

Isaiah 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Isaiah chapter 13. The oracle concerning Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw. On a bare hill raise a signal, cry aloud to them, wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exulting ones. The sound of a tumult is on the mountains as of a great multitude, the sound of an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together. The Lord of hosts is mustering a host for battle. They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the Lord and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land. Wail, for the day of the Lord is near, as destruction from the Almighty it will come. Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt. They will be dismayed. Pangs and agony will seize them. They will be in anguish like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at one another. Their faces will be aflame. Behold, the day of the

Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light.

The sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity. I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless. I will make people more rare than fine gold, and mankind than the gold of Ophir. Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

And like a hunted gazelle, or like sheep with none to gather them, each will turn to his own people, and each will flee to his own land. Whoever is found will be thrust through, and whoever is caught will fall by the sword. Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes, their houses will be plundered, and their wives ravished. Behold, I am stirring up the meads against them, who have no regard for silver, and do not delight in gold. Their bows will slaughter the young men, they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb. Their eyes will not pity children. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations. No Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there, but wild animals will dwell there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures. Their ostriches will dwell, and their wild goats will dance. Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces. Its time is close at hand, and its days will not be prolonged. Isaiah chapter 13 opens a new section of the book.

This section, by various reckonings, runs up to either chapter 23 or chapter 27. It chiefly concerns the nations, but Judah is also frequently addressed within it. There are similarities between this section of the book, and places like Jeremiah chapters 46 to 51, or Ezekiel chapters 25 to 32.

[3:16] Chapters 1 to 12 of Isaiah move from the period of the reign of King Uzziah to the Syro-Ephraimite War of the 730s BC, and anticipates the Assyrian crisis that followed around 701 BC. In this new section, it is Babylon that takes centre stage from the outset, and Assyria largely seems to have fallen out of view. Outside of the brief appearance in chapter 14 verses 24 to 27, it does not appear much.

Those words come at the end of the oracle concerning Babylon, and have led some commentators to believe that what we have here is a later editorial reworking of material that formerly addressed Assyria.

As it speaks about the downfall of Babylon at the hands of the Medes, it would seem to extend the historical scope of these chapters of Isaiah, from the 8th century threat of the Assyrians, to the rise of the Babylonians at the end of the 7th century, and their dominance through much of the 6th century, before the Babylonian empire fell to the Medes and the Persians around 539 BC.

There are certainly strong analogies to be seen between Babylon as depicted here, and the nation of Assyria as we have seen elsewhere in the prophecy. The nation by whom the Lord affects his judgement will itself be judged. The relationship between this section and that which preceded it might not be straightforwardly chronological in character, but given the typological similarities between Assyria and Babylon, we should not treat this section of the book as if it were detached from that which preceded it. The Neo-Babylonian empire succeeded the Neo-Assyrian empire at the end of the 7th century BC. As I have already noted, some commentators argue that the prophecy here originally referred to Assyria before being reworked to refer to Babylon. Babylon is certainly similar to and related to the Assyrian empire in various respects. Most commentators relate this chapter to Babylon in the context of its ascendancy and its destruction of Jerusalem at the end of the 7th century and beginning of the 6th. However, the work of Seth O'Lanson, the burden of Babylon, has given more support to the claims of those who see chapters 13 and 14 of Isaiah as referring to the Babylon of Isaiah's own time, rather than to a Babylon of almost 100 years later. John Oswald, one who follows O'Lanson's thesis, argues that Babylon was culturally dominant, even though not the heart of the empire that it would later become. Babylon enjoyed some independence and Sargon II lost control of it to Meridac Baladan. It functioned as, in his words, a symbol for Mesopotamia's glory and pride. In 689 BC, Sennacherib crushed Babylon's rebellion and destroyed the city and its chief buildings, a far more destructive defeat of the city than that which it suffered later on in 539 BC. The greatest benefit of O'Lanson's thesis would be placing all of these events in the context of the Assyrian hegemony of the region. This might make more sense of chapter 14 verses 24 to 27 and the reference to the death of Ahaz. However, it still leaves us with the question of why Assyria doesn't have a more prominent part to play. There are also some more serious problems for O'Lanson's theory. The oppressive Babylon mentioned here far more readily fits the Babylon that we have at the end of the 7th century and into the 6th than it does the Babylon of Meridac

[6 : 35] Baladan's time. Furthermore, the role of the Medes in verse 17 seems also not to fit with the period of Meridac Baladan when the Medes were not opponents of the Babylonians at all. Putting these problems to one side, one of the things that these chapters do that fit in with what has happened previously is placing the nations in their proper perspective. The Lord is over and the master of all of the nations.

