# Comparative Study of Isaiah 40-66 and Mesopotamian Royal Ideology

## Scientific Program

The prophecies of Isaiah 40-66 are admired for their lyrical beauty. Furthermore, their encouraging and hopeful message has given them great theological import in both Jewish and Christian thought. But these prophecies were not composed solely for their aesthetic value; they emerged from a historical reality, and the present project seeks to situate these important prophetic texts in their historical context.

As I have argued elsewhere, a historical approach, which situates Biblical texts within their ancient Near Eastern context, allows for a more complete understanding of majestic prophetic texts, especially those of Isaiah (Aster 2017:320). Like the material in earlier parts of Isaiah, the prophecies of Isaiah 40-66 respond to a particular historical circumstance. Furthermore, they address the political challenges relevant to that historical period and formulate theological responses to those political challenges. A full understanding of these prophetic texts requires attention to the interaction of the political, the historical, and the theological elements.

Understanding this interaction requires comparative study of the imagery used in the prophetic text and the imagery of the relevant political literature. Happily, we are in possession of key clues identifying the relevant political literature, supplied by the author (or one of the authors) of Isaiah 40-66. Isa. 44:24-45:7 clearly identify Cyrus by name, and refer to the imagery we know from Cyrus’ famous cylinder inscription (published in Schaudig 2001). When Isa. 45:1 states that God holds Cyrus’ hand, a reference to the image of Marduk (the chief Babylonian deity) supporting Cyrus’ hand, which we know from line 12 of the cylinder, is clearly intended, and when the same verse speaks of God’s causing nations to submit to Cyrus, the reference is to imagery we know from lines 17 and 18 of the cylinder, in which Marduk causes all the officers of “Sumer and Akkad” (i.e., southern Mesopotamia) to submit to Cyrus.

While these brief references identify Cyrus by name and situate us clearly in a specific historical period, they are hardly the only references to Mesopotamian royal imagery in Isaiah 40-66, As has long been recognized, such references are found throughout these chapters, and are particularly numerous in chapters 40-48. Yet despite the many scholarly works that identify individual motifs in individual verses and chapters (surveyed below), no comprehensive study of the use of Mesopotamian royal imagery in Isaiah 40-66 has appeared.

The goal of this project is such a comprehensive study, which will emphasize how the individual motifs we know from Mesopotamian royal inscriptions shape the rhetoric and message of large prophetic units in Isaiah 40-66, and particularly in 40-48. In my study of Isaiah 1-39 (Aster 2017), I argued that the elements bearing Assyrian influence are not simple discrete motifs, but larger literary units. As I detail below, in discussing preliminary results, I have identified literary units in Isaiah 40-66 which deploy motifs we know from Mesopotamian royal inscriptions to construct rhetorical arguments. These arguments on the one hand undermine Mesopotamian royal ideology; as the brief discussion above of Isa. 45:1 shows, the goal is to undermine Mesopotamian kings’ assertions of the power of their deities to legitimate their rule. But the arguments are far more subtle than a simple attack on idolatry: they include an alternate legitimation of Cyrus’ rule (as is clear in 45:1). Perhaps more importantly, they also include formulating the relationship between God and the Judahite exiles in light of the god-king relationship portrayed in Mesopotamian royal inscriptions. That relationship is extended and expanded, as Isa. 40-66 continue, into a relationship between God and the returned exiles who settle in Yehud.

### Survey of Research

Early critical study of Isaiah ignored the potential contributions offered by the Mesopotamian texts discovered during the course of the nineteenth century. Thus, while Duhm (1892) and Marti (1900) evince interest in historical issues, they did not correlate the stages of literary composition of Isaiah that they postulated to political or historical events known to us from the cuneiform material. Nor were such comparisons engaged by earlier proponents of Trito-Isaiah such as Kuenen (1892) and Elliger (1928), or later ones such as Hanson (1988), Emmmerson (1992), Rofe (1988, 2004) Becker (1997 and 2003), Goldingay and Payne (2006), Berges (2012) and Stromberg (2011), whose view that Trito-Isaiah is a separate composition~~al unit~~ is dominant in Biblical studies.

