

Judgment on Babylon, Edom, and Arabia

Isaiah 21

Isaiah 21:1-10 - *“The burden against the Wilderness of the Sea. As whirlwinds in the South pass through, so it comes from the desert, from a terrible land. ² A distressing vision is declared to me; the treacherous dealer deals treacherously, and the plunderer plunders. Go up, O Elam! Besiege, O Media! All its sighing I have made to cease.*

³ Therefore my loins are filled with pain; pangs have taken hold of me, like the pangs of a woman in labor. I was distressed when I heard it; I was dismayed when I saw it. ⁴ My heart wavered, fearfulness frightened me; the night for which I longed He turned into fear for me. ⁵ Prepare the table, set a watchman in the tower, eat and drink. Arise, you princes, anoint the shield! ⁶ For thus has the Lord said to me: “Go, set a watchman; let him declare what he sees.” ⁷ And he saw a chariot with a pair of horsemen, a chariot of donkeys, and a chariot of camels, and he listened earnestly with great care.

⁸ Then he cried, “A lion, my Lord! I stand continually on the watchtower in the daytime; I have sat at my post every night.

⁹ And look, here comes a chariot of men with a pair of horsemen!” Then he answered and said, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen! And all the carved images of her gods He has broken to the ground.” ¹⁰ Oh, my threshing and the grain of my floor! That which I have heard from the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, I have declared to you.”

Background Notes

Chapters 13-23 form a subdivision of the book of Isaiah. This subdivision contains prophecies against the foreign nations surrounding the kingdom of Judah. In chapter 21 are prophecies against Babylon, Edom, and Arabia.

Wasn't there already a pronouncement of judgment against Babylon back in chapters 13-14? Yes, there was. It appears that a second oracle of judgment was added, starting in chapter 21. There are five prophecies of judgment in chapters 21-23, with judgments against Babylon, Edom, and Arabia in chapter 21. Chapter 22 is a parenthesis – it is a judgment pronounced on Jerusalem, which was obviously not a foreign nation. Then chapter 23 was a pronouncement of judgment on the city-state of Tyre.

This second series of judgment oracles seems to be more intense and more negative than the first series.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord pronounced judgment against Babylon.

Babylon was described as the “wilderness of the sea” (v1), possibly because of the broad flat delta plain in the Mesopotamian Valley, where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers enter the Persian Gulf. The Babylonian Empire certainly controlled and occupied this area.

What about the “winds” of verse 1? “*As whirlwinds in the South pass through, so it comes from the desert, from a terrible land.*” The hot desert winds sweep over this area (and any U.S. soldier who has been in Iraq will agree). God will bring devastating forces, like the fierce hot winds, against Babylon. Assyria, Elam and Media, will go up against Babylon and cause her to groan (v2).

Isaiah did not glory in the horrors of war even though Babylon, the enemy of God’s people, would be judged (v3-4). This is a good lesson for us. We praise the Lord when He judges sin, because the righteousness of God is vindicated, and the consequences of sin are in line with biblical truth. But we don’t glory in seeing people suffer as the result of sin, and we don’t enjoy seeing the horrors of righteous judgment.

Most likely, verses 5-9 predicted the invasion of Babylon by the Medes and Persians in 589 BC (described in detail in Daniel 5). Daniel 5:1-4 says, “*Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand. While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.*”

Notice how Isaiah 21:5 predicted this banquet and the desecration of the Temple vessels: “*Prepare the table: set a watchman in the tower, eat and drink.* But then comes the sudden alarm! Babylon was under attack and needed to be defended. “*Arise, you princes - anoint the shield!*” Military shields were oiled before battle so that opposing weapons would slip and only strike a glancing blow - but it was too late.

As Daniel 5 described, during Belshazzar’s feast a hand appeared on the wall, writing a message of judgment. And Babylon fell on that very night, just as Daniel had previously predicted. Daniel 5:30-31: “*That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.*”

In the Isaiah 21 prophetic oracle against Babylon, Isaiah was to station a lookout and watch for cavalry coming with riders in pairs, along with a supply train of donkeys and camels (v6-7). That is exactly how the Persian army marched.

