

## The Second Round of Burdens, Isa 21-23

### Overview

We have just completed 8 chapters that encompass five Burdens. There are five more, but they extend over only three chapters. Not only are they much shorter, but they are also much more enigmatic, almost like dreams.

Motyer<sup>1</sup> suggests that they are in one-to-one correspondence with the first five burdens. If this is so, it will help us understand some of the enigmas that they present. Here are the correspondences:

First Cycle of Burdens	Second Cycle of Burdens	Point of Correspondence
13:1-14:23, Babylon	21:1-10, The Desert of the Sea (v. 9, "Babylon is fallen")	Target: Babylon
14:24-32, when Ahaz died	21:11-12, Dumah	Warning against false hope
15-16, Moab	21:13-17, Arabia	Refugees seek help from man
17-18, Damascus (and Ephraim)	22, The Valley of Vision (Jerusalem)	Target: Israel
19-20, Egypt	23, Tyre	Gentiles turn to the Lord

It's important to keep in mind the overarching theme of these burdens. God is sovereign over all the earth. He demonstrates this sovereignty by his judgments from time to time on one nation or another. Ultimately, these culminate in the Day of the Lord anticipated in ch. 2, when all nations will be humbled. Most of these burdens refer to some judgment that has been fulfilled by now, but all of them also look ahead to the coming Day of the Lord.

They teach us how we should understand international affairs today. As then, so today, the fates of nations lie in the hand of God. Tragedies are meant to draw their attention to him, and remind them that one day he alone will rule over all the earth.

### 21:1-10, The Desert of the Sea

Like the first burden in ch 13-14, the sixth deals with the fall of Babylon (v. 9). Isaiah's vision here encompasses both the dealings of Babylon with Jerusalem, and God's later judgment upon her.

**21:1 The burden of the desert of the sea.**--We know from the daily news from Iraq that Babylon is in a desert land. Yet the Euphrates, which runs through it, forms marshes and lakes. In fact, there was an extensive wetlands, about halfway between Baghdad and the Persian Gulf, inhabited by tribal people who lived on islands and traveled entirely by boat (see photo on handout), until Hussein drained them in a paranoid effort to destroy their inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah (51:13) describes Babylon as "thou that dwellest upon many waters, abundant in treasures," that is, a merchant people, and the title may refer to this as well. Tyre, with which this cycle of burdens ends, dwelt upon the sea, but was not in a desert.

<sup>1</sup> J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 1993, pp. 132-133.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.emporia.edu/earthsci/student/hubbard1/webpage.htm> ; <http://www.atlastours.net/iraq/marshes.html>

**As whirlwinds in the south pass through; so it cometh from the desert, from a terrible land.**--The intense heat rising from a desert can lead suddenly to whirlwinds and sandstorms. Isaiah makes this the image of a coming disaster, the invasion of Judah by Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar.

**2 A grievous vision is declared unto me;**--Isaiah is pained to witness, even in prophecy, national suffering. He is about to describe a double calamity.

**the treacherous dealer dealeth treacherously, and the spoiler spoileth.**--The verb “deal treacherously” is commonly used to refer to breaking a trust. For example, it describes an adulterous wife or an apostate people:

Jer 3:20 Surely *as* a wife treacherously departeth from her husband, so have ye dealt treacherously with me, O house of Israel, saith the LORD.

This expression is an important clue to what is being described. In ch. 39, Babylon sends a mission of friendship to Hezekiah, but Isaiah sees this mission as self-serving. He laments its treachery and the invasion that followed a century later.

**Go up, O Elam: besiege, O Media;**--Isaiah calls to the nations to whom Babylon fell, the Medes and the Persians. The Elamites ruled Persia up until Cyrus the Great, in 539, and Isaiah, writing 160 years before this time, refers to the people by the name by which they would then be known.

**all the sighing thereof have I made to cease.**--That is, the sighing of the Jews resulting from the treachery and spoiling of the Babylonians.

Thus, within a single verse (v. 2), we have both the fall of Jerusalem, and the fall of Babylon.

**3 Therefore are my loins filled with pain: pangs have taken hold upon me, as the pangs of a woman that travaileth: I was bowed down at the hearing of it; I was dismayed at the seeing of it.**  
**4 My heart panted, fearfulness affrighted me: the night of my pleasure hath he turned into fear unto me.**--Though he anticipates the fall of Babylon, Isaiah is still dismayed. Judgment is God's strange work, and Isaiah cringes at the vision, though it is the fall of Israel's enemy.

**5 Prepare the table, watch in the watchtower, eat, drink:**--The word “watchtower” appears only here, but is derived from a root that means “to spread out.” Probably the phrase should be translated, “spread out the carpets,” in preparation for a feast, along with the other three clauses. All four are not really commands, but infinitives, which can represent an indefinite historical tense (GKC 113ff). We might translate, “They are preparing the table, spreading out the carpets, eating, drinking.”

Daniel (ch. 5) tells us that the night that Babylon fell to the Medes and the Persians, Belshazzar king of Babylon was preoccupied with a “great feast.” The Greek historian Herodotus (History, 1.191) records that Cyrus was able to conquer Babylon because the city was distracted in a festival.

**arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield.**--These commands are a different verbal form than the previous four. Isaiah in vision sees the Babylonians preparing for their feast. He interrupts them with the warning, “Get up, get your weapons ready.” “Anoint the shield” may refer to polishing it to remove rust and cause arrows and spears to slide more easily off of it.

**6 For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth.**--If Babylon will not be alert, let Isaiah at least set a watchman. A believing student of Scripture will have more insight into what's going on in the secular world than unbelievers.

**7 And he saw [when he sees] a chariot *with* a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses, *and* a chariot of camels; and he hearkened [he shall hearken] diligently with much heed:**--These verbs continue the Lord's instructions. The recessive accent on the first verse shows that it is a converted perfect, continuing the imperfect of v. 6. When the watchman sees the invading army approaching, he is to pay very careful attention. Secular historians speak of the Persians advancing in pairs ("a couple of horsemen") and using camels in their attacks.

**8 And he cried, A lion:**--That is, he cries loudly, like a lion roaring; cf. Rev 10:3, where an angel cries "with a loud voice, as *when* a lion roareth."

**My lord,**--Not merely a title of respect, but an address to the Lord (*adonay*, not *adoniy*).

**I stand continually upon the watchtower in the daytime, and I am set in my ward whole nights:**--The watchman, whom the Lord has commanded to watch, reports that he is diligent in his mission.

**9 And, behold, here cometh a chariot of men, *with* a couple of horsemen.**--He reports seeing what the Lord had commanded him to watch for in v. 7.

**And he answered**--That is, spoke again, after an interval. First he sees the army approaching, and then he reports the result.

**and said, Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground.**--The city succumbs under the onslaught of the Medes and the Persians.

**10 O my threshing, and the corn of my floor:**--The violent agricultural action of threshing is frequently used to describe God's judgments. Matt 3:12 uses it to describe the purging of God's people, and here Isaiah addresses the remnant that will survive the coming Babylonian invasion.

**that which I have heard of the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have I declared unto you.**--When Jerusalem passes through its time of judgment, it is to remember this oracle, and remember that it is the word of God. In times of suffering, God's people must cling to his word.

## **21:11-12, Dumah [Silence]**

Seir is a location in Edom. There are places named Dumah in the Bible, but none of them is near Seir. We should probably understand the noun in its common meaning as "silence."

**11 The burden of Dumah [silence].**--The oracle consists of a single enquiry uttered during the night. A long, sleepless night could indeed be described as a "burden of silence," particularly when the only one around to talk, the watchman, doesn't say much.

**He calleth to me out of Seir, Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?**--Isaiah has been prophesying destruction on every nation. Someone in Edom learns of these prophecies, and they keep him awake at night. Tormented by fear and unable to sleep in spite of the silence of the night, he approaches the watchman on the wall, who is at the same time a metaphor for the prophet.

**12 The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night:**--The parallel with the second burden, in the year of Ahaz's death, helps clarify this. Philistia was urged not to rejoice in spite of the destruction of her foe Assyria, because further judgment was coming. Here, the promised fall of Babylon will be followed by further times of difficulty. Each mighty empire in Nebuchadnezzar's

vision will bring its own round of oppression and deliverance, all under the Lord's guidance. Cf. Zech 1:17. The morning is coming, but night will again follow, and then morning, and then night, cycle after cycle of trouble until the final great Day of the Lord arrives.

**if ye will enquire, enquire ye:**--The parallel with the second burden helps again. That burden ended pointing out how the Lord cared for those who trust in him. So now the watchman encourages the inquirer to turn to the Lord. "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found. He is your only hope."

**return, come.**--These two verbs appear in the same verse only 3x in the OT: here, Job 16:22 (where "turn" is negated), and Jer 3:22.

Jer 3:22 Return, ye backsliding children, *and* I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto thee; for thou *art* the LORD our God.

This appears to reflect the sense here, and may (as often in Jer) in fact be quoting Isaiah. Isaiah invites the Edomites to repent and join "the poor of the people" in the Ahaz burden.

## 21:13-17, Arabia

Motyer's parallels suggest that we compare this Burden with that on Moab. One persistent feature of that burden was the image of refugees fleeing the enemy: 15:5; 16:2, 4, 8. Here again Isaiah sees this tragedy of war unfolding.

**13 The burden upon Arabia.**--See the map. The other burdens concern the outer arc of the fertile crescent (Babylon, Damascus, Egypt, Jerusalem, Tyre, Philistia), or countries along the inner edge (Moab, Edom). Arabia covers everything in the middle. Their remoteness cannot protect them from the coming judgment. When God's wrath falls, there is nowhere to hide.

**In the forest in Arabia shall ye lodge, O ye travelling companies of Dedanim.**--He sees caravans of migrants. When they make camp, it is not along the road, but in "the forest." Arabia is not known for its vegetation, but they seek out whatever seclusion they can find.

The following verses show that, like the Moabites in ch. 15, 16, they are refugees.

**14 The inhabitants of the land of Tema brought water to him that was thirsty, they prevented with their bread him that fled.**--Tema is an oasis in NW Saudi Arabia. Its citizens provide water and food for the travelers.

