

Notes on Isaiah 13,14

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We begin a section (chapters 13-23) which some label as **Oracles against the Nations**. In all but three the NIV uses *against* in its editorial headings, yet some of them speak of salvation as well as judgment. All nations in this segment are related in some way to Judah and Jerusalem (1:1). We do not know when the oracles were written. Presumably they were given to Isaiah by the Lord at different times and then clustered together. See the [Appendix: Babylon in the Big Picture](#) at the end of this lesson. I highly recommend reading Jeremiah 50,51 for a longer oracle concerning Babylon.

A Chart on the relative length of each oracle:

Babylon	00000000	Egypt/Cush	0
Philistines	0	Babylon	00
Moab	0000	Edom	0
Damascus	000	Arabia	0
Cush	00	Jerusalem	0000
Egypt	0000	Tyre	000

The Oracle re Babylon That so much would be said about Babylon is very significant in Isaiah. Many say there were two Isaiah's, one who wrote 1-39 in the time of the Assyrians, and one who wrote 40-66 later with firsthand knowledge of Babylon and its demise. But Isaiah 44:24-28 insists that the Lord was showing himself as God by telling Judah the future. He even named Cyrus, the Persian monarch before birth and said that Cyrus would order the return of the Jews from the captivity (44:28; 45:1). We should affirm there was only one Isaiah and not follow those who resist the supernatural nature of predictive prophecy. Many boldly say that a man could not have such information long before time. To deny such prophecy is to deny the ability of God to tell and control the future. The Lord used very specific predictions, known to no one else and spoken by no false prophet, as proof that he is God alone (46:8-11; 48:3-8). In this early part of Isaiah, Assyria was the dominant Gentile power, yet in these oracles Babylon receives far more attention than Assyria. God was speaking well beyond the immediate issues of Isaiah's day. When godly men read Isaiah during the Babylonian Captivity, they must have had great comfort that their Lord had spoken such a clear oracle as this, more than a hundred years before their time.

13:1 – 14:27 Babylon or the World? The oracle is about Babylon, yet Babylon receives no specific mention till v.17. In vv. 2-16 it concentrates on the world (v. 11) and sometimes "the whole world" as in v.5 and 14:26. Yet the oracle is about Babylon! This is resolved when we see that the Lord is speaking of Babylon as typical of the world, its power, its ways, and its terrible end. Babylon is handled this way in the Bible because it was "the jewel of kingdoms" (v.19) outshining all others of this world for earthly glory (v.19). In Daniel 2 Babylon was the head of gold; lesser metals stood for other kingdoms. No pride could compare with Babylon's. The scope is broadened in v.9 so that those destroyed are 'sinners' not just Babylonians. So Isaiah presents her to us in this way: whatever is said of Babylon applies in principle to the world as a whole in rebellion against God. (See the appendix [Babylon in the Big Picture](#) at the end of these notes on 13 & 14.)

The oracle begins with a gathering, a coming together to battle (v.4). We do not read the prophets well if we look at such a passage as the Lord merely telling what will happen. We are reading of God's decrees. God has decided what will happen, announces it, and fulfills it. He says, "*I have summoned ... to carry out my wrath.*" (v.3) God is the ruler governing these events. Many of God's judgments have been

executed through the hand of sinners. Such judgments were no less punishment than when he personally casts the wicked into hell. First the mustering (13:4), then later the people of the world are scattered (vv.14-16).

13:6 The Day of the Lord Only chapter 13 mentions “the day of the Lord” in Isaiah. One way to define the time of ‘the day of the Lord’ is to say it is whatever day it is talking about – whatever the context requires. It always includes God’s reaction to something. It can be near at hand as in Ezekiel 13:5 & 30:3, or as here in Isaiah it speaks of an ultimate world-wide judgment which must therefore be a depiction of the final judgment when all mankind are made to stand before God. In Revelation 19 the destruction of Babylon is tightly tied to the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. Opposite things may occur at the same time.

In these verses the punishment of the world is given in the picture of many gathered for battle and much destruction, yet there is no identified winner of man over man as in v.17. It is really the Lord against man – God making man scarce (v.12), God punishing the world. The Fall of Babylon in ancient times is a foretaste of a much greater overthrow when God finally judges the entire world, and *the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ* (Revelation 11:15).

