

Isaiah 24-27, Concluding Cantata

Overview

Limits

This section is set off by repeated patterns on either side.

- Burdens in 13-23: of Babylon (13:1), in the year that King Ahaz died (14:28), of Moab (15:1), of Damascus (17:1), of Egypt (19:1), of the desert of the sea (21:1), of Dumah (21:11), upon Arabia (21:13), of the valley of vision (22:1), of Tyre (23:1)
- Woes in 28-34: the crown of pride (28:1), Ariel (29:1), them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord (29:15), the rebellious children (30:1), them that go down to Egypt for help (31:1), thee that spoilest (33:1).

So our attention is focused on what remains.

Theme

This section generalizes the burdens. Compare the summary offered by Keil and Delitzsch:

“The particular judgments predicted in the oracles against the nations, all flow into the last judgment as into a sea; and all the salvation which formed the shining edge of the oracles against the nations, is here concentrated in the glory of a mid-day sun. Chapters 24-27 form the finale to chapters 13-23, and that in a strictly musical sense. What the finale should do in a piece of music - namely, gather up the scattered changes into a grand impressive whole - is done here by this closing cycle.”

We will note specific echoes of the burdens as we work through this section.

Structure

The fundamental dynamic is an alternation of scenes of judgment and of rejoicing. The section falls into two parts.

In the first part, two major sections of judgment (24:1-12; 16b-22) alternate with a distant echo of songs of praise (13-16a, cf. 23). This section is marked by frequent¹ mention of the “earth” ארץ .

In the second part, the singers draw near, and we hear three songs, each followed by a description of the events of which they sing:

- Isaiah's Song (25:1-5) and a description of what will happen “in this mountain” (6-12)
- Judah's song (26:1-19) and advice and description for the coming judgment (26:20-27:1)
- The Lord's song (27:2-5) and description of the coming restoration of his people and judgment on the unbelievers (6-13).

¹ 4.3% of the words in ch. 24, compared with 0.6% over the entire book

24:1-23, Judgment of the Earth

4.3% of the words in this chapter are the word ארץ, translated “earth” except in vv. 3, 11, 13, where it is rendered “land.” This chapter contains over 8% of the instances of ארץ in the book, but less than 2% of the total words in the book. This emphasis suggests that the disaster described here is not particular to Israel, but (like the burdens) encompasses all the earth, Jew and Gentile alike.

1-13, Judgment

This section alternates effects with causes. The breaks are marked by causal conjunctions: “for” (3b), “because” (5b) (כי in both cases), and “therefore” (6). The causes progress from the Lord's command to the sin of the world's inhabitants. The effects move from the emptying of the world, to its sickness, to the withdrawal of joy from the inhabitants.

1-3, First Cycle

The statement of the coming judgment is chiasmic, with descriptions of the judgment on the earth on the outside and the people at the center. The judgment here is depicted as due to an outside agent, whether the Lord (v. 1) or a military enemy (v.3).

24:1 Behold, the LORD maketh the earth empty, and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down,--The first statement of judgment views the earth as a bottle that is turned upside down and poured out.

and scattereth abroad the inhabitants thereof.--Its contents are the inhabitants, who are cast out of their accustomed contexts.

Now Isaiah zooms in on six relationships in society.

2 And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the servant, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress;--The first three concern social status, and are listed from the lower member to the higher one.

as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the taker of usury, so with the giver of usury to him.--The last three concern wealth, and move from the wealthy person to the one dependent on him.

These six relationships are an example of a figure of speech called “merism,” which lists several parts in order to represent the whole. Typically, these parts are the extremes, indicating that everything in between is included as well. This figure, as well as the sense of the prophecy, reflect Isa 9:14-17. The point is that everybody, irrespective of societal distinctions, will come under judgment.

3 The land² [earth] shall be utterly emptied, and utterly spoiled:--Again the earth is said to be emptied, but now the means is spoil, the confiscation of goods during war.

for the LORD hath spoken this word.--The reason for the judgment is the Lord's purpose (cf. the explanation for the fall of Tyre in 23:8-9).

2 Highlighted instances (as here) translate ארץ “earth.”

4-5, Second Cycle

Again we read of the destruction of the earth and the impact on its inhabitants, but now they are arranged in an alternation, unfolding the chiasm of the previous paragraph.

4 The earth mourneth and fadeth away, the world³ languisheth and fadeth away,--Again we see the earth in shambles, but this time the disaster is more like an internal sickness than an external foe.

the haughty people of the earth do languish.--Even the leading members of society fall victim to the malaise.

5 The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof;--Now we learn that the suffering people are themselves the infection that causes the earth's illness.

because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant.--The diagnosis this time is not God's external judgment, but their own sin. Breaking God's laws brings its own consequences, as surely as failing to observe the manufacturer's instructions will lead to a malfunctioning machine.