In the oracle, the sentry reported that a chariot was coming. They announced that Babylon was fallen, and her idols could not help her because they were broken and shattered (v8-9). It was “threshing” – the Lord’s discipline. This would be good news for Judah – but this prophecy would warn Judah about making treaties with the up-and-coming Babylonian Empire that was looming on the horizon in Isaiah’s day.

Certainly this prophecy looks ahead to the complete fulfillment in the last days where we read of the defeat of End-Time Babylon in both Revelation 14 and 18. *“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.”* (Revelation 14:8 and Revelation 18:2). The Lord pronounced judgment against Babylon.

2. The Lord pronounced judgment against Edom.

Isaiah 21:11-12 - *“The burden against Dumah. He calls to me out of Seir, “Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?”* ¹² *The watchman said, “The morning comes, and also the night. If you will inquire, inquire; return! Come back!*

Dumah (v11) refers to Edom, because of the mention of Seir, which was the land of Edom. Genesis 32:3 says, *“Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother, in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.”*

It seems that Dumah was a name used here for Edom because, in the Hebrew text, it’s a word play in the prophetic oracle. Dumah means “silence.” The watchman in the prophecy was silent about Edom’s ultimate fate.

When the watchman was asked, *“What of the night”* or *How far is the night?”* In other words, how long until morning? The answer was *“Morning comes, but also the night.”* This may mean that morning was coming for Israel (relief from the Assyrian oppression), but night was coming for Edom. It could also mean that Edom would experience a short time of morning of freedom (relief from the Assyrian oppression), and then a further night of judgment would come.

The end of verse 12 says, *“If you will inquire, inquire; Return! Come back!”* The word *“return”* here could be understood in the sense of “repent and turn to the Lord.” If so, the point is obvious: “Edom, if you want to know the mind of God about your future, repent and turn to the Lord!” The same would be true for anyone today who wants to know about the future. Repent, and turn to the Lord!

This pronouncement of judgment on Edom would certainly be a warning to Judah not to make any alliances with Edom. The Lord pronounced judgment against Edom.

3. The Lord pronounced judgment against Arabia.

Isaiah 21:13-17 – *“The burden against Arabia. In the forest in Arabia you will lodge, O you traveling companies of Dedanites. ¹⁴ O inhabitants of the land of Tema, bring water to him who is thirsty; with their bread they met him who fled. ¹⁵ For they fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow, and from the distress of war. ¹⁶ For thus the Lord has said to me: “Within a year, according to the year of a hired man, all the glory of Kedar will fail; ¹⁷ and the remainder of the number of archers, the mighty men of the people of Kedar, will be diminished; for the Lord God of Israel has spoken it.”*

The territory of Arabia was southeast of Edom. Arabia was also facing the threat of an Assyrian attack. In fact, counting the time just as a hired man counts the exact length of time that he works, within a year Arabia and her army of tribesmen would be decimated in precisely that way (v16-17). Then the Arabian caravans (v13), and the fugitives (v14), and those who escape the sword (v15), would be looking for food, water, safety, and a place to hide.

So the message was, “Judah, don’t place any of your hopes in Arabia!” It would be futile, because the Lord has pronounced judgment against Arabia.

Practical Application

Watch for coming events!

In verse 6, the lookout was to report what he saw – specifically, what he saw in light of the prophecy: *“Go, set a watchman. Let him declare what he sees.”*

We should do the same. The Lord didn’t include the prophecies of coming events in His Word only to create interesting discussions for the prophecy scholars in the Church. It’s important for all of us to know the prophecies - so we can watch!

In view of coming events, the Lord Jesus said, *“Take heed, watch and pray, for you do not know when the time is” (Mark 13:33)*. We are living in a day that may indeed be the threshold of the End Times. We are to take heed – and watch - and pray.

Take heed! Keep your eye on the news as it relates to biblical prophecy.

Watch for coming events!