

Isaiah 46:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

They stoop, they bow down together; they could not deliver the burden, but themselves are gone into captivity.

Analysis

They stoop, they bow down together; they could not deliver the burden. Isaiah employs devastating irony to expose idolatry's futility. The verbs qara' (stoop) and shachach (bow down) typically describe worshipers before deities, yet here describe the gods themselves collapsing under their own weight. The idols Bel and Nebo (v. 1), Babylon's chief deities, require human carriers and cannot even preserve themselves from toppling.

"They could not deliver the burden, but themselves are gone into captivity" inverts the worshiper-deity relationship. Instead of gods delivering devotees from captivity, the gods themselves go into exile. When Cyrus conquered Babylon (539 BC), sacred images were seized as war plunder - the supposed divine protectors became prisoners. This historical event demonstrates that idols possess no agency, power, or reality beyond the material they're fashioned from.

Reformed theology sees here a fundamental apologetic: the true God acts; false gods are acted upon. Idolatry reverses proper order, making humans into god-bearers rather than God-bearers. Whereas Israel's God carried them (v. 3-4), Babylonian devotees exhausted themselves carrying lifeless statues. This principle applies to modern idolatries - career, wealth, ideology - which promise to carry us but ultimately require we bear their increasing weight until they collapse.

Historical Context

This prophecy targets Babylon's religious system, particularly the annual Akitu festival where massive statues of Bel (Marduk) and Nebo (Nabu) were paraded through Babylon's Processional Way. These ceremonies displayed the empire's gods in triumph, reinforcing Babylonian supremacy. Isaiah prophesies these very statues would be loaded onto pack animals (v. 1) as captive plunder when Cyrus conquered Babylon. Historical records confirm Persian forces captured Babylonian cult images, fulfilling Isaiah's mockery written 150+ years earlier.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. What modern 'burdens' have you been carrying that, like Babylonian idols, promise deliverance but require exhausting maintenance?
2. How does recognizing that God carries you (rather than requiring you to carry Him through religious performance) transform your spiritual life?
3. What specific idolatries in contemporary culture parallel Babylon's Bel and Nebo - imposing structures that ultimately collapse under their own weight?

Interlinear Text

מִשְׁאָה	מִלְתָּא	מִשְׁאָה	קָרְעָה	וְיַחֲדָה	לְאַיִלָּה	יָכְלָה	וְיָמְלָא	תְּמִלְתָּה
They stoop	they bow down	together	H3766	H3162	H3808	they could	not deliver	the burden
H7164						H3201	H4422	H4853

בְּלֹכְהָה:	בְּשַׁבְּעִים	וְנִפְשַׁת
but themselves	into captivity	are gone
H5315	H7628	H1980

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 48:7 (Parallel theme): For because thou hast trusted in thy works and in thy treasures, thou shalt also be taken: and Chemosh shall go forth into captivity with his priests and his princes together.

2 Samuel 5:21 (Parallel theme): And there they left their images, and David and his men burned them.

Judges 18:24 (Parallel theme): And he said, Ye have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and ye are gone away: and what have I more? and what is this that ye say unto me, What aileth thee?

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