

ISAIAH: JUDGMENT AND HOPE

14. Isaiah 13

The Oracle Concerning Babylon.

OVERVIEW OF ISAIAH 13-23

Isaiah 13 opens with the words: *The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.* Beginning with those words we enter a section of Isaiah that is eleven chapters long that contains a series of prophecies that are deal with a long list of nations —

Babylon – Assyria
Philistia – Moab
Syria – Ethiopia
Egypt – Edom
Arabia – Tyre

All of that is followed by four chapters dealing with God’s judgment on the whole world and the establishing of His Kingdom.

Each of these prophecies begin with *“The oracle concerning...”* The word *oracle* is from a verb that means *to lift up*. So it can mean *to carry* or *to lift up the voice*.¹ The **NKJV** translates it as *“the burden concerning.”* Isaiah uses this word to introduce each of these messages because they are *heavy* in the sense of its importance; heavy in the sense that they are foretelling events that produces sorrow or grief.

A lot of Christians avoid the Old Testament in general and in particular find the prophetic books intimidating because they don’t have a clue as to how they can make any sense of the predictive elements, the apocalyptic language and the use of symbols. All of that is exacerbated when they come across such big chunks of those books that are long, boring speeches concerning countries and peoples of the Ancient Near East. And they’re wondering: How does *any* of that have anything to do with our lives today?

FIRST — by sheer volume we have to conclude that God considers them to be **REALLY** important. A significant portion of each of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel is dedicated to addressing foreign nations. In Isaiah these oracles cover chapters

¹ Guzik, D. (2000). *Isaiah* (I s 13:1). Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik.

13–27. Jeremiah dedicates chapters 46–51 to the foreign nations. Chapters 25–32 in the book of Ezekiel concern non-Israelite peoples.

QUOTE: Peter Gentry — “Taken together, the space devoted to these oracles ranges somewhere between 12 and 23 percent of these books—a significant portion of the overall story.²

Even some of the “Minor Prophets” are focused on foreign nations:

Obadiah — Edom

Jonah and Nahum — Nineveh (the Assyrians)

Habakkuk — the Babylonians

Zephaniah on the Cushites (southern Egypt and Sudan)

Amos — addresses six foreign nations.

Why should we be bothered about Isaiah 13–23? The answer to that question is found in another question: Why is **God** so bothered about them that He would make such a point of giving to Isaiah these oracles, these heavy pronouncements about the future of these nations?

Here’s where we see just how important it is for us to understand the redemptive narrative of the Old Testament. We understand the prophetic books in light of their story of God’s Covenant relationship with Abraham (and Abraham’s descendants).

At the close of the first five books of the Bible (Deuteronomy) Moses sums up the history of Israel up to that moment and then predicts the future history of Israel all the way out to the end of our Bible. There in Deuteronomy we’re told that the future of the foreign nations is directly tied to the future of Israel. That is a given because of the covenant promises God made to Abraham in Genesis 12.

Genesis 12:1–3 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be

² Peter J. Gentry “How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets”

a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

God built on that covenant — promising to Abraham land (hence the term “Promised Land”). That land was not just a gift of real estate. It was the promise of a place where God would dwell among the descendants of Abraham. But that sacred space was at that time occupied by people groups that were given over to idols. In [Genesis 15](#) God told Abraham that Abraham’s descendants were going to be strangers in a land that wasn’t theirs for 400 years and that while there they would become slaves. That land would be Egypt. When Abraham’s grandson Jacob took his family to Egypt the “nation” of Israel consisted of 66 people. Those 400 years were a window of God’s grace. God gave the Canaanite peoples four centuries (The United States aren’t quite 2 ½ centuries old) to turn from their idols. At the end of those four centuries God delivered the descendants of Abraham from bondage and death in Egypt so He could bring them into the land He promised to Abraham. Only 66 descendants of Abraham went down to Egypt. A nation of millions came out. When they went in to possess the land of promise they would also be the instrument of YHWH’s judgment on the idol worshipping peoples of Canaan.

On the way to the land of promise YHWH led them to Mt. Sinai where He built upon His covenant with Abraham. Some describe it in the motif of marriage. By virtue of the Sinai covenant YHWH and Israel were married. But Israel cheated on YHWH by serving idols which leads to and involves failing to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice ([Genesis 18:19](#)).

In Deuteronomy Moses reminds the people of the blessings and the curses of the Covenant. [Deuteronomy 28](#) spells out the blessings for covenant loyalty and the curses for cheating on YHWH, their covenant partner.

[Deuteronomy 28:15](#); “But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.