Among those who question whether Trito-Isaiah should be considered a separate compositional unit, we should note the views of Liebreich (1955-56; 1956-57) Rendtorff (1984) Seitz (1988), and Sommer (1988).

Questions of compositional units require attention to literary analysis, and to considering how the individual units contribute to the greater whole. Many important contributions to the literary study of Isaiah 40-66 have been made in recent periods, and only a few of the most salient can be surveyed here. Haran (1963) engaged the terms “rishonot” and “hadashot” in this corpus, and demonstrated how Isaiah 40-48 should be considered as a unit, thus calling into question whether we ought to view Trito-Isaiah as a discrete literary composition. Anthonioz (2011) exposed many of the important theological polemics throughout Isaiah 40-66, but particularly in 40-48. Clifford (1984) convincingly demonstrated the rhetorical coherence of many of the long prophecies in Isaiah 40-66, a point to which I return below. Sommer (1988) demonstrated how Isaiah 40-66 deliberately uses earlier prophetic material in order to add authority to the relatively late prophecies contained in this corpus. These comparisons to earlier prophetic material also ~~has~~ have the effect of demonstrating the compositional unity of many long units, since the subtle references in the later passage to a single earlier passage show that the later passage was composed as a single unit.

Questions of date of composition remain prominent in scholarship. In considering the relationship between Isaiah 1-39 and 40-55, Williamson (1994) has argued that the author of the later corpus saw his work as an “integral continuation” of the former, and also edited the earlier chapters. Both Becker (1997; 2003) and Berges (2012) argue that a very limited eighth-century core can be identified in Isa. 1-32 (primarily in chapters 6-8), but that a very complex process of redaction has produced the present book whose addressees are in the late Persian period. These views have become increasingly prominent in scholarship. But none of these studies, which date different passages in the Isaiah corpus, have directly engaged the comparative aspect. They assign late dates of composition to much of Isa. 1-39, and I call these into question, using comparative evidence, in my 2017 book.

Interestingly, one of the first comparative studies of Isaiah 40-66 appeared over eighty years ago, when Behr’s 1938 thesis demonstrated clear similarities between expressions in Isaiah 40-66 and those found in Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions. Since then, the comparative aspect of Isaiah 40-66 has largely remained the province of studies focusing on small groups of verses, noting specific and localized comparisons between terms in Isaiah 40-66 and Mesopotamian royal inscriptions. Thus, Koch )1972(, Kratz (1991), and Fried (2002) discussed the specific mentions of Cyrus, engaging some of the Mesopotamian material. Comparative scholars such as Cohen (1968), Paul (1968), Eph’al (1986-89) and Schaudig (2008) addressed detailed comparisons between individual verses and specific imagery found in certain verses in Isaiah 40-66 and the Mesopotamian royal inscriptions and cultic texts. These studies demonstrate the rich potential for further and more comprehensive comparative study.

Nevertheless, few book length studies engaging the comparative material have emerged. The first modern book-length study to engage the question directly was Vanderhooft (1999). He explores Neo-Babylonian imperial ideology, its differences from Assyrian royal ideology, and the ways in which the Neo-Babylonian empire controlled the Levant. In his third chapter, he gives examples of passages in Isa. 40-66 which reflect Neo-Babylonian ideology. Vanderhooft’s study prepares the ground for the type of detailed study envisioned in this project. Similarly, Machinist’s lengthy and important 2003 article goes beyond its declared aim of exploring the Babylonian Zeitgest behind Isaiah 40-66 and exposes intriguing connections between Babylonian religious conflicts and the *rib*-speeches in Isaiah 40-66.

