

Isaiah Part 13: Prophecies against Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon

Isaiah 22 and 23

An overarching theme of these chapters is that God does not permit the wickedness of those who have set themselves against the Lord and against his anointed, and those who oppose his people, to go unpunished.

An oracle concerning Jerusalem (Isaiah 22)

“The oracle concerning the valley of vision” (v 1) – this refers to Jerusalem, a city on a hill but surrounded by three valleys. Since Jerusalem was a centre for the worship of God, and some of the prophets of God (including Isaiah) lived in Jerusalem, it is called the ‘valley of vision’.

“Let me weep bitter tears” (v 4) – we think of Jeremiah as the ‘weeping prophet’, but Isaiah also wept when he saw God’s judgment coming against his people.

“You collected the waters of the lower pool” (v 9) – when faced with an attack (by the Babylonians, supported by their Persian allies, ‘Elam’), they prepared the city by strengthening the walls for battle, and by making sure there was adequate water supply within the city walls for a siege (i.e. by using Hezekiah’s tunnel, which had been built prior to 701 BC in preparation for the impending siege by the Assyrians, see 2 Chronicles 32 v 2 to 4 and 2 Kings 20 v 20).

- In what ways do the people of Jerusalem make wrong preparations for the coming battle (v 8 to 14)? To whom should they have turned for help (v 11)?
- In verses 15 to 25, notice the contrast between self-centred Shebna and ‘my servant Eliakim’ – how are their destinies so different? Note that the peg ‘fastened in a secure place’ (v 23) refers to Eliakim, whereas the peg that ‘gives way’ (v 25) refers back to Shebna.

The place of Eliakim the son of Hilkiah before Hezekiah is somewhat obscure in the Scriptures: he is only mentioned in six passages, and the only description of him is that he was over Hezekiah’s household (2 Kings 18 v 18, 37, repeated in Isaiah 36 v 3, 22). But Eliakim was famous in heaven: “He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah” (v 21).

God would take the office and authority of the unfaithful Shebna, and give it to Eliakim instead (“I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your sash on him, and will commit your authority to his hand”, v 21). God will get His work done! If a ‘Shebna’ is unfaithful, God will remove him from his office, strip him of his authority, and give it to another.

“The key of the house of David” (verse 22) – Eliakim was King Hezekiah's newly appointed ‘steward’ or treasurer (replacing Shebna), and having the key to the house of David meant he had power to grant access to the king. In that day, the royal treasurer would have the large master key of the palace fastened to the shoulder of his tunic, as a picture of his authority to open and shut doors, without opposition.

In this sense Eliakim becomes a prophetic ‘type’ of the Messiah, because Jesus tells us this passage speaks about himself: “The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens” (Revelation 3 v 7); and, as he promises the missionary church at Philadelphia, “Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (Revelation 3 v 8).

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An oracle concerning Tyre and Sidon (Isaiah 23)

To the north of Israel, Tyre was the leading city of the Phoenicians, the great maritime power of the ancient world. The ‘ships of Tarshish’ were ocean-going vessels capable of long sea voyages lasting up to 2 to 3 years, possibly venturing as far as Cornwall, in south-west Britain, to obtain tin from the Cornish mines. Because Tyre was such an important harbour and centre for shipping, the city was synonymous with commerce and materialism. Tyre was the ‘Babylon of the Sea’. Because of their excellent harbours and seamanship, the merchants of Tyre and Sidon established a commercial empire far greater than one would expect given their size and military power. Tyre was a city in two parts: an inland city, and an island city. The inland city was conquered by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, just as Isaiah prophesies in this chapter (v 11). The island city was conquered later by Alexander the Great in 332 BC.

Tyre’s relationship with Israel was ambivalent. King Hiram of Tyre supplied David and Solomon great timber resources for the building of the temple and other projects. Hiram gave Solomon sailors so that Israel could build their commerce by sea. But later, Tyre gave Israel one of the worst rulers Israel ever had: Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab.

“Tyre is laid waste, without house or harbour” (v 1) – Isaiah pictures sailors from Tyre in Cyprus and in Egypt hearing of the destruction of the harbour of Tyre. When they hear the news, they ‘wail’ with anguish.

- What did God have against Tyre, Sidon and the ‘ships of Tarshish’? Was it simply that they were wealthy? Why did they need to be “ashamed” (v 4)?
- What evidence is there in this chapter that God’s ‘purpose’ was being fulfilled? What purpose?

Tyre was a city where money ruled, “whose merchants were princes, whose traders were the honoured of the earth” (v 8). To be a leader or honourable, one did not need to be of royal heritage, or even to be a good or an honest man. The only thing needed was success in business! “The LORD of hosts has purposed it, to defile the pompous pride of all glory” (v 9) – because of its great success, Tyre had become proud and full of self-confidence. But God’s purpose was to judge and humble Tyre, and Isaiah announces this.

“Daughter of Tarshish” (v 10) is possibly a reference to Britain (the source of tin); however, other colonies have been suggested, including Tartessus in Spain, Cartagena (Carthage) in North Africa, and Cittyim (Cyprus). “The Chaldeans... Assyria” (v 11) – the mainland city of Tyre was defeated by both the Assyrians and the Babylonians (Chaldeans). They were used by God to bring the city to ruin.

“Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years” (v 15) – God’s judgments are so precise that he decrees the exact number of years Tyre will be forgotten – and it is the same seventy years that the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon. “That you may be remembered” (v 16) – quoting perhaps a well-known song in his day, Isaiah makes the point that at the end of the seventy years appointed by God, Tyre will be remembered again.

“She will return to her wages” (v 17) – it seems that God will allow Tyre, symbolized by a prostitute, to continue her gross materialism with all the kingdoms of the world. But “her merchandise and her wages will be holy to the LORD” (v 18) – ultimately, the riches Tyre so desperately sought will be given to the LORD anyway. “The LORD will visit Tyre” (v 17) – some commentators think this refers to the flourishing of Christianity in Tyre in the days of the early church, or it may refer to end-times and the future Millennium.

Prayer – O Lord, as we listen to the lessons of these chapters, help us to be God-fearing like Eliakim, your servant, and not arrogant and self-centred like Shebna. Help us not to put our trust in uncertain wealth, like the merchants of Tyre and Sidon, but to put our trust in you, knowing that your purposes will be fulfilled – to judge and to humble the proud and self-sufficient, but to give salvation to those who call upon your name. Help us to trust in you always, in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.