13:10-13 Apocalyptic Cosmic upheavals of the sun, moon, and stars (vv.10 & 13) indicate apocalyptic literature. This occurs often in Daniel and Revelation. See also Matthew 24:29. In Psalm 18:7-19 the rescue of David from the hand of Saul is described as “the foundations of the earth laid bare”. It has hail and lightning; even the bottom of the ocean was exposed. This was not literal. Such words do not always refer to an event *still future*. David’s deliverance from Saul is not in the time of our Lord’s Second Coming; it was long ago. Apocalyptic can be used of any time frame, so such language in Isaiah 13:13 will not settle the time it refers to, though I do think this part of Isaiah 13 does refer to the end of the world. Apocalyptic is very valuable because it turns our attention from the situation we see naturally, and makes us look at this world in terms of the mighty activity of God Who acts with supernatural intervention when and how he pleases. It fits into Isaiah 13 very well.

13:13-16 This cruel day with wrath and fierce anger (v.9) is coming. If we have little sense of human sin and divine holiness and justice, then Isaiah 13 will shock us. Grasping the attributes of God prepares us for such cosmic judgment. Vv.14-16 reveal a judgment with no defense, no escape, and no mercy.

13:17-22 The Medes Isaiah now turns from World Babylon to City Babylon of that day, the one that fell to the Medes and the Persians in 539 BC. The Second Coming is THE Day of the Lord; but the Lord stirring up the Medes is an interim fulfillment of the ultimate Day. The Medes could not be bought off with gold; they had killing in mind. Just as there will be no mercy in God’s final judgment (Proverbs 1:24 – 30), the Medes have none either. Like Sodom and Gomorrah, Babylon will have no survivors. We must remember the point of 1:9: Sodom and Gomorrah have none, but Jerusalem will have a remnant. The Babylon of ancient times has never been rebuilt. God has had no compassion on the city which was the very opposite of the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21,22. What he did to that Babylon is what he will do to the present one as it unites against God and his people.

That Babylon is overthrown by God (v.19) does not contradict his using the Medes. Isaiah 10 makes very clear that God uses nations to carry out his decisions. So we must not create a false choice of: “Was it God or the Medes?” It was both, because God used the Medes. God Himself rose up against Babylon (14:22,23). The same truth appears in Acts 2:22-24 and Acts 4:28, “*They [Pilate, Herod, Gentiles, and the people of Israel] did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen*”.

13:22 It was not a very proud day for Babylon when wild animals roam in its empty palaces. Its pride was expressed in Daniel, “*As the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, ‘Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?’*” (Daniel 4:29,30).

Isaiah said very early that “*the arrogance of man will be brought low*” (2:17). In human history the Bible presents Babylon as the prime example of pride. The principle holds: unless we humble ourselves as little children, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3). If we present to God our righteousness for him to accept, we are arrogant rejecters of Christ. But if we throw away our pretence and vaunted goodness, accepting undeserved forgiveness and the righteousness of Christ as a gift, our pride has been humbled and we will be saved.

14:1,2 Compassion on Judah Proud Babylon will be extinct; Israel will survive. Babylon is rejected; Israel is chosen.¹ Babylon will be so desolate no Arab will pitch his tent there (v.20), but God will settle Israel in their own land. Because of sin they were taken away by foreigners, but the Lord would have the peoples bring them back to their own place. In years to come Cyrus would send them back, but the hand behind it all is God. He will settle Israel.

The Lord’s saving purpose is not confined to the descendants of Jacob. “*Aliens will join them*” (v.1) as in Psalm 87. Israel will expand by adding foreigners like Ruth who confessed Israel’s God as hers (Ruth 1:16). Believers in our Lord are “*no longer aliens*” but fellow-citizens (Ephesians 2:12,19). Gentiles will be heirs together with Israel (Ephesians 3:6). This is the opposite of being a stump (6:13). By adding Gentiles God has “*enlarged the nation*” (9:3), namely Israel.

Another reversal appears in 14:1-4. Israel was to be the head and not the tail (Deuteronomy 28:13). When it rebelled against the Lord, it became subject to other nations. This will be reversed with nations again serving Israel. The alien people joined Israel voluntarily, and having done so, serve as a conquered people would, but in willful service. The increase of the kingdom of Christ (9:7) will result in an earth full of the knowledge of the Lord (11:9). Aliens will unite with Israel; they will stream to house of their own accord (2:3).

14:3-21 The king of Babylon in Sheol The oppressor will meet his end, and then there will be peace. Even the trees will be happy. One aspect of our Lord’s work on the cross is the defeat of the devil which is essential to peace in our surroundings. Peace 1 is the reconciliation of God and man based on Christ’s death. Peace 2 in our earthly existence comes only when an oppressor is removed. Peace has been acquired by the death and resurrection of Christ (Colossians 1:13). In Isaiah 14 we have an example of Peace 2 when Babylon is defeated.

