

Isaiah 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 21. The oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea. As whirlwinds in the Negev sweep on, it comes from the wilderness, from a terrible land. A stern vision is told to me, the traitor betrays, and the destroyer destroys. Go up, O Elam, lay siege, O Media. All the sighing she has caused I bring to an end. Therefore my loins are filled with anguish. Pangs have seized me, like the pangs of a woman in labour. I am bowed down so that I cannot hear. I am dismayed so that I cannot see. My heart staggers. Horror has appalled me. The twilight I longed for has been turned for me into trembling. They prepare the table. They spread the rugs. They eat. They drink. Arise, O princes. Oil the shield. For thus the Lord said to me, Go set a watchman. Let him announce what he sees. When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels. Let him listen diligently, very diligently. Then he who saw cried out, Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed whole nights. And behold, here come riders, horsemen in pairs. And he answered, Fallen, fallen is Babylon, and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground. O my thrashed and winnowed one, what I have heard from the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, I announce to you. The oracle concerning Duma. One is calling to me from

Seer. Watchman, what time of the night? Watchman, what time of the night? The watchman says, Morning comes, and also the night. If you will inquire, inquire. Come back again. The oracle concerning Arabia. In the thickets in Arabia you will lodge, O caravans of Dedanites. To the thirsty bring water. Meet the fugitive with bread, O inhabitants of the land of Timur. For they have fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow, and from the press of battle. For thus the Lord said to me, Within a year, according to the years of a hired worker, all the glory of Kedar will come to an end. And the remainder of the archers of the mighty men of the sons of Kedar will be few. For the Lord, the God of Israel, has spoken. At the beginning of the oracles concerning the nations, in chapters 13 and 14, there was a lengthy oracle concerning Babylon, which seemed surprising in the context. Isaiah's ministry occurred during a period of Assyrian dominance in the region. Earlier in the period, in the late 730s BC, Israel and the Arameans were rebelling against

Assyria, attacking Judah to bring it into their anti-Assyrian alliance under a puppet king. King Ahaz appealed to Assyria for aid, and Assyria subdued Damascus, cut off support from Egypt, and took territory from Israel. Judah ended up in a far closer relationship with Assyria, one that was deeply compromising, both spiritually and politically. In 722 BC, after rebelling against Assyria again, Shalmaneser V came up against Samaria, which fell either to him or to his successor, Sargon II. Isaiah's oracles against the nations largely seemed to belong to the period following this, and leading up until the end of the 8th century, when, in 701 BC, Assyria under Sennacherib would come up against Jerusalem and King Hezekiah. This, however, raises challenging questions for us when we try to understand the prominence of Babylon in these prophecies, and the seemingly minimal attention given to Assyria by contrast. Babylon didn't become the dominant power in the region until 100 years later. The Neo-Assyrian Empire began to crumble from around 630 BC, after the death of Ashurbanipal, suffering a period of civil wars and rebellions by former vassal states. In particular, the Medes and the Babylonians escaped Assyrian rule and turned against their former suzerain. Assyria was taken in 614 BC, Nineveh in 612. In 609, they lost the Battle of

Haran, after which they were no longer a state. In 605 BC, at Carchemish, the Egyptians, with the remnants of the Assyrian army, were decisively defeated by Nebuchadnezzar, after which the Neo-Babylonian Empire was the unrivalled power in the region. The Babylonian Empire would last until 539 BC, when Babylon fell to Cyrus the Great. All of this was a very long time off when Isaiah delivered his prophecies. Yet the later chapters of Isaiah speak concerning this period, and these chapters of Isaiah have also long been read by people of various theological persuasions, as also speaking concerning these more distant events. Under Meridak-Baladan, Babylon had rebelled against Assyria following the death of Shalmaneser V in 722 BC. He had reigned over an independent Babylon until 710 BC, when Sargon II overcame that rebellion and reigned from Babylon for a number of years.

In 703 BC, Meridak-Baladan led another short-lived rebellion, during which time he seemed to have encouraged Hezekiah in his rebellion against Assyria. Sennacherib recovered Assyria's control of Babylon after nine months in 702 BC, but the Assyrians would again lose control of the city in 691 BC.

[5 : 17] In 689, after a nine-month siege, Sennacherib captured and sacked Babylon, flattening and flooding the city. The destruction of Babylon in 689 was unprecedented and would not even be repeated in 539 BC when Cyrus took over the city without it being destroyed. Destroying Babylon would be like destroying a great historic city like Rome, Paris or London. Even though such cities are not the centres of imperial power that they once were, there are a few finer cities in the world, and people from all over the globe travel to and admire them for their history, culture, wealth and grandeur. Even though it was not the centre of the great world empire of the time, Babylon was such a city in the day of Assyria, treated with reverence even by the foreign powers that ruled over it. Something of this reverence is seen in the fact that the Assyrian kings also claimed the throne and title of the king of Babylon, rather than simply removing its royal status. Sargon II even ruled his empire from there when he needed to consolidate his power in the region. Babylon would also have a similar importance in the time of Alexander the Great. Destroying such a glorious city was nearly unthinkable. Commentators take various approaches to handling the material concerning Babylon in these earlier chapters of Isaiah.

John Oswald describes the way that the most common datings of the material of chapter 21 has shifted over the years. The rise of belief in the Deutero-Isaiah hypothesis, which attributed chapters 40 to 55 of the book to a later period and author, writing at the end of the exile around 539 BC, originally made a later dating of this material popular. However, this reverted back to the time of Isaiah himself at the end of the 19th century. The oracle was referred to the defeats of Babylon in 710 and 72 BC and its sacking in 689 BC.

