

Yahweh versus Marduk: Creation Theology in Isaiah 40–55¹

By Reed Lessing

Introduction

Gen 1:26a undergirds this study of competing ideas of creation in Isaiah 40–55. “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image (בְּצַלְמֵנוּ), after our likeness (כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ).’ ”² “Image” (צֶלֶם) denotes the representation of something else, while “likeness” (דְּמוּת) qualifies “image,” lest in this case people conclude that they are exact images of God. We are similar to God, while at the same time also distinct from him.

Being created in Yahweh’s image and likeness denotes, among other things, that we are made to reflect him.³ Pivotal, though, is this fact. When we refuse to emulate the image and likeness of God our ability to reflect is not lost. It is just that instead of becoming like our Creator we become like something or someone else in creation. The Bible calls this idolatry. Pss 115:8 and 135:18 put it this way, “Those who make [idols] will be like them.” Our object of worship has a direct impact on who we are. To quote Greg Beale, “We resemble what we revere, either for ruin or restoration.”⁴

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² All translations from the Old Testament are mine.

³ N. T. Wright states, “Bearing God’s image is not just a fact, it is a vocation. It means being called to reflect into the world the creative and redemptive love of God. It means being made for relationship, for stewardship, for worship” (*The Challenge of Easter* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009], 43).

⁴ Greg Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 49.

Two examples drive this point home. At the golden calf apostasy Israel is described as people who “quickly turned aside on the way” (Exod 32:8) and are “stiff necked” (Exod 32:9). Why are Israelites depicted in these terms? Cattle run wild and are difficult to reign in. This means the people have become what they worshiped (cf. Hos 4:16).⁵ The second illustration comes from Jer 2:5 and 2 Ki 17:15. Both verses state, in part, וַיֵּלְכוּ אַחֲרֵי הַהֶבֶל וַיִּהְיֶה לָלוּ (“and they walked after the Nothing and became nothing”).⁶ The Canaanite fertility deity Baal is sarcastically described as הַהֶבֶל, “the Nothing.” Israelites became like the god they worshiped, absolutely *nothing*. People take on the character of the god they follow.

Granted, the debate pitting Israel’ s God against Babylon’ s god is a subtext of Isaiah 40-55.⁷ The prophet’ s chief concerns in these chapters include Cyrus and the Suffering Servant. However, based upon the truth that we become like the god we serve, this essay considers Isaiah’ s monumental creational theology in chapters 40–55 in light the differences between Yahweh and Marduk. The thrust of the article, then, is this. *Only as we worship Yahweh, the sovereign Lord of the universe, will we reflect his love and care for the environment.*

⁵ In the rest of the Bible, the phrase “stiff necked” is employed, with one deviation (Prov 29:1), to depict idol worshipers.

⁶ In Rom 1:18–32 Paul addresses this feature of idolatry when he teaches that God gives people over to what they worship (cf. Rom 1:24, 26, 28). The apostle asserts that those who chose not to worship the one true God “become vain” (ἐματαιώθησαν, Rom 1:21). These echo LXX Jer 2:5 and 2 Ki 17:15, ἐπορεύθησαν ὀπίσω τῶν ματαίων καὶ ἐματαιώθησαν (“they went after vanity and became vain”). In all three texts, the verb ἐματαιώθησαν is an aorist *passive*. People do not choose a life of nothing. But because of their idolatry, it is God’ s judgment upon them.

⁷ Even so, Joseph Blenkinsopp argues that Isaiah 40-55 is a “mirror image” that polemicizes Babylonian ideology (*Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 2005], 107).

The Setting of Isaiah 40–55

After the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem in 587 BC, the victorious Babylonians brashly asserted that their god Marduk was king. This propaganda was intended both to control the Babylonian populace, as well as to seduce captive Israelites away from Yahweh and toward a life-long commitment to Marduk. Judeans were programmatically coerced into believing the empire's ideology. Walter Brueggemann writes, "It is unmistakable that Babylon was not only a political-military superpower; it was also an advanced, sophisticated, winsome culture with its own theological rationale and its own moral justifications."⁸ The empire offered so much more than life in little, backwater Judah and dilapidated Jerusalem. Although some refused to be conformed to these "new realities" (e.g., Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, see Daniel 3), many Judeans accepted indoctrination and embraced the idea that the world was created and governed by Marduk.⁹ Isaiah, able to foresee this dilemma, counters with a creational theology of breathtaking splendor that climaxes with the command, "Say to Zion, 'Your God is King' " (Is 52:7). Isaiah argues that Yahweh's creational wisdom and strength are vastly superior to that of Marduk's.

