

Isaiah 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 14. For the Lord will have compassion on Jacob, and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land, and sojourners will join them, and will attach themselves to the house of Jacob. And the peoples will take them, and bring them to their place. And the house of Israel will possess them in the Lord's land as male and female slaves. They will take captive those who were their captors, and rule over those who oppress them. When the Lord has given you rest from your pain and turmoil, and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon. How the oppressor has ceased! The insolent fury ceased!

The Lord has broken the staff of the wicked, the scepter of rulers that struck the peoples in wrath with unceasing blows, that ruled the nations in anger with unrelenting persecution. The whole earth is at rest and quiet. They break forth into singing. The cypresses rejoice at you. The cedars of Lebanon, saying, Since you were laid low, no woodcutter comes up against us.

Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come. It rouses the shades to greet you, all who were leaders of the earth. It raises from their thrones all who were kings of the nations.

All of them will answer and say to you, You too have become as weak as we. You have become like us. Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, the sound of your harps. Maggots are laid as a bed beneath you, and worms are your covers. How you are fallen from heaven, O day star, son of dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven.

Above the stars of God I will set my throne on high. I will sit in the mount of the assembly, in the far reaches of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds. I will make myself like the most high. But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you. Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?

[2 : 0 9] All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb. But you are cast out, away from your grave, like a loathed branch, clothed with the slain, those pierced by the sword, who go down to the stones of the pit, like a dead body trampled underfoot. You will not be joined with them in burial, because you have destroyed your land, you have slain your people. May the offspring of evildoers never more be named. Prepare slaughter for his sons because of the guilt of their fathers, lest they rise and possess the earth, and fill the face of the world with cities.

I will rise up against them, declares the Lord of hosts, and will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, descendants and posterity, declares the Lord. And I will make it a possession of the hedgehog, and pools of water, and I will sweep it with the broom of destruction, declares the Lord of hosts.

The Lord of hosts has sworn, as I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand, that I will break the Assyrian in my land, and on my mountains trample him underfoot, and his yoke shall depart from them, and his burden from their shoulder. This is the purpose that is purposed concerning the whole earth, and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations. For the Lord of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back? In the year that King Ahaz died came this oracle. Rejoice not, O Philistia, all of you, that the rod that struck you is broken, for from the serpent's root will come forth an adder, and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent, and the firstborn of the poor will graze, and the needy lie down in safety. But I will kill your root with famine, and your remnant it will slay. Wail, O gate! Cry out, O city! Melt in fear, O Philistia, all of you! For smoke comes out of the north, and there is no straggler in his ranks. What will one answer the messengers of the nation?

The Lord has founded Zion, and in her the afflicted of his people find refuge. Isaiah chapter 14 continues the prophet's burden against Babylon. As in the case of the preceding chapter, we need to consider whether this relates to Babylon at some period during Isaiah's own day, or to the Babylon of the 6th century. In Isaiah's day, Babylon was defeated around 729 BC by Tiglath-Pileser III, who assumed the title of King of Babylon, although he did not annex Babylonia under Assyria.

When Sargon II revolted against Shalmaneser V, his brother and Tiglath-Pileser's successor, Babylon rebelled against Assyrian rule. Under Meridak-Baladan, Babylon gained independence of Assyria and Sargon II. In 710 BC, Sargon successfully overcame Babylon's rebellion and ruled from Babylon for five years, placing Babylonia under more direct Assyrian rule. There was a further rebellion by Meridak-Baladan in 703 BC, around the time that he fomented Judah's rebellion against Assyria II, King Hezekiah looking to Babylon for help against the Assyrians. Assyria regained control of Babylon shortly after, but lost it to another Chaldean ruler around 691 BC. After a nine-month siege, Sennacherib overthrew and sacked Babylon in 689 BC, levelling and then flooding the city, a significant step marking the failure of earlier Assyrian attempts at conciliation.

[5 : 39] Babylon was a proud centre of Mesopotamian culture and trade, but it would soon be brought down. It could serve both as a symbol of the pride of Assyria and its kings, who governed it at various times and in various manners, and a symbol of its own pride as a rebellious part of the Assyrian empire, and the most serious threat to the empire itself.

