

Mission and Meaning
Essays Presented to Peter
Cotterell

Edited by

Antony Billington

Tony Lane

Max Turner

Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995.

ISBN: 0-85364-676-7

© The Editors and Contributors 1995

Reproduced by kind permission of Paternoster Press

**Prepared for the Web in September 2009 by Robert I
Bradshaw**

<https://theologyontheweb.org.uk>

Nebuchadnezzar's Theology and Ours

Deryck C.T. Sheriffs

1. Introduction

Politics and religion are touchy subjects. Some would like to keep them apart for the safety of all concerned, some want to open a dialogue between them, and some would fuse them together to form an Establishment, Christian or Islamic. Missiology, theology and pluralism are variations on the politics and religion theme and are likewise touchy subjects. For some they would be code words for propaganda, self-legitimation and conflict. This essay looks at the way that Nebuchadnezzar's theology holds up a hermeneutical mirror in which we may examine our own assumptions, interpretations and vested interests as they touch on the way that we talk theologically and the way that we see and legitimate ourselves. We will reflect on the dynamic of language about election and divine sovereignty and consider whether there is a common theology of a High God as Creator with inter-faith implications.

As readers of the books of Kings, or Jeremiah, or Daniel would know, Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon must have been deeply ambiguous and troubling words in the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah. He urged submission to Nebuchadnezzar and equated rebellion against vassaldom with rebellion against Yahweh: 'Put the yoke of the king of Babylon on your necks and serve him and his people, so that you may live' (Jer. 27:12). This was not a popular interpretation of politics and monotheism in Zedekiah's day, and was hotly contested by the divination experts in Jerusalem. But how did Nebuchadnezzar himself understand his life and rule, and the divine will?

Perhaps our personal prayers are the best practical and concrete manifestation of our theology for in them we articulate our praise, our anxieties, hopes and basis for approaching God in language that may sound more like our normal speech and thought processes than the sentences in traditional creeds and books of academic theology. What we ask for will reflect our expectations of God and our understanding of the sort of involvement he has in our lives.

If this perspective on prayer is true, then we know quite a bit about Nebuchadnezzar's theology, because he inserted prayers in his accounts of the building work he did on walls and temples in Babylonia. He buried these records written in cuneiform on clay barrel cylinders as foundation deposits commending his work to the gods. We will use the ten column cylinder known as Nbk 15 as the basic text for our discussion, selecting from this long and detailed description of renovation work a couple of excerpts, the first autobiographical and two others from prayers.

2. Nebuchadnezzar on Nebuchadnezzar

Nbk 15. Excerpt 1:

- (A) 1. After goddess Erua created me,
2. Marduk had fashioned my structure within my mother,
3. when I was born, was created,
- (B) 4. I continually looked to the shrines of the gods,
5. the way of the gods I followed ever;
6. as regards Marduk, the great lord, the god, my maker,
7. to his artistic work I continually paid attention.¹

The tenor of the piece is relational. It describes the king's privileged and responsive connection with his god, Marduk, King of the Divine Assembly, and to some extent with the rest of the gods who are mentioned collectively in lines 4-5. Nebuchadnezzar is a 'Calvinist' in this piece – in the sense that he subscribes to a doctrine of predestination and election that includes conception, birth, destiny and discipleship.

1 Nbk 15, Col. 1:23-32 is discussed in a wider theological context in my unpublished doctoral dissertation, 'Empire and the Gods: Mesopotamian Treaty Theology and the Sword in the First Millennium BC' (University of Stellenbosch, RSA, 1976), 239. The translations of Akkadian here are my own unless specified to the contrary. The cuneiform text of Nbk 15 was published in London as long ago as 1861, and the corpus of Neo-Babylonian texts edited by S. Langdon is out of print, *Building Inscriptions of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, Part I* (Paris, 1905) (abbreviated here as *BINE*), 118ff. and *Die neubabylonischen Königsinschriften*, VAB 4 (Leipzig, 1912), 26ff., 120ff., referred to as *VAB 4* in Assyriology.

These particular lines are personalised theology. Nebuchadnezzar draws attention to his own conception, not to the institution of monarchy, or to the destiny of world domination for Babylon, or to the creation of the cosmos. His creation language has the effect of displacing his human father, Nabopolassar, by inserting Marduk into the process. So the king speaks synergistically of Marduk and his mother – ‘Marduk had formed my structure within my mother’ (line 2), offering a theologised biology that by-passes his father for the sake of theological emphasis.² The parallelism of expression in these lines suggests that we should not press the language for a literal moment of creation rather than a process. After all, the king speaks of engendering, embryonic development and birth.³ It is the whole biological process of his origins that he understood to involve Marduk.

Nebuchadnezzar’s doctrine of individual creation is widened later in the inscription by regarding his birth as a preliminary to his vocation to imperial rule. Indeed, the Babylonian empire itself fits into the wider scheme of created things, as the second excerpt demonstrates.

Nbk 15. Excerpt 2:

- (A) 1. Without you, my lord, what exists?
 (B) 2. For the king whom you love,
 3. whose name you pronounce,
 4. who pleases you,
 5. you establish his reputation
 6. and appoint a straightforward course for him.
 (C) 7. I am a prince who is submissive to you,
 8. the creation of your hands.
 9. You yourself created me
 10. and entrusted me with the rule of all peoples.
 (D) 11. In accord with your beneficence,

2 Elsewhere in the same cylinder Nebuchadnezzar refers to his father Nabopolassar in the phrase ‘Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, my father, my creator (*aba banûa*)’, Nbk 15, Col. 7:47, without any sense of contradiction.