Paul’s 2012 commentary identifies parallels to Mesopotamian texts, on a verse-by-verse basis. The commentary is a mother-lode of references in Isaiah 40-66 to Mesopotamian texts, with particular emphasis on the genre of royal inscriptions. It clarifies many of the linguistic parallels to the Mesopotamian texts, as well as identifying many similar motifs and imagery.

The present project aims to build on the comparative studies noted above, but goes beyond them. It takes the comparisons to individual motifs noted by Vanderhooft (1999), Paul (2012) and earlier comparative scholars, and argues that these could not have been formulated absent reference to the Mesopotamian material. It does this using carefully-constructed methodological criteria, which are discussed below. It furthermore argues that these motifs were subverted and reformulated so as to impugn the political and religious ideology emerging from the Mesopotamian texts. Particular emphasis is placed on how these motifs were used in political and religious texts of the Neo-Babylonian period and those of Cyrus’ reign.

This project moves beyond earlier studies by emphasizing the contribution of comparative study to understanding the larger rhetorical units that make up much of Isa. 40-66. In addressing larger rhetorical units, I build on the work of Clifford (1984) and Sommer (1988) noted above, who argued that the prophecies of Isa. 40-66 do indeed consist of large rhetorical units, not of short units composed of only small numbers of verses. Therefore, the project will examine the use of Neo-Babylonian motifs on the level of the large rhetorical unit. These units subvert and question Neo-Babylonian ideology first by referencing specific motifs that the audience identified with Neo-Babylonian royal propaganda, then by subverting these individual Mesopotamian motifs and integrating them into texts that argue for a different theological approach. As a result, the larger rhetorical units in Isaiah 40-66 argue not only against the way a specific motif is used in Neo-Babylonian texts, but against the ideological constructs which these individual motifs support. The subversion of Neo-Babylonian motifs in Isaiah 40-66 must be examined in the context of the large literary units that polemicize against Neo-Babylonian religious and political ideology, and especially against the adaptation of this ideology by Cyrus.

This approach is modeled on my 2017 study of Isaiah 1-39 in light of Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions. It integrates a comparative approach with close attention to literary and rhetorical structure, and argues that these allow us to fully understand the message of these prophetic passages. This use of comparative studies has the obvious consequence of situating the composition of the text firmly in the period where the texts referenced were known. Clear references to Neo-Assyrian motifs and ideology in certain passages in Isaiah 1-39 have shown that these passages must have been composed during the Assyrian period (Machinist 2016, Aster 2017). Similarly, clear references to Neo-Babylonian ideology in passages in Isaiah 40-66 show that these passages were composed not later than the period of Cyrus and his first successors, when Neo-Babylonian ideology was still known (Vanderhooft 1999, Paul 2012).

This comparative use of Neo-Babylonian data to date and interpret parts of Isaiah 40-66 has been critiqued by Barstad (1987; 1997) and his student Tiemeyer (2011), and their critiques must be addressed as part of this proposal. Barstad vigourously argued that the author of 40-55 never lived in Babylon (a view with which Baltzer [2001] concurs), and furthermore, that Palestine was not depopulated after the Babylonian exile. On the contrary, he argues, the compositions in Isa. 40-55 are directed at the community living in Palestine, exhorting them to see themselves as the continuation of the culture of “old Israel.” In support of this thesis, often known as the “myth of the empty land,” he argues that there are very few true Akkadian loan-words in Isaiah 40-55 and that many of the terms identified as Akkadian in fact come from Aramaic.

I find Barstad’s linguistic argument somewhat mystifying, and discontinuous with the arguments advanced by proponents of comparative studies such as Machinist, Paul, Eph’al and Vanderhooft. The use of Aramaic as a vector for conveying Mesopotamian motifs and ideology is well-known, and is recorded as early as a letter of Sargon II (720-705), who complains that his officials write too many letters in Aramaic (Dietrich 2003, text 2). Therefore, the key question is not whether the Neo-Babylonian motifs found in Isaiah 40-66 were transmitted to the author(s) of this corpus in Aramaic or in Akkadian, but whether the motifs in the Biblical material can be shown to be dependent on Neo-Babylonian antecedents. Because Akkadian literature, written in cuneiform, has been preserved, and Aramaic papyri fare less well over the centuries, modern scholars know Neo-Babylonian motifs primarily from the Akkadian texts. These motifs may well have been communicated to the Biblical author(s) and their communities in Aramaic, in written (or, more probably) in oral form, but the texts we have at our disposal which record these are in Akkadian. Clear methods have been developed by scholars of the comparative method to determine whether a given Biblical text references or depends on motifs known to us from extra-biblical texts.

