

## Isaiah 13:1-14:23, The Burden of Babylon

### Overview

We now enter an extended portion of Isaiah dealing mostly with the Gentiles. Each section is introduced as a “burden”: 13:1 (Babylon); 14:28 (Philistia); 15:1 (Moab); 17:1 (Damascus); 19:1 (Egypt); 21:1 (the desert of the sea), 11 (Dumah), 13 (Arabia); 22:1 (the valley of vision); 23:1 (Tyre). Isaiah has mentioned the Lord's sovereignty over the nations of the earth. Now he will develop this theme in depth. We live in a day of international turmoil. These chapters will remind us over and over that our God is the god of history, who rules over all the earth, regardless of the political machinations of the nations.

“Burden” **שָׁמַר** is literally something to be carried. Always, it describes a prophecy of judgment.

Is the prophecy described as a burden because of its impact on Babylon, or on Isaiah? The primary emphasis is the latter, as can be seen by its use with the cognate verb **שָׁמַר**. The full expression, used in Zech 9:1; 12:1; and Mal 1:1, is “the burden of the word of the Lord.” See notes for further detail.

Judgment is God's strange work (Isa 28:21), not something in which he takes pleasure (Ezek 33:11). It is a burden to a prophet to have to report such judgment as well.

We may feel that it is a burden to us to have to listen to them! But they are part of the “things” that “were written aforetime” “for our learning” (Rom 15:4), and we do well to attend to them.

### 13:1, Heading

**1 The burden of Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz did see.**--Babylon is not yet a world empire, and yet Isaiah is expressly stated to have seen this prophecy of her fall. Here we are, probably before 720, and Isaiah is seeing events in 539, nearly 200 years in the future. This verse is a direct claim to predictive prophecy. We may accept this claim or reject it, but we cannot deny that the book is claiming to predict the future.

This burden sets forth the coming judgment on Babylon as a foreshadowing of the future Day of the Lord. This parallel hints at a very important principle: we should see tragedies in our world as messages from the Lord, who is demonstrating his control and leaving people without excuse.

The first burden is structured as an alternation between the words of God and those of Isaiah, almost a responsive reading.

### 2-3, God summons his armies against Babylon

The first-person pronoun in v. 3 shows that God is speaking.

The main message of this paragraph, and a great comfort to the believer, is that God is completely in command of the events of history, even when the actors do not acknowledge him. When the Medes and the Persians came against Babylon, they were motivated by their own greed and lust for power. But they in turn were only the instruments of our sovereign God.

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**2 Lift ye up a banner upon the high mountain,**--This is the same idiom that we saw in 5:26 when the Lord summoned the nations against Israel.

**exalt the voice unto them, shake the hand,**--These are two more gestures of calling someone.

**that they may go into the gates of the nobles.**--That is, the city of Babylon, whose citizens thought of themselves as highly civilized. They will be made desolate.

Now the Lord describes the foes he will send against them. The possessive pronouns and the verbs indicate that he is completely in charge of this tide of history.

**3 I have commanded my sanctified ones,**--Those whom he has set apart and specially prepared for this mission. They certainly do not think of themselves as set apart by Israel's God. But they are.

**I have also called my mighty ones for mine anger,**--God takes complete possession of them as instruments to express his wrath. Again, they are aware only of their own blood-lust, but it is God's wrath that sends them on their way.

**even them that rejoice in my highness.**--The phrase is better translated, "my proud exalting ones." In parallel with the first two clauses, the possessive pronoun describes the invading army, not an attribute of the Lord. These armies do not think of themselves as under his control. They are proud and boastful, but still in the end he controls them.

What could be more timely than this picture of proud, boastful, mighty nations wrestling with one another? And what can be more comforting than to hear our heavenly Father say, "They are mine. I command them and control them."

### 4-8, Isaiah reports their approach and the resulting judgment

Now Isaiah is speaking, as seen by the third-person references to the Lord.

Isaiah observes two characteristics of the invaders, and in both cases emphasizes what the Lord has said in the previous two verses, that God is in control.

**4 The noise of a multitude in the mountains, like as of a great people; a tumultuous noise of the kingdoms of nations gathered together:**--The first characteristic is how many there are. They are a great crowd, and make a loud noise.

**the LORD of hosts mustereth the host of the battle.**--How can so many be drawn to one end? Because the Lord summons them.

**5 They come from a far country, from the end of heaven,**--Their second characteristic is the distance from which they will come. This is no local skirmish, but a major war of empires.

**even the LORD, and the weapons of his indignation,**--Again, the conflict must be understood as the work of the Lord bringing his wrath on Babylon.

**to destroy the whole land.**--The destruction will be overwhelming.

**6 Howl ye; for the day of the LORD is at hand;**--In 2:11, 12, we noted the phrases "in that day" and "the day of the Lord." The prophets are preoccupied with this day, which is characterized by the humbling of man and the exaltation of the Lord. It carries over into the NT to describe the day of the

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Lord Jesus' return. The ultimate day of the Lord is yet future, but the prophets see the geopolitical turmoil of their day as warning shocks, adumbrations of the great judgment to come. If we would be faithful to their message, this is how we should interpret the disasters we see in the world around us today.