3 Thus we have ‘Erua created me’ (line 1), and ‘Marduk formed my structure in my mother’ (line 2). The verb *banû*, ‘to build, construct, create’, is used in both active and ingressive forms – ‘Erua created/constructed me’ (line 1); the second instance of the verb *banû* places it after the verb for being born, ‘when I was born, was created/constructed’ (line 4). Semantics as well as parallelism warns against looking for precision of expression when the verbs describing the creative acts of Marduk are used interchangeably. Thus what we have is a cluster of verbs attached to the biological process: *banû* – ‘to construct, create’; *bašāmu* – ‘to fashion, create’, and (*w*)*alādu* – ‘to be born’.

12. O lord, who watches over them all,
13. lead them to love your exalted sovereignty.
14. May reverence for your divinity be in my heart.
15. Prolong (the days of) him who pleases you,
16. for you indeed are the one who gives me life.⁴

3. Sovereignty, Election and Semitic Idiom

The phrase 'the creation of your hands' (line 8) adds an anthropomorphic touch. The 'hands' of Marduk were at work in Nebuchadnezzar's conception, gestation and birth. This figure of speech conveys Marduk's personal involvement rather than being intended as a literal statement of mechanism. Yahwistic theology uses the same kind of Semitic expressions in which the hands of the deity express personal intervention, in judgment, in battle, in creation. Thus the Hebrew prophet appeals to Yahweh as Father and Creator in these terms:

And yet, O Yahweh, you are our Father.
 We are the clay, and you our potter,
 and the work of your hand are we all.
ma^ašeh yād^{kā} kullānū. (Isa. 64:8)

Other passages link the creation of human beings, the cosmos and God's shaping, active hands:

Will you question me about my children,
 or command me concerning the work of my hands?
 I made the earth and created humankind upon it;
 it was my hands that stretched out the heavens,
 and I commanded all their host. (Isa. 45:11-12 NRSV)

I am He, I am the first,
 moreover, I am the last.
 Indeed, it was my hand that founded the earth,
 and my right hand spread out the heavens;
 when I summon them,
 they stand attentive in their entirety. (Isa. 48:12b-13)⁵

4 Nbk 15, Col. 1:55-2:1. This excerpt is now available in the translation by B.R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, Vol. 2 (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1993), 744 (e) To Marduk (5).

5 The dramatic anthropomorphism of Yahweh's hands appears in many other passages: Isaiah 40:2, 12; 41:10, 13, 20; 42:6; 43:13; 45:1; 49:2, 22; 50:11; 51:16, 17; 59:1, and, in a dramatic contrast to effective and powerful divine intervention, in 65:2, 'I spread out my hands to a rebellious people.' I discussed Isaiah 40-55's engagement with Babylonian Creation theology and imperial

The Babylonian text offers more on Nebuchadnezzar's creation theology when we look at line 1 and line 16 which form a kind of *inclusio*. The lines dealing with the king are set beneath a rubric that we have marked as component (A) line 1: 'Without you, my lord, what exists?' This brings Marduk's creative work into the existential present rather than confining it to the primal past. The final line deals with the present life of the king: 'as regards my life, you indeed make it.'⁶ Taken together, these lines express a comprehensive recognition of human dependence on God.

Election theology can be expressed very succinctly, linked with creation theology, as it is later in Nbk 15: 'after Marduk created me for kingship...'⁷ We know that Nebuchadnezzar ascended the throne in a smooth transition after twenty-one years of his father's reign. The *Babylonian Chronicle* tells us that Nabopolassar died in mid-August of 605 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar was away on campaign in the Levant. The son hurried home and 'sat on the royal throne in Babylon' at the end of the first week of September. He inherited what his father had had to fight for in the liberation of Babylonia from Assyrian rule. Conspiracies, palace revolutions and independence bids by segments of the empire were a recurrent feature of transitions in dynastic succession throughout Mesopotamian history, so Nebuchadnezzar's secure career as son, general and then monarch must have readily enforced his beliefs in Marduk's supremacy and in the god's favour towards him personally. Nebuchadnezzar's election theology, enunciated as propositional theology in this excerpt, reflects his personal experience as much as it reflects traditional Babylonian Mardukism. It prompts the question of whether or to what degree our personal history shapes our theology or shapes what we end up endorsing in our tradition.

The theology of election itself is, of course, much older than the Neo-Babylonian empire, and we could go back more than a

nationalism in a Tyndale Lecture, published as "'A Tale of Two Cities": Nationalism in Zion and Babylon', *TynB* 39 (1988), 19-57.

6 The Babylonian *ša balātija lū tippēš* Langdon renders as 'for truly it is thou that hast made my life' (*BINE*, 121); Foster has 'that you sustain my life' (*Muses*, Vol. 2, 744). The construction uses the asseverative *lū* with the Present G-stem of *epēšu* – 'to do, make': 'you verily, truly, indeed, make my life.'