A parable tells the story of the king’s appearance in the grave – not the cemetery of dead bodies but Sheol where departed *spirits* go. The king of Babylon had sent many on ahead of him to Sheol; now it is his turn. All the spirits rise to greet him. “You have become like us.” He was not immune. The man who struck fear in all other nations has also come to join the dead. Pride is brought low. The man of pomp and glory has come to maggots and worms. His motivation was to be like God, but God will not give his glory to another (48:11). The King of Babylon was brought down. He would not let his captives go when he was alive, and now he cannot go free either.

¹ The Bible may speak of a people or individuals as chosen. Some may be part of an elect people but not personally elect such as Esau in Malachi 1:2,3. We should not take corporate election to deny individual election, nor individual to deny corporate election.

Some think this speaks of the devil and his rebellion. The likeness is unmistakable, yet the context is clearly the King of Babylon. Just as the devil is a liar and murderer and reproduces after his kind (John 8:44), so this king is like Satan and lusts for the place of God. (Ezekiel 28:11-19 has some descriptions that seem to apply to the devil.) What we have in Isaiah 14 is a case of “like father, like son” but the two are not confused. Many have coveted the place of God; none has succeeded and none will. Satan was the first to try.

The cemetery Leaving the unseen world of spirits, we see how the king’s body will be treated in death. We honor our leaders by respect shown to their dead bodies. The King of Babylon will have no such honor. He will end up in the kind of body pile we see in pictures of the Holocaust, like a worthless branch tossed aside as trash. The glory of Babylon will be erased in the overthrow of the city, in the death of its people, and even in the disposal of the body of its once lofty king. Unlike the line of David which cannot be extinguished, the sons of the King of Babylon have disappeared from the earth.

14:22,23 The Lord’s declaration Language of utter determination comes from the Lord in four “I will’s”. The King of Babylon picked a fight with God, and God accepted the fight. This particular judgment is shown to be final. And in studying Isaiah one must not miss that Babylon has no survivors (v.22). In this oracle God first reveals, but to add authority He then declares (three times in vv.22,23). Next He swears (vv.24-27)! (See Psalm 95.) He is very serious.

14:24-27 God’s oath and the example of Assyria There is no separate oracle here for Assyria. The other nations in this section are mentioned separately in terms of oracles, or a woe (18:1). Thus we have reason to view the mention of Assyria as part of the oracle concerning Babylon. The oracle declares what God would surely do in the future. By bringing up Assyria, God posted it as an example of him carrying out his word. So Assyria became an example of what would surely happen with Babylon. (See Jeremiah 50:18.) There is no such thing as God announcing a plan and purpose he does not carry out. The point was for Babylon to learn from Assyria, but it did not. “*As I have planned, so it will be.*” (See Jeremiah 51:11.) The decrees of God are certain, while the strategies of nations are thwarted (8:10).

The oracle ends with another reference to the entire earth and all nations (v.26) still within the oracle concerning Babylon. The reason is that later in the Bible, especially Revelation 14-18, the term *Babylon* represents the world in its rebellion. When Peter said Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13, he was probably speaking of Rome. Historical Babylon is gone; its continuing spiritual counterpart is the world. In Christ we are called to a city whose builder and maker is God! Babylon disappears, but God’s city has foundations (Hebrews 11:10). Friendship or kinship with the world is enmity against God (James 4:4). Let us be certain where our citizenship and loyalty are. In the New Jerusalem, God will live with redeemed man, but only because the old [Babylonian] order of things has passed away (Revelation 21:2-4).

14:28-32 The Oracle re The Philistines This is dated to the death of Ahaz, the king who would not trust the Lord but put faith in an alliance with a pagan nation. That is relevant to this oracle, because the same issue is present. The Philistine envoys (v.32) were a delegation with some proposal to the Jews. The answer to them is the simple truth that since it was the Lord who established Israel as people, it would be the Lord their God who would be their refuge. [*Refuge* is one of Isaiah’s words for Christ as in 32:1,2.] Whatever enticing scheme the Philistines were offering should be rejected. Here again Isaiah touches upon a worldly alliance as the opposite of faith in the promise of God. (See chapter 31.)

King David defeated the Philistines repeatedly. By Ahaz’ day Judah was weak and no threat to them at all. These old enemies rejoiced that the strong rod of David was broken (v.29). As with Moses, a rod

could become a snake, so here the broken rod of David would reappear as an attacking snake,² because God has not forsaken Judah. It will be strong again and then its poor people would be safe, while the Philistines would be wiped out with no survivors! Moses' rod was a symbol of strength (Exodus 7:8-13). When transformed into a snake it devoured the snakes of Egypt the enemy. All Judah needs is her Lord. The Philistines will melt away with none left. The line of David, which appeared to be so weak, would one day spring up in amazing power to strike again and deliver God's people from all oppressors. This is an allusion to salvation by the coming King, Jesus Christ, the Son of David.