Isaiah counseled Moab to seek refuge with the Lord, but she would not. So here, one Arab seeks help from another, but nobody turns to the Lord.

**15 For they fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, and from the bent bow, and from the grievousness of war.**--Here is the full explanation of why the Dedanim are on the road. Tiglath-Pileser and Sargon both boasted of their conquests in Arabia (ANET 284, 286).

**16 For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Within a year, according to the years of an hireling,**--This expression appears only here and in 16:14, in the burden of Moab. When you hire somebody for a period of time, they don't work a minute longer. The Lord promises that what he is about to predict will appear precisely on schedule.

**and all the glory of Kedar shall fail: 17 And the residue of the number of archers, the mighty men**

**of the children of Kedar, shall be diminished: for the LORD God of Israel hath spoken it.**--The fabled warriors of Arabia would be no match for the Mesopotamian invaders.

## **22:1-25, The Valley of Vision**

The fourth burden, named after Damascus, also concerned Ephraim. The ninth also involves the people of Israel, this time focusing on Jerusalem.

**22:1 The burden of the valley of vision.**--Jerusalem, though built upon three hills, is itself dominated by the Mount of Olives. Ps 125:2 reminds us that “the mountains are round about Jerusalem.” “In the last days, the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills” (2:2), but today one looks up from Jerusalem to the mountains. When Jerusalem is depicted as a valley, we are looking at her as she is now, vulnerable, subject to sin, and needful of the Lord's protection (here, Ps 125:2). When she is depicted as above the other mounts, we see her in her millennial glory (e.g., 2:2; Ps 48).

Though it is depressed geologically, it is the source of great vision, for there God's spirit moved upon many of his prophets and showed them what could not be seen from a physically higher vantage point. Yet in this oracle, the people show defective vision.

This burden has three parts. Each has a different addressee (the city; Shebna, the chief steward; and Eliakim, another palace functionary). In addition,

- 1b-14 is set off by the inclusio describing the inappropriate joy of the people, and other internal symmetry.
- Each of the three sections ends with a summary of divine judgment (vv. 14, 19, 25).

The common theme through the entire oracle is the sin of self-reliance: of a city toward itself, of a powerful man toward himself, of those who trust in a capable and responsible public servant. Our trust is to be in the Lord alone, and he will take away any other source of confidence.

### **1b-14, to the City**

The oracle concerning the city is divided into six paragraphs, arranged A BC BC A. The last three all begin with a reference to the “day” (5, 8b, 12).

- The outer layers (A, 1-2a, 12-13) describe the joy of the people, criticized by the Lord.
- The B (2b-3, 5-8a) sections describe enemy action against Jerusalem. The second member (5-8) is surrounded by additional information that it is the Lord who brings this disaster upon them.
- The C (4, 8b-11) sections contrast Isaiah's response to this threat with that of the people.

**What aileth thee now, that thou art wholly gone up to the housetops? 2 Thou that art full of stirs, a tumultuous city, a joyous city:**--The prophet pictures the city in turmoil. The nature of that turmoil is not clear until we reach the last phrase. Crowding the housetops, stirring, being tumultuous might result from a range of emotions. The last phrase makes it clear that this is the excitement of joy.

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This rejoicing, the prophet finds inappropriate: “What aileth thee now?” vv. 2b-3 explain why. The city is facing a disaster. The details in this section correspond most closely with the siege and conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

**thy slain men are not slain with the sword, nor dead in battle.**--That is to say, they are dead, but not in combat. The city has been besieged, and its citizens die of famine. This was a prevalent problem in 586 BC. E.g.,

Lam 4:9-10 They that be slain with the sword are better than they that be slain with hunger: for these pine away, stricken through for want of the fruits of the field. 10 The hands of the pitiful women have sodden their own children: they were their meat in the destruction of the daughter of my people.

**3 All thy rulers are fled together, they are bound by the archers:**--Recall the flight of King Zedekiah from Jerusalem, when he was captured and brought to the King of Babylon.

Jer 39:4-7 And it came to pass, *that* when Zedekiah the king of Judah saw them, and all the men of war, then they fled, and went forth out of the city by night, by the way of the king's garden, by the gate betwixt the two walls: and he went out the way of the plain. 5 But the Chaldeans' army pursued after them, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho: and when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon to Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he gave judgment upon him. 6 Then the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah in Riblah before his eyes: also the king of Babylon slew all the nobles of Judah. 7 Moreover he put out Zedekiah's eyes, and bound him with chains, to carry him to Babylon.

**all that are found in thee are bound together, which have fled from far.**--The reference here is to people from the countryside, who had taken refuge in Jerusalem, only to be trapped there.

Now we hear Isaiah's response to this vision of the coming judgment.

**4 Therefore said I, Look away from me;**--The verb is often used to indicate looking to someone for help (2 Sam 22:42; Isa 17:7, 8). When this disaster happens, people would naturally come ask Isaiah for help. But he is overcome with grief and seeks solitude,.