And the prophet is uniquely positioned to make such an assertion. Within the corpus of chapters 40–55, Isaiah calls our attention to the grass and flowers (e.g., Is 40:6–7), oceans and mountains (Is 40:12), stars (Is 40:26), worms (Is 41:14), trees (e.g., Is 41:19), and even moths (Is 51:8). He

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 126.

⁹ Richard Clifford writes, "A very large number chose not to move from their relatively prosperous situation. By the 540's, the exilic community was largely second-generation. They evidently preferred owning property and slaves in Babylon to returning to ruins and fields of uncertain ownership" (*Fair Spoken and Persuading: An Interpretation of Second Isaiah* [New York: Paulist Press, 1984], 13).

knows the hot blast of the khamsin (Is 49:10), as well as the gentle fall of rain and snow (Is 55:10). Isaiah writes about mountains and hills (e.g., Is 40:4; 41:15) and must have marveled at an eagle in flight (Is 40:31). The prophet could never forget the tenderness and innocence of a lamb (Is 53:7). Isaiah had a deep love for the created order.¹⁰ In fact, Isaiah 40–55 has more to say about creation than any other place in Holy Scripture.¹¹

The prophet's soaring creational theology, however, does not take place in a vacuum. He employs it to convince Babylonian exiles that Yahweh is the King and Creator. One important repercussion of Isaiah's argument is the proper concern and conservation of the environment.

Marduk and Creation

In contrast to Israel's creation narrative, where Yahweh peacefully orders everything by his word (Genesis 1), the Babylonian creation saga is full of violence. The *Enuma Eliš* (Akkadian for "when on high", the saga's first two words) is dated to the end of the second millennium BC and was composed by Babylonian clergy as a magisterial apology for

¹⁰ Ellen Davis calls Isaiah "the first urban agrarian" (*Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 121).

¹¹ John Reumann writes that "Deutero-Isaiah presents us with the most massive and amazing creation language in the Bible" (*Creation and New Creation: The Past, Present, and Future of God's Creative Activity* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973], 78). Creational theology in Isaiah 40–55 is discussed in Philip Hartner, "Creation Faith in Deutero-Isaiah," *VT* 17 (1967): 298–306; Thomas Ludwig, "Traditions of the Establishing of the Earth in Deutero-Isaiah," *JBL* 92 (1973): 345–57; Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Creative Redemption in Deutero-Isaiah* (AnBib 43; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970); Stephen Lee, *Creation and Redemption in Isaiah 40–55* (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1995); Ben Ollenburger, "Isaiah's Creation Theology," *ExAud* 3 (1987): 54–71.

Marduk' s supremacy.¹² Whereas the focus of Atrahasis (an early second millennium Akkadian creation and flood account) is on how earthly resources and the human population balance each other, the *Enuma Eliš* promotes Marduk as the legitimate successor to the older Babylonian deities, Ea and Enlil. While the epic is more concerned about Marduk' s rise to power in the Babylonian pantheon, by incorporating elements from Atrahasis, it discusses the creation of the world and the origins of humanity.

The first tablet of the *Enuma Eliš* begins by introducing Tiamat—the primeval sea, personified as a dragon—who is in conflict with the gods. The tension mounts in tablet 2 as Tiamat and her followers threaten the gods. Marduk is selected to fight Tiamat, with the agreement that if he defeats her he will be promoted to be the head of the pantheon. In tablet 4 Marduk overthrows Tiamat and lays out the cosmos using her corpse.