7 Nbk 15, Col. 7:26-27, *ištu ibnanni Marduk ana šarrūti*. Compare another prayer line to Marduk from Col. 10:47ff.: 'god, Marduk, lord, wise one of the gods, great (and) overbearing, you yourself created me (*atta tabnanni-ma*) and to kingship over the totality of peoples you appointed me (*ana šarrūti kiššat niši taqipanni*).'

millennium to Hammurabi of Babylon and find similar theological claims: 'the great gods named me, and I am a shepherd who promotes well-being, whose sceptre is just.'⁸ What Nebuchadnezzar added to this election language was an empire that stretched westwards to the border with Egypt.

This peep into Nebuchadnezzar's theology discloses several features of its language that also characterise the theological language of the Old Testament. There are common ways of expressing things, or similar concepts, such as 'the fear of Marduk' and 'the fear of Yahweh', or 'walking before Marduk' and 'walking in the way of Yahweh'. This is scarcely surprising since Hebrew and Babylonian are both Semitic languages that share a number of idioms. One we will examine now is the significance of naming and destiny.

Bible readers will be familiar with the renaming of Abraham, Sarah and Jacob, and with Jesus' renaming of Peter. These renamings mark significant turns of destiny. Naming to kingship marks the call of destiny, and for Nebuchadnezzar this call was from conception. Very likely Nebuchadnezzar understood his destiny in the light of his Bible, the Babylonian Creation Epic. This dramatises Marduk's nomination to the kingship of the gods. The whole final Tablet 7 of *Enūma eliš* is a recitation of the fifty honorific names of Marduk that follow on from his willingness to be elected to office as champion of the gods. At one level, they are simply honorific titles heaped upon him, but at another they are naming his destiny as king of the gods. Like his god Marduk, Nebuchadnezzar understood himself as destined to rule by the decision of heaven.

We can compare similar associations of naming and destiny in the language used about Cyrus, Israel and the mysterious Servant figure:

Nbk 15:

The king whom you love
whose name you pronounce...
you establish his reputation
(literally, 'make his name straight')

8 CH Epilogue xxivb: 40-45. To 'name', *nabû*, in line 41 is 'to call to office' and we could similarly translate Nbk 15 Excerpt 2: line 3 as 'whom you call, elect to office'. Compare the formula used by the 7th century Assyrian king Ashurbanipal: 'whom the gods have called ('the pronunciation of his name they have spoken', *nibīt šumšu izkurū*) to kingship and have created in the womb of his mother (*ina libbi ummišu ibnū*) to become the shepherd of Assyria' (Rassam Cylinder, Col. 1:5).

The election of Cyrus:

...it is I, the LORD,
 the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
 For the sake of my servant Jacob,
 and Israel my chosen,
 I call you by your name
 I surname you, though you do not know me.⁹

The election of Israel:

But now thus says the LORD,
 he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
 Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name, you are mine.

The election of the Servant:

The LORD called me before I was born,
 while I was in my mother's womb he named me.¹⁰

The deity takes the initiative before there could be a human response, or, as the passage about Cyrus indicates, without that king's knowledge. The language of creation and election share this feature of emphasis on the sovereign activity of the deity rather than on the response of the person called. They are linked to a birth theology that we will now explore in parallel.

When we think about the doctrine of personal and individual creation against the background of the deity as Creator of the cosmos, we notice two things immediately. This micro and macro scale version of the creation doctrine appears inside and outside the Bible. Semitic personal names incorporate this doctrine into the naming of children at birth, and it seems probable that the earliest Semitic pantheon that we know of recognised Il as a High God who was involved in the creation of children.¹¹ This pushes the macro-

9 Isaiah 45:3b-4 using *qāra*, 'to call' with preposition *bē* and *šēm*, 'name'.

10 Isaiah 43:1 (with *qr*' *bē* and *šēm*) and Isaiah 49:1b from the second of the so-called Servant poems (*Yhwh mibbeten q'rā'āniy mimnē'ey 'immiy hizkīr š'miy*, using the two verbs *qr*' and *zkr* for the process of naming).

11 See J.J.M. Roberts, *The Earliest Semitic Pantheon: A Study of the Semitic Deities Attested in Mesopotamia before Ur III* (London: Johns Hopkins, 1972) and the review of it by A.R. Millard, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 19.1 (1974), 87ff. On the Ugaritic material, see J.C. de Moor, 'El, the Creator', in R. Rendsburg, R. Adler, M. Arfa, N.H. Winter (eds.), *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of C.H. Gordon* (New York: Ktav, 1980), 171-87.

micro doctrine of creation connected with a High God back to the 3rd millennium and about as far as written records will ever attest. Genesis probably reflects this Semitic High God theology in its positive presentation of the Canaanite priest-king Melchizedek who pronounces a blessing in the name of El Elyon ('ēl 'elyōn), 'maker of heaven and earth' (*qōneh šāmayim wā'āreš*, Gen. 14:19). The Genesis theologian presumably understood both Abraham and Melchizedek to be giving recognition to the same deity.¹²

Mesopotamian theology of birth distinguishes between the Creator deity who is the source of life and birth-goddesses who superintend the gestation and delivery process. In Nbk 15, Excerpt 1, we had a dual reference to Marduk and Sarpanitum's roles in Nebuchadnezzar's birth.¹³ With the Near Eastern idea of the High God's involvement in life-giving and birth, we could compare, and contrast, Eve's exclamation after the birth of the first human child, Cain – 'I have created/acquired a child with Yahweh' (Gen. 4:1), meaning 'together with Yahweh has this child come to birth'.¹⁴ Genesis 4:1 is quite explicit about the biology, naming the male and female human pair, and referring both to the act of intercourse and to the conception. So Eve's statement of synergism – 'I with Yahweh' – is figurative and theological, i.e. it is a creation theology, not a

12 See G.J. Wenham, 'The Religion of the Patriarchs', in A.R. Millard and D.J. Wiseman (eds.), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), 157-88. 'This study has tended to support the main conclusions of modern scholarship about the character of that religion. It involved the worship of the Semitic high god El, who revealed himself to the leaders of the clans' (183-84).