**I will weep bitterly, labour not to comfort me, because of the spoiling of the daughter of my people.**--He is driven to weeping over the disaster. When bad things happen, it is a good idea to stop and think about the meaning of what is taking place.

**5 For it is a day of trouble, and of treading down, and of perplexity by the Lord GOD of hosts in the valley of vision, breaking down the walls, and of crying to the mountains. 6 And Elam bare the quiver with chariots of men and horsemen, and Kir uncovered the shield. 7 And it shall come to pass, that thy choicest valleys shall be full of chariots, and the horsemen shall set themselves in array at the gate. 8 And he discovered the covering of Judah,**--This paragraph corresponds to 2b-3 in describing the judgment, but with an important addition at the beginning and the end: references to the agency of the Lord in bringing about the disaster. Here is the theme we see over and over through these burdens: national disasters are not accidents. They are from the hand of the Lord, and it is from him that we must seek the remedy.

Isaiah's response was to seek solitude and exercise his heart over the judgment. How did the people



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respond? The next paragraph begins and ends by stating where they did look for help when he said, “look away from me.”

**and thou didst look in that day to the armour of the house of the forest.**--The “house of the forest” was constructed by Solomon as part of the palace complex, and served as an armory:

1Ki 7:2 He built also the house of the forest of Lebanon; the length thereof was an hundred cubits, and the breadth thereof fifty cubits, and the height thereof thirty cubits, upon four rows of cedar pillars, with cedar beams upon the pillars.

1Ki 10:17 And he made three hundred shields of beaten gold; three pound of gold went to one shield: and the king put them in the house of the forest of Lebanon.

They take comfort in their weapons.

vv. 9-11a describe two steps that they take to prepare for attack: improve the fortifications, and secure the water supply. They are arranged as an alternation.

**9 Ye have seen also the breaches of the city of David, that they are many:**--They surveyed the city's walls and identified the weak places.

**and ye gathered together the waters of the lower pool.**--The gathering together may refer to routing the rain water collection system to ensure that all possible water is captured in the city's reservoirs.

**10 And ye have numbered the houses of Jerusalem, and the houses have ye broken down to fortify the wall.**--Now we return to the fortifications. Having identified the weak places, they destroy some houses to get building materials to shore up the breaches.

**11 Ye made also a ditch between the two walls for the water of the old pool:**--The reference here may be to the 1750' tunnel that Hezekiah dug under the Ophel (Figure 1, Figure 2) to bring the water of Siloam to a reservoir within the city walls, in preparation for the anticipated siege of Sennacherib.

2Ki 20:20 And the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and all his might, and how he made a pool, and a conduit, and brought water into the city, *are* they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?

2Ch 32:30 This same Hezekiah also stopped the upper watercourse of Gihon, and brought it straight down to the west side of the city of David.



Figure 1: Map of Hezekiah's water system  
(<http://www.bibleistrue.com/qna/pqna21.htm>)



Figure 2: Interior view of the tunnel  
([www.holylandphotos.org/browse.aspx?s=1,2,6,19,359,363&img=ICJOTHT15](http://www.holylandphotos.org/browse.aspx?s=1,2,6,19,359,363&img=ICJOTHT15))

Instead of weeping over the coming judgment, the people

self-confidently review their weapons, fortify their wall, and ensure their water supply.

**but ye have not looked unto the maker thereof, neither had respect unto him that fashioned it long ago.**--The pronouns (“thereof,” “it”) are feminine, and probably refer to “city” [of David] in v.9. They pride themselves in the strength of their city, but refuse to look to the One who founded it.

Notice the repeated use of verbs of “looking” at the beginning and end of this paragraph (and contrast with Isaiah's command, “look away,” in v.4). Historically, the city has been a place of vision (v. 1), but the people's vision is corrupt and misdirected.

**12 And in that day did the Lord GOD of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth:**--God's purpose in bringing Sennacherib was to turn the people's hearts to himself.

**13 And behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine: let us eat and drink; for to morrow we shall die.**--Instead, they are overcome with joy. Motyer suggests that the occasion of the celebration may have been the completion of the water tunnel, an amazing engineering feat for the time. They are intoxicated with their self-confidence.

**14 And it was revealed in mine ears by the LORD of hosts, Surely this iniquity shall not be purged from you till ye die, saith the Lord GOD of hosts.**--Their self-reliance is heady but deadly. God characterizes self-confidence as “iniquity.” Like all sin, it will bring its wages of death.

### **15-19, Shebna**

Now Isaiah focuses in on one individual who epitomizes the sinful self-reliance of the city.

**15 Thus saith the Lord GOD of hosts, Go, get thee unto this treasurer, even unto Shebna, which is over the house,**--This man was a senior official in the court. The title “who is over the house” indicates the chief steward, the kind of role that Joseph had in Potiphar's household (Gen 39:4) and in Pharaoh's court (Gen 41:40). We read of him, along with his successor Eliakim, associated with Hezekiah in 36:3, 11, 22; 37:2.

**and say, 16 What hast thou here? and whom hast thou here,**--Apparently, Shebna, like Joseph, is a foreigner in the land where he rules. His name is not Hebrew, he is not described as “son of” in Hebrew fashion, and Isaiah here suggests that he is an opportunistic intruder with no real interest in Jerusalem.