Using these methods, and focusing on linguistic similarities between Biblical and Akkadian texts, we can show dependence of the Biblical texts on the extra-biblical ones. Of course, the discussion begins with similarities between formulations in Biblical texts and those in extra-biblical ones, but such similarities are not enough. Close attention to the grammar and syntax of the Biblical passages is needed. Specific formulations, unusual in the language of the Biblical text, but common and known to us in Akkadian or Aramaic, betray a process of borrowing and/or influence on the Biblical text. Malul (1990), Tigay (1993) have shown that such unusual elements are unlikely to have been generated in the Biblical passage under consideration without reference to expressions we know from cuneiform or Aramaic material. Expressions that are expected or fit well in Akkadian or Sumerian, but which betray linguistic irregularities in the Biblical text, cannot reasonably be considered to have been developed in the Biblical text without regard for the cuneiform one. Their criteria were applied in interpreting the *rib* passages in Isa. 40-48 by Holtz (2008).

A more developed series of criteria were established by Christopher B. Hays (2008) building on earlier work by Richard Hays (1989) in other fields. Carr (2017) largely concurs with Christopher B. Hays’ taxonomy of criteria, which include:

1. the availability to the authors of the Biblical text of the extra-biblical material (a critical point on which I elaborate further below),
2. the precision of the similarity
3. the recurrence or clustering of references to the extra-biblical text in the Biblical one (a key point in discussing Isaiah 40-66),
4. the extent to which the motif fits in the borrowed text (a point addressed in great detail in Tigay [1993])
5. the likelihood that the ancient author intended such an allusion
6. the contribution of the intertextual reading to the larger rhetorical unit’s argument (a point on which I’ve elaborated above).

Crouch (2014) attacked the question of identifying influence from a different angle. She argues that if we are to demonstrate that a Biblical text intentionally references a cuneiform text, we must show that the Biblical text overtly signals its references to the older work in such a way as to make the reference clearly perceptible to the intended audience. Like Hays, she introduces into the discussion issues of specificity of reference, and authorial intent. She notes that “The more complex the relationship between the source and other potential sources, and the more specific the author intends to be in identifying the source, the more specific the signal needs to be…” (Crouch 2014:24).

Many scholars have addressed the methodological questions addressed above, and despite slightly different emphases found in their works, a clear consensus has emerged. By combining their methods, it is possible to arrive at a reasonably certain conclusion about the likelihood that a given Biblical passage was influenced either by a motif which we know from specific extra-biblical sources. Applying these methods to Isaiah 40-66 clearly yields conclusions that differ from those advanced by Barstad.

These methods are not applied in Tiemeyer’s valuable 2011 study. Importantly, her study exposes many recurring motifs in Isaiah 40-55, including the idol-fabrication passages and the journey through the wilderness trope. But she is resolute in arguing that passages in Isa. 40-48 which have been shown by comparative scholars to betray influence from Babylonian texts could possibly have been composed without knowledge of those texts. While such a possibility cannot be denied, the preponderance of probability militates for a different conclusion. I agree with her that parts of Isa. 40-55 were composed in Judah. But while her position on the borrowing of terms we know from Akkadian texts is slightly more nuanced than Barstad’s, she doubts that any parts of Isaiah 40-55 were composed in Babylon, or betray direct Babylonian influence (see especially pp. 96-98.) She argues that any Babylonian influence is best explained as part of an amorphous “shared cultural heritage” (p. 130). Such a conclusion cannot be supported when one applies the methodological criteria discussed above, which are part of the consensus among comparative scholars.