“He [Marduk] split her [Tiamat] in two, like a fish for drying; half of her he set up and made as a cover, heaven. Spreading half of her as a cover, he established the earth.” Tablet 6 depicts Marduk' s establishment of the world and the creation of people from the blood of Tiamat' s partner, Qingu. Tablet 7 concludes the saga by stating fifty names for Marduk that describe his characteristics, delineate his jurisdiction, and identify his prerogatives. He is identified by universal epithets like “Great Lord” , “Lord of the Lands” , “King of Heaven and Earth” , “The Foremost of the Universe” , “Hero of the Gods” , and “Lord of the Lords.”¹³ The propaganda pumped into the populus was *Marduka ma surru*—which, when translated from the Akkadian, means “Marduk is King!”¹⁴

¹² The *Enuma Eliš* is in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (ed. J. B. Pritchard, 3d ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 60–72.

¹³ Daniel Block, “Chasing a Phantom: The Search for the Historical Marduk.” *ABW* 2 (1992): 20–43, 28.

¹⁴ Marduk never completely replaced Ea and Enlil. Babylonian religion preferred accumulation (even if it was illogical) to substitution. It was a laissez-faire religious culture.

The *Enuma Eliš* was recited during the annual *Akitu* festival. This celebration is very old, as attested by some scraps from the Ur III period (ca 2055 BC–1940 BC). The Babylonian version represents the final chapter in the festival's development. By adding a reading of the *Enuma Eliš* to the *Akitu* festival, it became the empire's "propagandist tool wielded to promote state ideology."¹⁵ The celebration was a twelve-day event held at the beginning of each year.

The role of the *Enuma Eliš* in the *Akitu* festival is best described as *historiola*, that is, a mythological story intended to foreshadow a magical result. "In this case, Marduk's mythical victory over evil demons on day four of the *Akitu* prefigured the removal of demonic impurity in the *kuppuru* ritual of the following day."¹⁶ As with all mythological rites, the *Akitu* sought to actualize order, fertility, and life in a world continually threatened with chaos, sterility, and death.¹⁷ Adherents believed that as the narrative was retold and reenacted, the divine world interfaced with the world of space and time. In the retelling of Marduk's victory of Tiamat, it was affirmed that the timeless story impacted the lives of his followers. The victory of order over disorder that is perpetually happening in the realm of the deities was actualized for the present moment.

The brutal and bloodthirsty account of creation was not confined to the *Ésagila*, the Sumerian name for the temple dedicated to Marduk that housed his cult image and where the *Akitu* festival took place. This violent creation narrative influenced Babylon to respond in kind to the world around them. They became what they worshiped, a people emulating

¹⁵ Julye Bidmead, *The AKITU Festival* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2002), 1.

¹⁶ Kenton Sparks, "Enuma Elish and Priestly Mimesis." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007): 625–48, 633.

¹⁷ Brevard Childs writes, "Myth is a form by which the existing structure of reality is understood and maintained. It concerns itself with showing how an action of a deity, conceived of as occurring in the primeval age, determines a phase of contemporary world order. Existing world order is maintained through the actualization of the myth in the cult" (*Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* [London: SCM Press, 1962], 27–28).

Marduk. Like their god, Babylonians treated the environment with callousness and cruelty. One of the empire's frequent tactics in siege warfare was to destroy trees, vineyards, and crops.¹⁸

To get some context of how thoroughly Babylonians wreaked havoc upon ecosystems, we need to compare them with Assyria. Beginning in the twelfth century BC, and extensively from the ninth century forward, Assyrian sources depict the massive destruction of nature, often called "ecocide."¹⁹ Targeting a conquered people's agriculture served as punitive action. It was intended to inflict long-term economic and psychological pain. Babylon likewise destroyed the environment as a means of warfare, yet they differed from Assyria in one major way. After time Assyria restored cities and lands devastated by war (see 2 Ki 17:24), but the Babylonians adopted a scorched-earth policy. When they marched into Judah in the sixth-century they left vast swaths of land dilapidated so as to create a buffer of wastelands between themselves and Egypt.²⁰

Oded Lipschits details the horror of Babylon's tactics that culminated in the demise of Jerusalem in 587 BC. He writes, "This region was not settled again until the Persian period, and even then recovered only partially and in limited fashion, another indication of the extent of the

¹⁸ Michael Hasel, *Military Practice and Polemic: Israel's Laws of Warfare in Near Eastern Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2005), 95–123. On the other hand, those who worshiped Yahweh, when attacking a city, were instructed to treat the environment with care. "When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you?" (Deut 20:19).

