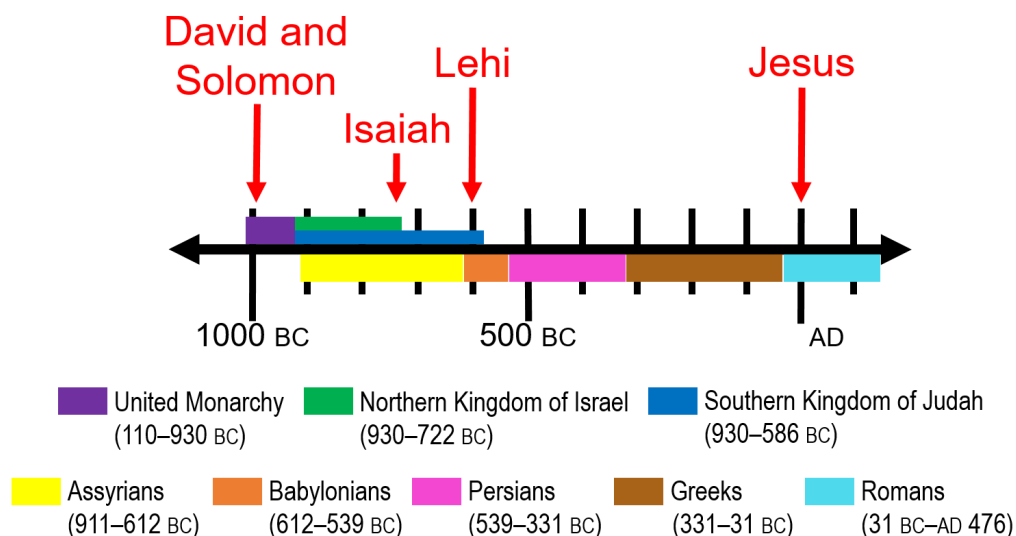


## Rel A 304 Reading Questions for Tuesday, October 24

“The Babylonians,” in Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely,  
*Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 316–21.  
“The Persians,” in *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament*, 354–59.  
Isaiah 40–48

With the second exam down, now we’re ready to move on to the second half of Isaiah! In between chapter 39 and chapter 40 is a time jump carrying us a century and a half past Isaiah’s life. Chapter 39 predicted the Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem and carry away the people into captivity, and chapter 40 drop us right into that exile—in fact, quite close to the end of it. These chapters assume that the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the people’s forced relocation are all past events, and now the prophetic voice tells the people in exile to have hope: Babylon is about to fall, and soon they will be able to go home.



“The Babylonians,” in Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely,  
*Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 316–21.

The Babylonian Empire had a lasting impact on the history of Judah. Below is a survey of what happened:

605 BC      The Babylonians defeat a combined force of Egyptians and Assyrians at the Battle of Carchemish, and the Babylonian Empire is born.

597 BC      After Judah resists against Babylonian control, King Nebuchadnezzar captures Jerusalem and install a new king, Zedekiah, on the throne. The Babylonians also take 10,000 Judahites into captivity in Babylon (among

these were Ezekiel and Daniel). Following this, Jeremiah, Lehi, and “many” other prophets (1 Nephi 1:4) warn that if Jerusalem does not repent, the Babylonians will return to destroy the city, and many more Judahites will be carried away captive. Lehi and his family flee Jerusalem and head into the desert.

586 BC      After Zedekiah rebels against the vassal treaty he had signed with Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians return and destroy Jerusalem. Many more Judahites are carried away as captives to Babylon.

*The prophecies in Isaiah 40–48 appear to be addressed to captive Jews living in Babylon sometime between 597 and 539. They predict that Jehovah will soon empower Cyrus to conquer Babylon and that the Jews will be allowed to return home and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.*

539 BC      Cyrus the Great conquers Babylon, ending the Babylonian Empire and ushering in the Persian Empire. Cyrus issues a decree allowing the exiled Jews to go home and rebuild.

515 BC      After years of effort, the temple in Jerusalem is rebuilt and dedicated.

1. “Although relatively short-lived (605–539 B.C.), the Neo-Babylonian Empire had a profound effect on Israelite history and the Bible” (*Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament*, 321). Summarize in a sentence or two how the Babylonians impacted the history of Israel.

**“The Persians,” in *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament*, 354–59.**

2. Although the story is not likely to be historically accurate, the Jewish historian Josephus made the interesting claim that the Persian king Cyrus let the Jews leave Babylon because Cyrus had read what? (See the box “Cyrus, Anointed of Jehovah”.)



### Comfort for God's People (40:1–11)

The second half of Isaiah famously opens with a striking command, *naḥəməū, naḥəməū 'ammī*—“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.” Israel has sinned, yes, and has suffered the consequences, yes, but now Jehovah is preparing a way for them to return home, both spiritually and physically.