**that thou hast hewed thee out a sepulchre here, as he that heweth him out a sepulchre on high, and that graveth an habitation for himself in a rock?**--Joseph gave instructions that his bones were to be carried back to Canaan. But Shebna has constructed himself a majestic tomb, befitting a prominent individual. He not only thinks of himself as important, but wants others to as well. He has plenty of wealth to expend on such a project.

**17 Behold, the LORD will carry thee away with a mighty captivity,**--The word rendered “mighty captivity” is literally “hero, champion.” It is likely a sarcastic statement: “The Lord will carry thee away, you Big Man.”

**and will surely cover thee. 18 He will surely violently turn and toss thee like a ball into a large country:**--God will wrap you up into a ball and throw you far away from home. The fulfillment may have occurred under Hezekiah's apostate son Manasseh, who was taken captive into Assyria:



2Ch 33:11 Wherefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon.

**there shalt thou die**,--In a foreign land, far from the elaborate tomb that he had prepared for himself.

**and there the chariots of thy glory shall be the shame of thy lord's house**.--Again there is an allusion to the Joseph story. One way a king honored a high official was to provide a special chariot:

Gen 41:43 And he made him to ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried before him, Bow the knee: and he made him *ruler* over all the land of Egypt.

This close relation to the king means that when he is cast away, the king will share his shame.

**19 And I will drive thee from thy station, and from thy state shall he pull thee down**.--Along the way, he will lose his position “over the house,” something that has already happened by ch. 36.

The Lord's words in the first person anticipate the next section, while the return to the third person recalls the previous one, making this verse an inverted hinge.

## **20-25, Eliakim**

**20 And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah: 21 And I will clothe him with thy robe, and strengthen him with thy girdle, and I will commit thy government into his hand: and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah**.--Shebna's office will be given to another, Eliakim. God calls him “my servant,” indicating his faithfulness.

The fulfillment of this is seen in 36:3, where Eliakim is now “over the house” and Shebna is simply a scribe.

**22 And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open**.--This phrase is applied to our Lord in Rev 3:7. Later in Isaiah he will frequently be called “the servant of the Lord.” The Messiah is the ultimate one with authority over David's house, and in this sense Eliakim, the royal steward who serves faithfully in the place of self-serving Shebna, is a type of our Lord as Jehovah's faithful servant.

**23 And I will fasten him as a nail in a sure place; and he shall be for a glorious throne to his father's house. 24 And they shall hang upon him all the glory of his father's house, the offspring and the issue, all vessels of small quantity, from the vessels of cups, even to all the vessels of flagons**.--Two metaphors are combined chiastically.

- A throne. The expression probably means, not “glorious throne,” but “a throne on which glory sits,” that is, he will be the podium from which the family's glory will shine forth.
- A nail. The purpose of the nail is not to hold boards together, but as a storage mechanism, on which things of value are hung. In a Bedouin encampment, we saw the implements for making coffee (Figure 3) stored on a nail on a tentpole (Figure 4).

Note “They shall hang upon him.” The people see his reliability. He is far more reliable than Shebna. But the people are still addicted to self-reliance. Now they put their trust in him, and as a result,

judgment must fall.

**25 In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, shall the nail that is fastened in the sure place be removed, and be cut down, and fall; and the burden that was upon it shall be cut off: for the LORD hath spoken it.**--Eliakim, after all, is only a man, and the Lord, to deal with the problem of self-reliance, must remove him, as he removed Shebna before him, and as he doomed Jerusalem to judgment for its self-reliance.

## 23:1-18, Tyre

**23:1 The burden of Tyre.**--Like the fifth burden (on Egypt), the tenth anticipates that a gentile nation is eventually drawn to serve the Lord. Also like the burden on Egypt, the burden on Tyre has clearly distinct sections describing judgment (1-14) and restoration (15-18). These are the only two burdens that include subsequent restoration of the nation whose judgment is described. Other burdens anticipate the elevation of God's people (14:1-3 in Babylon; 14:32 for Philistia; 16:5-6 for Moab), but not of the nation named in the burden.

Tyre was a double city. It was a city on the mainland of Lebanon, and an island more than a kilometer off the coast that served as its harbor and citadel. It was 20 miles south of Zidon (Sidon), another city on the mainland from which it was founded. Tyre and Sidon are often named together in the Bible, and Isaiah addresses both of them here. In time of war, the inhabitants would withdraw to the island, which had its own wells and was virtually impregnable. Alexander the Great built a causeway from the mainland to the island in order to bring his siege machines to bear against it, and over the centuries that causeway has accumulated silt and sand, so that now the former island is a peninsula.