13 Our reading of Nbk 15, Col. 1:23-32 follows VAB 4, 123-24 and CAD B, 138 under *bašāmu*, 'to create', where *dingir ir-ú-a* is taken as the divine determinative with the epithet 'Conceiver', a title of Marduk's wife, Sarpanitum, based on *erû*, 'to conceive'. Langdon had previously understood the lines as referring to Marduk only. The ANE tendency was to assign a chief female spouse to a national male head of pantheon, whether these male deities were paired off with consorts originally or not. At Ugarit, Asherah is El's chief consort-wife and together they produced the gods, their offspring who then constituted the Divine Assembly.

14 Commentators have wrestled with the exact sense and postulated parallels for *qānītiy* יָסַף 'et-Yhwh both in terms of the meaning of the verb *qnh* that can mean 'create' but more often appears as 'acquire, buy', and in terms of the particle 'et which means 'with, together with', or possibly 'with [the help of]'. Neither difficulty obstructs the obvious recognition of Yahweh as instrumental in the birth of the first individual to be born. See the full review of solutions in C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (London: SPCK, ET 1984), 289ff., and the comments of R. Hess, *Studies in the Personal Names of Genesis 1-11*, AOAT 234 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993), 112.

description of biological mechanism. The biology is found in 'the Man knew his wife and she conceived and bore Cain'.

4. Nuancing our Birth Theology

The Old Testament, Mesopotamia and we ourselves wrestle with a language to express our creation theology. When it comes to speaking about our individual existence, we want to avoid biological reductionism and to acknowledge our life as ultimately a gift of God.

Paul could endorse the theology of a pagan who wrote 'in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). Paul also spoke of 'the God who made the world and everything in it, who himself gives life and breath and everything to all human beings' (Acts 17:24-25) without these phrases causing controversy; so Paul apparently counted on continuity in High God God-talk before he introduced his christology to the Athenians.

What continuity is there between Nebuchadnezzar's birth theology, the Old Testament's and ours? When the Psalmist spoke about the beginning of his life, he could use highly pictorial language to express orthodox Yahwistic theology:

Indeed you yourself created my kidneys,
 you wove me together in my mother's womb.
 I give you thanks because
 you are awesomely wonderful,
 so wonderful are the things you have made.
 You have known my being through and through;
 my bone structure was not concealed from you
 when I was being made in secret,
 worked in motley fashion deep down in the earth.
 Your eyes saw my embryo,
 and in your book are all written down
 days that were planned
 before any of them occurred. (Ps. 139:13-16)¹⁵

The poem mixes theological language and factual, biological language. It also draws heavily on Hebrew idiom. Hence, 'you

¹⁵ The translation is from L.C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1983), 249. In verse 13b, the verb *qnh* clearly means 'create' (cf. the comments on Genesis 4:1 in the note above). The phrase 'in the depths of the earth' (*b^etaḥtiyōt 'āreṣ*, v. 15b) in parallel with 'in secret' seems to be a very pictorial way of describing embryological development as unobservable, out of sight, remote from human knowing. Hence 'my mother's womb' of v. 13b is the biological statement of literal, factual nature and 'in the depths of the earth' is the poetic, pictorial and metaphorical statement of the same reality.

yourself created my kidneys' is a theological statement combined with a Semitic 'physiology'. Kidneys normally do duty for aspects of an Israelite's personal inner being.¹⁶ Yet in Psalm 139 with its focus on embryological development the phrase 'you yourself created my kidneys' is likely holistic, inclusive of the body while speaking of the emergence of the personality in the process. Though this language of the emergence of the person from the biological process is not in our idiom, it is doubtful if we can find an integrated biological/theological dialect that expresses our theology and self-understanding much better, or, at least, less pictorially.

For us, many of the mysteries of embryology have been unravelled, or will likely be within a generation by the major advances that have been made in microbiology. The processes that the psalmist could not observe have been studied in microscopic detail in cell cultures, animal embryology and in the research and practices carried out in human fertility clinics. We are left speaking a double language like Nebuchadnezzar, the language of theology and the language of biology. In this sense, our theology is in fundamental continuity with the language of the Ancient Near East. The difference is the amount of detail that can be filled in biologically on the one hand, and on the other hand the need to attribute the creative act at the theological level not simply to a High God, a Creator deity or even a sole deity, Yahweh, but to our God understood through Jesus as a trinitarian deity. This divides Christian orthodoxy rather radically from other monotheisms, nascent or explicit, ancient or modern.

