

# Isaiah 24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Isaiah chapter 24. Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be as with the people, so with the priest, as with the slave, so with his master, as with the maid, so with her mistress, as with the buyer, so with the seller, as with the lender, so with the borrower, as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered, for the Lord has spoken this word.

The earth mourns and withers, the world languishes and withers. The highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left. The wine mourns, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh.

The mirth of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. No more do they drink wine with singing, strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.

The wasted city is broken down, every house is shut up so that none can enter. There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine. All joy has grown dark, the gladness of the earth is banished.

Desolation is left in the city, the gates are battered into ruins. For thus it shall be in the midst of the earth among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is done. They lift up their voices, they sing for joy, over the majesty of the Lord they shout from the west. Therefore in the east give glory to the Lord, in the coastlands of the sea give glory to the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the righteous one. But I say, I waste away, I waste away, woe is me, for the traitors have betrayed, with betrayal the traitors have betrayed. Terror and the pit and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth. He who flees at the sound of the terror shall fall into the pit, and he who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare, for the windows of heaven are opened.

[ 2 : 1 7 ]     And the foundations of the earth tremble. The earth is utterly broken. The earth is split apart. The earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunken man. It sways like a hut. Its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again. On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit. They will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be confounded, and the sun ashamed. For the Lord of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be before his elders. The oracles concerning the nations in Isaiah chapters 13 to 23 started with an oracle against Babylon, and ended with one against Tyre, pronouncing disaster upon nations and cities across the Near East. In chapters 24 to 27, we move from these specific oracles to a broader and more general statement of the Lord's judgment about to fall upon the earth. While some have termed this Isaiah's apocalypse, on account of the cosmic scope of the judgment declared, as John Oswald argues, it lacks many of the typical visionary and symbolic features of such apocalyptic literature. The sort of features more familiar from the book of

Revelation, and is better understood as eschatological. The prophetic declarations about the Lord's judgments and acts of salvation coming upon the earth in these chapters are punctuated, as John Goldingay observes, with hymns responding to them, in which worshippers respond to the great deeds of the Lord. The material of these chapters does not provide clear indications of its historical context. At the heart of these chapters, as Christopher Seitz observes, is a city of uncertain identity, mentioned in chapter 24 verse 10, chapter 25 verse 2, chapter 26 verse 5, and chapter 27 verse 10. Save for the city of which the men of Judah sing in chapter 26 verses 1 to 5, the references to a city are to a city that is judged or destroyed, yet no specific identifications are made. We are not told that the strong city of chapter 26 verse 2, for instance, is Jerusalem, or that the city to be destroyed is Babylon. While these prophecies likely have an original historical occasion, a more immediate reference, the non-specific character of the references should probably serve as an indication that the point of the prophecy, in its canonical situation, is not primarily a particular historical judgment, but a more general statement about the Lord's comprehensive judgment upon the earth, one that should not be restricted merely to one time frame, but which nonetheless does have concrete historical references. Sites, Brevard Childs, and many others relate the section chiefly to the time of Babylon and its downfall, but Gary Smith seems correct to emphasise the context where the actions of Assyria are more immediately in view. The entire world was indeed judged by the agency of Assyria, and would again be judged by means of the power of Babylon a century later. The contrast between two cities is in some respects comparable to what we find in places like the end of the book of

