

Isaiah Part 10: Prophecies against Babylon, Assyria and Philistia

Isaiah 13 and 14

Isaiah 13 begins a section ending at Isaiah 23 v 18 where he prophesies against the nations. It is fitting for judgment to begin at the house of God, so the LORD has first spoken to Israel and Judah. But now, the LORD speaks against the ‘nations of the world’, beginning with Babylon.

The judgment of Babylon (Isaiah 13 v 1 to 22)

The word “oracle” (Isaiah 13 v 1, Isaiah 14 v 28), also translated “burden”, is the Hebrew word מַשָּׂא (massa). In the prophetic writings, an ‘oracle’ is a message of weighty importance, ‘heavy’ in the sense that it speaks of impending judgment, and is thus designed to produce sorrow and repentance...

- In this chapter, Isaiah displays “elegance of composition, variety of imagery, and sublimity of sentiment and diction, in the prophetic style” – do you agree? So, how does God administer judgment against Babylon?

“The Lord of hosts is mustering a host for battle” (v 4) – this is an army of judgment against the Babylonian Empire, prophesied decades before Babylon was a world power. “They will look aghast at one another” (v 8) – when Babylon fell suddenly, without a battle, in a surprise attack by Cyrus in 539 BC, the citizens of the city were completely shocked (see Daniel 5).

“The day of the LORD comes” (v 9) – Isaiah now speaks in the ‘prophetic tense’, having in mind both a near fulfilment (the fall of the Babylonian Empire), and an ultimate fulfilment (the final destruction of Babylon before the return of Jesus). The phrase ‘the day of the LORD’ means not just a single day, but a season when the LORD sets things right. It is as if today is ‘the day of man’, but the ‘the day of the LORD’ is coming...

“The stars of the heavens... will not give their light; the sun will be dark” (v 10) – several prophetic passages describe the cosmic disturbances that precede and surround the return of Jesus (Joel 2 v 10; Revelation 6 v 12 to 14; Isaiah 34 v 4), and Jesus may have been referring to this passage in Matthew 24 v 29. “I will punish the world for its evil” (v 11) – this prophetic identification of Babylon with the world, ripe for ultimate judgment, is consistent through the Scriptures. We should not be surprised that Isaiah has prophetically combined the vision of Babylon’s doom with the judgment of the whole world for its evil.

Babylon was a literal city built on the River Euphrates (Genesis 11 v 1 to 9), and later became the capital of a cruel empire that conquered Judah. In the Old Testament, ‘Babylon’ was associated with organized idolatry, blasphemy and the persecution of God’s people. In the New Testament, the world’s religious and commercial system of the last days is symbolized as ‘Babylon’ (see Revelation 17 and 18).

“I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place” (v 13) – this idea is echoed in Haggai 2 v 6 and Hebrews 12 v 25 to 27. Since God can shake the heavens and the earth, and since God is immovable, it makes more sense to trust in God than even the ground we stand on or the air we breathe.

“It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations” (v 20) – when Cyrus conquered Babylon, he did not devastate the city: Alexander the Great later made Babylon his headquarters. General desolation did not set in until the third century BC, when Babylon gradually fell into decay, and became completely depopulated by the time of the Muslim conquest in the seventh century AD. Some Bible scholars suggest that ‘Babylon’ (in a literal, or allegorical sense, or both) will be rebuilt, so that it may receive its ultimate judgment – sudden and complete destruction “like Sodom and Gomorrah” (v 19) – during the end-times...

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The restoration of Jacob (Isaiah 14 v 1, 2)

Babylon's loss was Israel's gain! Isaiah 13 ended with the destruction and desolation that was going to come upon Babylon. But since Babylon was Judah's great enemy, any judgment on Babylon was an expression of God's mercy upon Israel. So, Isaiah follows the pronouncement of judgment on Babylon with "the LORD will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel" (v 1).

Israel's remnant taunts the king of Babylon (Isaiah 14 v 3 to 23)

"When the LORD has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and... hard service" (v 3) – God announces a day when he will give real rest to believing Israel. They will have rest from pain, turmoil, and hard service. Such rest is the birthright of every believer in Jesus Christ – see Matthew 11 v 28 to 30.

"You will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon" (v 4) – in the day of restoration, the defeat and weakness of the king of Babylon will be exposed, and Israel will rejoice. As this prophecy continues, it becomes clear that Isaiah has two aspects of prophetic fulfilment in mind: (i) first, there is the immediate and partial fulfilment regarding the City of Babylon and its king; (ii) second, there is the distant and ultimate fulfilment regarding the spiritual 'Empire of Babylon', and its king, Satan...

- From verse 12 onwards, the focus shifts from the literal king of Babylon to the spiritual 'power behind the king', the one called 'Day Star' (i.e. Lucifer) and 'Son of Dawn'. What this passage tell us about the character, sinful ambitions, and ultimate fate of Satan? See also Ezekiel 28 v 12 to 19.
- Why do you think God hates pride so much? See James 4 v 6, 1 Peter 5 v 6.

"How you are fallen from heaven" (v 12) – the Bible describes *four* different falls of Satan:

1. From anointed to profane (Ezekiel 28 v 14 to 16, before Genesis 3)
2. From access to heaven (Job 1 v 12, Zechariah 3 v 1) to restriction to the earth (Revelation 12 v 9, at some unspecified time, as referred to in this verse, Isaiah 14 v 12)
3. From the earth to bondage in the pit (Revelation 20 v 2, 3, at the start of the millennium)
4. From the pit to the lake of fire (Revelation 20 v 10, at the end of the millennium).

In Luke 10 v 18 Jesus said "I saw Satan fall like lightning..." – Jesus may be referring here to the imminent decisive victory over Satan at the Cross; or this may be a prophetic look at the second fall described here.

Notice the five "I will" statements in verses 13 and 14: (i) "*I will* ascend to heaven; above the stars of God; (ii) *I will* set my throne on high; (iii) *I will* sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; (iv) *I will* ascend above the heights of the clouds; (v) *I will* make myself like the Most High."

Oracles concerning Assyria and Philistia (Isaiah 14 v 24 to 32)

- What aspects of God's character are emphasised? How do they encourage us to trust in him?

"For the Lord of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it?" (v 27) – God always accomplishes His purpose. His plan is never frustrated. Even when we have no trust in our own plan, we can fully trust God's purpose!

Some see in verses 28 to 32 a warning of future judgment for 'modern Philistines', that is, Palestinians. '*Palestina*' is the Latin name for Philistia, and this may be a prophetic warning to the Palestinians: they should not rejoice in the suffering or downfall of Israel, because worse judgment will befall them.

Prayer – O Lord, help us to listen carefully to the warnings given in these chapters. Help us to remember that Satan is a defeated enemy, and that your redemptive plans and purposes will ultimately be fulfilled, for us and for all the nations of the world. Help us to trust in you always, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.