

The end of the oppressive empire is at hand: The thrust of the oracles in Jeremiah 50–51 Masoretic text

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The article seeks to bring the effect of the encounter with the Neo-Babylonian Empire on the oracles in Jeremiah 50–51 Masoretic text (MT) to the fore. In these oracles, the Babylonian imperial claim of global rule from Babylon as a manifestation of the kingship of Marduk is countered with the counter-imperial claim that Yahweh is king. Babylon was merely a golden cup in the hand of Yahweh. The city of Babylon, which was built by Marduk, would suffer a fate similar to that of Jerusalem. It is argued that Empire Studies offer fresh insights into the apparent tension between the Oracles against Babylon and the pro-Babylonian sections of the book of Jeremiah. The contrast between them lies primarily in the manner in which the Babylonian imperial claims are dealt with. While the pro-Babylonian sections of the book of Jeremiah present a disguised transcript of resistance, the oracles against Babylon openly confront the Babylonian imperial claims. Utilising insights provided by Empire Studies, the article scrutinises the effect of the encounter with the Neo-Babylonian Empire on the oracles in Jeremiah 50–51 MT. Finally, the contrasting ways in which the oracles against Babylon and the oracle in Jeremiah 27:5–11, which is seemingly the most pro-Babylonian part of the book of Jeremiah, confront the imperial claims of Babylon, are considered.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The research highlights the effect of the encounter with the Neo-Babylonian Empire on the oracles in Jeremiah 50–51 MT. Unlike the oracle in Jeremiah 27:5–11, which represents a disguised transcript of resistance, the oracles against Babylon openly confront the Babylonian imperial claims.

Keywords: Babylon; Marduk; empire; Yahweh; oracles against Babylon.

Introduction

The oracles in Jeremiah 50–51 MT (henceforth abbreviated as OAB) are focused on Babylon as city and Babylon as the land of the Chaldeans, that is, on the core of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Empire Studies¹ which are concerned with the manner in which the biblical text interacts with empire, have emerged as a poignant lens offering fresh insights (see Wood 2016:55–57). Pannkuk (2021:98) suggests that the rival sovereignty of the Babylon king is assimilated in Jeremiah 27:5–11 into a Yahwistic framework by subsuming it under the still greater sovereignty of Yahweh. It was not Marduk who gave Nebuchadnezzar dominion over the earth, but Yahweh. Service to the Babylonian king is notably identified with Yahweh's will (27:6) and resistance to him as resistance to Yahweh's will (27:8, 10). The depiction of Yahweh in 27:5–11 was seemingly influenced by the Neo-Babylonian imperial discourse and the ideology that this discourse served (see Pannkuk 2021:237). In contrast to 27:5–11, which seemingly demands conformity to Babylonian hegemony (see Carroll 1996:29), the OAB announce the demise of Babylon. In contrast to 29:5–7, in which the exiles are advised to settle in Babylon, the exiles are called upon to flee from Babylon in the OAB (see 50:8; 51:6). Babylon would suffer a fate similar to that of Jerusalem (see Hill 1999:180). The author(s) of the OAB obviously interacts with the Babylonian imperial claims in a distinct manner.

Pyper (2016:157) believes that the Jeremian oracles against the nations were a reassurance that being part of the empire is all part of the plan of God. He furthermore suggests that these oracles were a device to induce the reader to wait patiently despite the apparent powerlessness to bring about the longed for recovery of Israel's power and identity. All is in God's hands and any revolt

1. In postcolonial writings the terms 'imperialism' and 'colonialism' are often lumped together. The movement of post-colonialism is not defined by a method, but rather by a perspective and angle of vision. It deals with the effect of colonialism on cultures and societies (Collins 2005:69). Sugirtharajah (2006:16), following Said, views imperialism as the practice, the theory and the attitude of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory. With regard to the intended audience(s) of the Minor Prophets, Cataldo (2021) aptly asserts it was not a *colonised* subject, but a community subordinate to imperial rule. That is notably also the case as far as the intended audience of the OAB in the book of Jeremiah is concerned. For that reason, this article focuses on the manner in which the Neo-Babylonian imperial discourse had an effect on the OAB.

