rise of Persia were also brought about by God for the same reason but this time it was for the restoration of Judah. The reason was clearly stated as “For Jacob My servant’s sake” in the previous chapter of Isaiah’s prophecy.

The False Gods – 46:1-2

¹ Bel has bowed down, Nebo stoops over; Their images are consigned to the beasts and the cattle. The things that you carry are burdensome, A load for the weary beast. ² They stooped over, they have bowed down together; They could not rescue the burden, But have themselves gone into captivity. Isaiah 46:1-2 (NASB95)

Bel and Nebo were Babylonian gods that were going to be proved to be powerless to stop the Persian Empire that was being used by God to bring judgment on the Babylonians. The Babylonians had been enabled by God to rise to power and bring judgment on the Assyrians and on Judah. However, the Babylonians credited their rise to power to their gods Bel and Nebo.

The name Bel was not (as some commentators suggest) the same as Baal which was the Phoenician god of nature. This name came about from one of the early kings of the area of Babylon who was named Belus and when he died he was “deified” and declared to be a “god” that was associated with the sun. Whether actually or just in their mythology, Nebo was the son of Belus and was associated with the moon. Of course, there were images and statutes of these two pagan deities

in Babylon. Apparently, it was a common practice for people in that area of the world to combine the names of their gods in the names given to their children or perhaps names that a king or ruler might take for himself. One of the Babylonian names that we may recall is Belshazzar which clearly has the name “Bel” in it. Also, Nebuchadnezzar was named for “Nebo.”

The Israelites also did this in that many of the names of Hebrew people would be made up of parts of names associated with God. For example, the name “Joel” is a combination of the sound Jah (from YHWH or Jehovah) and the sound El (from Elohim – which a common reference to a divine being.) So “Joel” would mean “Jehovah is God.”

The start of the satire regarding these “gods” of Babylon was that they would be toppled over and hauled away in oxen-drawn carts for the purpose of getting any metal of value (such as gold, silver or bronze) from them. These so-called gods were burdens that had to be carried about by the people who had worshiped them.

In the last part of verse two, we see a satirical reference to the people of Judah being taken into captivity by the Babylonians, the gods of the Babylonians (and the Babylonians themselves) would be taken into captivity by the Persians.

The True God – 46:3-7

³ “Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, And all the remnant of the house of Israel, You who have been borne by Me from birth And have been carried from the womb; ⁴ Even to your old age I will be the same, And even to your graying years I will bear you! I have done it, and I will carry you; And I will bear you and I will deliver you. ⁵ “To whom would you liken Me And make Me equal and compare Me, That we would be alike? ⁶ “Those who lavish gold from the purse And weigh silver on the scale Hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god; They bow down, indeed they worship it. ⁷ “They lift it upon the shoulder and carry it; They set it in its place and it stands there. It does not move from its place. Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer; It cannot deliver him from his distress. Isaiah 46:3-7 (NASB95)

In classic Hebrew poetry fashion, Isaiah presented this message with parallel statements that gives us some insight into the terms we find in the Scriptures. For example, Isaiah tells us that the “remnant of the house of Israel” is the “house of Jacob.” (Half of the translations I found omit the linking word “and” in verse three. If the word “and” is included, then the verse sounds as if Isaiah is addressing two different groups which would be contrary to the parallelism construction.)

The parallelism is also seen in “borne from birth” and “carried from the womb.” It is also found in “old age” and “graying years.” Other repeated ideas are “bear you” and “deliver you.” These comparisons continue to the end of this chapter.

The people of Babylon gave their gold and silver to a hired craftsman to fashion a lifeless statue that had to be carried on their shoulders to reside in a fixed place. This object of their worship could not do anything to help the people during times of trouble. In stark contrast to this, the God of Israel did not need to be fashioned or formed by a goldsmith nor did He need to be carried about by anyone.

Instead, it was God who “formed” the people as we see in Psalm 139:13 “For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb.” It was God who “carried” or cared for and delivered and protected them from birth through the latter years of life. No other “god” of the pagan nations had such a role in relationship to those who were worshipers. There was no one comparable to the God of Israel.