Remember that Isaiah is speaking here. He recalls the oracle of ch. 2, and identifies what he now sees with the Day that was mentioned there.

**it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty.**--Here are two great characteristics of these judgments: they bring destruction and devastation, and they come from the Lord. The second comforts those of his people who are there to observe the first.

**7 Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart shall melt: 8 And they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another; their faces shall be as flames.**--It is humbling, but important, to visualize each of these images. The doctrine of the day of the Lord ought to bring an end once and for all to the Santa Clause image of God that much so-called Christianity promulgates today. We may imagine Isaiah staggering in awe at the consequences of this horrible judgment. "Look—people are in agony! They are writhing in pain! Their faces are flushed with excitement and shame!"

### **9-22, God announces the Day of the Lord**

Now the message returns to the mouth of the Lord (shown by the first person in v. 11'; "he" in v. 9 should be "it," the day of the Lord).

There are two paragraphs here, each introduced by "Behold." The first speaks in general of the day of the Lord, while the second focuses on Babylon.

The overall lesson that we should take from this announcement is an appreciation of how terrible sin is:

- the degree to which it pollutes the world, which cannot be cleansed but must be **destroyed**;
- the **wrath** it inspires in God;
- the degree to which it **perverts** the hearts of men, turning them into beasts.

Only when we understand the wickedness of sin can we truly appreciate the salvation that God has graciously given us.

### **9-16, General character**

First, the Lord confirms Isaiah's interpretation of the events as belonging to the day of the Lord. God verifies that it is an expression of his wrath and it is intended to be cruel and painful.

This section in turn falls into two parts.

- vv. 9-13 focus on the active aspects of God's wrath, what the Lord does to people and the world. They are marked off by an inclusio in "the day of the Lord" – "the day of his fierce anger."
- vv. 14-16 describe the passive aspects, how people treat one another when his common grace is

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withdrawn from the earth (Motyer). Cf. Rom 1, “God gave them up.” The new beginning in this section is marked by יהיה in 14.

### 9-13, The Active Aspect of the Day of the Lord

**9 Behold, the day of the LORD cometh,**--“Yes, Isaiah, you are right. What I am summoning is indeed the day of the Lord.”

This day has three characteristics, emphasized chiastically in this section:

- on the outside, the Lord's wrath that motivates the judgment, vv. 9b, 13;
- next, the destruction of the physical creation that men have defiled, vv. 10, 13;
- at the center, the destruction of sinful people, vv. 11-12, but with an early hint in 9c.

**cruel both with wrath and fierce anger,**--Jeremiah defines “cruel” as “not having mercy” (6:23; 50:42). The Lord explains that this cruelty stems from his wrath and anger. This is hardly the picture of God, so dear to many, as a harmless grandfather with a white beard, but it is consistent with one who is said to “hate all workers of iniquity” (Psa 5:5), whose “soul hateth ... the wicked and him that loveth violence” (Psa 11:5). We cannot appreciate God's salvation until we come to grips with his hatred and wrath against sinners.

**to lay the land desolate:**--“Desolate” emphasizes not just physical destruction, but the resulting horror.

**and he [“it,” sc. the day of the Lord] shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it.**--The parallelism suggests that the pronoun should be understood of the day of the Lord, not of the Lord himself, which also allows the entire paragraph to be understood as spoken by the Lord. The Lord's anger is a response to man's sin, and the desolation accomplished by the day of the Lord is intended to remove the sinners.

Matt 13:36-43 describes this same event, the purging out of sinners from the land.

**10 For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine.**--The darkening of the heavenly bodies is often reported as a characteristic of the day of the Lord:

Isa 24:23 Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the LORD of hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously.

Ezek 32:7, 8 And when I shall put thee [Pharaoh, image of Antichrist] out, I will cover the heaven, and make the stars thereof dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. 8 All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set darkness upon thy land, saith the Lord GOD.

Joel 2:10 The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble: the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining:

Joel 2:31 The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the LORD come.

Joel 3:15 The sun and the moon shall be darkened, and the stars shall withdraw their shining.

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Matt 24:29 Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: = Mark 13:24

Rev 6:12-17 is the culminating description of this event..

The heavenly bodies were the central attraction of ancient near eastern idolatry: Deut 4:19; 17:3; Jer 8:1. In 2 Kings 17:16, Israel is said to go into captivity because “they ... worshipped all the host of heaven.” Manasseh followed this path in 2 Kings 21:3. Cf. Stephen's summary in Acts 7:42, 43,

Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices *by the space of* forty years in the wilderness? 43 Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.

Israel repeatedly worshiped the host of heaven, but in fact the host of heaven worship the Lord,

Neh 9:6 Thou, *even* thou, *art* LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all *things* that *are* therein, the seas, and all that *is* therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee.