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against the occupier is a revolt against his sovereign will (see Pyper 2016:149). The OAB do however differ profoundly from the oracles against the other nations in the book of Jeremiah. The OAB announce the demise of the empire which acts as the aggressor in some of these oracles. The call on the exiles to flee from Babylon explicitly undermines the Babylonian claims of empire as it notably runs counter to the policies of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II.

Gerstenberger (2011:46) suggests that the concept of an empire developed interculturally in the gradually developing major societies in the ebb and flow of history. Probably since the third millennium BCE, the concept belonged to the collective existence of Near Eastern concepts of the world. As Stuart (2011:29–30) observes, there is no term in either the Hebrew or Aramaic vocabulary of the Old Testament that requires translation into English as 'empire'. The concept is nonetheless present, specifically in Jeremiah 50–51 MT. Eidevall (2014:121) aptly warns that there is a risk of overstating the element of continuity between the Assyrian Empire and its 'successor', the Neo-Babylonian Empire. It is nonetheless noteworthy that both empires are portrayed as lions in Jeremiah 50:17: the king of Assyria devoured the flesh of Israel and Nebuchadnezzar gnawed its bones. In Jeremiah 50:2, heralds are called upon to announce the demise of Babylon to the nations. According to Terblanche (2024a:8): 'These nations were in all likelihood those which were subjects of the Neo-Babylonian Empire'.

As Kessler (2003:39) aptly observes, a reader is overwhelmed by the quantity of literary forms which seem to tumble over one another in the OAB. Jeremiah 50–51 is nonetheless not a haphazard collection. Van Hecke (2003:69, 85), for example, demonstrates that there is a quite strong development both of the description of Israel and Judah's fate, and the conceptualisation of Babylon's lot. The diverse literary forms in Jeremiah 50–51 are furthermore linked by a main theme, the demise of Babylon, and a sub-theme, the return of the exiles to Zion.

Except for the judgement oracles which open with a challenge, the addressee (Babylon, her kings, etc.) is referred to in the third person. Kessler (2003) notably observes:

Except for the judgment oracles which open with a challenge, the addressee (Babylon, her kings, etc.) is referred to in the third person. It seems as if YHWH is not even speaking to Babylon but to anyone who would hear, especially Israel/Judah. (p. 44)

With regard to the 'promise oracles' and promise narratives which are addressed to Judah, Kessler (2003) furthermore notes:

They have no independent existence apart from the framework into which they have been placed; they have been 'melted down' to find their home in an independent literary and rhetorical creation so that we may say that their function is purely literary and rhetorical. (p. 41)

Interestingly, in Jeremiah 51:59–64, the postscript to the OAB, nothing is said about the audience (see Kessler 2003:40).

Ben Zvi (2014:147) observes that not all empires are the same. One should take the possibility that the anti-empire reactions of the author(s) of the oracles in Jeremiah 50–51 are not necessarily identical to 21st-century anti-imperial sentiments into account (see Heath 2011:277–278). A sensitivity and openness to the critique, already present in the texts themselves, is particularly needed (see Holt 2013:113). Consequently, the presentation of the Neo-Babylonian Empire in Jeremiah 50–51 MT plays a crucial role in the discussion. According to Jeremiah 50:28, Babylon would experience the vengeance for Yahweh's temple. Yahweh labels the Babylonians the plunderers of his heritage (50:11). In the OAB, the people of Judah are portrayed as oppressed – their captors refused to let them go (50:33). These oracles obviously presuppose the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Yahweh's temple in 586 BCE. The nation from the north which would cause the demise of Babylon is explicitly identified in 51:11 as the Medes. However, in 539 BCE the Neo-Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians, and not the Medes. Kessler (2003:206) and Goldingay (2021:899) believe that the OAB seemingly reflect the historical reality between 586 and 550 BCE, the year Media fell to the Persians (see Goldingay 2021:899; Kessler 2003:206).²

Thelle (2009:200) points out that Jeremiah 27–29 MT contains some of the most 'pro-Babylonian' rhetoric in the book of Jeremiah. Within the limits of this article, the key text, Jeremiah 27:5–11, which in spite of calling for conformity to Babylonian hegemony, attributes Nebuchadnezzar's power to Yahweh, will receive the main focus. Since Empire Studies are utilised as interpretive lens for the OAB as well as the seemingly 'pro-Babylonian' parts of the book of Jeremiah, the Babylonian imperial ideology will be discussed extensively.