### 1b-14, Tyre's Fall

Isaiah does not itemize any sins of Tyre. The nation was in fact friendly to Israel. Hiram king of Tyre was on friendly terms with both David (2 Sam 5:11) and Solomon (1 Kings 5:1, "Hiram was ever a lover of David"). v. 9 explains the judgment: Tyre was glorious and honorable. The purpose of the day of the Lord, as Isaiah introduced it in 2:12-17, is to bring low "every one that is proud and lofty, and every one that is lifted up," even if they are otherwise upright. Peter brings this warning down to the present age:

1Pe 5:5-6 God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. 6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:



Figure 3: Bedouin making coffee. Note mortar. (Van and Anita Parunak, June 1975)



Figure 4: Mortar stored on a nail on a tent post (Van and Anita Parunak, June 1975)

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The section begins and ends with a command to the ships of Tarshish to howl. The intermediate six paragraphs address Tyre, Zidon, Tyre, then again Tyre, Zidon, and (apparently, comparing 6a with 12c) Tyre.

The second three differ from the first three in several ways.

- They emphasize the means of Tyre's destruction (thus Motyer).
- They name the Chaldeans as the instrument that God uses, thus aligning with the prophecy in Ezek 26:7-11.
- They refer to Tyre by name, but not as an island

We likely have another example here of prophetic foreshortening, which places two disasters side by side. An earlier example is the twofold fall of Babylon (13:9-16; 17-22). There, as here, the prophecy that comes first is the more encompassing one, looking further into the future, while the second one is more immediate historically.

### 1, Opening Lament

**Howl, ye ships of Tarshish;**--Tarshish is a trading center in the western Mediterranean. The precise location is not known. Key possibilities are Spain and Carthage (where the island of Sicily would hit Africa if Italy kicked it). A "ship of Tarshish" is a large vessel that could sustain long voyages over the Mediterranean.

**for it is laid waste, so that there is no house, no entering in: from the land of Chittim it is revealed to them.**--Tyre would have been one of the main ports of call for such vessels, a place for profitable trade, repairing the vessel, and refreshing the sailors. When they hear that Tyre is destroyed, and they have lost their port, they mourn.

Before we return to this lament in v. 14, Isaiah will first describe the coming judgment, then analyze its cause. In each of these sections, he speaks of Tyre, then Zidon, then Tyre again.

### 2-6, Description of the Judgment

The judgment is described in four successive imperatives: "be still," "be ashamed," "pass over," "howl."

**2 Be still, ye inhabitants of the isle;**--In the first cycle, referring to the broadest historical scope, Tyre is "the isle." She is to be silent, and reflect upon what she has lost.

**thou whom the merchants of Zidon, that pass over the sea, have replenished.**--Tyre was built up by the wealth of the Zidonians, generated by trade ("that pass over the sea").

**3 And by great waters the seed of Sihor, the harvest of the river, is her revenue;**--Sihor is a name for the Nile, and "the river" is used in the same sense. Grain harvests from Egypt were an important part of ancient trade.

**and she is a mart of nations.**--All the ancient world met in her bazaars.

**4 Be thou ashamed, O Zidon:**--Now the mainland city is addressed. She hears a voice that brings

shame upon her.

**for the sea hath spoken, even the strength of the sea,**--“Strength” refers to an isolated refuge. Island Tyre cries out to her across the water. The voice seems to come from the sea.

**saying, I travail not, nor bring forth children, neither do I nourish up young men, nor bring up virgins.**--She has become sterile and dead, no longer a place of wealth and fertility.

**5 As at the report concerning Egypt, so shall they be sorely pained at the report of Tyre.**--Here is an explicit link with the fifth burden. The merchants of Zidon would be dismayed to learn of Egypt's catastrophe in the drying up of the Nile (ch. 19-20), the source of much of their merchandise. Now they hear of the loss of their own node in this trading network.

**6 Pass ye over to Tarshish; howl, ye inhabitants of the isle.**--Now Isaiah turns his attention back to the island citadel. He urges its citizens to get on one of their ships and flee far away to Tarshish in the far west. Their initial dumbness of shock has turned into wails of grief.

**7 Is this your joyous city, whose antiquity is of ancient days? her own feet shall carry her afar off to sojourn.**--In spite of her illustrious past, she is now in exile.

## 8-13, Causes of the Judgment

There are three causes: the Lord's purpose, his command, and the Chaldean. Again, we consider Tyre in the outer members and Zidon in the center. This time, there is no reference to the island, and the focus is likely on Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of the mainland city and subjugation of the island.

**8 Who hath taken this counsel against Tyre,**--Who would do such a thing to such a wonderful city? Isaiah backs this up with three titles indicating how honored Tyre was.

**the crowning city,**--Literally, “the one who crowns.” Tyre is seen as a king-maker.

**whose merchants are princes,**--The merchants are not just tradesmen, but recognized as rulers.

**whose traffickers are the honourable of the earth?**--Everyone looked up to her traders.

**9 The LORD of hosts hath purposed it, to stain the pride of all glory, and to bring into contempt all the honourable of the earth.**--Tyre's honorable position is just the problem. Recall the purpose of the day of the Lord, as recounted in Isa 2:12-17. Pride and respectability is all that is needed to fall under God's judgment. He will exalt himself alone, and anyone who threatens to outshine him must be brought low.

The first cause of judgment is God's purpose. He determines ahead of time what will come to pass.