3. Given all that the Israelites in exile had been through, these chapters frequently encourage them to exercise faith in the Lord. “All flesh is grass,” and grass withers away, but what can they trust “shall stand for ever”?

### The Incomparability of God (40:12–31)

This section introduces a prominent theme in Isaiah 40–48: Jehovah is more powerful than any king, nation, or god. Nothing and no one compares to Him. This would have been an important reminder to those in captivity, as ancient Near Eastern people typically interpreted military conflicts in theological terms. The strength of a human army reflected the strength of the god they worshipped, so if you lose, it means their god beat up your god, who had been powerless to save you. Some Judahites probably saw the conquest of Jerusalem as suggesting that the Babylonians’ god Marduk was more powerful than their god Jehovah.

4. Isaiah 40:27 indicates that many in Israel felt abandoned: “My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment [‘justice’] is passed over from my God.” They felt that God didn’t see the painful path they were on and that God was passing by their problems but doing nothing about them. Isaiah 40:28–31 provides a response to them and to anyone who feels like God doesn’t care about them. Ponder that response and summarize the points it makes in your own words; imagine that you’re using these verses to help someone whose trials have made them question God’s love.

## **The Nations Called to Witness God's Victory (41:1–7)**

Although he is not yet named specifically, Isaiah 41:2–3 contain the first allusion in these chapters to the Persian king Cyrus. Cyrus is the one who conquered Babylon and ended the Israelites' captivity by allowing them to return home and rebuild Jerusalem.



## **Israel Assured of God's Help (41:8–20)**

This section continues to describe God's plans for Israel.

5. After the people of Judah broke the covenant and refused to repent, Jehovah allowed the Babylonians to destroy their country, their capital, and their temple. Many of the people then spent years living in captivity in a foreign land. It would have been natural for them to wonder, is Israel finished? Is God done with us? Could Israel ever serve Him again, or have we blown it too badly? In Isaiah 41:8–20, how does God answer these questions?

## **God Challenges the Powerless Idols (41:21–29)**

This section returns to a theme that is prominent in Isaiah 40–48: the worthlessness of idol worship. We saw a little of this back in chapter 40. Remember that these Israelites are living in a foreign land that is *saturated* with idolatry, so when you combine the fact that they lost their country (thanks, Jehovah!) with the fact that they live in a powerful nation with their own attractive gods (hey, check out Marduk!), you can imagine that the pull to honor the Babylonian gods would have been powerful. They need to turn from all that before returning to rebuild Jerusalem, or they'll just take Babylon with them. Note that there is another hint about Cyrus in v. 25—someone the idols have utterly failed to predict.

## **The Servant, a Light to the Nations (42:1–9)**

Isaiah 42 opens with the first of four passages from Isaiah 40–55 that are often called “the servant songs” because they each quote or describe a special servant of Jehovah. (The other servant passages are found in Isaiah 49:1–6, Isaiah 50:4–11, and Isaiah 52:13–53:12, so we'll read those next time.) In this first servant passage, Jehovah describes the servant in vv. 1–4 and

then speaks to him directly in vv. 5–9. There are two basic ways you can interpret the servant: first, the servant figure could be representing a group of people. God referred to Israel as “my servant” back in Isaiah 41:8–9, so you could continue to see Israel described as a servant here in Isaiah 42:1–9. Second, the servant figure could refer to an individual person. From there you’d have to decide if you want to interpret this as a contemporary individual living during the Babylonian exile, as an individual living at some point in the future, or as having a fulfillment in multiple individual servants in different dispensations.

6. Isaiah 42:1–4 contains the first of the so-called “servant songs” in Isaiah. What are the two basic ways you can interpret the identity of the “servant”?

### **A Hymn of Praise (42:10–17)**

This song praises Jehovah both for what He has done and what He is about to do.

7. When Jehovah rescued the Israelites from Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea, they sang a song to praise their deliverance, declaring that “the LORD is a man of war” (Exodus 15:3). Isaiah 42 contains a new song that similarly describes Jehovah as “a man of war” and describes what He will do to “his enemies.” Given the bigger context of Isaiah 42, what is the likely identification of these “enemies” that will soon meet the same fate as Pharaoh’s army?

### **Servant Israel Has Been Blind and Deaf (42:18–25)**

The previous section had praised Jehovah for rescuing Israel from their enemies, but this section turns back the clock and chastises Israel for having gotten into this mess in the first place. Responsibility for Israel’s destruction and scattering lies with Jehovah, who allowed all this because Israel forsook the covenant.

### **From Affliction to Something New (43:1–21)**

This section follows the chastising from the previous section with a transition: “But now ...” Israel messed up before, *but now* they are commanded not to fear because Jehovah has redeemed them.