The article commences with an account of Judah's encounter with the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Subsequently the presentation of the Neo-Babylonian Empire in the OAB will be considered. An investigation into the renunciation of the Babylonian imperial claims will follow. Finally, the relationship between the OAB and Jeremiah 27:5–11, a key text in the pro-Babylonian sections in the book of Jeremiah, will be examined.

Judah encounters the Neo-Babylonian empire

The Babylonian crown prince Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptian forces at Carchemish and Hamath in 605 BCE. Following the death of his father Nabopolassar later that year, Nebuchadnezzar was crowned king. Lipschits (2005:36–40) notes that during the first 2 years of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar seized control of the whole Levant. In a campaign in the second half of 604 BCE, he subjugated the territories in southern Syria and Palestine down to Gaza. The Judean king Jehoiakim was forced to pay tribute. Subsequent to an unsuccessful attempt by Nebuchadnezzar

²Interestingly Nabonidus's promotion of the moon-god Sin to chief god at the expense of the status of Marduk reached its most dramatic level from his return from Teima to Babylon until the conquest of the city by Cyrus (542–539 BCE) (see Machinist 2003:246).

during the winter of 600–601 BCE to invade Egypt, Judah rebelled (see Lipschits 2005:51). However, in 598/597 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar was able to suppress the rebellion. Jerusalem was only saved from devastation by the death of Jehoiakim. His successor, Jehoiachin, together with some of Judah's social, religious, military and economic elite, was deported to Babylon (see Lipschits 2005:54–55). Nebuchadnezzar allowed the continued existence of the kingdom of Judah with Zedekiah as king. However, in 588 BCE, Zedekiah revolted. Nebuchadnezzar emulated an Assyrian practice, when he punished the rebellious Zedekiah (see Beaulieu 2018:229). Beaulieu (2018:229) emphasises that Jerusalem and the surrounding areas as well as the Shephelah and the military forts protecting the western border of Judah, were destroyed and depopulated. No effort was made to rebuild Jerusalem (see Betlyan 2006:266). Mizpah succeeded Jerusalem as administrative centre (see Jr 40:5–41:3). Vanderhooft (2006:242) emphasises that Nebuchadnezzar's goal was seemingly to stem a potential Egyptian encroachment into the Levant. Except for those who fled to Egypt, the Judeans faced Babylonian hegemony. The successive deportations experienced by the Judeans were a typical imperial procedure, meant to achieve the breaking down political resistance (Liverani 2005:236).

Whether the Babylonians installed an effective imperial administration in the southern Levant remains a matter of debate. In contrast to scholars, for example Sack (2006:229), who are of the opinion that the Neo-Babylonian Empire did not break with the Assyrian past administratively, Levavi (2020:62) emphasises that 'some key elements of the imperial structure in the Levant under the Neo-Babylonian monarchs were clearly different from those of the Neo-Assyrian period'. Levavi notes that under Assyrian rule many of the western territories had been turned into Assyrian provinces directly administered by an Assyrian governor. Nebuchadnezzar, on the other hand, mentions the kings of Sidon, Tyre and Ashdod in the *Hofkalender*, a building inscription commemorating the building of his palace, dating to ca. 597 BCE. As far as Judah is concerned, the archaeological picture indicates that different areas were affected by the Babylonian campaigns in different ways (see Levavi 2020:63). Betlyan (2006:278) stresses that the area around the former city of Jerusalem was so ruined that tribute and taxes must have been meagre at best.

The Al-Yahūd tablets demonstrate that Judean exiles, who were brought to areas that had not been populated since the Assyro-Babylonian wars of the 7th century, lived in acceptable circumstances (see Rom-Shiloni 2017:128). Kessler (2003:203) observes that these exiles apparently heeded Jeremiah's encouragement to build houses, to plant gardens, to take wives and to raise sons, that is to promote the welfare of Babylon (Jr 29:1–7). Unfortunately, the Neo-Babylonian period gets minor representation in the Āl-Yāhūdu tablets. Only three texts fall within Nebuchadnezzar's regnal years. The earliest is from 572 BCE (Rom-Shiloni 2017:126). It is nonetheless inconceivable

that there would have been a monolithic viewpoint on Babylonian hegemony among the traumatised survivors (see Sharp 2022:422).