He is the one who controls and moves all of the playing pieces on the board. There is, as Oswald notes, a coherent argument to be observed here. The chapter opens with a new superscription, as in chapter 1 verse 1 and chapter 2 verse 1. It's referred to as an oracle. As Christopher Seitz notes, this term is used on a number of further occasions in the chapters that follow. Many have seen this as a strong indication that we are dealing with a broader section of the larger book. This indeed seems to be the case, although the material of these chapters is not only inclusive of oracles. There are also woes, for instance, and the oracles that we have are themselves varied in character. The chapter begins with the Lord setting up a signal, summoning people for battle. We've already seen this sort of action back in chapter 5 verse 26. He will raise a signal for nations far away and whistle for them from the ends of the earth, and behold, quickly, speedily, they come. The question, however, is, who are the consecrated ones? Is this Babylon, in the period where it would judge the nations, or is it referring to the Medes and the Persians who would judge them?

It would seem that on our answer to this question hangs our reading of the verses that follow. They seem to refer to a more general judgment of nations. Those who think that the consecrated ones of the Babylonians would think of places like Jeremiah chapter 25 verses 11 to 12.

This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.

For such a reading, verse 5 would refer to the Babylonians' seventy years dominance of that region. However, others see this as a reference to the Medes and the Persians that followed them. This would connect these verses with the verses that immediately follow and the reference to the Medes being raised up against them in verse 17. If the consecrated ones are the Babylonians themselves, however, we will be seeing here another pronounced example of the nation by whom the Lord judged others being judged itself, as in the case of the Assyrians.

[9 : 10] The day of the Lord would come upon the Babylonians. The scripture speaks of many different days of the Lord. These various days of the Lord anticipate the great eschatological day of the Lord. They are full stops in the sentences of nations, but they look forward to the greater end of all things, the final judgment when the Lord will judge all of the living and the dead. The focus here is upon the sin of pride, the arrogance, the pomp, and the hubris of nations, something that Babylon seemed to represent in an almost archetypal manner, perhaps understandably given its association with the tower and the city of Babel. The Lord would sap them of courage, might, and will, leaving them incapable of standing against their adversaries. The prophet uses the imagery of birth pangs, something that we see elsewhere in places like Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 31.

For I heard a cry as of a woman in labour, anguish as of one giving birth to her first child, the cry of the daughter of Zion, gasping for breath, stretching out her hands, woe is me, I am fainting before murderers. Alongside that imagery, there is also cosmic imagery. Perhaps the purpose of this imagery is to humble a nation that worships celestial bodies. We encounter similar imagery elsewhere in the book, in chapter 34 verse 4, for instance. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. We also find it in other prophets, such as Ezekiel chapter 32 verses 7 to 8. When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark. I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord God. They would also be scattered and pursued, as like a beast before the hunter. Children would be dashed to their death, wives would be raped, and houses would be plundered. The psalmist might be referring to this in Psalm 137 verses 8 to 9. O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us. Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock. As I have already noted, the reference to the Medes in verse 17 here would seem to fit a 6th century referent, far more than it would a referent at the end of the 8th or beginning of the 7th century.

Many commentators see problems with the claim that the Medes conquered the Babylonian empire in the 6th century, arguing rather that it was the Persians. However, where scripture elsewhere refers to this, it tends to reference the Medes particularly. This is most clearly seen in the character of Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel, but also in Jeremiah chapter 51 verse 11.

[11 : 58] Sharpen the arrows, take up the shields. The Lord has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the Lord, the vengeance for his temple. Earlier chapters of Isaiah spoke about the judgment coming upon Judah and Jerusalem, referring to the total and final judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah in the process.

In chapter 5 verse 17, it spoke of nomads eating among the ruins of the rich in the land, and the way that the land would be returned to the state of wilderness. The judgment that Babylon would face would be far more severe and final. It would not even be a place for nomadic herdsman. It would be a place filled with the eerie shrieks and cries of night-time animals, a city utterly desolate and humiliated. We find a similar account in Isaiah chapter 34 verses 10 to 15.

There the prophet speaks of Edom. Night and day it shall not be quenched. Its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste. None shall pass through it forever and ever. As human habitation is cut off, the city reverts to a place for wild beasts. All of this is a sign of the severity and the finality of the Lord's judgment. A question to consider. Where in the New Testament do we see the symbolism of this chapter being used? In what ways could the judgment upon Babylon described here be understood as archetypal in character.

Thank you.