When the Lord comes to bring in his kingdom, he will cause “every knee to bow.” The heavenly host will be darkened to show their submission to him, and people will be deprived of their false gods.

**11 And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible.**--Two parallelisms are noteworthy in this verse.

**World ... wicked.**--“World” תבל represents the inhabited earth. It includes not only the planet, but its population. This parallelism thus equates the earth and its population with “the wicked,” and anticipates the NT use of “world” κοσμος. Cf. 1 John 5:19, “the whole world lieth in the wicked one.”

**Evil ... iniquity ... arrogance ... haughtiness.**--An arrogant, haughty spirit is not just unpleasant. It is evil, because it competes with the prestige that is due to God alone. Recall 2:11, in the context that first introduced the day of the Lord,

Isa 2:11 The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day.

**12 I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir.**--“Precious” is used in the sense of “rare.” Cf. the characterization of the days of Eli, before Samuel received his vision,

1Sa 3:1 And the word of the LORD was **precious** in those days; *there was* no open vision.

The judgments of the day of the Lord will slay so many that people will be scarce.

**13 Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place.**--Like the darkening of the heavenly bodies, the shaking of heaven and earth is a common feature of the Day of the Lord (see notes). Key moments in the Revelation are punctuated by earthquakes together with

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heavenly disruptions: Rev 6:12-17 (Sixth Seal); 8:5-12 (start of seven trumpets); 11:13 (resurrection and translation of the two witnesses); 11:19 (the seventh trumpet); 16:18 (the seventh vial).

Perhaps the most famous prophecy of this shaking is Hag 2:6-7,

For thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; 7 And I will shake all nations

Heb 12:25-29 offers an interpretation of this great shaking,

now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. 27 And this *word*, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

God destroys the old order to bring in the new. The shaking of the heavens and the earth is his great wrecking ball, clearing the way for the new creation. It's not just that he will remove sinners out of an otherwise pristine creation. The world has been so defiled by sin that he must destroy the creation itself.

**in the wrath of the LORD of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger.**--Cf. v. 9 (though only one of the words for "anger" is the same between the verses). The motive for this terrible time of judgment is the Lord's wrath.

### **14-16, The Passive Aspect of the Day of the Lord**

Now the Lord turns his attention from what he will do to the earth, and considers how people will behave when he withdraws his common grace that restrains them from their worst instincts. We are still looking at the final Day of the Lord, but focusing on the indirect effects when "God gives them up," cf. Rom 1:24, 26, 28. The terribleness of sin is seen not only in God's wrath and the pollution it brings to the physical creation, but also in how completely it corrupts the human heart.

**14 And it shall be**—This Hebrew form functions as a paragraph marker. It is a mistake to seek an explicit subject for it. In this case, it divides the Lord's active judgment in 9-13 from his passive judgment in 14-16. The major break should come after "be," not after "taketh up."

The rest of the verse is a simile.

**as the chased roe, and as a sheep that no man taketh up:**--The figurative part of the simile describes people as sheep without a shepherd, the antithesis of Ps 23. In antiquity, the king was often viewed as the shepherd of his people Cf. Hammurabi's description of himself several times in his law code as "the shepherd," e.g.,

Prolog, "I, Hammurabi, **the shepherd**, have gathered abundance and plenty," "I am **the shepherd** of the people who causes the truth to appear, guiding my flock rightly."

Epilog, "The great gods have called me, I am the salvation-bearing **shepherd**, whose staff is straight."

But the Lord is the only true shepherd, and when he withdraws his care, no human ruler can fill the gap. The world will truly be "as sheep having no shepherd."



**they shall every man turn to his own people, and flee every one into his own land.--**The shepherdless sheep mill around together and flee from every noise.

**15 Every one that is found shall be thrust through; and every one that is joined unto them shall fall by the sword.--**When they are found, they are helpless to defend themselves.

**16 Their children also shall be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses shall be spoiled, and their wives ravished.--**There is no law. One person takes advantage of another with no restraint.

### **17-22, Specific impact on Babylon**

This section contrasts with the previous one in two ways. There, the day of the Lord, in its full eschatological realization, will fall upon **all** the earth on a day still in the **future**. Here, the Lord focuses in on the manifestation of this judgment against **Babylon** at a time that, though future to Isaiah, is now in the **past**.

**17 Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them,--**The Medes are first mentioned in Gen 10:2 (“Madai”) as descendants of Noah's son Japheth, along with Magog, Tubal, and Meshech, who are often named as eschatological enemies of Israel. Most of what we know about them comes from Herodotus. They originated in the area of Azerbaijan, and did not become a unified kingdom until about 700 BC. Thus Isaiah's prediction that they would overthrow Babylon is amazing not only for announcing the fall of Babylon but also for the instrument that would be used, which was not yet politically united at the time he wrote.