Revelation. Rather than seeking to identify the city to be destroyed with one particular city, it seems better, in the light of the non-specificity of the text, to recognise that many cities might be comprehended under its figure. Already we've seen Babylon and Tyre's significance as global cities of their day. The city of these chapters could be seen as a unifying figure for man's power and hubris manifested in many various cities in Isaiah's day and in ours. It is the archetypal opposition between the city of man and the city of God. Alec Mottier hears allusions back to key stories of early Genesis, the stories of the flood and Babel. Verse 18 is one of the only places in scripture that references the windows of heaven outside of the flood narrative, perhaps the greatest biblical account of cosmic judgment. Besides this, he notes references to the everlasting covenant, themes of the vine connected with Noah's planting of vineyard, and reference to the curse. As in the flood, there is a sort of cosmic decreation occurring, in which the earth will revert to an empty and desolate state, much as it was prior to the original creation. The scattering of the people and the bringing down of the city also recalls the story of Babel, the precursor, of course, to Babylon. The judgment upon the earth is imminent. The opening verse describes what the judgment of the Lord will affect, the emptying of the earth and the scattering of its people. The judgment will be comprehensive, affecting people of all ranks and stations. Verse 2 presents a series of opposed pairs, the tails and the heads of society.

No party will be immune. A structured and ordered society will be flattened in undifferentiated judgment. The certainty of this judgment is founded in the certainty of the Lord's word. The Lord has declared it, so it will surely come to pass. The prophecy assembles various sets of images of the disaster that will befall the earth. In verse 4, the disaster is compared to a dreadful drought that will cause everything to wither and languish. In verse 5, the image is one of pollution, as the iniquity of the people, breaking the law and the covenant, has made everything unclean. In verse 6, the image shifts to a curse consuming the land like fire, burning its inhabitants and leaving little in its wake.

It is the imagery of a vineyard, its harvest and the drinking of its wine, that connects verses 7 to 13. Times of joy and celebration would become grim and sorrowful. The jubilation of great festivals would be ended. Songs would be silenced. Pleasures would be soured. The desolate city of verse 10 is described using a term familiar from Genesis chapter 1 verse 2's description of the formlessness and void of the earth at the outset of the days of creation. The chaos and emptiness of the city is a decreation.

[ 8 : 16 ] Its inhabitants have either departed, abandoning their former dwellings, or they have retreated from the chaos to the extent that they can behind closed doors. As all joy and gladness flees from the devastated city, people call out for the wine and the feasts of the good times from which they have been firmly and finally banished. The situation would be similar to that after a harvest, where only a few scattered fruit could be found after the harvesters had gone through the fields. Only the smallest remnant would remain. Verses 14 to 16 provide the first worshipful response to the just judgments of the Lord in the eschatological prophecy that precedes it. People around the world are summoned to join in the praise from west to east to proclaim the glory of the Lord, all the ends of the earth joining in.

Perhaps we should understand these as the voices of the remnant gleanings of all of the nations. However, as Oswald suggests, the prophet might recognize that he will not know this great deliverance in his own days, which causes him to lament. His own time is one of treachery and the apparent triumphing of the wicked, all while the people of the Lord waste away. As at other points in this chapter, wordplay accents the prophet's claims. The five concluding words of verse 16 are all forms of the same Hebrew root. The disaster awaiting the people of the earth is unavoidable.

If they run from one of its forms, they will fall into another form of it, and even if they were to escape that, they would be trapped in a third. It cannot be evaded. The very structure of creation is being shaken up. As in the flood, the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth are shaken and tremble. All that people would depend upon starts to give way under them. The whole earth sways and totters, disoriented and unstable like a drunken man. The key expression, on that day, introduces the final statements of the chapter. Once again underlining the comprehensive character of his judgment, the Lord presents the judgment as occurring against the rulers in heaven and the kings on the earth. The hosts of the heavens here are probably not merely stars as symbols of human rulers and powers, but angelic powers placed over the nations, whose rebellion is to be judged. We likely see such figures in references to powers like the prince of Persia in the book of Daniel. Much as in the book of These powers are to be imprisoned, locked up in the pit of Sheol, awaiting a final judgment. This great demonstration of the Lord's universal rule and his supremacy over all rebellious powers will lead to the shining forth of his glory, utterly eclipsing the glory of either sun or moon.

A question to consider, how might the general character of this chapter help us better to recognize commonalities between events such as Babel and the flood, to which it alludes, and other judgments upon the whole world order, such as that described in the book of Revelation?