She furthermore argues that because some of the Mesopotamian motifs have different referents in the Mesopotamian texts than in Isaiah 40-48, we cannot consider these as references to motifs we know from Mesopotamian literature (pp. 88-92). As I demonstrated (Aster 2017), such subversion and adaptation of motifs are a basic part of how prophetic literature, in particular that in the Isaiah corpus, deploy Mesopotamian motifs.

One of the points which allows Tiemeyer to doubt whether Isaiah 40-55 refers to specific motifs known to us from the Neo-Babylonian texts is her very brief (pp. 73-75) discussion of the epigraphic evidence for the life of Jewish exiles in Babylon during the exile. In the years since the conclusion of Tiemeyer’s research, many relevant texts from the Al-Yahudu and other archives have been published. Some of the relevant publications in the last ten years include Beaulieu 2011; Pearce and Wunsch 2014; Horowitz, et al. 2015, and discussion in Waerzeggers 2015. These show an exiled Judahite community negotiating boundaries which created group identity, but clearly involved in the economic life of Babylon. Studies published in the last ten years exploring the contacts between Judahites and other groups in Babylonia include Abraham 2015; Alstola 2019; Beaulieu 2015; Bloch 2014; Berlejung 2016, 2017, and 2018; Pearce 2014; Wunsch 2013; Waerzeggers 2014; Zadok 2014 and 2015, and other essays in Stökl and Waerzeggers 2015; Zilberg 2019.

The picture that emerges from these texts can only be described briefly here, based on Berlejung 2018. We find a small group of elite Judahites in the Babylonian urban centres, a group which included the family of Jehoiachin (about whom Weidner – gave hints) and which was immersed in Babylonian literary culture. We also find a larger group of rural Judahites, many of whom received bow-fief lands in the countryside and also fulfilled compulsory service for the king. The rural Judahites were organized, as were many other middle-class Babylonians, into *ḫadru* units. By means of such groupings, rural Judahites interfaced with the Babylonian administration. Furthermore, some second-generation rural Judahites began to “climb the social ladder” (Berlejung’s term), advancing economically and developing greater ties with the Babylonian royal administration, with the scribal elite who were needed for contracts, and with the judicial system needed to adjudicate any contract disputes. While the masses of rural Judahites had little contact with the urban centers, there were clearly some rural Judahites who, by dint of their economic advancement, needed contact with these centers to preserve their newfound economic status. Royal merchants, tax collectors, and other officials were already found among Judahite exiles by the middle of the sixth century BCE.

All these economic roles made it necessary that Judahites have knowledge of the literary motifs and political ideas that were part of Babylonian urban culture. By no means do I claim that large numbers of rural Judahites knew Babylonian political ideology. But there were both a small urban elite and a gradually-increasing number of rural social climbers among Judahites in Babylon who certainly knew more and more about Babylonian temple architecture, about Babylonian political machinations, and about the political ideology advanced by the claimants to the throne (the equivalent of modern-day politicians). They became aware of the ways in which political ideology was communicated by these politicians to their constituencies, which included the Babylonian urban elite. They certainly heard such ideology in Aramaic. Although nearly all the texts we have at our disposal from Babylonia are in cuneiform, there was certainly a very active scribal culture in Aramaic, much of whose production has not survived the ravages of time. The Aramaic scribal culture and its point of contact with cuneiform scribal culture are explored in Bloch 2018. Ultimately, it matters little to us whether Judahite exiles in Babylonia knew Neo-Babylonian political ideology in Akkadian or Aramaic. By dint of their contacts with scribes, Aramaic or Akkadian, they become aware of some of the Akkadian terms in which these political claims were couched; they knew the claims, and the expressions used to convey them. Thus, a clear channel of transmission of Babylonian political ideas to Judahite exiles existed, addressing many of the questions on this topic raised by Tiemeyer (2011:84-94).