Another observation we could make about micro-creation is that the Old Testament has room for a spectrum of perspectives on God's involvement in individual human births. There is the simple biology of the 'begat' language of genealogies. These 'begats' stand under God's general blessing of 'be fruitful and multiply' enunciated in Genesis 1 and reiterated after the Flood. Then there is the multiplication of births in Exodus as a sign of fulfilment of promises of 'seed' to Abraham. Then there is birth in answer to prayer or distress, births for Rachel, Samson's parents and for Hannah after prolonged periods of infertility. Zechariah and Elizabeth's conception of John the Baptist offers a New Testament sequel to these. Beyond these births and levels of God's involvement, there is

16 The 'kidneys' in a number of biblical instances represent that interior aspect of human nature that God inspects and tests (Pss. 7:9; 26:2; Jer. 11:20; 17:10; 20:12; cf. Ps. 16:7; 73:21; Prov. 23:16), so the 'kidneys', like the 'heart', are normally part of the language of spirituality, belonging to the sphere of personality rather than biology.

the supernatural reversal of Sarah's menopause leading to the conception of Isaac, and beyond that level there is the virginal conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. We could, then, speak about different levels of divine involvement in human reproduction if we wanted to reflect the biblical theology of conception, embryological development and giving birth. Theology would want to draw some distinctions. Not all human births signify the same sort of divine involvement. Besides the births within Israel with differing election and role significances, there are births contributing to the Table of Nations and births to Israel's neighbours and enemies. Our theology of God as Creator of the child requires nuancing. It is certainly difficult to integrate it with our understanding of the random mutations of genetics that produce birth defects and spontaneous abortions, but there is not space to extend that discussion here.¹⁷

Finally, any fair analysis of Nebuchadnezzar's language about his personal creation and about the creation of all that exists must acknowledge its dynamic. This lies in his theology of divine purpose and election to rule. The political imperialism is legitimated by the creation theology, just as the Creation Epic *Enūma eliš* legitimates the role of Marduk as King of the gods and Babylon as the centre of the world. Indeed, we could argue that Nebuchadnezzar's theology is only one example of the phenomenon of theology-as-legitimation and we must return to this after a few further remarks on the High God and the concept of creation.

5. A High God theology?

When we meet Marduk as Nebuchadnezzar's god, or meet him in Isaiah 46:1, he is *bēl*, and we should write this 'Bel', with a capital, as the proper name without case endings that it is. He is not a 'lord', but 'the Lord', head of pantheon and a High God, despite the continued but more limited recognition of Anu, the Sumerian god Sky. This reflects the rise of Babylon and the waning of the city of Uruk, and Enlil's city, Nippur. Marduk is 'king of the gods' and 'king of heaven and earth' and holds 'the Anu-ship, the Enlil-ship, and the Ea-ship, the lordship and the kingship', even in an Assyrian

¹⁷ In his very readable book on genetics, Steve Jones reports that Martin Luther described Siamese twins as monsters without a soul (*The Language of the Genes* [London: Flamingo, 1994], 285). We would presumably want to nuance our understanding of God's involvement in such births a little differently!

king's estimate.¹⁸ The words of W. Sommerfeld, who wrote a full monograph on the rise of Marduk, are worth quoting here:

Gradually a greater variety of qualities was attributed to him than to any other Mesopotamian deity. Indeed Marduk did not simply replace another god, e.g. Enlil. His supremacy was verging on universality or, if one would like to say so, on monotheism.¹⁹

Nebuchadnezzar's creation-birth-rule theology was employed by the Persians with Ahuramazda as their legitimating High God. In fact, the adaptability and cross-cultural transference of this High God theology only serves to underline its political dynamic rather than its propositional truth.

An inscription from Darius the Great, son of Hystaspes, the Achaemenid, who inherited Babylonia around 521 BC and allowed the Jews to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, both continues the

18 Line 46 of Nebuchadnezzar's 'New Texts from the Procession Street' published by B.K. Ismail, *Sumer* 41.1/2, 34-35 and lines from a prayer of Ashurbanipal commented on by T. Jacobsen in terms of delegation of cosmic powers to Marduk (*Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976], 234). Anu, Enlil and Ea were the old Sumerian deities who exercised power in a triple decker universe of sky, earth and underground, so the line attributes their combined power to Marduk. Perhaps even more striking is a votive inscription to Marduk from an Assyrian king who may have been opposing Nebuchadnezzar's father Nabopolassar in Babylon's liberation war: Its collection of stock phrases is particularly impressive given its historical context: 'To Marduk, venerable, magnificent, Enlil of the gods, highest of the gods, who directs all the gods, who holds the bond of the Igigi and Anunnaki, commander, true god, king of the totality of heaven and earth, at whose mention the great gods fearfully attend his command, humble (though) gigantic in stature, who was raised in the Apsû, abounding with dignity, surpassing of form, perfect of features, the able one, the knowledgeable one, he who knows everything, who understands the will of the Apsû, who comprehends the mystery of the *lalgar*, the lord of Babylon who resides in Esagilâ, the great lord, lord of the universe...' (E. Leichty, 'An Inscription of Ashur-etel-ilani', in J.M. Sasson (ed.), *Studies in Literature from the Ancient Near East*, Festschrift S.N. Kramer [New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1984], 217-20).