The presentation of the Neo-Babylonian empire in Jeremiah 50–51 MT

The portrayal of Nebuchadnezzar and the Assyrian king as lions devouring Yahweh's people points to a continuity between the Assyrian and Babylonian rule in the eyes of the author. The lament in Jeremiah 51:34–35 depicts Nebuchadnezzar as a תנין ('dragon') that swallowed Israel. The maltreatment of Jerusalem is furthermore described with the metaphor of rape as is implied by the phrase וְשָׂרִי וְגַמְטִי ('violence done to me and my body') (see Goldingay 2021:943). Van Hecke (2003:84) observes that in 51:38, the imperialism and insatiability of the people of Babylon are metaphorically portrayed as the greed and gluttony of lions. The Babylonians are openly accused of oppressing Israel and Judah (see Jr 50:33). As their redeemer, Yahweh would however plead their case and cause the inhabitants of Babylon to shudder. Korpel (1999:92) suggests that the term צָבָה, occurring in Isaiah 40:2, can be construed as a reference to the Neo-Babylonian *šābu*, the compulsory work prisoners of war had to do. Second Isaiah furthermore speaks of Judeans being confined in prison (Is 42:7; 49:9) (see Carr 2010:170). Curiously, Nabopolassar asserts on the Nēmetti-Enlil inscription (Da Riva 2013):

On that day, upon all my work force I imposed the *tupšikku*-basket, I made them carry hoe and spade. The people of the countries north and south (lit. upper and lower) whose lead-rope Nabû and Marduk had put in my hands. (p. 75)

Nebuchadnezzar boasts: 'The whole of the races, people from far places, Marduk, my lord, delivered to me, I put them to work on Etemenanki. I imposed on them the brick basket' (see Carr 2010:169). In order to carry out his grandiose projects, Nebuchadnezzar had to impose corvée throughout his dominion (see Beaulieu 2018:232). As Ruiz (2007:135) fittingly remarks:

Not everyone who was compelled to live under Babylon's eternal shadow found the shade comforting.

Babylon is not only depicted as the פַּיִשׁ of the whole earth (Jr 50:23) in the OAB, but also as the 'destroyer of the whole earth' (51:25–26). A פַּיִשׁ was a heavy hammer for breaking rocks (see Clines 2011:679). It thus seems evident that despite Nebuchadnezzar's claim that the Babylonian rule was beneficent to the subject nations,³ the poet(s) of the OAB presumed that Babylonian rule had an extremely negative effect on the subject nations. The Babylonians continued with the Assyrian policy of drawing material and manpower to the metropolitan centre (see Bagg 2013:131). Resources gathered from tributes and war booties were used for the extensive building programme, mainly focused on Babylon (Liverani 2014:541, 545).

3. On the inscription on the Wadi Brissa stela Nebuchadnezzar claims: 'I ensured for Lebanon peace and security' (see Pritchard 1992:306).

Yahweh accuses Babylon in Jeremiah 50:29 of self-elevation. Ramazzotti (2022:8) notes that the location of the city itself was conceived as the geographic and symbolic 'centre of the world'. A letter from an official to an Assyrian counterpart about the arrival of Esarhaddon in Babylon substantiates this belief. According to the letter, Esarhaddon, when he entered Babylon would have trodden on the centre of the lands (Lambert 2013:201). According to *Enuma Elish* V 119–130, Marduk proposed the building of Babylon as the central point of the universe (see Lambert 2013:458). A barrel cylinder of Nabopolassar describes Babylon as the stairway to the heavens (see Sheriffs 1988:24). Conversely, Yahweh announces in the OAB that Babylon would become the last of the nations (see Jr 50:12).