Isaiah describes this moral breakdown with three expressions.

- **transgressed the laws.**--This is a standard way of describing disobedience. The laws are viewed as a barrier, which the sinner crosses. The plural is unusual (appearing 15x out of 233), and suggests that we are concerned not only with Israel's law (usually referred to in the singular), but with the law of God written in the heart of the Gentiles. Paul describes this phenomenon:

Rom 2:14-15 For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: 15 Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and *their* thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;)

Having a knowledge of the law, whether written or natural, does not guarantee obedience to that law. The nations can break the law of God in their hearts just as readily as Israel can break the law of Sinai.

- **changed the ordinance,**--An “ordinance” is literally something engraved on stone, and therefore intended to be permanent. The verb rendered “changed” is usually intransitive, but a homograph (coming from a different protosemitic guttural, cf. the Arabic) means to pierce through. It describes what Jael did to Sisera with the tent peg. The imagery is graphic: they have dared to lift up their own chisel to God's unalterable ordinance, and shattered it.
- **broken the everlasting covenant**—A number of “everlasting covenants” are described in the Bible, including that with Abraham (Gen 17:7, 13, 19; 1 Chr 16:17 = Ps 105:10), the Sabbath (Exod 31:16), the showbread (Lev 24:8; cf. Num 18:19; 25:13), David (2 Sam 23:5; Isa 55:3; 2 Chr 13:5), and a future covenant (Isa 61:8; Jer 32:40; 50:5; Ezek 16:60; 37:26). The past ones all have to do with Israel, and the future covenant will be unbreakable (cf. Jer 31:32). There is one “everlasting covenant” in the past that bears on Gentiles, and that is God's covenant with

3 תבל “inhabited land”

Isaiah 24-27, Concluding Cantata

Noah:

Gen 9:16 And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that *is* upon the earth.

One of the terms of that covenant is that

Gen 9:6 Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.

The apex of lawlessness is the disregard for human life and the prevalence of wanton murder. The prevalence of abortion in our day is a central manifestation of this aspect of how “the earth is defiled under its inhabitants.”

6-12, Conclusion

After two rounds of “judgment is coming, because ...,” Isaiah finishes by once more describing the judgment, with a double “therefore.”

6 Therefore hath the curse devoured the earth, and they that dwell therein are desolate:--The “therefore” should be understood to include both the divine purpose (v. 3) and the natural consequences of human sin (v. 5). In the thrice-repeated words of Rom 1, “God gave them up” to the consequences of their own wickedness.

The reference to a “curse” devouring the “earth” recalls Gen 3:17,

Gen 3:17 And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life;

The judgment he describes results directly from the sin summarized in v. 5.

therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left.--The second “therefore” moves from the curse on the earth to the destruction of people; from quality of life (“they ... are desolate”) to quantity of life (“few men left”).

Next he details the impact of these two “therefore's.” The paragraph contains two images reflecting the effects of human strife and warfare: failure of agriculture in the fields (the result of the curse of v. 6a), and destruction in the cities (carrying out v. 6b).

7-9, Agricultural Failure

The image of agricultural desolation recalls the judgment on Moab,

Isa 16:8-10 For the fields of Heshbon languish, *and* the vine of Sibmah: the lords of the heathen have broken down the principal plants thereof, ... 9 Therefore I will bewail with the weeping of Jazer the vine of Sibmah: I will water thee with my tears, O Heshbon, and Elealeh: for the shouting for thy summer fruits and for thy harvest is fallen. 10 And gladness is taken away, and joy out of the plentiful field; and in the vineyards there shall be no singing, neither shall there be

Isaiah 24-27, Concluding Cantata

shouting: the treading shall tread out no wine in *their* presses; I have made *their vintage* shouting to cease.

The harvest is potentially the most joyful time of year, when there is an abundance of food and wine. Thus it is particularly harsh when judgment falls on the crops. Isaiah focuses on the vintage, which has the potential to be the most joyful of all harvests because of the potential of intoxication.

7 The new wine mourneth, the vine languisheth, all the merryhearted do sigh.--First he observes the fact of the crop failure.

8 The mirth of tabrets ceaseth, the noise of them that rejoice endeth, the joy of the harp ceaseth.--Next he hears the sound of the band die down, as people realize there will be no wine.

9 They shall not drink wine with a song; strong drink shall be bitter to them that drink it.--Even if there were wine, the drinkers would take no joy in it because of their depression. Or is he suggesting that when the crop fails, they try to satisfy their thirst with old wine saved from last year, only to find that it has become vinegar?

10-12, Death in the City

This paragraph is the first time he mentions the “city,” an important motif throughout this section. The reference is not to any one specific city, but to the notion of city life in general.