Biblical studies have recently begun to take note of the great potential offered by these contacts for a fuller understanding of Biblical prophecy. Much of the discussion has thus far been focused on Ezekiel, the prime prophet of exile. Studies such as Ganzel and Holtz 2014, Vanderhooft 2014, Rom-Shiloni 2017 and Delorme 2019 all show the great potential contribution of comparative study of Babylonian realities to a fuller understanding of Biblical prophecy.

The time has come for unlocking the potential that such comparative study offers for achieving a better understanding of Isaiah 40-66.

This is particularly the case, given that many of the comparisons in the case of Isaiah 40-66, are to royal inscriptions and other texts dealing with imperial ideology. Enormous strides have been made in the last thirty years in understanding the history of the transition in Babylonian kingship to Nabonidus and from Nabonidus to Cyrus. Works such as Briant 1996, Beaulieu 1998 have taught us a great deal about the various rival claimants to the throne, and Machinist 2003 has argued that the political ferment in this period served as an important background to many passages in Isaiah 40-66.

Furthermore, many royal inscriptions and related literature have been published in good editions, including Schaudig 2001, Da Riva 2012; 2013a; 2013b. (See also Da Riva 2008). Finkel (2012), building on Kuhrt (1983), showed the great importance of Cyrus’ propaganda, and explored the ways it was disseminated, and Waerzeggers (2012) discussed the importance of a more poetic text known as the “Verse-account of Nabonidus” in disseminating royal ideology. The times is ripe, therefore, to explore the contribution of Neo-Babylonian royal ideology to our understanding of Isaiah 40-66.

## Research Objectives and Expected Significance

My overall objective is to harness the comparative data for “exegetical payoff” (to use Tigay’s phrase). The exegetical payoff is a clear understanding of the stages of the argument in Isaiah 40-66. These stages are detailed below, and they show how the comparative data can contribute to our understanding of Isaiah 40-66. A series of articles will be produced, and these will ultimately be integrated into a full-length commentary on Isaiah 40-66.

While taking individual motifs used in individual verses as its starting point, the project goes beyond interpreting specific verses. It addresses the larger rhetorical units in their historical context, and aims to understand how these respond to political realities. As I showed (Aster 2017), theological responses gain meaning when situated in their historical context, and therefore correlating the passages’ message to their historical context is a primary goal of this project.

While the understanding of the Biblical text, including its rhetoric and theology, is a worthy goal in and of itself, the project will contribute to other areas of humanities research. The primary topic of Isaiah 40-66 is the experience of an migrant community returning to the land from which they were forced to emigrate. Experiences of migrants are at the forefront of contemporary academic studies, as are questions of how migrants frame and explain their experiences. A better understanding of how the community of Judahite exiles in Babylon understood its experience of exile and responded to the possibility of return can be achieved through this project, and this can contribute to larger discussions of migrant experiences.

## Detailed Description of Proposed Research

#### Working Hypothesis

Our working hypothesis is that prophetic passages do not consist of isolated and fragmented "kerygmatic" statements, but ~~that~~ rather they develop coherent arguments and express clear ideologies. This position has been defended in many studies of Isaiah 40-66, especially Clifford (1984) and Sommer (1998). Furthermore, using the methods detailed by comparative scholars such as Tigay (1990), Malul (1990), Hays (2008), and others, we can identify motifs we know from Mesopotamian royal inscriptions, and other Mesopotamian literature, in Isaiah 40-66. These individual motifs will be examined first in the context of the specific verses, and then in the context of larger rhetorical units, with a goal of understanding how different parts of Isaiah 40-66 respond to the political realities of the period.