The description of Babylon in Jeremiah 51:25–26 as a הר המשחית ('destructive mountain') seems ill-suited for the city situated on an alluvial plain (see Kessler 2003:119–120). It has therefore been suggested that the depiction of the city as a mountain symbolises Babylon's power (see Goldingay 2021:938; Rudolph 1968:311). It is nonetheless more likely that the description might allude to the ziggurat of Babylon, E-temen-an-ki (see Keown, Scalise & Smothers 1995:370).

To conclude, the OAB present the Neo-Babylonian Empire as a brutal empire (see Sharp 2022:419) which would experience Yahweh's vengeance.

The renunciation of the Babylonian imperial claims

Marduk will be smashed

Nevader (2015:281–283) asserts that in accordance with Neo-Babylonian ideology most, if not all, royal activity was aimed at ensuring the continuation of the temple cult, particularly that of Marduk, the patron deity of the city of Babylon.⁴ The task of (re)building temples dominates the entire Neo-Babylonian royal corpus. Nevader furthermore observes that what little militaristic rhetoric appears in the inscriptions serves to further this goal. Notably, the OAB have the Babylonian imperial ideology in the focus. These oracles are introduced by a call to unknown heralds, to announce to the nations that Babylon is captured and that Marduk is smashed (Jr 50:2):

הגידו בגוים	Declare among the nations,
והשמיעו ושארו־נס	let it be heard, lift up a standard,
השמיעו אל ותכחדו אמרו	let it be heard, do not hide, say:
נלכדה בבל	Babylon has been captured,
הבייש בל	Bel is shamed,
חת מרדך	Marduk is shattered!
הביישו עצביה	Her images are put to shame,
חתו גוליה	her idols are smashed.

⁴The Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptional corpus is concerned almost entirely with the king in relation to the sacred in the form of his relationship with the great Babylonian temples (see Nevader 2015:284).

Curiously, the demise of Babylon is in Jeremiah 50:2 portrayed as a *fait accompli* (see Stipp 2019:772).

By the end of the second millennium, Marduk had become the Babylonian god *par excellence* and was simply called *Bel* [the Lord] (see Oshima 2007:351). *Enuma Elish*, which was not merely a religious principle; but also a political statement, reveals that Marduk and Babylon were inseparable (Katz 2008:123). As Oshima (2007:351) notes, *Enuma Elish* recounts how Marduk gained the supremacy in the Mesopotamian pantheon and how his city, Babylon, became the 'capital' of the world. Nebuchadnezzar II claimed that Marduk entrusted him with the kingship over all nations (see Lang 1983:237; Langdon 1912:123, 141). As Beaulieu (2018:219–220) aptly remarks:

[Through] the exercise of imperial power gave Babylon, if only for a short while, the concrete expression of the claims long laid by its theologians.

It is therefore no surprise that the oracles which call Babylon's imperial claims into question, are introduced by an oracle that announces that Marduk would be smashed.

Subtle allusions to *Enuma Elish* can be observed in the OAB. According to *Enuma Elish* (IV 3, 5), Marduk was at his own wish proclaimed king of the gods. Jeremiah 51:57 counters this claim by the assertion that Yahweh is king. It is noteworthy that the name *Bel*, which is seemingly associated with Marduk's role as Babylon's patron deity (see Heath-Whyte 2023:187–190), is used twice in the OAB. *Bel* would be ashamed because he could not defend his city (Jr 50:2). Babylon's story would be a tale of shame (see Jr 50:12; 51:47) (Kessler 2003:156).

In *Enuma Elish* VII, Enlil calls Marduk by his own name: 'Lord of the Lands' (see Lambert 2013:131). Lambert (2013:456) interprets this action as a transfer of power. In the OAB to the contrary, the epithet *יהוה צבאות*, which emphasises Yahweh's omnipotence, occurs repeatedly (see Jr 50:18, 25, 31, 33, 34; 51:5, 14, 19, 33, 57, 58). The real power resided with Yahweh who used Babylon as an instrument to punish the disobedient Judah, and not with Marduk. Interestingly, in Jeremiah 51:44 *Bel*, in other words Marduk, is portrayed as a monster who would have to disgorge what he had swallowed. The Babylonians evidently attributed their victories over Judah to Marduk (see Biddle 2022:267).