The notion of a city often carries negative connotations. Cities require coordination and organization, and foster the growth of human government, with its usurpation of God's authority. The first references to cities in the Bible, in Genesis, help establish these associations.

- The first city was built by Cain (Gen 4:17), apparently in an effort to evade God's curse that he would be “a fugitive and a vagabond ... in the earth.”
- When we think of the rebellion of people after the flood in Babel, we usually think of the tower they tried to build. But in fact, their effort was twofold,

Gen 11:4 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.

God went down to see “the city and the tower,” v. 5, and when the Lord confused their tongues and scattered them, “they left off to build the city,” v. 8, with no mention of the tower!

- One indicator of the difference between Abraham and Lot is that Abraham maintained a pastoral lifestyle, while “Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain” (Gen 13:12).

Throughout this section we will see the initial condemnation and destruction of the city of man's strength, but also the anticipation of the city of God, organized under his rule.

10 The city of confusion is broken down:-- “Confusion” is תהו “emptiness, formlessness” as in Gen 1:2. Here is a paradox: structure is the very essence of a city, but this one has become unstructured.

every house is shut up, that no man may come in.--Another paradox: houses exist so that people can enter and leave them and find shelter, but these houses have become impenetrable.

11 There is a crying for wine in the streets;--The people, accustomed to a riotous life-style, now

Isaiah 24-27, Concluding Cantata

mourn the departure of their pleasures, described in vv. 7-9.

all joy is darkened, the mirth of the land [earth] is gone.--Without their wine, and in the face of destruction, no one can rejoice.

12 In the city is left desolation, and the gate is smitten with destruction.--All that is left is ruin and rubble. The verse is highly alliterative: וְשִׁאֵר בְּעִיר שְׂמָהּ וְשִׁאֵיהָ יִבְתָּשׁ עָרָה. The repeated sibilants give the effect of the wind whistling through the abandoned ruins.

13-16a, Distant Praise

13 When thus it shall be in the midst of the land [earth] among the people, there shall be as the shaking of an olive tree, and as the gleaning grapes when the vintage is done.--He recalls the image of 17:6, comparing the remnant that survives the judgment with the gleanings of a harvest.

Isa 17:5-6 And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the corn, and reapeth the ears with his arm; and it shall be as he that gathereth ears in the valley of Rephaim. 6 Yet gleaning grapes shall be left in it, as the shaking of an olive tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof, saith the LORD God of Israel.

In spite of the desolation of vv. 7-12, a remnant escapes. And their behavior is a surprising contrast with the mourning of the previous paragraph. vv. 14-16a are a triplet. Each member mentions singing, locates the singers afar off, and points to the Lord as the subject of their song:

Singing	14 They shall lift up their voice, they shall sing ... they shall cry aloud	15 Wherefore glorify ye	have we heard songs,
Subject	for the majesty of the LORD,	the LORD ... even the name of the LORD God of Israel	even glory to the Righteous One [singular].
Source	from the sea.	in the fires [the east], ...in the isles of the sea.	16 From the uttermost part of the earth

Technical notes on the symmetry:

- The order of the elements in the third item is reversed with respect to the first two, a common form of chiasmic closure.
- The second panel doubles the second and third elements.

14 They shall lift up their voice, they shall sing—This word for “sing” emphasizes a ringing sound, a loud and joyous hymn. It is the blessed privilege of God's people to sing with joy when the world around them is wailing with despair. Our happiness does not rest in the things of this world, which will pass away. The next phrase tells us what we have to sing about:

for the majesty of the LORD,--This noun (גָּאוֹן) is one of those that has a positive connotation when applied to God, but a negative one when applied to men (e.g., Isa 13:11, “I will cause the **arrogancy** of the proud to cease”; 23:9, “The Lord of Hosts hath purposed it, to stain the **pride** of all glory”). The qualities for which the remnant praise the Lord are those that make him repugnant to unbelievers: his

Isaiah 24-27, Concluding Cantata

ancient Israel, constructed to store rainwater through the extended dry season, and one fleeing through the countryside would have to be careful not to fall into one by accident.

“Snare” is a deliberate trap, set with malice.

18 And it shall come to pass, that he who fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit; and he that cometh up out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare:--Each poses a successive threat to those who realize their danger. There is no way to escape.

for the windows from on high are open, and the foundations of the earth do shake.--The language is reminiscent of God's world-wide judgment in the days of Noah,

Gen 7:11 In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened.

As in v.5, Isaiah means us to associate the two judgments. In both cases, God's wrath against sin leads to a universal and unavoidable destruction.

