

Isaiah 21

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21:1-10 An oracle concerning the Fall of Babylon 150 years later than Isaiah, Judah would face a foe that would overwhelm them. In Isaiah's time the Lord spared Jerusalem from Assyria. But one day he would send Babylon, warning his people by Jeremiah and Ezekiel that if they did not repent of their idols, Jerusalem would fall, and it did. Many call this *The Babylonian Captivity*.

However, as early as the days of Isaiah, before Babylon was the dominant power, God spoke by his servant Isaiah about that nation. Here in chapter 21 we have the same old carnal solution to trouble. Jerusalem had turned to Egypt for help against Assyria, only to find that Egypt was full of empty promise (chapters 30,31). So the idea that Babylon might be a good ally against the threat of Assyria was very tempting. This we find in chapter 39. Yet Hezekiah's nation would receive the opposite of what he wanted. This short oracle in chapter 21 was given to dispense with such a thought. Babylon too would be defeated, thus it could not be a very good Savior. (The oracle about Babylon in chapters 13 & 14 speak of its total destruction in the days of later prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.)

After Babylon defeated everyone in all directions and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, Babylon itself was overthrown in 539 BC by the Medes and Persians. That was near the end of the seventy year captivity for the exiled Jews and the return to the land to rebuild Jerusalem. 150 years before that 21:9 said, "*Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground.*" Did Babylon fall twice? Early on, Babylon challenged Assyria when Assyria was strong, and Babylon lost. This is the background of Isaiah 21. As resistors to Assyria, the Babylonians were a very attractive temptation for Hezekiah to desire them as allies – thus the tragedy in chapters 21 & 39. Note the trend: Judah had trusted Assyria to aid them against Israel/Aram; then they trusted Egypt against Assyria. In Isaiah 39, we have evidence of trust in Babylon to resist Assyrian domination. Such an alliance was also a betrayal of faith in the God of Israel. Isaiah shows in this chapter that Babylon at that time in history was defeated by Assyria. Thus the "fallen, fallen" message. Trusting in the Babylonians was just one more folly, a spiritual departure from fidelity to their covenant Lord. It was faith in another loser, when all along the Mighty Lord was committed by covenant to maintain them, if they would simply believe him. This explains Isaiah's anguish in vv.3,4.

Two Isaiah's? Some hold that the detail about Babylon and its eventual fall prove that an Isaiah of a later time added to this prophecy. They think some later writing was included with the early writing of the Isaiah who lived in the days of Ahaz and Hezekiah. The first Isaiah knew of the Assyrian threat, but a later "Isaiah" (or Second Isaiah) wrote of the eventual Fall of Babylon under the Medes. This later "Isaiah" would name Cyrus before he was born (44:28; 45:1; 45:13). That to these scholars is proof that he was a contemporary of Cyrus. One form of this evil hypothesis says that the first Isaiah wrote only chapters 1-39. But notice that the oracles of the nations beginning in chapter 13 and here again in chapter 21, speak of both defeats of Babylon. God spoke of Babylon within chapters 1-39. He more than knows the future; he announces it as certain, and fulfills his Word infallibly. Lifeless idols cannot do this, but the God of Israel did, and thereby he claimed to be the real God (44:6-8; 48:3-5). God spoke all this through ONE Isaiah.

Babylon a model of insurrection against God Babylon as a model of "the city of man" extends from Genesis to Revelation. The Lord has deliberately used that city *as representative of the world opposed to him*. In Genesis 11, they had an agenda opposed to God's. He frustrated Babel's plans by confusing their languages. They appear again as a foe of Assyria (in 21), but fail. In Daniel's day they would rule the world, yet crash in one day (Daniel 5:26-31). In 1 Peter 5:13 Babylon is a name for Rome. Then in Revelation 14:8, quoting Isaiah 21:9, we have another proclamation of its fall ending its powerful worldwide influence, falling in a single day (Revelation 18:8). Its ultimate fall never to rise again is pictured in graphic terms in Revelation 18, where it is the model city of sin, the very opposite of New Jerusalem, the city of our God. We look for a city whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10). The past "falls" of Babylon and the future symbolic fall in Revelation 14:8 all mean man's united rebellion will be crushed, and *the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever* (Rev. 11:15).