In *Enuma Elish*, Marduk is repeatedly hailed as an avenger (see II 127, 156; II 10, 56; V 10, 58, 116, 138, VI 13, 105, 163). However, in Jeremiah 50:28, Yahweh declares that Babylon would experience his vengeance for his temple. Kessler (2003:116) notes that the doxology in 51:15–19, which almost verbatim corresponds with 10:12–16, elevates the qualities of Israel's God as creator of the earth and the heavens. In contrast to Marduk, who according to *Enuma Elish* made the heaven and the earth out of the dead body of Tiamat, Yahweh created the earth by his strength and stretched out the

heavens by his intelligence (51:15). The image of Yahweh stretching out the heavens occurs repeatedly in the Old Testament (see Is 40:22; 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; 48:13; 51:13, 16). Nonetheless, set against the announcements of the demise of Babylon the doxology seemingly echoes *Enuma Elish* (IV 138) which refers to Marduk as stretching out the heavens.

By representing Yahweh as the king, the OAB do not merely set him in opposition to the Babylonian king, but also to Marduk.⁵ Since Yahweh is elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah called king (see Jr 8:19; 10:7, 10; 46:18; 48:15), the portrayal of him as king in Jeremiah 51:57 is clearly not an imitation of the notion that Marduk was king. Interestingly, Flynn (2014:168) regards the notion of Yahweh's universal rule occurring in the Psalms of Yahweh's kingship and First Isaiah as a response to Assyrian imperialism.

Stipp (2019:762) believes that the fact that Babylon is addressed as a mountain in Jeremiah 51:25 implies a knowledge of Babylonian mythology. According to *Enuma Elish* IV 42–58, Marduk used the four winds against Tiamat. Jeremiah 51:1, on the other hand, discloses that Yahweh would stir up a destructive wind against Babylon and the inhabitants of Leb-Qamai (An atbash for Babylon). The depiction of the sea covering Babylon in 51:41–42 ostensibly alludes to the mythological chaotic waters of the primeval ocean, that is, Tiamat (see Thompson 1980:764). The official Babylonian theology regarded the gods Marduk and his son Nabu as upholders of the cosmic order. Irrespective of the belief in Marduk's mastery of the primeval waters Yahweh will cause Marduk's patron city to be covered by the chaotic waters.

The OAB repeatedly announce that Babylon would become a desolation (Jr 50:13, 39–40). The language being used seems to be conventional.⁶ Jeremiah 50:39–40, for example, reveals that Babylon would become a wilderness without inhabitants, the home of wild animals. Kessler (2003:100) notes that Yahweh's ultimate plan for Babylon was her return to chaos. While *Enuma Elish* claims that Marduk had defeated Tiamat, the symbol of the destructive forces that threatened the world order (see Chisholm 2002:67), the OAB emphasise that Yahweh would return Babylon to chaos.

Some of the traits of Ninurta, a Sumerian warlike warrior god, were assumed by Marduk (Frayne & Stuckey 2021:278). According to Jeremiah 50:21–29, Yahweh was at war with Babylon. He has opened his storehouse and brought out the weapons of his curse (Jr 50:25). According to *Enuma Elish* IV 130, Marduk took up his club and smashed Tiamat's skull. The battle song in Jeremiah 51:20–23 depicts the kings of Media as Yahweh's war-club (see Terblanche 2024b), which is used by him to smite Babylon.

5. Interestingly, the Babylonian king plays a minor role in these oracles.

6. It was already applied to Judah. See for example Jeremiah 4:27; 6:8; 9:10; 12:10–11; 18:16; 19:8, 34:33; 44:6. The curses that conclude Neo-Assyrian political treaties portray the destruction which the violation of the treaties would cause as the transformation of lively cities (or kingdom) into empty cities (and land) (see Rom-Shiloni 2015:37). Remarkably, Jeremiah 50:18 draws a direct historiographic comparison between the end of the Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian empires (see Hamilton 2021:123–124).

Sheriffs (1988:38) observes that global rule from Babylon was seen as a manifestation of the kingship of Marduk, who created the world, the capital city and man. The OAB counter this Babylonian imperial claim through the counter-imperial claim that Yahweh is king. Babylon was merely a golden cup in the hand of Yahweh making all the earth drunken (Jr 51:7). Now Babylon would be punished as was suggested in Jeremiah 25:12–14, 26.