¹⁹ Hasel, *Military Practice*, 61.

²⁰ John Betlyon, "Neo-Babylonian Military Operations other than War in Judah and Jerusalem," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (ed. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 263–83.

damage.”²¹ Lipschits’ study indicates that during the Persian era Jerusalem’s population was about 3,000, or “12% of the population of the city and its environs on the eve of the destruction.”²²

The evidence is overwhelming. Those who worship Marduk have little or no regard for creation. Once the relationship between Yahweh, the true Creator, and creature is ruptured, we are unable to have loving and caring relationships with any other part of creation. Without fellowship with the one true God, human beings are at odds with everything and everyone in creation. Like their god Marduk, Babylonians treated the world as little more than a bunch of raw materials and commodities that are to be exploited, used, and then thrown away. The empire’s history testifies to numerous ecological disasters that were propelled by gluttony and greed.

Yahweh and Creation

Within this context of the Babylonian slash and burn policy, Isaiah rolls out his restoration project in chapters 40–55. The prophet offers a countertext to the *Enuma Eliš* and its claim that Marduk is king. His first order of business is to introduce another King named *Yahweh*. With the term מֶלֶךְ יַעֲקֹב (“King of Jacob” , Is 41:12), the prophet makes his first declaration in Isaiah 40–55 of Yahweh’s kingship. Earlier in the book, Sennacherib takes the title of king (e.g., Is 36:1, 2, 4; 37:4, 8), as does Merodach Baladan (Is 39:1, 7). After the kingly description of Yahweh in Is 40:10–11, though, the prophet describes earthly kings only in the plural, מְלָכִים (“kings”). Only one person merits the title King, and that is Yahweh. Isaiah intends for us to confess with Hezekiah, “Yahweh the God

²¹ Oded Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah between the Seventh and Fifth Centuries B.C.E.” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (ed. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 333.

²² Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah,” 365.

of the Armies, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth” (Is 37:16). The prophet refers to Yahweh as “King” (מֶלֶךְ) again in Is 43:15; 44:6 (while in Is 52:7 מִלְךָ [“to reign”] comes as a verb).

Yahweh is not only the King of Israel, he is אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם “the eternal God” (Is 40:28).²³ He is permanent and lasting. Before creation Yahweh was there, and he will be after this world ceases to exist. To assert that King Yahweh is the world’s only Creator, in chapters 40-55 Isaiah employs wide variety of creational verbs. His list is impressive.²⁴ They include בָּרָא (“to create” —16 times), עָשָׂה (“to make” —24 times), יָצַר (“to form” —15 times), פָּעַל (“to work” —3 times), נָטָה (“to stretch out” —5 times), יָסַד (“to found” —5 times), רָקַע (“to spread out” —2 times), צָמַח (“to sprout” —5 times), כִּוֵּן (“to establish” —2 times), טָפַח (“to extend” — 1 time), and נָטַע (“to plant” —2 times).

The verb בָּרָא deserves additional comment. It only takes Yahweh as its subject and never takes an accusative of material, hence the verb denotes *creatio ex nihilo*. It appears in the Old Testament forty-eight times (thirty-eight times in the Qal stem, ten in the Niphal), and is concentrated mostly in Genesis (eleven times), Psalms (six times), and Isaiah (twenty-one times). It is used fifteen times in Isaiah 40–55 (40:28; 41:20; 42:5; 43:1, 7, 15; 45:7 [two times], 8, 12, 18 [two times]; 48:7; and 54:16 [two times]). בָּרָא could never apply to a Babylonian god such as Marduk who negotiates, bargains, and fights with other gods in order to create.

²³ Goldingay comments, “Yhwh is God of the age in the sense of being sovereign over and throughout its whole course as long as it lasts, to its very end” (*The Message of Isaiah 40–55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* [London: T&T Clark, 2005], 69).

²⁴ Karl Eberlein, *Gott der Schöpfer—Israels Gott* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1986), 73–82.