Appendix: Babylon in the Big Picture

The Bible gives much attention to Babylon. In Genesis 11 Babel/Babylonia was a city united in its own purpose with no regard for the Lord. God opposed it, frustrated their plans, and scattered them. God's contention with this city was evident very early.

In the Bible as a whole In time Babylon became a very powerful city. God made Nebuchadnezzar to be its ruler in power and glory (Daniel 2:37,38). No city matched Babylon in its brief moment in history, but as a city against God and his people, God would bring it down. Jeremiah 50,51 prophesied the sudden and drastic end of Babylon, "So will Babylon sink to rise no more..." (Jeremiah 51:64). Both themes run through Scripture: Babylon the Great and Babylon has fallen. See Revelation 14-18 about "the great city" and its eternal ruin. Note the joy in heaven when Babylon is destroyed, as it deserves to be (Revelation 19:1-3).

The ancient city on the Euphrates River, a city of greatness and evil, was and remains a type of the world itself, a world that dares to oppose God, has false gods and persecutes God's people. The spirit of Babylon, the spirit of Anti-Christ, lives on in the world (1 John 4:1-3). Babylon, with new people now but the same rebellion as before, is a name for the world-city to be put down by God. God also has a city, one he transforms into a City of Righteousness (Isaiah 1:26). It is the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22), the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, the Bride (Revelation 21:2), "the mother of us all" (Galatians 4:26), the beloved city (Revelation 20:9).

In Isaiah as a whole These oracles and prophesies in Isaiah 13-27 speak much of Babylon. Before Assyria was removed as a threat, the Babylonians made an overture for an alliance with Hezekiah. Isaiah condemned Hezekiah's reception of them and predicted captivity in Babylon (chapter 39). The great deliverance of the Lord in chapters 40-48 is from Babylon. The LORD God of Israel, the real God, destroyed Bel and Nebo, gods of Babylon (chapter 46). The Lord's people are to flee the place (48:20). They may do so because God is their Redeemer/Savior/Deliverer (43:1,14; 45:15). But even when Babylon was a city on the Euphrates River, a distinct nation known to the world, God spoke of deliverance from it in expanded terms. Thus even this early in Scripture this is a foretaste of everlasting salvation (45:17) greater than Israel's physical return from the Babylonian Captivity. We miss the big picture if we see only Israel's deliverance from an ancient oppressor. That was God's salvation in miniature.

² This is an example of Scripture presenting a future event by using earlier figures or events, which were familiar to the people of God. It is a way to convey that the same Lord with an unchanged purpose is still active in behalf of his people. See also 11:15,16; 4:2 & 50:2. This feature in Scripture is essential to interpreting the Book of Revelation with its many allusions to OT imagery.

In Isaiah 13-27 Babylon appears three times. In the first oracle (13:1 – 14:27) and in the second set of oracles beginning with 21:1-10. More than a century before the fall of Babylon, its judgment is stated as God punishing the world (13:11). This repeated way of presenting Babylon makes it very clear very early – even prior to the fall of the ancient version – that this single city would serve as a metaphor for the entire world. Keeping this in mind is a great aid in understanding Revelation. The big picture is already clear in the Old Testament.

The Contrast of Two Cities The third passage concerning Babylon (chapters 24-27) was conditioned in earlier chapters by references to Babylon as city and world. Then chapter 24 treats the earth, the world and the city as the same entity, of which ancient Babylon was typical. The desolate world-city (24:10) faces ultimate judgment in which the floodgates of divine wrath open to shake the foundations of the earth (24:18). This goes beyond God’s dealings with a city no longer in existence. It is the worldwide earth that falls never to rise again (24:20, Jeremiah 51:64). Isaiah 24-27 sets forth *their* city Babylon (without Babylon being named) in 25:2,12; 26:5, and as earth and world again in 26:9. This contrasts with *our* city (26:1) of this mountain (25:7,10) which is Zion (without Zion being named); thus it is Jerusalem. “*We* have a strong city” (26:1); in fact, it is an enlarged nation (26:15) with extended borders, but *they* have a destroyed city. There is no Nebuchadnezzar International Airport serving the Babylon region. Viewing life in this fallen world as a contest between two different kinds of cities is seeing a picture that does not begin in Revelation but in Isaiah.

Babylon is a foil (i.e., a deliberate contrast) for God’s city. As our Lord dealt with Babylon in history, so will he deal with the world “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with holy angels...” (See 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10.) We must take heed to see that our true home is the city of God, not the city of the world. Satan’s day ends in the day of the Lord (13:6 & 9) when rebellion is forever removed from the earth. The new heavens and the new earth will be the home of righteousness (2 Peter 3:13), the Faithful City (1:26). All who receive Christ reject the passing city with its enticement and enjoy everlasting life in the real one.