**which shall not regard silver; and as for gold, they shall not delight in it.--**They are motivated, not by plunder, but by blood-lust. They cannot be bought off.

**18 Their bows also shall dash the young men to pieces; and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children.--**They exhibit no natural reluctance toward slaying fellow-humans.

**19 And Babylon, the glory צְבִי of kingdoms, the beauty תְּפָאֵרֶת of the Chaldees' excellency,--**These terms “glory” and “beauty” are used together in 28:1,4 to describe the worldly beauty of Ephraim, which also is doomed to fall. Men build lovely civilizations; in the day of the Lord they are brought to naught. The terms come together in only two other OT passages, both Messianic, both in Isaiah,

4:2 In that day shall the branch of the LORD be **beautiful צְבִי** and glorious, and the fruit of the earth *shall be* excellent and **comely לתפארת** for them that are escaped of Israel.

28:5 In that day shall the LORD of hosts be for a crown of glory **צְבִי**, and for a diadem of beauty **לתפארת**, unto the residue of his people,

The only true beauty belongs to the Lord. Just as he darkens the heavenly host to overcome their rivalry, so he will destroy human culture to exalt his own beauty.

**shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.--**From the time of Moses, this catastrophe

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is repeatedly cited as a prototype of how God's wrath can reduce an outwardly prosperous and beautiful civilization to ashes.

**20 It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there.**--This prophecy reaches far beyond the time of Isaiah, but still was fulfilled in antiquity.<sup>1</sup> See K&D for the successive stages:

- 540, Cyrus, the leader of the Medo-Persian army, left the city still standing
- 518, Darius Hystaspis had to conquer Babylon a second time, and had the walls entirely destroyed, with the exception of fifty cubits.
- 484, Xerxes desecrated the temple of Belus.
- 312, the city was conquered by Seleucus Nicator (312), it declined just in proportion as Seleucia rose.
- Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79) says (Natural History, VI, 30), "The temple there of Jupiter Belus is still in existence; he was the first inventor of the science of Astronomy. In all other respects it has been reduced to a desert, having been drained of its population in consequence of its vicinity to Seleucia, founded for that purpose by Nicator, at a distance of ninety miles, on the confluence of the Tigris and the canal that leads from the Euphrates."
- Strabo (born 60 BC) applies to it (16:15) the words, "The great city is a great desert."

**21 But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs [wild goats] shall dance there. 22 And the wild beasts of the islands [hyenas] shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons [or "jackals"] in their pleasant palaces:**--The AV translators had difficulty with some of the animal names in these verses. "Satyrs" in v. 21 is an attempt to reconcile the Hebrew word (literally "hairy one," a common term for "he-goat") with the LXX translation δαιμονια "demons, but the other terms all describe animals, and the most straightforward explanation is that this term does also. Wild goats will gambol over the ruins, treating them as no better than natural piles of rocks. The point is that the lovely city will be deserted, inhabited only by wild animals of the desert.

**and her time is near to come, and her days shall not be prolonged.**--One might ask how a destruction that would not be accomplished for four hundred years" can be called "near." But with the Lord, a thousand years is as one day (2 Pet 3:8).

Here in Isaiah, the fall of ancient Babylon serves as an illustration of the coming Day of the Lord. Rev 14-18 in turn describes the final Day of the Lord using Babylon as an image. Notice how Rev 14:8 and 18:2 echo the double "fallen" of the Hebrew (not the LXX!) in Isa 21:9.

Isa 21:9 Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground.

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<sup>1</sup> See James E. Smith, "The Fall of Babylon," Seminary Review 17.1 (1970), pp. 3-23, <http://www.dabar.org/SemReview/fallbabyprob.html> . For an alternative view, that the fall of Babylon predicted in the prophets is yet future, see various Bib Sac articles by Charles Dyer, and conveniently, "The Biblical Argument for the Rebuilding of Babylon," <http://ldolphin.org/Dyer-Babylon.html> .



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Rev 14:8 And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.

Rev 18:2 And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.

### **14:1-20, Isaiah promises restoration and judgment**

Throughout this section, the Lord is described in the third person, indicating that Isaiah is now speaking again.

There are two big ideas throughout this chapter:

- the blessing that comes on those who are the Lord's;
- the humiliating end of those who oppose him.

In the promise, as in the judgment, we can see both a near and far fulfillment.

#### **1-2, The Promise**

Up to this point we have been viewing the judgmental aspects of the Day of the Lord. It also brings blessings, which Isaiah, responding to the Lord's description of the judgment, now describes.

**14:1 For the LORD will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet [or “again”] choose Israel, and set them in their own land:--**Two things deserve our attention here:

1. The process by which the Lord deals with his elect;
2. The repetition of this process in the case of Israel.

Consider first the process. Isaiah recapitulates the steps through which he deals with his elect, the same steps that led to Israel's earlier history as his chosen people, and that are now applied to us, cf. Rom 8:29-30; 2 Thes 2:13-14; 1 Pet 1:2,3.