It is remarkable, therefore, that explicit scholarly discussion on creation in Isaiah 40–55 only began in the 1930s.²⁵ Rolf Rendtorff summarizes the consensus: “Faith in God the creator was perceived and experienced as the all-embracing framework, as the fundamental, all-underlying premise for any talk about God, the world, Israel, and the individual.”²⁶ Creation is not a subordinate doctrine to salvation. Rather, in Isaiah 40–55 Yahweh’ s salvific goal is to restore all creation.

Creation theology in chapters 40–55 falls into two broad categories: texts that announce Yahweh’ s creational power (e.g., 40:12, 26) and texts whose focus is on the exodus and land conquest as a new creation (e.g., 41:17–20; 43:13–17; 43:1–7; 43:16–21; 49:8–12; 51:9–11). As Creator Yahweh is (1) sovereign over the stars (40:26), (2) the source of strength for Israel (40:28), (3) transforming the world now (41:20), (4) caring about all people (42:5), (5) the one who brought Israel into existence and protects them (43:1), (6) intervening in Israel’ s history (43:15), (7) causing disasters that indirectly bring restoration to Israel (45:7), (8) bidding creation to fulfill its purposes (45:8), (9) not hiding in a formless place where no one can find him (45:12), and (10) making new things happen now (48:7).²⁷

Isaiah 40:12–26 is the pinnacle of the prophet’ s teaching on creation. The most comprehensive statement is in 40:12. “Who has measured waters in the hollow of his hand, and marked off heaven with a span, and all the dust of the earth within a measure, and weighed mountains with a scale, and hills with balances?” In his cupped hand, Yahweh is able to hold all the water of the oceans, lakes, rivers, streams,

²⁵ A review of the scholarship is in Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (CBQMS 26; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994), 163–76.

²⁶ Rolf Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 107–8.

²⁷ Goldingay, *Israel’ s Gospel* (vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 78.

brooks, and puddles. Three-fourths of the earth's surface is comprised by water, yet all of it fits into the hollow of Yahweh's hand!

From the waters to the heavens, we barely have time to catch our breath, as Isaiah states that Yahweh measures the skies by means of a span between his outstretched thumb and little finger. The vastness of the universe cannot be measured, yet it is reducible to the length of Yahweh's outstretched hand!

Then, like a ride on a roller coaster, we are brought down from heaven to earth. Looking around, we ask, "What about the dust, mountains, and hills? Can Yahweh measure them, too?" No problem! All the dirt of the earth is insurmountable, yet Yahweh is able to reduce it to one-third of a bushel. And he is able to balance all the mountains and hills—with one mountain, Mt. Everest, almost six miles high—on his scale. Who is this God capable of holding, surveying, and weighing such a massive universe? His name is Yahweh, and he is the true King, like no other! He made everything and promises one day to restore the world so that its glory outshines its original pristine perfection (Is 51:3).

The foundation of Isaiah's creational theology in chapters 40–55 is Genesis 1. So much so that Michael Fishbane calls it an "aggadic exegesis" of the first chapter in the Bible.²⁸ But mention of Genesis 1 opens up host of problems. The chief one pertaining to this study is the idea of *Chaoskampf*.

Yahweh and Chaoskampf

Although Genesis 1 is completely free of any pre-creation combat motifs, critical scholars believe that, just like Marduk, Yahweh could not

²⁸ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 322–26.

create an ordered universe until first he defeated the forces of chaos.²⁹ They assume that Israel' s religion evolved gradually from that of the ancient Near East and retained the same kind of mythic creational context. But if this is true, Yahweh is no different from Marduk, for both needed to defeat disorder to create the world.

This understanding goes back to Hermann Gunkel, who believed that prophets like Isaiah employed sea-battle imagery to elicit both protological and eschatological events. His 1895 book, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit*, argues that the creation account in Genesis 1 derived from the *Enuma Eliš*. He coined the term "*Chaoskampf*" to describe the motif of a primordial battle between Yahweh and chaos in Gen 1:2 that derived from Marduk' s conquest of Tiamat.