19 The earth is utterly broken down, the earth is clean dissolved, the earth is moved exceedingly.--Each of these three clauses uses a special Hebrew construction to emphasize the thoroughness of the judgment, represented by the adverbs “utterly,” “clean,” and “exceedingly.” It is as broken down, dissolved, and shaken as anything possibly can be.

The next two statements use a different form of emphasis, a simile.

20 The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard,--We are to envision it tottering down the road, staggering under the stupefying influence of alcohol.

and shall be removed like a cottage;--Like a temporary lean-to in a windstorm, it is blown away.

and the transgression thereof shall be heavy upon it; and it shall fall, and not rise again.--Once again, we are reminded that the Lord's judgment is correlated with the moral failings of the inhabitants of the earth. The earth is full of transgression. Therefore it will fall without recourse.

21 And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall punish the host of the high ones that are on high, and the kings of the earth upon the earth.--The dualism of “the high ones” and “the kings” recalls the contrast between the king and prince of Tyre in Ezek 28, or the prince and kings of Persia in Dan 10:13, or the dual use of “principalities and powers” in the NT of earthly (Titus 3:1) and heavenly (Eph 6:12) political entities. God will judge both the human rulers of the nations and the spiritual powers who stand behind them.

22 And they shall be gathered together, as prisoners are gathered in the pit, and shall be shut up in the prison, and after many days shall they be visited.--“Visited” can be understood either positively (as restoration, cf. 23:17) or negatively, as final judgment (29:6). The verb has just been used in v. 21, where it is translated “punish.” This and the general tenor of this chapter suggest that we should take it in the negative sense here.

There are other biblical references to this sequence of imprisonment followed by judgment.

- Jude v. 6 records that the angels who sinned in Gen 6 are now imprisoned, awaiting “the

judgment of the great day.”

- Rev 20:1-3, 7-10 record that during the Millennium, Satan will be imprisoned, only to be judged at the end.

23, Distant Praise

23 Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed,--Recall 13:10,

Isa 13:10 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 heavenly bodies were objects of worship, but when the Lord reigns, they will be subdued before him.

when the LORD of hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously.--The Lord is pictured as enthroned in Zion, surrounded by his elders, who constitute his court. Compare 1 Kings 12:6,

1Ki 12:6 And king Rehoboam consulted with the old men, that stood before Solomon his father while he yet lived,

Currently, the Lord's court consists of “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.

Who will form the Lord's court in the future day of which Isaiah speaks? We have some clues in the NT.

Mat 19:28 And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Rev 20:4 And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them:

John's vision of the heavenly assembly includes both the “beasts” (cherubim) and the “elders” (representing the believers),

Rev 4:4-6 And round about the throne *were* four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. ... and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, *were* four beasts full of eyes before and behind.

Rev 19:4 And the four and twenty elders and the four beasts fell down and worshipped God that sat on the throne, saying, Amen; Alleluia.

Incredibly, the Lord associates us with him in his final glorious reign.

Notes

אלה and ארר "Curse"

Brichto and the lexica try to make nuanced distinctions between these roots, but the main difference appears to be suppletive: אלה is used overwhelmingly as a noun, while ארר is predominantly used verbally. Num 5:18-27 actually uses the two roots to describe the same phenomenon. So it is legitimate to cite Gen 3:17 ארר as background for the אלה of 24:6.

	Noun	Verb
אלה	35x	6x
ארר	מארה 5x	63x

קריה and עיר

Motyer emphasizes the importance of the “city” in this section, but in fact two different words are used: עיר (Isa 24:12; 25:2; 26:1; 27:10) and קריה (Isa 24:10; 25:2,3; 26:5). What is the difference between them?

1. Both can be applied to the same place (Jerusalem, in 1:22; 22:2; 25:2); more generally, they appear to be a conventional poetical pair, with עיר coming first.
2. קריה is much less common (10x in Isa, vs. 47 for עיר)
3. עיר can denote a town dependent on another town (Josh 13:17; Jer 19:15; 34:1; 49:13; Zech 7:7), like חצר or בת (cf. Neh 11:25), but קריה is never used this way.
4. Deut 2:36; 3:4 use both words, עיר to describe the cities that the Israelites conquered, קריה as a hypothetical city that might have stood against them but did not.

Items 3 and 4 suggest that קריה may imply greater strength than עיר, perhaps reflecting a derivation from קיר “wall.” (The difference is in emphasis, not fact; many instances of עיר are associated with fortifications: Isa 24:12; Lev 25:29; Deut 3:5; etc.) In this case, AV is very perceptive in rendering עיר as “town” and קריה as “city” in Hab 2:12, just as the LXX renders עיר as *πολις* and קריה as *μητροπολις* in Isa 1:26 (but in Jer 49:25 LXX renders קריה as *κομη* “village”). But overall, the difference may be more poetical (item 1) than semantic.