- “Mercy” describes his unmotivated, fundamental love for some people. The word appears for the first time in Exo 33:19, “I ... will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and **will shew mercy** on whom I will shew mercy.” It is analogous in Rom 8:29 to the step, “whom he foreknew,” or in the parallel in 2 Thes 2:13, “beloved of the Lord.”
- “Choose” is his action of distinguishing them from others as a result of this underlying love.
- “Set them” is the blessing that results from their special position in his favor, and corresponds to the glorification that is promised in the NT passages.

He describes their return to a place of favor using the same terms that he would use to describe their initial call.

Now notice the word “yet,” better translated “again.” Because of their sin, they have been set aside, but he will restore them.

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This sequence anticipates Rom 11:17-24. Israel is depicted as an olive tree. Some of the branches are broken off, and Gentiles grafted in in their place. But one day Israel will be grafted back into the tree (11:23-24). Here, Isaiah describes that restoration to a lost place of privilege as a renewal of God's chain of love, choice, and blessing.

Zech 2:10-12 even more closely anticipates Rom 11 by associating the re-choosing of Israel with the establishment of the Gentiles as God's "people" (cf. Hos 1:10; Rom 9:24-25):

10 Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the LORD. 11 And **many nations** shall be **joined to the LORD** in that day, and **shall be my people**: and I will dwell in the midst of thee, and thou shalt know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto thee. 12 And the LORD shall inherit Judah his portion in the holy land, and **shall choose Jerusalem again**.

This restoration of Israel is anticipated in the return under Cyrus. Yet that was only a foreshadowing of the ultimate Millennial restoration, as Zechariah himself recognized at the time when he prophesied an intervening dispersion before the ultimate restoration:

Zec 1:16-17 Therefore thus saith the LORD;

[538 BC] I am returned to Jerusalem with **mercies** [רחמים, cf. Isa 14:1 רחם]: my house shall be built in it, saith the LORD of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem.

[AD 70] 17 Cry yet, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; My cities through [better, "from"] prosperity shall yet be spread abroad ["scattered"; everywhere else the verb has negative connotation];

[Millennium] and the LORD shall yet [again] comfort Zion, and shall yet [again] **choose** Jerusalem.

**and the strangers shall be joined with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob.**--Contrast Zech 2:11, "joined to the Lord" (same verb). That was anticipating the grafting in of Gentiles to the olive tree. Here, we are seeing the association of Gentiles with Israel in Israel's ascendancy. Compare Ezra 4:2, when strangers tried to associate themselves with the rebuilding of the temple because they perceived that Israel was in favor. We will want to watch to see if there are unambiguous references to this during the Millennium.

**2 And the people shall take them, and bring them to their place:**--Cf. 11:12,

And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

Once, the nations chased Israel into dispersion. Now they bring them back.

**and the house of Israel shall possess them in the land of the LORD for servants and handmaids: and they shall take them captives, whose captives they were; and they shall rule over their oppressors.**--This relation is markedly different from that in the church age, when "there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek" (Rom 10:12; cf. Gal 3:28 "there is neither Jew nor Greek," Col 3:18 "there is neither Greek nor Jew").

Moses promised Israel such a destiny:

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Deu 26:18-19 And the LORD hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all his commandments; 19 And to make thee **high above all nations** which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the LORD thy God, as he hath spoken.

They forfeited this position in their apostasy, but now this is among the blessings that Isaiah sees restored to them:

Isa 45:14 Thus saith the LORD, The labour of Egypt, and merchandise of Ethiopia and of the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over unto thee, and they shall be thine: they shall come after thee; in chains they shall come over, and they shall fall down unto thee, they shall make supplication unto thee, saying, Surely God is in thee; and there is none else, there is no God.

Isa 49:22-23 Thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard to the people: and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders. 23 And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the LORD: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me.

Isa 60:14 The sons also of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee; and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet; and they shall call thee, The city of the LORD, The Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

The fulfillment of the present promise was anticipated during the return at the end of the sixth century: note Artaxerxes' charge to Ezra, establishing Jewish law as the law of the province.

Ezr 7:25-26 And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not. 26 And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.

But the other promises of Israelite domination that we have seen surely go far beyond Ezra's experience. The Millennium, unlike the present church age, is a period when Israel, with the Lord Jesus as her seated king, is dominant over all the earth. Today, at the level of **individuals**, there is no difference between Greek and Jew. But at the **national** level, there is all the difference in the world between any other nation whatsoever and restored Israel.

### **3-20, The Taunting Song**

**3 And it shall come to pass in the day that the LORD shall give thee rest from thy sorrow, and from thy fear, and from the hard bondage wherein thou wast made to serve,--**The notion that the Lord will give them rest has a long history in the OT. Throughout the journey through the wilderness, it is the heart of the promise to bring Israel to security in her own land: God promised Moses,

Exo 33:14 And he said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.

God's promise in Deut makes clear its key elements: Israel, in the land, secure.