While Gunkel' s sights were set predominantly on Genesis 1, he first sought to establish the presence of *Chaoskampf* in the Old Testament more broadly, beginning with Is 51:9–10a. "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of Yahweh. Awake as in days of old, generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces? [Who] pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep?" Gunkel claimed that the references to Rahab and the dragon "coincides remarkably well... with the Babylonian myth of the struggle of Marduk against Tiamat."³⁰ Although he affirms this Isaianic text references the exodus, Gunkel' s main line of inquiry pursues "how the destruction of

²⁹ Typical is this statement by Michael Deroche, "Although the Hebrew Bible contains a variety of cosmogonic traditions, most agree that God creates the universe by imposing order upon a primeval, pre-created chaos" ("Isaiah XLV 7 and the Creation of Chaos?" *VT* 42 [1992]: 11–21, 11). See also John Goldingay, who believes Is 51:9 alludes to both the Babylonian creation myth and its Canaanite version. He then argues that Isaiah appropriated these allusions, intentionally referring to Yahweh' s victory over chaos in the creation of the world (*The Message of Isaiah 40–55*, 432–33).

³⁰ *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit Creation and Chaos in the Primeval era and the Eschaton* (trans. K. William Whitney Jr.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 22.

Pharaoh could be depicted as the annihilation of a great monster.”³¹ His answer is *Chaoskampf*, that is, the coloration of Israelite traditions in “the pigments of that [Babylonian] myth.”³²

Frank Moore Cross shifted the focus of the discussion from Babylonian to Canaanite origins.³³ Following Thorkild Jacobsen,³⁴ Cross suggested that “the battle with the dragon Ocean is West Semitic in origin” rather than originally Babylonian, but nevertheless, he draws parallels between biblical texts and both Canaanite and Babylonian myths. Whereas Gunkel spoke of *Chaoskampf*, Cross refers more generally to “the cosmogonic or creation battle with monstrous Sea.”³⁵ Both of these influential scholars see the *creational/cosmogonic* conquest of Yahweh over the sea wherever Yahweh exerts his power over water. In his influential Anchor Bible Genesis commentary in 1964, Ephraim Speiser likewise argues that the Genesis account of creation is the same as the Babylonian creation myth.³⁶

This line of thinking equates Yahweh with Marduk and sets the Israelite creation account into the context of warfare. It is better, however, to interpret Isaiah’s sea-battle imagery in Is 51:9-10a as describing Yahweh’s power at the *exodus* (see Is 43:16-21).³⁷ It consequently serves

³¹ Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval era and the Eschaton*, 22.

³² Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval era and the Eschaton*, 22.

³³ Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

³⁴ Jacobsen, “The battle between Marduk and Tiamat.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 (1968): 104–108.

³⁵ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, viii.

³⁶ Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 10. John Oswalt discusses Speiser’s finding and concludes that there are few, if any, direct connections between the Babylonian and Israelite creation accounts (*The Bible Among the Myths* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009], 100–103).

³⁷ It is commonly recognized that Isaiah 40–55 draws most heavily on the exodus as the archetypal act of Yahweh’s deliverance. Stuhlmüller calls the theme of the exodus in Isaiah 40–55 “not merely one of the themes... It is the prophet’s dominant

as a demonstration of his might he is about to exercise through Cyrus (e.g., Is 44:28; 45:1) and the Suffering Servant (e.g., Is 52:13-53:12). Its function in Isaiah' s argument is historical and eschatological but not *protological*.³⁸ If the prophet uses imagery that at first glance might appear similar ancient Near Eastern cosmogonic myths, no evidence exists to suggest that he thereby intends to refer to the *event* of Yahweh' s creation of the world. Isaiah' s decision to speak of Yahweh' s power with water imagery is best accounted for as a reference to the exodus in which water is Yahweh' s *instrument* in victory, not his enemy. In Is 51:9–10a the prophet portrays Yahweh' s battle with a historical enemy, Egypt, and not a *prehistorical*, primeval one.