**10 Pass through thy land as a river, O daughter of Tarshish: there is no more strength.**--As we have noted, “daughter of X,” where X is the name of a city, is to be understood as “daughter X,” X personified as a young and delicate woman. Tarshish formerly was dominated by Tyre. But now she can do as she pleases, since Tyre's strength is finished.

**11 He stretched out his hand over the sea, he shook the kingdoms:**--“He” here is the Lord. The cities are addressed as feminine throughout.

“Stretch out one's hand over the sea” is a direct reference to Exod 14, the parting of the Red Sea by

Moses. Four times in these verses (16, 21, 26, 27) this phrase occurs.

The parting of the Red Sea showed the Lord's sovereignty over the sea. Tyre had viewed herself as in control of the sea. Isaiah recalls the Red Sea miracle to remind us that the Lord is really in control.

**the LORD hath given a commandment against the merchant city, to destroy the strong holds thereof. 12 And he said, Thou shalt no more rejoice, O thou oppressed virgin, daughter of Zidon:**--Now the focus shifts to Zidon. Again Isaiah describes the source of the judgment. The Lord has progressed from his sovereign purpose to his irresistible command.

**arise, pass over to Chittim; there also shalt thou have no rest.**--Though Tyre is not mentioned here, the repetition of the phrase from v. 6, which concerned Tyre, suggests that the focus once again moves to Tyre from Zidon. Chittim is an ancient name for the island of Cyprus. The people could board their ships and flee to that island, much closer than either Carthage or Spain, but Isaiah warns them that they will not have peace there.

**13 Behold the land of the Chaldeans; this people was not, till the Assyrian founded it for them that dwell in the wilderness:**--Now Isaiah draws our attention to the instrument that God commands, the Chaldeans. He recalls their distant origin, growing out of the Assyrian empire.

Of the next three clauses, the first two have plural verbs, while the third is singular. I understand the subject of the first two to be the people of Tyre, while the third describes the Chaldean people.

**they set up the towers thereof,**--The Tyrians erected their watchtowers to guard against the invader.

**they raised up the palaces thereof;**--The verb actually means "to make bare." They stripped out the wealth to carry it away to safety. Thus Ezek 29:18 records that "Nebuchadrezzar ... had ... no wages, nor his army, for Tyrus, for the service that he had served against it."

**and he brought it to ruin.**--"He refers to "this people" ((צב masculine). In spite of their preparations, they were undone by Nebuchadnezzar's siege.

## 14, Closing Lament

**14 Howl, ye ships of Tarshish: for your strength is laid waste.**--This echo of v. 1 closes the description of Tyre's fall. "Your strength" summarizes briefly the value of the city as port and market that was detailed in v. 1. The noun often refers to an isolated refuge, which Island Tyre was.

## 15-18, Tyre's Restoration and Conversion

**15 And it shall come to pass in that day,**--The immediate reference here is likely to the capitulation of the city to Nebuchadnezzar.

**that Tyre shall be forgotten seventy years, according to the days of one king:**--Fleming<sup>3</sup> notes that "In Tyrian history a period of great depression follows the siege of Nebuchadnezzar." The 70 years correspond to the final period of the Babylonian empire, up until its conquest by Persia.

**after the end of seventy years shall Tyre sing as an harlot.**--Isaiah describes Tyre's mercantile

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3 *The History of Tyre*, Columbia Univ. Press, 1915, p. 46.



activity as fornication. The metaphor offers a searching critique of capitalism.

In marriage, a man and a woman seek one another's welfare in a committed relationship. But a harlot seeks only her own enrichment, with no commitment to her lover.

Similarly, in trade, a merchant can seek to care for the needs of his customers, and look forward to being rewarded for his efforts. But we have seen too many examples of merchants who seek only their own enrichment. Like a harlot, they pretend to love their customers and stockholders, but have no commitment to their ultimate well-being. In our day, one thinks of WorldCom, or Enron, or Countrywide Mortgage.

Corporate Tyre was such a business, the economic analog to a harlot, pretending to serve others but really interested only in its own well-being.

**16 Take an harp, go about the city, thou harlot that hast been forgotten; make sweet melody, sing many songs, that thou mayest be remembered.**--After her fall, the city's attempt to regain her prominence has the pathetic aspect of an old harlot, no longer physically attractive, trying to attract customers anew. Isaiah's invitation is a taunt. Her prospects are not good.

**17 And it shall come to pass after the end of seventy years, that the LORD will visit Tyre,**--But the Lord has mercy on her. He enables her to regain her trading status. And what does she do with this divine gift?

**and she shall turn to her hire, and shall commit fornication with all the kingdoms of the world upon the face of the earth.**--She returns to her old ways, practicing fornicacious enterprise, seeking only her own enrichment and glory.

**18 And her merchandise and her hire shall be holiness to the LORD:**--This is a striking statement. Deut 23:18 says explicitly that the hire (same word, אַתְּוֹנָה) of a harlot may not be given to the Lord.

Deu 23:18 Thou shalt not bring the **hire** of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the LORD thy God for any vow: for even both these *are* abomination unto the LORD thy God.