Isaiah 40-66 clearly address changing geographic and political realities. (These changes have given rise to the idea of Trito-Isaiah, although other understandings of these changes are clearly possible and perhaps desirable, as detailed above.) Chapters 40-48 have two clear aims: on the one hand, to encourage Judahites in Babylonia to view Cyrus as sent by God to issue his declaration and allow the return to Judah; while on the other to highlight differences between God and Marduk and to undermine Marduk-theology, as Machinist (2003) and Anthonioz (2011) have pointed out. This objective is achieved in Isa. 48:20, which “concerns itself with the exiles in Babylon and its central message is to get them out of there” (as even Tiemeyer [2011:126] is forced to admit. That verse narrates the departure of the caravan of return from Babylon. Prophecies in subsequent chapters addressed to the Judahites making the difficult and perilous journey through the desert (49:1-52:12), with 52:11-12 marking the actual moment of arrival in Jerusalem. During this journey, the prophet defines a new rȏle for himself: “maker of a covenant with a nation, to establish the land, to cause abandoned land-inheritances to be inherited” (Isa. 49:8), in a rhetorical unit consisting of 49:1-14.

As the verses describing the prophet in that unit show, many of the Mesopotamian motifs used in 40-48 are then re-used and re-interpreted in later passages. Thus, the description “a nation’s covenant, a light of nations,” applied to the Judahites in Babylonia in 42:6 is clearly taken from descriptions of Mesopotamian kings who describe themselves as *nur mātāti* in their inscriptions, and vaunt their having forced smaller kingdoms to accept vassal-treaties. This description is then re-interpreted and applied to the prophet himself in 49:8. There, the words “*berit ‘am*” from 42:6 are re-interpreted in light of the prophet’s role in allocating land-inheritances.

A full understanding of how the Mesopotamian imagery is used in chapters 40-48 is thus critical in understanding subsequent chapters in Isaiah 40-66. In particular, the so-called “servant songs” found throughout Isaiah 40-55 are part of this pattern of re-use and re-interpretation of motifs to address new political and historical realities.

Such motifs figure prominently in later parts of Isaiah 40-66 as well. As I argued in Aster (2012: 316-336), the luminous imagery in Isaiah 60 depends on Neo-Babylonian motifs known to us from royal inscriptions.

A brief summary of the elements of Isaiah 40-66, which I take as a working hypothesis, follows. Isaiah 40-48 focus on encouraging the Judahites to see Cyrus’ proclamation as Divinely-inspired, while rejecting Marduk theology. Isaiah 49-53 address the challenges of the journey through the desert itself, and the heartbreak of arriving in Yehud and discovering how significant the economic and demographic challenges are, while chapters 54-66 reframe the dream of return in light of the harsh realities the returnees encounter when they reach Yehud. These last thirteen chapters re-work earlier prophecies, using the Neo-Babylonian imagery so prominent in chapters 40-48. While some passages in these last thirteen chapters attribute the difficulties to Judahites’ failings, others (like chapter 60) place the dreams of a brilliant Jerusalem into the more distant future, when God will intervene directly to show His approval of the exiles’ return.

#### Experimental Design and Methods

The study will begin by defining rhetorical units in Isa. 40-53, and then working within each unit to identify the references to Mesopotamian motifs, especially those from the royal inscriptions. A post-doctoral researcher, with expertise in prophetic literature and Mesopotamian royal inscriptions, will be employed to study Biblical passages, engage comparative material, and consider how these contribute to the message of the passage. Graduate students working on prophetic literature will also be part of the project. The graduate students and the post-doctoral researchers will all gain experience in research and publication, valuable for their future careers.

As a working hypothesis, I have identified the following rhetorical units, basing myself on clear criteria such as messenger formulae in the opening verses, and more importantly, on the use of inclusio techniques to parallel the opening and closing verses of units (see, for example, how Isa. 50:1-3 parallel 51:1-3). These units are: 40:1-11; 40:12-31; 41:1-20; 41:21-43:10; 43:14-44:28; 45:1-17; 45:18-45:25; 46:1-47:15; 48:1-49:14; 49:15-49:26; 50:1-51:3; 51:4-51:11; 51:12-52:12; 52:13-53:12.