21:2-5 The stern vision (ESV) means it is not good news for Jerusalem. So this shows the fall of Babylon as a helper. “The betrayer betrays” (v.2) is a phrase used elsewhere of Assyria as the betrayer (33:1). We should expect it to mean the same here. This is a dire vision, painful for the prophet to report (v.3). To link up with Babylon is to incur Assyria’s wrath after Babylon has been punished for its threat. Judah will suffer greatly for this spiritual blunder. Isaiah has no glee at the death of the wicked. The Medes have help from Elam, a nation to the east of Babylon, to defeat Babylon. Later when Babylon was the superpower, Elam was no longer a threat. God will end the sighing Babylon has caused, because she is no longer able to fulfill her threats. If Babylon is no longer a danger to her neighbors, neither is she any aid to Jerusalem! The news is terrible, because Babylon’s fall makes way for a rampage by Assyria against Babylon’s allies, and Judah was one of them! They prepare for war; it is all in vain; Babylon will fall. That leaves all the little nations who trusted her in terrible trouble, because the Assyrians were exceptionally cruel.

21:6-8 Waiting for the answer. Eventually the lookout sees the courier in his chariot. The news is, “Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!” This is both sad and wonderful. In Revelation 19 they sing Hallelujah over such news. Later in Isaiah (chapters 40-48), the news of Babylon’s fall and extinction is the severe hand of God against the most glorious empire the world has ever seen. Throughout Scripture Babylon represents the world and all its glory and doom. It was an awesome and autocratic empire.

You, O king [Nebuchadnezzar], are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold (Daniel 2:37,38).

21:9,10 Judgment against a powerful enemy is part of deliverance. Satan is the prince of this world (John 12:31), the ruler of the kingdom of the air (Ephesians 2:2). Christ came to judge and destroy him (1 Corinthians 15:24-26, John 16:11, Colossians 2:13-15, Hebrews 2:14,15). Salvation is represented in both testaments as including the destruction of Babylon. God sets his people free from it. They will no longer be crushed underfoot on the threshing floor. Babylon faced divine defeat at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 9), at the hand of Assyria (Isaiah 21), at the sudden collapse overnight to the Medes and Persians (Daniel 5), and ultimately will crumble at the Second Coming of Christ (Revelation 14-18). One would be wise not to join them.

The news of Babylon’s fall in Isaiah 21 is news (or so I suppose) of Assyrian retaliation against Jerusalem. Thus Isaiah cringes, and gives his people an unwelcome message. To his people, pictured as those who have endured a threshing, this is the announcement from the Lord, a word they would not relish. The watchman must report what he sees, and the prophet must convey the Lord’s message, not the assurances that hearers wish for.

Shattered gods This is a major theme in Isaiah. “...*All the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground.*” (21:9). It is the holy determination of God to crush false gods, to show their falseness, their powerlessness against him, and to judge them as the tools of Satan that they are. Isaiah names Bel and Nebo, the deposed and helpless gods of Babylon (46:1-7). In Exodus 12:12 the Lord said, “... *On all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord.*” Again he said, “... *The idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence ...*” (Isaiah 19:1). The story of Philistine gods, fallen and broken before the ark of the God of Israel, is easy to read, but I fear is not well-known. It needs to be. See 1 Samuel 4-7, “... *Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him*” (1 Samuel 5:3,4). To understand such a Scripture is to know the hand of God in the history of the world even before it strikes. The images represent demons. Luther was right to say of Satan, “His wrath and power are great.” The Bible does not stop at commandments forbidding the worship of idols. It further informs us that the unchangeable Lord has shown his divine fury in the past toward false gods. In the end he will crush every pretender to his throne and every vestige of error which emerges from the lying heart of the devil.

21:11,12 An Oracle of Dumah and Seir This refers to Edom, the nation descended from Esau. The brief oracle indicates time passing and uncertainty for the future. What is going to happen is not told; the inquirer must come back again. There is a lot of watching and waiting and wondering. God did not reveal any specific decision concerning them. Israel had promises to support hope. Esau had none.

21:13-17 An Oracle concerning Arabs The Dedanites live in Arabia, east of the Red Sea. They too are fugitives seeking help, hoping for it from fellow Arabs, the warriors of Kedar. But there is no effective help from them, because soon they too will be defeated and their glory brought down. Kedar in Genesis 25:13 is a son of Ishmael. God promised to preserve the children of Ishmael and he has. Millions live today as testimony of God's mercy on Hagar and her son (Genesis 21:17,18). In this oracle Kedar has survivors, so there is a remnant among them also. (Since I know a number of beloved Arab brothers and sisters, such words are a joy to me.) In due time, they too in large numbers will sing the praises of the Lord (42:11,12). But in this oracle the Dedanites are drawn into the turmoil in the rest of the world. Even their own people cannot help them.