[Deuteronomy 28:49–52](#) The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, ⁵⁰a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young. ⁵¹It shall eat the offspring of your cattle and the fruit of your ground, until you are destroyed; it also shall not leave you grain, wine, or oil, the increase of your herds or the young of your flock, until they have caused you to perish. ⁵²“They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land. And

they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land, which the Lord your God has given you.

Deuteronomy 28:53–55 And you shall eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters, whom the Lord your God has given you, **in the siege** and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you. ⁵⁴The man who is the most tender and refined among you will begrudge food to his brother, to the wife he embraces, and to the last of the children whom he has left, ⁵⁵so that he will not give to any of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating, because he has nothing else left, **in the siege and in the distress** with which your enemy shall distress you in all your towns.

Deuteronomy 29:24–28 all the nations will say, ‘Why has the Lord done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?’ ²⁵Then people will say, ‘**It is because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord**, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, ²⁶and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them. ²⁷Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against this land, bringing upon it all the curses written in this book, ²⁸and **the Lord uprooted them** from their land in anger and fury and great wrath, and **cast them into another land**, as they are this day.’

Deuteronomy 32 is kind of like a lawsuit. The Song opens with Moses calling the heavens and the earth as legal witness. YHWH — the offended party — levels charges and makes promises to bring judgment and exile on the offending party — Israel. AGAIN — All of that was defined in the covenant.

In **Deuteronomy 32:21** we see why these foreign nations play a part in Israel’s judgment

Deuteronomy 32:21 They have made me jealous with what is **no god**; they have provoked me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are **no people**; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.

What does God mean by this phrase “those who are no people”? I believe we can understand this by the words Peter used in describing what happens when a man or woman is saved by faith in Jesus

1 Peter 2:10 (NLT) “Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God’s people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God’s mercy.”

The final covenant curse would involve YHWH handing HIS people — the people who derived their identity from their covenant relationship with YHWH — Handing them over to those who had no identity — those who were **no people**. He would allow those who were **no people** to conquer, humble and lead them into captivity. In their arrogance the **no people** would conclude that they conquered and captured Israel because their god(s) are bigger and more powerful than YHWH. When the Assyrians come and conquer all the cities of Judah, this is exactly what they initially said:

Isaiah 37:10–13 “Thus shall you speak to Hezekiah king of Judah: ‘Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. ¹¹Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction. And shall you be delivered? ¹²Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar? ¹³Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, the king of Hena, or the king of Ivvah?’ ”

On the flip side of that same coin the descendants of Abraham will be so blinded by their unfaithfulness to YHWH that they will not be able to understand that the only reason for their defeat by was NOT the might and the power of foreign nations — it was not because the gods of the foreign nations are superior to Yahweh. Their defeat and their exile was completely because they had violated their covenant with YHWH.

THE POINT OF THESE ORACLES IS THIS — God wants to make absolutely clear that no matter how great or glorious a civilization might appear to be — if it is built on idols and all of the social injustice that follows from idols — it will not last. It is doomed to destruction. In these oracles we see YHWH promising to bring destruction to the nations who had built civilizations on false gods — and will judge Israel for her covenant infidelity

Here in Isaiah and as well as in Jeremiah and Ezekiel these oracles show that YHWH controls and governs not just Israel but the entire world. He is sovereign over all nations. YHWH alone defines what is right and wrong. YHWH alone makes future plans that shall certainly come to pass.

QUOTE: Peter Gentry — *No one and no nation can challenge his right, spurn his will, or thwart his actions.*³

THAT IS WHAT God wanted His people to understand in the day of Isaiah as the events and the superpowers of that rolled across the stage of history

THAT IS WHAT God wants you and me to understand as we watch the events and the superpowers of our day roll across the stage of history.

As we work our way through these oracles we **DON'T** want to miss the fact that **YHWH** is not only declaring His plans to judge the nations for their idolatry — He is also calling and inviting them to find salvation through the promised future king of Israel

So here we go

Isaiah 13:1 The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.

This oracle/burden against and concerning Babylon will last until the end of **chapter 14**.

TWO BIG THINGS HERE

FIRST — Isaiah finished his prophetic career in 685 B.C. — about 100 years before Judah finally fell at the hands of the Babylonian armies (586 BC).

At the time of this prophecy, Babylon was a significant nation — an emerging superpower. But the Assyrian Empire was still the superpower.

This tells us that the Lord — who knows the end from the beginning — can speak of His judgment on the pride of Babylon a hundred of years before the judgment comes.

SECOND — This prophecy was probably never published in Babylon. It wasn't given as a warning to them. Like we said in the overview of these oracles — this oracle was given to help the people of God. The oracle against Babylon reveals

³ Peter J. Gentry "How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets"

that God is just — It was not just the Israelites that were going to be judged for their covenant failure. He will also judge the wicked nations around them.