Judah was tempted to ally itself with Babylon in this way, and the humbling of Babylon would represent a caution to Judah and its kings. They should not look to Babylon for salvation, but only to the Lord. This would of course be a very important message to the Judah of Isaiah's own day. Readings that treat Babylon in Isaiah chapters 13 and 14 as the Babylon of Isaiah's day have the strong advantage of relieving the problems associated with the prophet Isaiah addressing a political situation quite distant and different from that of his immediate context, problems that will be felt much more keenly in the latter parts of the book. It also would allow us to situate the prophecy before 710 BC and the death of King Ahaz, mentioned in verse 28 of this chapter. However, we might be left wondering why the Babylon of Merodak-Baladan would merit such prominent treatment in the prophecies concerning the nations, especially in contrast to Assyria, which was the more dominant power.

Others are unconvinced of attempts to account for the prominent role supposedly played by the Medes in the prophesied downfall of Babylon. Seth el-Lanson emphasises the fact that after Tiglath-Pileser III, Assyrian kings claimed the throne and the title of the king of Babylon. He makes the case that despite the address to Babylon and its king, it is principally Assyria that is in view in these verses.

This, he argues, explains why Assyria suddenly comes to the foreground in verses 24 to 27. It has been central throughout, but it has been treated in terms of Babylon and its king. Given the immense cultural, economic, and political significance of Babylon in the Assyrian empire, the Assyrian kings claiming of the proud title of the king of Babylon and the symbolic and theological importance of the memory of Babel that Babylon represented, Alanson and others see it as appropriate to represent Assyria and its rulers in such a manner. Such a prophecy would naturally assume a new significance with the rise of the Neo-Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar at the end of the 7th century, about 100 years later.

Gary Smith raises the possibility that there is a telescopic presentation of the downfall of Babylon that could include both its destruction in 689 BC and the final cutting off of its power in 539 BC.

[8 : 10] At various points, we get glimpses of a much further eschatological horizon in such prophecies. The import of such a message, delivered toward the end of the 8th century, would be a warning against dependence upon the power of Babylon. Only trust in the Lord would provide a reliable basis for Judah's survival. The theories of Alanson and others are not without their problems, however, and many commentators believe that these prophecies only make sense referred to the later Babylon, of the end of the 7th, and throughout most of the 6th century. The chapter begins with a statement of the reversal of Israel's fortunes and the return of its captives. The Assyrian king Sennacherib claimed to take 200,150 people captive in his campaign against Judah, in which he also overthrew 46 cities.

We might also see in anticipation of the later return of captives under Cyrus' decree here, Israel, according to this prophecy, would again be marked out as the chosen people of the Lord. Israel's captives would be returned to their place by the peoples, former captives would be placed under their rule, and foreigners would join Israel, something already foretold in places like chapter 2, verses 1-4. These prophecies seem to await a greater salvation than any of the partial realisations of their promises in Isaiah's nearer future would offer. We might also hear some recollections of Exodus here, with deliverance from slavery, the joining of foreigners to Israel, the downfall of a great adversary, and the Lord's granting of rest to his people from their labours.

In verses 4-21, we have a poetic taunt over Babylon's king. The king here may not be a particular king, but a more general symbol of Babylon's power and sovereignty. The king is described as a fierce and cruel oppressor, a description that has strengthened the case of those who identify him with the Assyrian king, and what John Oswalt describes as their reign through terror.

The humbling of the power of the oppressor gives rest to those who have suffered under his mighty blows. The earlier chapters of Isaiah offer us several instances of the imagery of the felling of trees as a picture of judgment falling upon land. In chapter 2 verses 12-13, for instance, For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low, against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up, and against all the oaks of Bashan. Trees were symbols of powerful people and rulers.

Tyrannical powers also fell great forests for their military and other projects, and as manifestations of their dominance, devastating lands that they conquered. The earth is released from the power of the oppressor, but the underworld rises up to meet him.

[10 : 50] Former kings and powerful men welcome him to their now impotent company, all of his pride and might now brought to naught, laid to rest in the earth, with the maggots and worms as his living covering.