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Deu 12:10 But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and when he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety;

It is a recurring theme of Joshua, and David enjoyed it,

2Sa 7:1 And it came to pass, when the king sat in his house, and the LORD had given him rest round about from all his enemies;

But clearly, it did not last. The very essence, security in the land, was dashed away with the captivities. The “rest” vocabulary does not occur once in the history of the restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah. The Millennium is the final and ultimate achievement of this rest.

**4 That thou shalt take up this proverb against the king of Babylon, and say,--**As we have seen throughout this burden, multiple historical horizons are in view.

- The taunt is appropriate to the historical king of Babylon, probably Belshazzar, who was slain when Cyrus conquered Babylon (Dan 5:30).
- The temporal indication in the previous verse points us toward this title in reference to the Antichrist.
- The condemnation here of the attitude of arrogance and disregard for others is not limited to these two. We should let this vivid condemnation search our own hearts.

The taunt has two parts, each beginning with “how” הַיֵּהוּ. Each of these is divided in turn into an earthly scene (4b-8, 16-20) and an other-earthly scene (9-11, 12-15), arranged chiasmatically.

### 4b-8, Earthly

**How hath the oppressor ceased! the golden city ceased!**--Two features go together: the heavy-handedness of the rule, and the prosperity of the civilization, as people use force to build wealth. But the Lord will put an end to it.

**5 The LORD hath broken the staff of the wicked, and the sceptre of the rulers.**--The pairing is a favorite of Isaiah (6x; 2x in Ezekiel; 2x in Num in sense of “tribe”), always reflecting chastisement and force. It appears three times in ch. 10 (vv. 5, 15, 24) with reference to the Assyrian as God's rod; in 9:4, as here, God promises to destroy it.

**6 He who smote the people[s] in wrath with a continual stroke, he that ruled the nations in anger, is persecuted, and none hindereth.**--The king is being judged for his wrath not only against Israel, but also against others (peoples pl., nations). v.20 will add a final level to the criticism: that he abuses his own people as well.

**7 The whole earth is at rest, and is quiet [tranquil]: they break forth into singing. 8 Yea, the fir trees rejoice at thee, and the cedars of Lebanon, saying, Since thou art laid down, no feller [lumberjack] is come up against us.**--Recall the imagery of Assyria as his ax and saw (10:15), which views the nations they conquered as forests (Ephraim in 9:18; Assyria in 10:33-34). Now that the dominant ruler is subdued, the nations (like trees) rejoice in their safety.

## 9-11, Other-Worldly: The Scene in Hell

**9 Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming:**--“Hell” here, as throughout the OT, is Sheol, the place of the dead. Here it is used to represent its contents (as in the phrase, “I drank the whole bottle,” referring to the contents), a figure called metonymy.

**It [One]<sup>2</sup> stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; it [one] hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations.**--The king of Babylon is humbled to death, but he is not alone. “all the chief ones of the earth” find their way here eventually.

**10 All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?**--In his conquests, he may have sent many of them down to Sheol, but ultimately he must join them, and there he will be no better than they.

**11 Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols:**--His court is humbled along with him.

**the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee.**--In utter starkness they remind him of the humbling end of his body, to be eaten by worms.

## 12-15, Other-Worldly: The Scene in Heaven

Now the focus shifts from Sheol to heaven.

**12 How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!**--Milton and popular culture understand “Lucifer” to be Satan, but v. 4 clearly states that this is the king of Babylon. The name “Lucifer” means light-bearer, and translates the Hebrew הִלֵּל “shining one,” probably referring to the morning star. An excellent case has been made that Isaiah here alludes to the ancient myth of Phaeton, son of the sun-god Helios, who drove his father's chariot too near to the sun and was destroyed.<sup>3</sup> His name also means “shining one,” he was also identified as the morning star, and in one tradition he was also “son of the morning,” born to Eos, the dawn-goddess. The myth told of one whose haughty ambitions led to his downfall, and Isaiah appropriates the imagery to the doom of the king of Babylon.

Isaiah uses the imagery of this well-known myth to paint a graphic picture of the king's judgment.

**how art thou cut down to the ground,**--The same verb used of trees in 10:33.

**which didst weaken the nations!**--Over and over Isaiah reminds us that those who abuse others will one day be humbled. The theme is from David, who frequently speaks in the Psalms of those who fall into the pit that they have dug as a trap for others (7:15; 35:7; 57:6; 94:13).

**13 For thou hast said in thine heart,**--Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. He perceives the inner pride of the king, which is now described in five “I will”s. The objects of his intent are especially arrogant, but any unqualified intention is sinful:

Jam 4:13-16 Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and

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2 The universal interpretation of the subject of the 3ms verbs as “Sheol” from the previous verse leads to an awkward rhetorical shift, from Sheol as metonymy of the container in v. 9a to personification in 9b. By recognizing the common impersonal use of the 3ms in 9b, semantically similar to a passive, it becomes an amplification of 9a. “Sheol is moved to meet thee. That is, all the chief ones are stirred up for thee; all the kings of the nations are raised up.”