The Trustworthy One – 46:8-11

⁸ “Remember this, and be assured; Recall it to mind, you transgressors. ⁹ “Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, ¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish

all My good pleasure';¹¹ Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it. Isaiah 46:8–11 (NASB95)

It is helpful to remember the context of this prophecy. It was written to the people of Judah about 10 years after the fall of the northern kingdom (Israel) to Assyria and about 125 years before the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians. This was a call by God through Isaiah for the remaining tribe of the descendants of Jacob to repent and turn to the One True God rather than continue to be involved with pagan practices. We know from the writings of Jeremiah (a century after Isaiah) that the people were still “baking cakes” and offering them to the “Queen of Heaven.” Quote from Jeremiah: “Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes to offer to the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to arouse my anger.” – Jeremiah 7:17-18

We tend to think that the people of Judah should have known better since they had the prophets and the Scriptures available to them. However, it had been more than a century since Isaiah’s time and Jeremiah was not a popular figure during his time. Just consider how much our own nation has changed in less time that what the Jews had experienced. The change in our nation in cultural norms from the time of the 1950s compared to now are staggering and the lack of reverence that the general public now shows toward God compared to then is shocking.

Even with the clear evidence that God is real, many people (both then and now) mocked God. What did Jehovah present to them to give evidence (proof) that He is God? We see the answer in verse ten that focused on the fulfillment of prophecies and promises that we see in the ancient Scripture writings. If a person carried out an open-minded examination of prophecies in the Bible compared to things that have happened that fulfill those prophecies, then the only logical conclusion is that “it is real” and only a Person Who knows the end from the beginning could possibly be able to inspire writers to record such evidence.

It should be comforting for us today to be able to rely on God’s promises to save His people and that the final outcome will be victory for God and those who put their trust in the completed work of Christ for our salvation. This was the plan that God had shared with Abraham that through him and his “seed” all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God repeated this promise to Jacob that He would be with him until all had been fulfilled and on the cross, Jesus declared the fulfillment of that when He said, “It is finished.” This was God’s “good pleasure” or His will which was predestined to be accomplished.

We see some specifics in a series of events that would lead to the demise of the Babylonian Empire in that God showed Isaiah that a nation would rapidly swoop down upon Babylon and destroy it so that God’s will for His people and eventually the entire world would come to pass.

The Just One – 46:12-13

¹² “Listen to Me, you stubborn-minded, Who are far from righteousness. ¹³ “I bring near My righteousness, it is not far off; And My salvation will not delay. And I will grant salvation in Zion, And My glory for Israel. Isaiah 46:12–13 (NASB95)

In the previous verses, God contrasted Himself with the pagan gods and in these final verses, God contrasted Himself with the people who were “the people of God.” The description of the people was translated as “stout-hearted” in the KJV. That was not a complementary use of that term. The good kind of “stout-heartedness” results from humility and relying upon God. Just the opposite was intended here. We might translate this as “bull headed” since it described a people who were said by Alexander MacLaren to be those “who are far from righteousness [and] are those who are

not only sinful in actions, but do not desire to be otherwise, having no approximation or drawing toward a nobler life, by aspiration or effort.”

The contrast is seen in that “they were far from righteousness” and yet “God would bring righteousness to them.” These were a people who knew that they needed to repent and yet they kept putting it off until sometime in the future. (Sounds similar to what people do today.) The contrast is that God said His salvation was not going to be delayed.

Some commentators attempt to apply these verses to the Babylonians, but the context clearly shows that God was speaking to the Jews who were predestined to be essential in the eternal purposes of God to bring salvation to fallen mankind. This promise was given to them even while they were in their typical stubborn rejection of God and were running away from (rather than toward) God’s righteousness. This was God’s grace in action and not something that they deserved.

We also see from these comments that God already had a timetable for accomplishing those events in which “His righteousness would be brought near.” Of course, we recognize that this prophecy was with regard to the coming of the Messiah which would be fulfilled at the end of the “70 weeks of years” following their exile or captivity in Babylon. We realize that it would be nearly 700 years after Isaiah that the prophecy would be fulfilled and yet, in God’s time frame this was “near.”

God even told them where the salvation event would take place and we know from the historical accounts that it was in Zion that Christ was crucified and God’s ultimate strength (His glory) was made manifest in the “weakness” of dying on a cross. This also shows a contrast in God’s way versus the way of lost humanity. God said that His strength was made perfect in weakness and the opposite of that is found in those who are “stout-hearted” or “stubborn-minded” and even those who take pride in their rebellion against the holiness and righteousness of living a Godly life that aligns with God’s word. We see this sin of rebellion still happening all around us in today’s world and just as God did in Isaiah’s time, He holds out an invitation to repent, turn to Him and be saved. The choice is ours, however, the consequence of that choice belongs to God.