How then can Tyre's unclean gain be holiness to the Lord? Calvin appears to have the answer:

the Prophet does not mean that the merchandise of Tyre will be consecrated to God while she continues to commit fornication, but describes a time subsequent to her change and conversion. At that time she will not lay up riches for herself, will not amass them by unlawful methods, but will employ them in the service of God, and will spend the produce of her merchandise in relieving the wants of the godly. When he used a word expressive of what was disgraceful, he had his eye on the past, but intimated that she would unlearn those wicked practices, and change her disposition.

Like Egypt, and unlike the other nations upon whom Isaiah has declared burdens, she will one day turn to the Lord.

**it shall not be treasured nor laid up;**--When this final day comes, she will no longer hoard her wealth for her own use. She will no longer be a harlot, serving only herself while pretending to love others.

**for her merchandise shall be for them that dwell before the LORD, to eat sufficiently, and for durable clothing.**--Finally her commerce will truly be for the sake of serving others.

## Notes

### **Historical Reference of 21:1-10**

The big issue here is whether this destruction of Babylon is in 539 (by Cyrus) or something earlier, most commonly identified as 689 (by Sennacherib). See Motyer for a good argument for the earlier date, and an explanation based on the notion that Isaiah is warning Hezekiah against a Babylonian alliance against Assyria because Assyria will shortly destroy her.

While attractive, this interpretation would have been impossible throughout most of the church's history. The fact of the 689 destruction of Babylon by Assyria is documented in the Bavian inscription<sup>4</sup>, but was not readable in modern times until Henry Rawlinson deciphered cuneiform around 1850. By contrast, the destruction in 539 is the focus of considerable biblical revelation.

The notion of a canon implies not only inspiration (the transmission of God's revelation) but also adequacy for understanding. On this basis, I prefer to associate the destruction here with 539.

Allied to this is the understanding of v. 2. What is the treacherous dealing described here? Assyria did not deal treacherously in putting down the Babylonian rebellion in 689, nor in fact did Cyrus in 539. But the Babylonians, whose king Merodach-Baladan sent a mission of friendship to Hezekiah, did deal treacherously with Judah in later invading. We know from ch. 39 that this envoy attracted considerable attention from Isaiah. Thus v. 2 describes the faithlessness of Babylon to Judah, for which the following verses describe God's retributive justice.

### **The Fall of Tyre**

As throughout the burdens, there is both an historical and an eschatological perspective. The historical reference of the fall of Tyre is not entirely clear. We do know that it fell to Alexander the Great in 332 BC, but v. 13 appears to ascribe the destruction to the Chaldeans. Ezekiel prophesies that Nebuchadnezzar will conquer Tyre (Ezek 26:7-11), but notes that he was not enriched by the conquest (Ezek 29:18). Secular history records that Nebuchadnezzar's siege lasted 13 years (586-572), but does not record the fall of the city. However, the king of Tyre died the year the siege ended, Tyre did become subject to Babylon, and two of her kings were held captive there (Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, 1.158). Hengstenberg<sup>5</sup> argues in detail that Tyre did in fact fall to Nebuchadnezzar.

Isaiah clearly has in view the fall of the island citadel. But Tyre was a double city, with buildings both on the island and on the adjacent mainland. Nothing in Ezekiel's prophecy of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest requires that he conquer the island. In fact, Ezek 26:3 anticipates that "many nations" will be required to conquer Tyre. Then Nebuchadnezzar's conquest is described with 3s pronouns referring to the Babylonian king (7-11), followed by plural pronouns describing the ultimate end of the city (12-14). Perhaps (as Fleming suggests in his *The History of Tyre*, Columbia Univ. Press, 1915),

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4 [http://books.google.com/books?id=O1EZAAYAAJ&pg=PA21&lpg=PA21&dq=%22bavian+inscription%22&source=bl&ots=4yDiJqHrXf&sig=O3ParGH41QCEkJ4VVx\\_p7uahmE4&hl=en&ei=BodxSrZYMoukMbXrILEM&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=4](http://books.google.com/books?id=O1EZAAYAAJ&pg=PA21&lpg=PA21&dq=%22bavian+inscription%22&source=bl&ots=4yDiJqHrXf&sig=O3ParGH41QCEkJ4VVx_p7uahmE4&hl=en&ei=BodxSrZYMoukMbXrILEM&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4)

5 [http://books.google.com/books?id=Y3tbAAAAQAAJ&printsec=titlepage&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s#v=onepage&q=&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=Y3tbAAAAQAAJ&printsec=titlepage&source=gbs_navlinks_s#v=onepage&q=&f=false)

## Isaiah 21-23

Nebuchadnezzar's conquest was of the mainland city, and accounts for Isaiah's references to the Chaldeans, while other aspects of the conquest mentioned in Isaiah are due to Alexander.

This division aligns with the distinction between Isa 23:2-7, 8-13. The first section mentions the isle explicitly, but doesn't say anything about the Chaldeans, while the second section, which identifies the Chaldeans as the cause, refers to Tyre by name and not as an isle. The foreshortening that is so common in prophecy may be at work here; the second paragraph has in mind the most immediate humbling of the city, under Nebuchadnezzar, while the first looks beyond it to the more serious conquest by Alexander. The 70 years then refers to the period after Nebuchadnezzar's conquest.