

Isaiah 47: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Isaiah chapter 47 Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon. Sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for you shall no more be called tender and delicate.

Take the millstones and grind flour. Put off your veil, strip off your robe, uncover your legs, pass through the rivers. Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your disgrace shall be seen.

I will take vengeance, and I will spare no one. Our Redeemer, the Lord of hosts is his name, is the Holy One of Israel. Sit in silence and go into darkness, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for you shall no more be called the mistress of kingdoms.

I was angry with my people. I profaned my heritage. I gave them into your hand. You showed them no mercy. On the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy.

You said, I shall be mistress forever, so that you did not lay these things to heart, or remember their end. Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sits securely, who say in your heart, I am, and there is no one besides me.

[1:06] I shall not sit as a widow, or know the loss of children. These two things shall come to you in a moment. In one day, the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries, and the great power of your enchantments.

You felt secure in your wickedness. You said, No one sees me. Your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, I am, and there is no one besides me.

But evil shall come upon you, which you will not know how to charm away. Disaster shall fall upon you, for which you will not be able to atone. And ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing.

Stand fast in your enchantments, and your many sorceries, with which you have laboured from your youth. Perhaps you may be able to succeed. Perhaps you may inspire terror.

You are wearied with your many counsels. Let them stand forth and save you, those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons make known what shall come upon you. Behold, they are like stubble.

[2:08] The fire consumes them. They cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. No coal for warming oneself is this. No fire to sit before. Such to you are those with whom you have laboured, who have done business with you from your youth.

They wander about, each in his own direction. There is no one to save you. Chapters 41 to 48 of Isaiah are a sustained argument for monotheism, presenting the Lord as supreme over all of the false gods, their images and their worshippers, unique as the creator of all, the master of history, and as the one whose sovereignty will be publicly demonstrated, so that all knees would bow before him.

The Lord's sovereignty would especially be demonstrated in the humiliation of the false gods of the nations, and as the Lord's word declared long in advance concerning Cyrus, proved effective and true.

Chapter 46 described the shaming of Bel and Nebo, chief gods of the Babylonians, and the futility of idolatry more generally. In chapter 47, the focus turns to the city of Babylon itself.

In the earlier oracles against the nations, in chapters 13 to 23, Babylon was especially prominent. It headed the list of the people subject to the Lord's judgment, with Tyre at its conclusion.

[3:23] Chapters 13 and 14 are almost entirely devoted to judgment upon Babylon, with Babylon mentioned again in chapter 21. The oracles against the nations, while probably largely delivered in the years running up to 701 BC, when Sennacherib and the Assyrians would come up against Jerusalem, also seemed to foreshadow the later judgments that would occur at the end of the 7th

century, and during the 6th, with the rise and fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Here, however, in chapter 47, the fall of Babylon to Cyrus in 539 BC is more directly foretold. In the earlier oracles against the nations, we saw that Babylon and Tyre were great world cities of their day, their glory and splendour setting them apart from other cities, upon the land and the sea respectively.

As such, they could stand for the Lord's judgment upon the pride of man more generally. In chapters 24 to 27, we also saw something akin to the archetypal opposition between the city of man and the city of God.

Given Babylon's prominence and significance, it was a potent symbol of the city of man, and as John Oswald notes, as the antipole of the city of God, its downfall was an oracle of salvation for Zion.

As such a symbol, the passages concerning Babylon's downfall resonate long after Babylon's day, not least in the book of Revelation, where the city that is overthrown in the Lord's judgment at the end of the age is referred to as Babylon the Great.

[4 : 50] Babylon is represented as a wealthy young virgin, accustomed to the luxury that comes with its privileged status. Zion is also often pictured in a similar manner. The Lord will utterly humiliate Babylon in its pride, devastating it and stripping it of its former glories.

The virgin, who formerly enjoyed all of the finery of nobility, would be reduced to grinding flour at the millstone, some of the most menial of work, as a slave. She would be divested of her garments as a rich woman, and would have to dress as a regular labourer, walking through the irrigated fields. Babylon's nakedness would be uncovered. Such descriptions are used elsewhere of the humiliation of proud cities, for instance of Jerusalem in Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 36 to 39.

Thus says the Lord God, Because your lust was poured out, and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated.

I will gather them against you from every side, and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness. And I will judge you as women who commit adultery, and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy.

[6 : 08] And I will give you into their hands, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber, and break down your lofty places. They shall strip you of your clothes, and take your beautiful jewels, and leave you naked and bare.

Uncovering nakedness is an image of shame, and the greatest humiliation, perhaps also implying rape. The image also suggests exposure of the true character of the city, especially in its moral character.

Babylon will be seen for what it is. Verse 4 frames the declaration of Babylon's downfall as a glorious message of salvation for Israel. The great oppressor city is being overthrown by the Lord, and the oppressed are, by implication, being liberated.

Verses 5 to 11 present a series of indictments against Babylon, and the consequent sentence that will be enacted upon her. In the statements that the Lord attributes to Babylon, it's evident that Babylon in its pride fancied that it was as God.

I shall be mistress forever, and I am, and there is no one besides me. In making these claims, Babylon is attributing to itself what is only true of God, directly attacking the uniqueness of his deity, and parodying his own words concerning himself.

[7 : 18] If these chapters are focused upon the monotheistic claim that the Lord alone is God, against all pretenders to his throne, Babylon is another of the powers claiming of itself what belongs to God alone.

If Babylon enjoys glorious might and splendor, it is only because the Lord has established them in his providence. Yet Babylon was unwitting of the fact that all its majesty and dominance was received from the Lord's hand, and could just as easily be removed.

He had empowered Babylon to be his instrument of judgment upon his unfaithful people. However, much as the acts of Assyria was earlier judged by the Lord, so Babylon would also be humbled for its pride and presumption.

Babylon fancies itself invulnerable, and hubristically imagines itself beyond the reach of the Lord's judgment. Its majesty would never fade, its might would never fail. It considered itself immune to the

