



Religion resisting empire: Oracles against Babylon (500s BCE)

*Throughout history, people have used religious resources to both support and resist imperialism. The following biblical selections are examples, from the ancient world, of religion resisting an empire through **protest** in the form of words and symbolic actions. The empire being protested is the neo-Babylonian empire, which dominated the Fertile Crescent about 610-540 BCE. Around 605 BCE, the Babylonians subjugated the kingdom of Judah, an Israelite state that had its capital at Jerusalem. In the 580s BCE, after attempted revolts by Judah's rulers, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and relocated much of the population to Babylonia. These Israelite, or Jewish, exiles remained in Babylonia until that empire was conquered by the rising Achaemenid, or Persian, empire.*

Israelite religion had a prophetic tradition, in which individuals spoke or wrote oracles on behalf of a deity whose Hebrew name has traditionally been rendered into English as Jehovah. The first of the two texts presented here is an oracle attributed to the prophet Isaiah, who lived in the 700s BCE; however, modern scholarship dates this text to the 500s BCE. The oracle predicts that Jehovah will cause Babylon to be destroyed by a neighboring people, the Medes. The second text is about Jeremiah, who was a prophet during the years when Judah was a Babylonian vassal. In this short text, Jeremiah instructs a Jewish military officer that, during a state visit to Babylon, the officer should read aloud Jeremiah's oracles against the empire and then perform an act that symbolizes Babylon's coming destruction. Verbal and symbolic protests such as these do not by themselves defeat an empire; but by denying the empire's legitimacy, they do provide a form of resistance.

1. A text attributed to Isaiah paints a verbal picture of Babylon's promised fall

The oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw:

The noise of a multitude is heard in the mountains, like the noise of a great people,
the tumultuous noise of kingdoms and nations gathered together!

Jehovah-of-armies is mustering an army for battle. [...]

The day of Jehovah is coming, cruelly, with wrath and fierce anger,
to make the land desolate and exterminate sinners from it. [...]

I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity.

I will put an end to the arrogance of the proud; I will lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless. [...]

Against Babylon, I will stir up the Medes,
who will care nothing for silver, who cannot be placated with gold.

Their arrows will dash the young men into pieces.

They will have no pity even on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not spare children.

Babylon, glorious among kingdoms, in whose beauty the Chaldeans take pride,
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah after God overthrew them.

Never again will it be inhabited, never again will it be lived in, generation after generation.

The Arabian will not make camp there, nor will shepherds bed their flocks there.

Wild beasts of the desert will lie down there; the houses will be filled with the cries of birds.

Ostriches will live there, and wild goats will dance there.

Wolves will howl in the city's strongholds, and jackals in the pleasant palaces.
Babylon's time is coming soon; its days will not be prolonged.

For Jehovah will have compassion on Jacob; he will again show favor for Israel and set them in their own land [...] In the day when Jehovah gives you rest from your sorrow and your trouble, from the hard labor you were compelled to provide—in that day, you will take up this saying against the king of Babylon:

The oppressor has come to his end! His arrogant raging has ceased!
Jehovah has broken the staff of the wicked, the scepter of rulers—
the staff that, in wrath, beat the peoples with an unremitting stroke;
the scepter that, in anger, ruled the nations with unrestrained persecution.
Now the whole earth is at rest and at peace; they break out in song.
Even the firs and the cedars of Lebanon rejoice over your fall:
“Since you have been felled, no woodcutter has come up against us!”

Down below, the whole underworld is aquiver at your coming.
The shades of the former chieftains of the earth are roused to meet you;
the former kings of every nation rise up from their thrones.
All of them speak up and say to you:
“Have you also become as weak as we are? Have you become like us?”
Your pomp, the music of your harps—down to the underworld they have come!
Maggots have become your bed; worms, your bedcover.

How far you have fallen, morning star, son of the dawn!
You who laid low the nations are now cut down to the ground! [...]
Those who see you will stare at you, will consider you:
“Is this the man who made the earth tremble and shook kingdoms,
who made the world a wasteland and overthrew its cities,
who did not let his prisoners return to their homes?”
The kings of all nations—all of them—lie in glory, each housed in his own tomb.
But you are thrown from your sepulcher like something loathsome,
a corpse trampled underfoot, dumped in a stony pit amid a pile of the war dead.
You will not join the kings in burial
because you have destroyed your land, you have killed your people.

Evildoers should leave no descendants after them.
Prepare to slaughter his sons for their fathers' iniquity,
so they cannot rise up and possess the earth and blanket the world with cities.

* * *

2. Jeremiah orchestrates a symbolic act denouncing Babylon (c. 595 BCE)

This is the command that Jeremiah the prophet gave to Seraiah, son of Neriah, son of Mahseiah, when Seraiah accompanied Zedekiah, king of Judah, to Babylon during the fourth year of Zedekiah's reign. Seraiah was the quartermaster.

Jeremiah wrote down in a book all the calamities that would come upon Babylon—all the words that are written here concerning Babylon. Jeremiah said to Seraiah: “When you arrive in Babylon, read aloud all these words and say: ‘O Jehovah, you have said of this place that you will cut it off, so that nothing will live in it, human or animal, but it will be desolate forever.’

“Then, when you have finished reading this book, tie a stone to it, throw it into the middle of the Euphrates, and say: ‘So too Babylon will sink and never rise again because of the calamities I will bring upon it.’”

Source: Isaiah 13:1, 4, 9, 11, 17-22; 14:1, 3-12, 16-21; Jeremiah 51:59-64, American Standard Version (ASV). *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, Translated out of the Original Tongues, [...] Newly Edited by the American Revision Committee, A.D. 1901* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1901), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/cub.u183036404525>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excepts extensively edited by John-Charles Duffy in consultation with more recent translations. A clause has been omitted from the end of the Jeremiah selection (“and they shall be weary”) on the presumption that it is an ancient scribal error, accidentally copied from the end of a preceding passage. Poetic passages that, in the ASV, are formatted as running text are broken here into lines. Chapter and verse numbers omitted. Some of the ASV’s paragraph breaks adjusted. Some phrases reordered for clarity. Antecedents of some pronouns specified, and some clarifying modifiers added to the text. Some metaphors replaced by more direct statements of their presumed meaning. Occasional references to the city of Babylon as feminine have been made gender-neutral here (e.g., *her days* → *its days*), thus regularizing the inconsistent usage of the ASV translation. Neither the ASV nor the Hebrew original contains quotation marks; their placement here is sometimes conjectural, because in the Isaiah selection it is not always clear where quotations should be understood to end. Hyphenation has been added to the uncouth epithet *Jehovah-of-armies* (more commonly rendered in Bible translations as *the LORD of hosts*, but the ASV’s use of *Jehovah* to represent the Tetragrammaton is retained here).

To reduce textual clutter, none of the foregoing emendations have been marked with square brackets or ellipses, which are reserved to indicate where more substantive content has been elided.

In the line from Isaiah, “Prepare to slaughter his sons for their fathers’ iniquity,” the plural possessive *fathers’*, not singular *father’s*, accurately reflects the received Hebrew text.

This modernized adaptation of selections from the ASV is intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above or a more recent translation.



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