3 J.W. McKay, “Helel and the Dawn-Goddess,” VT 20:4 (1970), 451-464.

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continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: 14 Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. 15 For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. 16 But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.

**I will ascend into heaven,**--Compare his ambition with that of the generation after the flood,

Gen 11:4 And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top *may reach* unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

But this is a futile hope, as our Lord tells us:

Joh 3:13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

**I will exalt my throne above the stars of God:**--Probably a reference to the angels, as in Job 38:7,

Job 38:7 When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

There appears to be some relation between the heavenly bodies and the angels, as reflected in the use of the phrase “host of heaven” for both of them:

Deu 4:19 And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the **host of heaven**,

1Ki 22:19 And he said, Hear thou therefore the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the **host of heaven** standing by him on his right hand and on his left.

The king of Babylon aims to take his place among the heavenly powers.

**I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north:**--Greek gods had their Olympus. In Canaanite mythology, the gods convened upon a far-away northern mountain is commonly identified with Mount Cassius, in modern Turkey along the eastern Mediterranean coast. Into this divine counsel the king desired to ascend.

**14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;**--The sacred mountain would rise above the clouds, and the king will go to the very top.

**I will be like the most High.**--Here is the culminating boast: to be like God. This was how Satan seduced our first parents in Eden:

Gen 3:5 For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods [God], knowing good and evil.

In Canaanite mythology, the name of God used here (עליון) refers to the first generation of the gods, the most ancient deities. To this rank the king aspires to ascend.

The culmination of this ambition is seen in the Antichrist,

2Th 2:1 that man of sin [shall] be revealed, the son of perdition; 4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

It was common in the ANE for the king to claim divine titles. The common nature of this assertion does



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not make it right, and Isaiah describes the humiliating destiny of anyone with such aspirations.

**15 Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.**--He is only a man, and will meet the destiny of all men (Eccl 7:2).

Compare Daniel's prophecy concerning Antichrist (11:36-37, 45):

And the king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvellous things against the God of gods, and shall prosper till the indignation be accomplished: for that that is determined shall be done. 37 Neither shall he regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god: for he shall magnify himself above all. 45 ... yet he shall come to his end, and none shall help him.

### 16-20, Earthly

Now we return to the earth, where people gather around the body of the slain monarch.

**16 They that see thee shall narrowly look [gaze] upon thee, and consider thee,**--After their death, tyrants are often vilified and made examples. Consider modern attitudes toward Hitler and Stalin.

**saying, Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms; 17 That made the world as a wilderness, and destroyed the cities thereof; that opened not the house of his prisoners?**--During his life, everyone feared him. But death strips away the aura of power, and leaves everyone wondering how he could have been so terrifying. They do not realize, as he did not, that he could have this effect only as the Lord's instrument. This was true of Assyria:

Isa 10:5 O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation.

Jer applies it to Babylon:

Jer 51:20-23 Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms;

A true appreciation of ourselves will reveal that we can do nothing except as the Lord's instruments.

**18 All the kings of the nations, even all of them, lie in glory, every one in his own house.**--The usual custom is that when a monarch dies, he is buried in honor, in a beautiful tomb.

**19 But thou art cast out of thy grave**--In contrast, the Babylonian king is dishonored. Three illustrations are given:

- **like an abominable branch,**--“Branch” is perhaps used in the sense of “offspring,” as in 11:1. In spite of his royal birth, he is now despised. He ends where the Messiah begins (53:1), as a “tender plant” that is “despised and rejected of men.”
- **and as the raiment of those that are slain, thrust through with a sword, that go down to the stones of the pit;**--The bloody clothing of slain warriors is worthless even as spoil.
- **as a carcase trodden under feet.**--The very antithesis of an honorable burial.

**20 Thou shalt not be joined with them in burial,**--That is, with other kings. His spirit is with them in Sheol (vv. 9-15), but his body remains unburied. The distinction between the two is clearly maintained.

**because thou hast destroyed thy land, and slain thy people:**--Those who oppress other nations invariably abuse their own people. He has not only been a scourge to others (v. 6), but a tyrant at home, and in doing so has breached his responsibility as a monarch.

**the seed of evildoers shall never be renowned.**--His experience is now reduced to a general principle. If you are concerned for your reputation, don't behave wickedly.

## 21-23, God Summarizes the Coming Destruction

**21 Prepare slaughter**—The divine imperative, last heard in vv. 2-3, returns as an inclusio around the entire section.

**21 Prepare slaughter for his children for the iniquity of their fathers;**--God is true to his principle declared in Exod 20:5,

I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;

**that they do not rise, nor possess the land, nor fill the face of the world with cities.**--God will not allow any creature to obtain dominion over all the earth. To prevent this, he cuts short the power of each tyrant in turn. He alone will possess all the earth.