19 W. Sommerfeld, 'The Rise of Marduk - Some Aspects of Divine Exaltation', *Sumer* 41.1/2, 97-101, 10. His book *Der Aufstieg Marduks* published in 1982 was summarised and reviewed by W.G. Lambert, 'Studies in Marduk', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47 (1984), 1-9. We have recovered no myths about Marduk that depict him as drunken and lecherous, unlike Enki in Sumer or El at Ugarit. In other words, Marduk, as far as we know, was a major deity with a moral record as far as the Mesopotamians were concerned. His spouse was Sarpanitum who was worshipped as a birth-goddess and major female deity of Babylon.

Babylonian language tradition and shows how it was adapted to the service of Persian interests and of the Persian religion that was far more monolatrous than the Neo-Babylonian:

A great god is Ahuramazda, who created the heavens, who this earth created and created human beings, who gave blessings to human beings, who created Darius king, king of many kings, who commands the multitudes... 'Ahuramazda is great, he is greater than (all the other) gods, it is he who created me (*šu anāku ibnanni*). It is he who established me as king (*šu anāku šarru iltakanni*)...'20

The verb *banû*, to create, is used five times in these few lines. It is applied to the heavens, the earth and the king. If Zaehner and other specialists in Zoroastrianism are right, then 'Darius was every bit as much a monotheist as was Zoroaster himself', though Zaehner is using 'monotheist' in a way that allows for the recognition of the existence of other transhuman powers.²¹ Indeed, the Old Testament itself recognises the existence of other transhuman powers who can be called 'gods' or 'sons of Elyon', or 'sons of God', and conceived of as members of the celestial Divine Assembly – without this posing any threat to the doctrine of Yahweh as the High God, the Creator of heaven and earth.²²

Now, to some extent, the book of Daniel allows for a 'conversion experience' that builds on prior Near Eastern indigenous concepts and in that way endorses those concepts. The God that the pagan kings acknowledge in Daniel is 'God Most High' ('*illāy'ā*), 'the King of heaven' (*melek š'mayy'ā*, 4:37), or elliptically 'Heaven' in the phrase 'Heaven rules' (4:26). Very obviously, this High deity was not conceived of by Nebuchadnezzar or Darius as an Underworld or vegetation deity, but as the sort of deity who could be addressed in

20 M-J Steve, *Nouveaux mélanges Épigraphiques: inscriptions royales de Suse et de la Susiane*, Ville royale de Suse VII, Mémoires de la Délégation archéologique en Iran Tome LIII (Nice: Editions Serre, 1987), Fig. 64 DSf: lines 13, and 6-7. Compare the statement 'great is Ahuramazda, who is the greatest of all the gods, who created mankind' (*DN rabi ša rabû ina muḫḫi ilāni gabbi ša... nišē ibnû*, CAD B, 87, *banû* A, 3a.1'; *nišē* – 'the peoples'), and Ahuramazda 'who created heaven and earth' (*ša šamē u eršetī ibnû*, CAD S, *šamû* A, 343, 1b.2' from an inscription of Darius).

21 R.C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1961), ch. 7, 'Achaemenids and Magi'.

22 See conveniently M.E. Tate's discussion of Psalm 82 and the expressions 'the Assembly of El/God', 'gods' and 'sons of Elyon' ('*dat-ēl*, 'ēlōhim, b'ney 'elyōn) together with the literature cited there (*Psalms 51-100*, WBC [Dallas: Word Books, 1990], 328ff.).

that very ancient Sumerian or Semitic idiom as 'lord of heaven and earth'.²³

The Darius in Daniel speaks the line 'May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!' (6:16). This Darius recognises 'the God of Daniel' (6:26) as though distinct from other deities that were being worshipped. Nevertheless, Nebuchadnezzar and Darius are credited with a ready-made Kingdom theology that can be attached to the exiles' God. They already have the conceptual framework of a pantheon head who is sovereign over political kingdoms, and not just of a national and territorially limited deity who is manifest only in the forces of nature such as the thunderstorm. This High God 'rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he wills' – a phrase that is repeated for emphasis. This accords with the theme of the book of Daniel – the Kingdom of God.²⁴ Nebuchadnezzar and Darius do not seem to become strict monotheistic Yahwists in the storyteller's mind, for there is no phrase or story indicative of their denial of the existence of all other gods, or their non-participation in state rituals after the recognition of 'the Most High'.²⁵ Nor did the historical Cyrus the Great or Darius the Great become true Yahweh monotheists despite authorising the Judeans' return from Exile and the re-building of the Jerusalem temple.

The Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus and Darius known through their inscriptions are locked into their own imperial theology. They practice a theology of legitimation, not a Yahwistic liberation theology and an obedience to Sinai covenant stipulations. Their creation doctrine serves their claim to the throne. The bottom line, rather literally in the case of Nbk 15, is 'born-to-rule' and 'power-to-Babylon'. Thus Nebuchadnezzar ends his long account of the restoration and improvements to Babylon, its walls and shrines, with a prayer from which we excerpt the following lines:

God, Marduk, lord, knowledgeable one of the gods, great, dominant, it was you who created me and appointed me to sovereignty over all peoples... your command, beloved Marduk, made this house. May it grow old to distant days, and may I enjoy its abundance. Within it may I attain old age. May I enjoy progeny. Within it may I receive the weighty tribute of the kings of the four quarters of the world, of all mankind. From the foundation of the heavens to the apex of the heavens, wherever

23 The Sumerian, *lugal.an.ki* and Akkadian *šarri šamē u eršetim* for 'lord of heaven and earth' find an echo in Jesus' words, 'I thank you, Father, lord of heaven and earth...' (Luke 10:21).