If we read Isaiah 40–55 from the perspective that it polemicizes against the *Enuma Eliš*, Is 51:9–10a would make little sense if the prophet intended to refer to a Yahweh *Chaoskampf* creation myth corresponding to that of Babylon' s. Rather, the polemic is more logical if Babylon' s conviction about Marduk' s kingship expressed in the ritual of the *Akitu* festival is tacitly evoked by use of Rahab/dragon imagery that Isaiah has appropriated to Yahweh' s exodus victory over his enemies. Like Rahab/Egypt, Marduk/Babylon is a monstrous enemy only Yahweh can defeat. The logic of the polemic in Isaiah 40–55 then runs like this: “The Babylonians think Marduk defeated Tiamat and is the true god who maintains the cosmos as its king. But look, Yahweh' s arm shattered his enemies then (Egypt) and will do so again now (Babylon). Then who do

theme... basically... [his] ONE theme, and all else is subservient to it” (Stuhlmüller, *Creative Redemption*, 59). While the prophet employs numerous exodus echoes, the motif is the chief subject in 40:3–5; 41:17–20; 42:14–16; 43:1–3, 14–21; 48:20–21; 49:8–12; 51:9–10; 52:11–12; 55:12–13.

³⁸ This is true throughout the Old Testament. When biblical authors refer to Yahweh' s victory over dragons, Rahab, Leviathan etc., or describe Yahweh' s strength in terms of his power over water, they intend to divest such images of their ancient Near Eastern protological moorings in favor of a historical or eschatological context and reference.

you suppose will be shown to be the real King, the Creator of the heavens and the earth?"

Such a polemical move does not require the notion that Isaiah appropriated mythic images of creation at any point in his argument. Rather, they refer exclusively to Yahweh's victory over Egypt in the exodus. In fact, not only is such a mythic creational reference not necessary, it would weaken the prophet's argument. In undermining the Babylonian worldview, Isaiah is not embracing a mythic worldview, just one of its motifs.³⁹ The prophet does not reduce Yahweh to one who must battle chaos to create the cosmos. Yahweh needs no murderous assault over chaos to create the world. His battles are not against primordial chaos (because no such entity existed before the world's creation), but against spiritual chaos manifested by oppressive nations like Babylon.

Creation's Song

Oppressive empires, like Babylon, abuse people and the environment. Caring for creation is of little concern for them. But Babylon (Isaiah 47) and her pantheon (Is 46:1) will soon be dust in the wind. Isaiah maintains, then, that it is time for creation to celebrate! His creational hymns (Is 42:10-12; 44:23; 49:13; and 55:12-13) invite rivers, deserts, forests, and the like to praise Yahweh. "The mountains, hills, and trees have a deep stake in the defeat of such military powers as represented by Babylon, because empires such as Babylon are notorious for the irreversible damage done to nonhuman creation."⁴⁰ However, when

³⁹ Oswalt offers this analogy: "That you might call someone a Hercules does not prove that your view of the world is the same as that of the ancient Greeks from whose myths that personage comes" (*The Bible Among the Myths*, 93).

⁴⁰ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster, 1998), 162.

Yahweh delivers Israel from Babylon, trees will be replanted, crops will grow, deserts will come alive, and everything will be made new.⁴¹

Isaiah' s creational hymns include these words, "Sing to Yahweh a new song ... Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice" (Is 42:10–11).

"Sing, heavens ... shout, depths of the earth; break forth into singing, mountains, forest, and every tree in it!" (Is 44:23). "Sing for joy, heavens, and exult, earth; break forth, mountains, into singing!" (Is 49:13). "The mountains and the hills will be cheerful before you in joy. And all the trees of the field will clap their hands" (Is 55:12).⁴² These texts are more than figures of speech and poetic extravagance. As one who worshiped Yahweh (see Isaiah 6), the prophet had a deep love and respect for creation. Isaiah' s life is a reflection of the God he adored. This is why his hope is not redemption *from* the world but the redemption *of* the world. Empire' s like Babylon will never have the last word. Yahweh will restore and renew all things (see Is 65:17). The Jewish teaching of *tiqqum ha' olam*, the repair of the world, comports with this idea.⁴³

Conclusions

We become what we worship, and this either renews or destroys the environment. Through the *Enuma Eliš* and Isaiah 40–55 we see how adherents of Marduk rape and pillage creation, while those who worship Yahweh value and respect the world. Since violence permeates the creation epic of the *Enuma Eliš*, those who worship Marduk treat creation

⁴¹ For a study that discusses the rejuvenation of the earth throughout the Bible see Richard Austin, *Hope for the land: Nature in the Bible* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988).