²On a bare hill raise a signal; cry aloud to them; wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. ³I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exulting ones. ⁴The 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.

AGAIN — Nearly a century before Babylon was *the* superpower God describes them with sights and sounds of battle.

DON'T MISS THIS — *³I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exulting ones. ⁴...The Lord of hosts is mustering a host for battle.*

God is saying that this was HIS army! God was forming an army to judge Babylon.

⁵They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the Lord and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land. ⁶Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come! ⁷Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt. ⁸They 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.

Babylon fell suddenly by an amazing surprise attack by Cyrus — the citizens of the city were completely shocked (Daniel 5).

⁹Behold, the day of the Lord comes,

Isaiah now speaks in the “prophetic tense” — if-you-would. This statement has both a near fulfillment (the day of judgment against the Babylonian Empire), and an ultimate fulfillment (the final day of judgment at the return of Jesus).

The day of the LORD is an important phrase. It’s used some 26 times in the Bible. It’s a reference — not to a single day of judgment — but of the season of judgment when the LORD sets things right. We could put it like this: Today is man’s day — but the LORD’s day is coming!

⁹Behold, 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. ¹⁰For 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.

There are several prophetic passages in the Bible that describe the cosmic disturbances that will precede and surround the return of Jesus (Joel 2:10, Revelation 6:12–14, Isaiah 34:4). Jesus was probably quoting or paraphrasing this passage from Isaiah in Matthew 24:29:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

In the near fulfillment of the judgment of Babylon — that empire no doubt *felt like* the whole world was coming apart. **In the ultimate fulfillment** connected with the return of Jesus, the whole world *will* be falling apart.

¹¹I 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.

Babylon is mentioned more than any other city in the Bible except for Jerusalem. We find it 287 times in the Scriptures. Babylon was a literal city on the Euphrates river. It was the capitol of the empire that cruelly conquered Judah.

To those familiar with the Old Testament, the name *Babylon* is associated with organized idolatry, blasphemy and the persecution of God's people. Merrill Tenney — in his book *Interpreting Revelation* — makes this comment about Babylon.

Babylon “Was the seat of the civilization that expressed organized hostility to God.”

Isaiah has prophetically combined the vision of Babylon's judgment with the judgment of the whole **world for its evil**. In the New Testament, the world's system of the last days is characterized both religiously and commercially as Babylon (Revelation 17 and 18).

¹²I will make people more rare than fine gold, and mankind than the gold of Ophir. ¹³Therefore 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.

The prophet Haggai and the book of Hebrews echo this same thought.

Haggai 2:6 For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land.

Hebrews 12:25–28 See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,

Since God can shake the heavens and move the earth, and since God Himself is unshakable — we ought to trust in God more than the ground we stand on and the air we breathe.

¹⁴And 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. ¹⁵Whoever is found will be thrust through, and whoever is caught will fall by the sword. ¹⁶Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished.

This is a powerful picture of both the near and far fulfillment of this oracle. It pictures the near fulfillment of God’s judgment upon Babylon at the hands of Cyrus — and its future fulfillment in God’s judgment upon the world in general, as *unrelenting*. Think of those documentary movies where they the **hunted gazelle** is overtaken by the lion, and it utterly consumed. There is no escape from God’s unrelenting judgment.

This has huge application for us concerning Jesus! This is the same *unrelenting* judgment that was poured out upon Jesus on the cross. *Jesus was the hunted gazelle* — He *willingly* made Himself so!

Isaiah 13:17–22 Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them, who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold. ¹⁸Their bows will slaughter

the young men; they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not pity children.

AGAIN — this prophecy was made decades before the Babylonian Empire replaced the Assyrian Empire as *the* superpower. Even more time elapsed before **the Medes** came **against** the Babylonians, conquering them as instruments of God’s judgments.

These passages drive skeptics of the Bible crazy — drives them to take the position that Isaiah was written *after* these events happened — fraudulently framed after the fact as predictive.

AGAIN — God knows the end from the beginning — and He knows it in minute, specific detail.

¹⁹And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them.

Comparing Babylon to Sodom and Gomorrah not only suggests complete destruction — it carries the weight of moral cause for judgment.

²⁰It 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. ²¹But wild animals will lie down there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will dwell, and there wild goats will dance. ²²Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces; its time is close at hand and its days will not be prolonged.

Cyrus didn’t level the city of Babylon when he conquered it. The great walls of Babylon were left standing until 518 B.C.. Babylon didn’t become desolate until the third century B.C.. Babylon became completely depopulated by the time of the Muslim conquest in the seventh century A.D.. To this day it is desolate.

This is also true in the yet future fulfillment of this oracle. There is coming a day when the “world system” in opposition to God will cease to exist.