24 Cf. Daniel 4:17, 25, 26, 32 and 5:21.

25 See J.E. Goldingay's comment and collection of references to 'God Most High' in his commentary, *Daniel*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 71-72.

the Sun god rises, may there be no enemy, may there be none opposing me. Within it may my descendants rule the Mesopotamians for ever.²⁶

This very fairly represents the theology and spirituality of Nebuchadnezzar and compares with Nbk 15: Excerpt 2, after which that column of the inscription went on to describe Nebuchadnezzar's military exploits in distant lands and the presentation to Marduk of the imperial tribute that resulted. Here at the end of the inscription we encounter Babylonian prosperity theology. It is a this-worldly eschatology based on imperialism. The theology fuels and is reinforced by the economics. We need not question the sincerity of Nebuchadnezzar's theology. All the evidence suggests that he combined a sincere devotion to Marduk with running his empire. Yet we would also be right to characterise Nebuchadnezzar's theology as Babylonian nationalism and imperial propaganda.

The theologian of Daniel had a critical perception of Babylonian and Persian theology.²⁷ He allowed the possibility that the Jewish God might be recognised as 'the God of heaven' by pagan kings. He did not disapprove of Daniel and friends taking promotion and serving as officials in the very empire that had deported them and had placed the temple vessels from Jerusalem in its shrines, but he cherished a counter-culture and a Zion-based hope of the Kingdom. Whether he could have conceived of a devotion to Yahweh that was detached from Palestine, Jerusalem and the temple of Zion is a moot point. If we lay Daniel's prayer alongside the prayers of Nebuchadnezzar that we have studied, then the story of Daniel on his knees facing towards Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10), and the Jerusalem-centredness of Daniel's prayer in ch. 9 (9:2, 7, 12, 16-19, 20-21, 25-26) suggest that the author of Daniel would have had no reason to conceive of his 'God of Heaven' without the focus of a Promised Land and Zion temple.

If we can and do have a different idea of the Kingdom of 'our Father who is in heaven', it is because we are detached from that particular contextual embeddedness – as much by our socio-cultural experience and ethnicity as by submission to the teaching of the gospels. In theory, then, with this Kingdom shift, we have far less

²⁶ Nbk 15, Col. 9:47-51 and Col. 10:1-19. Many similar Concluding Prayers could be cited from the Neo-Babylonian Building inscription corpus.

²⁷ Note Daniel's prophetic confrontation with Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:27 – 'break off your sins by practising righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your tranquillity.'

vested interest in our own cultural incidentals, be they tribal, ethnic, territorial or institutional.

6. Empire Builders and Theologians Today

Detachedness from the matrix of Babylon and Zion theology does not leave us dispassionate and disembodied in our Christian theology. It leaves us with questions about the embeddedness of theology within our cultural, social and political matrix. Theology is never disembodied. It is always someone's theology, and that someone lives somewhere, speaks in a specific language and with a particular accent, belongs to a particular social stratum, has a particular income, and is either male or female. If there are elements of theological truth that might be cross-culturally recognised, the question then is how interwoven they are with their mother culture. If they are contextually embedded, does that mean that they are also buried under cultural determinants? There is truth in the belief that the world was created by God. But there is more to it than that, and more than enunciating a propositional statement. What is the dynamic? Why say it in the specific situation? To what end? In the Near East the act of creation was attributed to a High God such as Il, or El, or the Aten in Egypt, or Ahuramazda in Persia. This truth was complemented by the belief that each individual life and birth are owed to this Creator God. Did this common belief that Yahwism made its own, and Christianity has embraced, liberate or enslave? Did it lead towards a monotheism with a personal and social ethic, or away from it?

It is a sobering thought that English history is a story of kings who were Christianised and who then, like Henry VIII, appropriated Christian theology to legitimate themselves, invoking a doctrine of the divine right of kings and seeing themselves as elect to play the role of 'Defender of the faith', meanwhile imprisoning or executing those whose theology did not legitimate their reign. We are now detached enough from that English theology to read with a wry smile the media debates over Prince Charles and the succession, or the meaning of 'Defender of the faith' or re-interpretations of it as 'Defender of faith'. The uneasy juxtaposition of three monotheistic faiths in Britain is enough to re-open questions of the State and the Church, of Establishment, of common recognition of the High God, of pluralism and conversion, and of religious education in State schools. These questions are just as pressing outside Britain – in Israel, Pakistan and Latin America, or in Russia, Chechnya and Afghanistan.