We will begin by focusing on 40-53 because the changes and re-interpretation of motifs in Isa. 40-66 require that the material be attacked in the order in which it is presented. Once the references to Mesopotamian motifs in each unit have been identified, questions such as adaptation/subversion and re-interpretation will be addressed, in order to understand how and why the motif is chosen and what role it plays in the prophet’s rhetoric. Specific rhetorical units will then become the topic of articles that will be published, with a goal of receiving critique. After 40-53 have been addressed, Isa. 54-66 will be studied, paying close attention to how earlier motifs are re-interpreted in these chapters. The overall goal of a full-length commentary on Isaiah, will then be achieved.

As the project moves forward, a website will make the text of the commentary available both in Hebrew and in English. Opportunities for scholars and the educated public to comment on the interpretations will be made available, thus harnessing “the wisdom of the masses” for the benefit of a fuller understanding of the Biblical text.

#### Preliminary Results

An application of the comparative method to a several passages in Isa. 1-39 (Isa. 2:1-4; 2:5-22; 10:5-15, 10:28-11:10, 14:28-32, 36:1-37:38) appears in Aster 2017a, in the context of a larger study of reactions to Assyrian imperialism in Isaiah 1-39. Several other examples of comparisons between passages of Isaiah 40-66 and Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions were discussed above, and I have identified several others in conference talks which will appear as articles. Among these are 41:8-9, in which God addresses Israel as “I have held onto you from the ends of the world and from its far corners I have called you, and I have said to you ‘you are My servant’.” The idea of choosing someone from “the ends of the world” and from “its far corners” clearly reflects of Cyrus’ self-portrayal. This idea is found in the cylinder, line 11 “He (Marduk) surveyed and looked throughout all the lands, searching for a righteous king, his heart’s desire. He supported his hand. He called out his name: Cyrus, king of Anshan; he pronounced his name to be king. While the terminology reflects Cyrus’ self portrayal, including the search at the ends of the world, the support of the hand, and the calling of the name, Isa. 41:8-9 subvert Cyrus’ ideology with two levels of replacement. First, God rather than Marduk is “calling the shots” and second, Israel rather than Cyrus is being called. The clear argument of this passage, read comparatively, is that the Judahites in Babylon are the true goal of the fascinating political changes that took place in Babylon c. 538 BCE. Marduk did not bring Cyrus to rescue the temples of that city; rather, the God of Israel searched for a means of extricating Israel from Babylon, and uses Cyrus to achieve this end. The comparative reading thus brings the encouraging message into dialogue with historical reality.

#### Conditions for Conducting the Research

I have published extensively on Isaiah 1-39, using Mesopotamian royal inscriptions to illuminate and explain many passages; many positive reviews of Aster (2017) have been published. I expect to build a team of graduate students and a post-doctoral researcher to work on the present project. We will also engage the wider scholarly community, by working with scholars abroad who are working on Isaiah 40-66 and are interested in comparative study. If further funding becomes available, a scholarly workshop on the comparative study of Isaiah 40-66 is planned.

#### Expected Results and Pitfalls

The project aims to move scholarly discussion globally towards recognizing the importance of historical context in studying Isaiah. More specifically, it aims to encourage scholars to consider the use of linguistic anchors, primarily those coming from Mesopotamian royal inscriptions, to provide more accurate dates for many sections of this very important prophetic corpus. The historically-grounded discussion of Isaiah can provide a better basis for understanding the message of this book, and for larger discussion of the theme of exile, migration, and return.

The primary pitfall in any comparative project is that of “parallelomania,” a term coined by Sandmel (1962) to describe the dangers of identifying every similarity as a parallel. The careful application of the criteria listed above to the passages under discussion can ensure that only parallels intended by the author of the text are identified. Fate has given modern scholars the gift of the re-discovery of Mesopotamian royal inscriptions, and it is our responsibility to use this gift judiciously and harness it for Biblical exegesis.

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