⁴² Similar ideas come in Ps 148:7–10, "Praise Yahweh from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds!"

⁴³ Oliver O' Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 15.

violently. In chapters 40–55, though, Isaiah offers a different version of creation, based upon Yahweh' s concern, control, and care for the entire world. Those who worship Yahweh are empowered to treasure and value people, soil, lakes, animals, rivers, indeed, everything on this magnificent planet.

Today, apart from a saving relationship with Yahweh through his definitive revelation in Jesus Christ, people continue to slash and burn God' s beautiful creation. Look around. Our relationship with the earth is dominated by the attitudes of consumerism, commodity, and exploitation. The list includes massive deforestation, air, water, and noise pollution, acid rain, nuclear waste, mercury-laden fish, holes in the ozone layer, styrofoam and plastics in our landfills, and beer cans on the bottom of our oceans.

More specifically and closer to home (at least in the Midwest) is our ongoing dependence upon irrigation. Dependent upon aquifers deep within the earth, these sources of water receive little to no recharge and are dropping more than one meter per year.⁴⁴ This water is pumped up to water the fields but then is not used efficiently. "The FAO [Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations] estimates that crops use only 45% of irrigation water."⁴⁵ The practice adds to the loss of topsoil and the increase of erosion. This aids, then, in the pollution of our fresh waterways. Adding to the problem is the high amount of chemicals farmers use to grow food. Most fertilizers are made water-soluble so that they can be made more easily available to the plants. This seems like a good idea, however, it makes the chemicals highly susceptible to being washed away with rain and irrigation water. The overflow of chemicals, especially nitrogen-rich fertilizers, is seeping down through our streams,

⁴⁴ Leo Horrigan, Robert Lawrence, and Polly Walker, "How Sustainable Agriculture Can Address Environmental and Human Health Harms of Industrial Agriculture," *Environmental Health Perspectives* 110 (May 2002): 445–56, 447.

⁴⁵ Horrigan, Lawrence, and Walker, "How Sustainable Agriculture Can Address Environmental and Human Health Harms of Industrial Agriculture," 448.

rivers and ground water. Many of these feed into the Mississippi River and flow into the Gulf of Mexico. There is now a dead zone bigger than Rhode Island that has formed due to this overdose of nitrogen in the water.

This is only one problem. Thousands more abound.

Biblical scholars, for their part, have not been very helpful. Historically they have marginalized the doctrine of creation by placing an inordinate amount of attention upon history as God' s only sphere of activity and revelation.⁴⁶ This is understandable, given the Bible' s own emphasis on history. Yet dismissing creation as an inferior doctrine is unacceptable. Things, however, are changing. Noteworthy is Terence Fretheim whose work enables Christians to embrace environmental concerns from a biblical perspective.⁴⁷

Through Fretheim and others, Christians are reawakening to the central role of creation in biblical faith. They are rereading sections like Isaiah 40-55 and being amazed at how relevant Israel' s scriptures are for our current environment crisis. Isaiah' s confession is ours as well. "Yahweh is the Sovereign Lord of the universe!" We worship him through Jesus, his incarnate Son.

Our Savior loves creation. He not only points out its beauty and wonder (e.g., Mt 6:26-29), but also dies to restore us to the Father and renew the entire created order.⁴⁸ Regular and faithful worship of Jesus

⁴⁶ For a discussion, see Lessing, *Jonah* (St. Louis, CPH, 2007), 143-50.

⁴⁷ Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

⁴⁸ John writes, "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a *garden*, and in the *garden* a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid" (Jn 19:41). N. T. Wright adds, "The Spirit who brooded over the waters of creation at the beginning broods now over God' s world, ready to bring it bursting to springtime life. Mary goes to the tomb while it is still dark and in the morning light meets Jesus in the garden. She thinks he is the gardener, as in one important sense he indeed is. This is the new creation. This is the new Genesis" (*The Challenge of Easter*, 34).

empowers us to become more like him and thus realize that the vast world is not ours to do with as we please. It belongs to our loving Father who invites to confess the times we have devalued his creation, receive his priceless gift of forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ, and then by his Spirit' s power protect his planet!