In Christianised South Africa a regime has just recently come to an end. The Apartheid system was conceived and put into place by communicant members of the Dutch Reformed church. Dutch Reformed theology legitimated Apartheid until world opinion, as much as international Reformed theology, repudiated Apartheid as a heresy.²⁸ Two theological documents from the Black community that emerged from within the crackdown of the state of emergency and the brink of civil war took up the issue of theology as State legitimation. The *Kairos Document* spoke about 'State theology' and the God of the South African state. It also spoke scathingly of 'Church theology' that offered a spurious human reconciliation, and an implicit legitimation of the white minority government. Likewise, the *Evangelical Witness in South Africa* confronted the theology of the Status Quo and a suspect 'Mission theology'. Both documents are repudiations of a High God theology that is devoid of prophetic critique. Both documents cite and react to wording from the former South African Constitution that sounds uncomfortably like Nebuchadnezzar theology. Indeed Babylonian phrases from the Neo-Babylonian corpus jump to mind as possible translations:

In humble submission to Almighty God, who controls the destiny of peoples and nations, who gathered our forebears together from many lands and gave them this their own; who has guided them from generation to generation; who has wondrously delivered them from the dangers that beset them.²⁹

The evaluation of this High God theology is fiercely and justifiably critical, as two quotations from first *The Kairos Document* and then EWISA will illustrate:

28 These broad allegations can be documented in detail by reference to speeches by Cabinet ministers and DRC Synod debates and issued statements such as *Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkerverhoudinge in die Lig van die Skrif* (Kaapstad: NG Kerk Uitgewers, 1974), published in English as *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* (Pretoria: Dutch Reformed Church Publishers, 1976).

29 Quoted in *Evangelical Witness in South Africa: A Critique of Evangelical Theology and Practice by Evangelicals Themselves* (Soweto: Concerned Evangelicals/Oxford: Regnum, 1986), 24, and previously quoted in *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church* (Johannesburg: Skotaville/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986 2nd edn), 7. The ecumenical *Kairos Document* emerged first, articulating much grassroots anger and resistance. The EWISA document probably shocked the white evangelical English speaking community just as much because its drafters could not be dismissed as leftwing radicals.

This god is an idol. It is as mischievous, sinister and evil as any of the idols that the prophets of Israel had to contend with... Here is a god who exalts the proud and humbles the poor – the very opposite of the God of the Bible who 'scatters the proud of heart, pulls down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the humble' (Lk. 1:51-52)... From a theological point of view the opposite of the God of the Bible is the devil, Satan. The god of the South African State is not merely an idol or false god, it is the devil disguised as Almighty God – the antichrist.

It is presumptuous on the part of this racist government to claim that it was the God of the Scriptures who 'gathered' Whites from Europe to South Africa whereas it is common knowledge that they settled here for economic reasons. This 'God' referred to in this preamble comes across as the god of the oppressor to black people of South Africa. It is a 'God' of the white people of South Africa. To the township youths who are attacked and killed, this 'God' is the god of the teargas, bullets, sjamboks, prison cells and death. This type of God to us Christians comes as an antichrist, negating the very basis of our Christian faith.

It is clear from the statements above that sharing an acknowledgement of a High God is not enough, not even when it is the same God by name and by Christian tradition, for the activity of the same God can scarcely be invoked to offer two contradictory interpretations of the same history. This is a Jeremiah situation with competing alternative interpretations of history, politics and empire. In Jeremiah's day, two incompatible Yahwistic prophesyings in Jerusalem and a Marduk tradition in Babylon offered High God theologies of birth, election, vocation, judgment, blessing and divine sovereignty. It was doubly ironical, then, that Hananiah ('Yahweh-has been gracious') was wrong, and that elements of Jeremiah's message supported Nebuchadnezzar's understanding of his campaigns to the Levant, though he got his marching orders from Marduk.

Today we may have trouble distinguishing who is our Jeremiah. Bible-expounding theologians have left a legacy of interpretation that has so recently included the justification of slavery, of occupation of land, of Apartheid, and of the marginalisation of gifted women in the church. We have every reason to be wary and self-critical, and to look for vested interest as a driving motive behind theological discourse.³⁰ A Lutheran theologian writing in the heat of the struggle in South Africa in an article entitled 'How does the

30 On the biblical justification of slavery by Reformed theologians in the USA as recent as Charles Hodge and John Murray (1957), see K. Giles, 'The Biblical Argument for Slavery: Can the Bible Mislead? A Case Study in Hermeneutics', *EvQ* 66:1 (1994), 3-17.

Church address the structure-related convictions of its members?' remarked:

It should be obvious by now that all of us are located somewhere in the social system and that this location has a profound effect on how we see reality, how we feel and what we think. Normally theologians underestimate this effect of structural situation on mentality and concentrate on convictions such as the Christian faith, Nationalism or Marxism.³¹

If doing theology can never be extricated from its social matrix, then each institution will develop a theology that justifies its existence and legitimates itself, and will use the language of election, calling, guidance and destiny at personal level or institutional level to relate its own sociological dynamic and activities to the will of the High God. The truth of affirming that we owe our life, existence and eternal destiny to God must somehow dovetail with our involvement in social and institutional life. For a Christian denomination, a Bible College, a monastery, a Missionary organisation, or a Christianised State, Nebuchadnezzar theology is a sobering mirror with its mix of truths about a High God as Creator of cosmos and child, with its spirituality of godfearing, walking before the god and seeking guidance, its prayer and its worship. This Babylonian product from centuries ago is a disconcerting example of how theological language may mix and confuse truths about God that authentically affirm us with illegitimate justification of our vested interests and covert agendas. Reading Nebuchadnezzar's theology might just help us from becoming the neo-Babylonians of our generation.

31 K. Nürnberger, 'How does the Church address the structure-related convictions of its members?', *JTSA* 53 (1985), 22-35.