Zion versus Babylon

The OAB assert that Babylon, the royal capital of Marduk, would suffer a fate similar to that of Zion. The city's magnificent buildings would become a heap of stones (Jr 51:37). Babylon's walls would fall (50:15; 51:44, 58). The city's high gates would be razed (51:58). The canals, indispensable for Babylon's agriculture (see Allen 2008:516), would run dry (Jr 50:38). Babylon would also be conquered by a nation from the north. Notably the oracle in Jeremiah 6:22–24 which warns Jerusalem of the approach of a nation from the north is reused in 50:41–43.

According to the OAB, the nations would no longer stream to Babylon (Jr 51:44). As was noted earlier, the city of Babylon was believed to be the geographic and symbolic 'centre of the world'. Remarkably the OAB do not imitate empire by depicting Zion as the centre of the world. Unlike Isaiah 2:1 and Micah 4:2 which portray the nations as streaming to Zion, the OAB announce that the people of Israel and Judah would return to Zion (see Jr 50:4–5).

Eidevall (2014:123) notes that Isaiah 13, which is evidently also directed at Babylon, ostensibly oscillates between empathy and *Schadenfreude*, between lament and desire for revenge. A similar situation is seemingly present in Jeremiah 50–51. In 51:8b, the exiles are directed to wail for Babylon and to bring balm for its wounds. Babylon's condition was however hopeless (see Kessler 2003:107) and 51:8–9 seemingly echoes Yahweh's inquiry in 8:21, whether there was no balm in Gilead to restore the health of his people. As far as Babylon is concerned, the exiles could only mourn her condition (see Stulman 2005:360). Kalmanofsky (2016:127) characterises the OAB as revenge fantasies which incite Yahweh to act on his and on Israel's behalf. Babylon's doom is indeed characterised as Yahweh's revenge (Jr 50:15; 51:6, 11, 36).

To sum up, Yahweh is in control of history. Consequently, the fortunes of Zion and Babylon would be reversed.

The relationship between Jeremiah 50–51 (MT) and Jeremiah 27:5–11 (MT)

As Pannkuk (2021:98) notes, the rival sovereignty of the Babylon king is assimilated into a Yahwistic framework in Jeremiah 27:5–11 by subsuming it under the still greater sovereignty of Yahweh. Contrary to the Babylonian imperial conception, the oracle asserts that Yahweh had given Nebuchadnezzar mastery over the earth. Pannkuk suggests

that as the realities of Nebuchadnezzar's political dominion could not be denied, these realities were assimilated in the oracle within a Yahwistic framework. By identifying service to Nebuchadnezzar with Yahweh's will (Jr 27: 6), the interests of the empire are apparently served. In light of the Neo-Babylonian conception that global rule from Babylon was a manifestation of the kingship of Marduk (see Sheriffs 1988:38), Jeremiah 27:5–11 is clearly imperially subversive. Scott (1990:xii) applies the term 'hidden transcript' to describe what represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. Should the prophecy in 27:5–11 be regarded as a hidden transcript? The oracle can nevertheless be described as a disguised transcript of resistance.

The supplement in Jeremiah 27:7 MT⁷ attempts to soften the notion that service to the Babylonian king is identified with Yahweh's will. It sets the arrangement through which Yahweh had given dominion over all nations to Nebuchadnezzar within a finite temporal scope (see Pannkuk 2021:91). Interestingly, the address to priests and the people of Judah in Jeremiah 27:16–22 MT reiterates the promise that the Babylonian rule would not be permanent. Yahweh's sovereignty was only provisionally allied with Babylon (see Brueggemann 2007:109). The temple vessels would ultimately be returned. The carrying off of them to Babylon should not be interpreted as a sign that Yahweh had been defeated by Marduk.⁸

The oracles in Jeremiah 27:5–11 and 50:1–51:58 confront the imperial claims of Babylon in notable different ways. Jeremiah 27:5–11 depicts Yahweh as Nebuchadnezzar's patron deity (see Pannkuk 2021:238). In the OAB to the contrary Yahweh's announces that he would punish the Babylonian king and his land (Jr 50:18). The proud city of Babylon, claiming to be the geographic and symbolic centre of the world, would become a wasteland without inhabitants. Strikingly the oracles in Jeremiah 27:5–11 and 50:1–51:58 have the notion that Yahweh is the creator of heaven and earth in common. The contrast between these oracles lies primarily in the manner with which the Babylonian imperial claims are dealt with. While the oracle in 27:5–11 represents a disguised transcript of resistance, the OAB openly confront the Babylonian imperial claims.