John Goldengay contrasts the oracle concerning Babylon in this chapter with that of chapters 13 and 14, suggesting that it is much more what we would expect of an oracle concerning Babylon in Isaiah's own day, mixed in with the other nations, rather than at their head and given particular prominence.

The balance of scholarly judgment has shifted back again to the later dating of the 6th century, although Oswald notes that commentators are increasingly adopting positions that allow for both horizons to be in view. There are different ways in which this could be approached. For some commentators like Oswald himself, it seems plausible to see both references to the defeat of Babylon in the 8th and early 7th centuries on the near horizon and dark foreshadowings of a more distant horizon of Babylon's destiny in 539 BC. For others, earlier prophecies were remixed and elaborated by later hands to address situations current in their own later days. Andrew McIntosh, for instance, has made a case that Isaiah chapter 21 is a palimpsest, a prophecy concerning an earlier situation that has been recycled and reworked for a later time. This position has been persuasive for many, but it seems to me it's not necessary to read the chapter in that way. The oracle begins in a mysterious manner, being introduced as the oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea. We should note that the following chapter begins in a similar fashion, the oracle concerning the value of vision, perhaps suggesting that the two ought to be read together. If the reference to the wilderness of the sea is not a textual corruption, as some suggest, then we might take this to be a description, likely unflattering, of the marshy land of southern

Babylon. Described in such a manner, it is certainly not auspicious as a source of aid. The evocative yet elusive description of the whirlwind from the wilderness has been understood by some to refer not to the subject matter of the vision, but to the vision itself. The unsettling vision descends upon Isaiah like a storm. Elam and Media are called to go up against their adversary. These details would seem to fit a 6th century reference well, Elam and Media being the Medes and the Persians who overthrew Babylon in 539 BC. Elam and Media were allies of Babylon during the earlier period of the late 8th and early 7th centuries. However, Oswald questions whether this summons needs to be read as a literal prediction. Isaiah, he suggests, could be painting a more general picture of Babylon's destruction, rather than making a claim about the exact form that it would take. He could also be read as calling upon Babylon's allies to turn against it. This earlier dating is strengthened by Isaiah's reaction to the prophecy. He is greatly dismayed by the news of Babylon's coming downfall. In sharp contrast to the rejoicing over Babylon's downfall that characterises later prophecy concerned with the exile period.

[9 : 59] This would make a lot more sense of a situation where Judah was looking to Babylon for its rebellion against Assyria. The crushing of Babylon would be devastating news for Judah, and the prophet is deeply dismayed by the vision. Christopher Cites raises a further possibility that Isaiah is dismayed, much as Daniel is described as being dismayed, when he sees visions of events that are very distant in time. Such a reaction is described of Daniel in places like Daniel chapter 7 verse 15, 28, and chapter 8 verse 27. Isaiah sees troubling and obscure visions, but cannot make sense of them. Readers of Isaiah have long seen in verse 5 a possible reference to Belshazzar's feast at the eve of the fall of Babylon.

The banquet is prepared and enjoyed, but the enemy has come upon them, and they are quite unready. However, one could also understand the people at the feast to be the enemies of Babylon, who prepare for battle after their banquet. Alec Martia has even suggested that the meal may have been the meal that Hezekiah prepared for the Babylonian ambassadors in chapter 39. The prophet is described as a watchman, much as Habakkuk in Habakkuk chapter 2 verse 1. I will take my stand at my watch post, and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint. As the divinely appointed watchman, Isaiah is instructed to declare what he sees, speaking out when he sees a procession of horsemen, riders on camels, and riders on donkeys approaching. The watchman, told what to look out for, perseveres in scanning the horizon day and night. Eventually, the riders and the horsemen appear. These are the evidence of Babylon's doom.

Babylon is fallen, and its gods with it. The prophet then addresses the people of Judah as the threshed and winnowed one, presumably referring to the fate that awaits them at the hands of the Assyrians, without any Babylonian aid to support them. They will be trampled underfoot and beaten, much as grain on the threshing floor. The object of the oracle of verses 11 and 12 is difficult to ascertain. Historically, the reference to Seir led people to identify it as referring to Edom.

Duma may be related to Idumea. Alternatively, Duma was one of the sons of Ishmael, along with Kedar and Timur, who are both mentioned in the following oracle. Dedan, who is also mentioned in verse 13, was one of the grandsons of Abraham by Keturah. The identification of Duma with Ishmael and the Arabian allies of Babylon seems to be the more likely identification. Duma was an oasis in northern Arabia. The trade route through Duma would be important for the Edomites, who would be eagerly awaiting news. The prophetic watchman is asked what time of the night it is. Is there going to be a new dawn soon? The watchman's response is equivocal, though. Morning is coming, but so is night, and the Enquirer is encouraged to come back again when things are clearer. The Arabians were important allies of the Babylonians, and Nabonidus even ruled from Timur when he left Babylon in 552 BC.

In verses 13 to 17, however, we have an oracle concerning Arabia, with refugees from the north fleeing from the sword, coming into their desert land, as Kedar is stripped of its glory. Much as Judah was encouraged to take in Moabite refugees, the Arabians of that region are encouraged to take in their brothers who have fled from the sword. A question to consider. The prophet's involvement in the reception of the word of the Lord is pronounced in this chapter. The vision comes upon him like a whirlwind and sets him trembling. Later he is described like a watchman, sleeplessly scanning the horizon. Where else in scripture do we find such images of the intensity of the prophet's relationship with the word of the Lord?