Note now the three-fold repetition of “saith the Lord,” באם יהוה. This phrase, always placed after what it describes, is not to be confused with the common proposed expression, “Thus saith the Lord,” כה אמר יהוה. The expression here functions to mark a summary statement.<sup>4</sup> Each of these statements summarizes one of the three paragraphs of divine speech that Isaiah has reported. Recognition of these three clauses as summaries leads us to associate vv24ff with what follows.

**22 For I will rise up against them, saith the LORD of hosts,**--This was the theme of vv. 2-3. The next two summaries concern the human and physical consequences, respectively, of this divine opposition.

**and cut off from Babylon the name, and remnant, and son, and nephew, saith the LORD.**--This recapitulates what Isaiah has just noted, “The seed of evildoers shall never be renowned” (v. 20). God will destroy the king and his dynasty.

**23 I will also make it a possession for the bittern, and pools of water: and I will sweep it with the besom of destruction, saith the LORD of hosts.**--This summarizes the physical destruction of the city described in 13:17-22.

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4 H. V. D. Parunak. Some Discourse Functions of Prophetic Quotation Formulas in Jeremiah. In R. D. Bergen, Editor, *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics*, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Dallas, TX, 1994, pages 489-519.

## Notes

### **Who carries the burden?**

משא is used in the literal sense in Numbers, in two ways. In 4:15, it takes the subjective genitive,

And when Aaron and his sons have made an end of covering the sanctuary, and all the vessels of the sanctuary, as the camp is to set forward; after that, the sons of Kohath shall come to bear it: but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die. These things are the burden of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation.

“These things are the burden of the sons of Kohath,” the things that they must carry. So perhaps we are to understand these prophecies as burdens placed upon the nations?

In 11:11, it takes the objective genitive,

And Moses said unto the LORD, Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest **the burden of all this people** upon me?

Here, the people are the burden, which rests upon Moses. Are we then to see the nations as burdens that annoy the Lord, and that he seeks to cast away?

The usage in Zech (9:1; 12:1) and Mal (1:1), where it is “the burden of the word of the Lord” concerning some nation, makes the burden the prophecy itself. Though these are much later than Isaiah, 2 Kings 9:25-26 is much earlier, and appears to follow the same pattern.

Unfortunately it is mistranslated in the AV:

2Ki 9:24-26 And Jehu drew a bow with his full strength, and smote Jehoram between his arms, and the arrow went out at his heart, and he sunk down in his chariot. 25 Then said *Jehu* to Bidkar his captain, Take up, *and* cast him in the portion of the field of Naboth the Jezreelite: for remember how that, when I and thou rode together after Ahab his father, the **LORD laid this burden upon him**; 26 Surely I have seen yesterday the blood of Naboth, and the blood of his sons, saith the LORD; and I will requite thee in this plat, saith the LORD. Now therefore take *and* cast him into the plat *of ground*, according to the word of the LORD.

The highlighted phrase is literally, “The Lord lifted up this burden concerning him.” The phrase נשא משאו על משאו is frequently used in this sense, where the object lifted up is a verbal action, e.g., a weeping and wailing (Jer 9:9, ET 10), a lamentation (Jer 9:9, ET 10), or a parable (Hab 2:6).

Another good example is Jer 23:33-38, which plays on the idea of a burden:

when this people, or the prophet, or a priest, shall ask thee, saying, What *is* the burden of the LORD? thou shalt then say unto them, What burden? I will even forsake you, saith the LORD.

The sense here is “Burden? What burden? I'm just going to drop you.”

### **NT analogs of תבל**

I have suggested an analogy with NT κοσμος. It is important to recognize that the LXX reflex is

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οικουμενη, never κοσμος, but the latter is not used in a geopolitical sense in the OT, most commonly translating אבצ "host" (5x) and עדי "glory" (7x).

### ***Shaking in the Last Day***

Isa 2:19 And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth.

Isa 2:20-21 In that day a man shall cast his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which they made *each one* for himself to worship, to the moles and to the bats; 21 To go into the clefts of the rocks, and into the tops of the ragged rocks, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth.

Jer 4:24 I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly.

Eze 38:20 So that the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the heaven, and the beasts of the field, and all creeping things that creep upon the earth, and all the men that are upon the face of the earth, shall shake at my presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the steep places shall fall, and every wall shall fall to the ground.

Joe 3:16 The LORD also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the LORD will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel.

Hag 2:6 For thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land;

Hag 2:21 Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I will shake the heavens and the earth;

Mat 24:29 Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken:

Rev 6:12-17 And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood;

Rev 8:5-12 And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake.

Rev 11:13 And the same hour was there a great earthquake, and the tenth part of the city fell, and in the earthquake were slain of men seven thousand: and the remnant were affrighted, and gave glory to the God of heaven.

Rev 11:19 And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple the ark of his testament: and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail.

Rev 16:18 And there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such as was not since men were upon the earth, so mighty an earthquake, and so great.