Final remarks

The recycling of material from earlier parts of the book of Jeremiah in the OAB⁹ suggests that the OAB are in a conversation with the earlier parts of the book, specifically the pro-Babylonian sections. The OAB are neither a violent,

7.The text form presented by Jeremiah MT is about a sixth longer than the text form presented by Jeremiah LXX. The variant readings between the two text forms range from subtle shifts to matters of style, word order and diction. The majority view among scholars is that the shorter form, attested in the Jeremiah LXX, reflects a shorter Hebrew Vorlage (Terblanche 2024a:3).

8.In a campaign against Arab tribes of northern Arabiam Nebuchadnezzar committed an act of godnap by taking the gods of the Arabs (see Johnson 2011:198). According to Johnson (2011:1) 'godnap can be defined as the theft, and subsequent manipulation for the purposes of propaganda, of a cult status and sometimes also of the related cultic appurtenances in conjunction with the capture and destruction of an enemy city'.

9.For example, the enemy from the north oracle in Jeremiah 6:22–24 and the hymn to God the Creator in 10:12–16 (see Van der Toorn 2009:194).

nationalistic interlude into the book of Jeremiah as is suggested by Graybill (2021:534), nor the fruit of false prophecy (see Peels 2007:82). These oracles openly confront the Babylonian imperial claims, whereas the so-called pro-Babylonian parts represent a disguised transcript of resistance (see Scott 1990:xii) by emphasising the sovereignty of Yahweh.

As has been asserted by Sharp (2022:419), the OAB are unmistakably resistance literature. Strine (2014:95) argues that the vulnerability of the Judahite exiles to Babylonian power did not permit them the 'luxury of direct confrontation'. However, by calling the pretensions of the Babylonian imperial claims into question, the OAB provided hope for the Judeans living under Babylonian hegemony: As a result of Yahweh's actions Babylon would suffer a fate comparable to that of Jerusalem.

The characterisation of the book of Jeremiah as a 'comprador' text, for example by Pyper (2016:150), does not apply to the OAB. Pyper (2016:150) maintains that according to postcolonial theory, a 'comprador' text espouses the interests of the comprador class, those members of the colonised society who stand to gain from the economic and political opportunities that the empire will give and from the favours that the colonising power may offer to its loyal devotees. By asserting that Babylon will be turned into a wasteland without inhabitants, the OAB would make those Judean exiles, which according to the Al-Yahūd tablets lived in acceptable conditions, aware that Babylon would become an object of horror among the nations (see 50:23; 51:41–43).

The Cyrus Cylinder claims that Marduk declared Cyrus king of the world and ordered him to take Babylon and restore the traditional cult. Marduk was angry with Nabonidus and chose Cyrus to replace him (Blenkinsopp 2014:141). Blenkinsopp (2014:141) rightly infers that Cyrus was clearly given religious legitimation as successor to the last Babylonian king. Notably, Blenkinsopp (2014:141) records that at the end of the Cylinder text, Cyrus reports the discovery of an inscription of Assurbanipal whom he describes as 'a king who preceded me'. that is, as king of Babylon. One of the titles of Cyrus which appears on contemporary inscriptions is 'king of Babylon, king of the lands' (*šar Bābili šar mātāti*). The anti-Marduk polemic in the OAB implies that the capture of Babylon by Cyrus would evidently not be regarded as a fulfilment of the prophecies in Jeremiah 50–51.

In conclusion, the OAB obviously counter the Babylonian imperial claim of global rule as a manifestation of the kingship of Marduk with the counter-imperial claim that Yahweh is king.

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