8. Isaiah 43:16–17 describes what Jehovah did to the Egyptian army during the Exodus. Strikingly, Jehovah then tells the current generation of Israel to *forget* those miraculous events from the past (“Remember ye not the former things”). Instead of looking to the past, they should look *forward* to the deliverance He is bringing in the present (“Behold, I

will do a new thing”). What is the “new thing” that will replace the exodus from Egypt? (See vv. 14, 19–20).

### **Israel Sinned But Has Been Forgiven (43:22–44:5)**

Here we shift once again to recounting Israel’s past crimes, followed by yet another promise that they need not fear because Jehovah has still chosen Israel to be His servant. In this constant back-and-forth between chastising them and promising hope and deliverance, you can sense that the people really needed to wrestle with the fallout from the Exile, and these revelations are helping them do that.

### **The Absurdity of Idol Worship (44:6–20)**

Another section mocking the logic of idol worship. It includes a famous description of a man chopping down a tree and using half the wood to make a cooking fire, and half the wood to make an idol that he hopes will save him. He is so spiritually blind that he cannot see the irony.

### **God Will Restore the People, Jerusalem, and the Temple (44:21–28)**

Continuing from the previous section, Jehovah admonishes His servant, Israel, to remember this lesson about the idols. He assures them once again that He has redeemed Israel and will restore them. At the end of this section we get the first named reference to King Cyrus of Persia, whom Jehovah calls “my shepherd.”

9. What does Jehovah promise will happen to Jerusalem? To the other cities in Judah? To the temple?

### **God Addresses Cyrus (45:1–8)**

In this section Jehovah speaks directly to Cyrus. (We have no way of knowing if any Israelite ever showed Cyrus this revelation or if the first-person address is purely for rhetorical effect.) We have seen Jehovah address foreign kings before, such as the king of Babylon or the king of Assyria, but the tone here is strikingly different as *this* king will be carrying out Jehovah’s will. In fact, Jehovah calls Cyrus his “anointed,” using the Hebrew term *messiah*, emphasizing that Cyrus has been called to perform a mission on Jehovah’s behalf.

10. Jehovah explains that through Cyrus He will “subdue nations” and smash down “gates of brass,” invoking images of a conqueror capturing a fortified city. Does Cyrus recognize

Jehovah—is he aware that Jehovah has been the one preparing him to accomplish all this?

### **Response to Objections about Cyrus (45:9–13)**

In this section Jehovah responds to some Israelites who apparently objected to something about Cyrus. It does not say what the exact concerns were, but Jehovah insists that “I will direct all his ways” and that through Cyrus Jerusalem will be rebuilt and the people in exile set free.

### **Exiled Israel Victorious through Jehovah (45:14–19)**

This section repeats many of the themes we have already seen, such as Jehovah’s sovereignty, Israel’s victory, and the futility of idol worship.

### **Defeated Babylon and All Nations Invited (45:20–25)**

This important section shifts audience: instead of addressing Israelites in exile, Jehovah now speaks to Gentiles, specifically “ye that are escaped,” meaning those who have survived. Because of the recurring descriptions of Babylon’s fall that appear in these chapters, it’s very likely that one audience for this revelation were the defeated Babylonians themselves. They are invited to see what the God of Israel has done for His people and recognize His unique sovereignty. Sooner or later, Jehovah declares, “every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall swear” to Him.

11. Jehovah invites the Gentiles who are “escaped of the nations” to recognize Him the way Israel does. “Look unto me,” He invites them, “and be ye \_\_\_\_\_, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.”

### **Israel Encouraged to Trust Only in Jehovah (46:1–13)**

Once again, the Israelites in exile are encouraged to trust in Jehovah, not the gods of Babylon (the gods Bel and Nebo are named specifically). As He has before, Jehovah points out that none of the idols predicted the conquest by Cyrus (the “ravenous bird from the east”), which demonstrates Jehovah’s superiority.

### **A Mocking Lament over Babylon (47:1–15)**

This poem describes Babylon’s fall, reminiscent of what we read back in Isaiah 13–14.

### **New Prophecies Will Prove God's Foreknowledge (48:1–11)**

Isaiah 48 contains a powerful call to repentance. Jehovah will save this remnant in exile, but are they ready? Have they learned from their mistakes in the past? Or will they continue to invoke Jehovah's name superficially, without any truth or righteousness?

### **The New Prophecy: Israel's Redemption from Babylon (48:12–22)**

In this section Jehovah explains that he predicted the Babylonian exile and now He's going to predict something "new." Although the Israelites' ancestors did not hearken to His previous predictions, the current generation should listen to Him now.

12. Isaiah 40–48 concludes with a direct command that the people "go forth" from where? Although this was a literal command for that generation of Israelites, how might this command have spiritual applications for God's people in other times?