The descent of the king was from the very heights of the heavens. He was a man who fancied himself as one of the gods, a great luminary and power over the world of his day. He is compared to the morning star, possibly to be understood as the planet Venus. Many commentators seek to identify the description here with a particular myth, typically of a lesser deity trying to usurp the throne of a higher god. There are important differences between these myths and the account of the proud man here, although it is possible that Isaiah was playing with some of their motifs. Perhaps the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north, for instance, is a mythological reference to Mount Zaphon, the mountain of the gods equivalent to Mount Olympus in some Canaanite mythology.

This arrogant ruler believed that he could make himself like God, raising his throne above that of God. We might see a parallel here with the story of Babel. This is a man who, as it were, wants to be a human tower to heaven. The figure here has often been popularly associated with Satan, who is called Lucifer on the basis of it. But there is no reason to believe that Satan is being referred to here, even though such tyrants might appropriately be viewed as reflecting his character as the great dragon behind all tyrants. We have a similar lament over the king of Tyre in chapter 28 of the book of Ezekiel. There could be no more pronounced contrast between the ruler's hubristic ambition to rise to the heights of heaven and the depths of his fall to the lowest parts of the abyss of the grave.

Down in Sheol, the magnitude of the dread and destruction that he once exerted upon the earth is barely conceivable in the light of his humiliation and the utter stripping of his once terrible powers. He is described as one who has fallen ignominiously in a losing battle, not being given the honors of a royal burial, like others in the company of the fallen kings.

This dishonor corresponds to the wickedness of his behavior during his life. Even his own people would not rally to recover him and honor him in his death. The name of his house will be extinguished to ensure that none of his descendants came to exercise power in the likeness of their evil father.

[13 : 05] The Lord seals the fate of Babylon in language that recalls that of the end of the preceding chapter in verses 19 to 22. 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 lie down 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.

Both the king of Babylon and his city will be brought to nothing. The place of the oracle against Assyria in verses 24 to 27 raises questions about the relationship between it and the preceding material that focuses upon Babylon. Given the temptation of looking to Babylon for assistance against Assyria, perhaps the point of the prophecy here is to show that the Lord will bring down Assyria by his own means, and that Judah ought not to try to achieve this by an imprudent alliance with Babylon. The prophecy of the Lord's breaking of the Assyrian in his land might refer to Sennacherib's failure to take Jerusalem in 701 BC. We read in chapter 37 verses 36 to 37, And the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians.

And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib, king of Assyria, departed and returned home, and lived at Nineveh. The Lord's declaration of the downfall of Assyria repeats prophecies from earlier in the book, for instance in chapter 10 verse 27, And in that day his burden will depart from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck, and the yoke will be broken because of the fat. The Lord is the God over all of the nations, the master of history, and his purpose would stand for Assyria and for all of the other nations.

His people needed to learn not to fear the nations and to look to them for their salvation, but to look to the Lord alone instead. At the end of chapter 14, we move into material concerning neighboring nations to Judah. If Babylon wasn't able to help, Philistia, Moab, Syria, and others might be looked to for aid against the Assyrian threat. The prophecy was delivered in the year of the death of King Ahaz. Historically, this has led many to believe that the rod that struck Philistia that was broken, in verse 29, is a reference to the rod of Judah and its Davidic kings, perhaps especially Ahaz. However, during his reign, the Philistines were more of a threat to Ahaz than he was to them. Considering this, many have seen this as a reference to the perceived removal or withdrawal of the Assyrian threat following the death of Shalmaneser and the rise of Sargon II. However, that seeming reprieve would be short-lived. Under later kings such as Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, far from being broken, Assyrian power would rise to new heights. This account would help to make sense of the threat coming from the north in verse 31. These verses contrast the security of Judah as the flock of the Lord in Zion, and the insecurity that Philistia will experience. Perhaps we should see this as a promise that if Philistia would join themselves to Judah, they too could know the Lord's gift of aid and security in their distress. A question to consider. David Dorsey has argued that there are contrasts between the king of Babylon described in this chapter and the suffering servant in the later part of Isaiah. What possible contrasts can you see between these figures?