

ISAIAH 14: LAMENT OVER BABYLON

OUTLINE OF ISAIAH 13-14

- A. The Day of the Lord (Ultimate Judgment on Ultimate Babylon) (13:1-16)
- B. Immediate Judgment on Present Babylon (13:17-22)
- C. The Messianic Kingdom of Israel (14:1-2)
- D. **Ultimate Judgment on Ultimate Babylon (14:3-23)**
 - 1. Earth at peace with death of the king (4b-8)
 - 2. Sheol stirred at the arrival of the king (9-11)
 - 3. Ironic end in Sheol of the one who aspired to be God (12-15)
 - 4. Ironic end on earth of the one who terrified nations (16-21)
- E. Immediate Judgment on Present Assyria (14:24-27)

Of 14:9-15 “This poem is an imaginative visit to Sheol. Though neither an architect’s drawing of the world-to-come nor a sociologist’s report, a poem can be expected to draw out principles and focus issues. In this way it expresses some central Old Testament truths about the dead. First, the dead are alive—in Sheol. In the Bible ‘death’ is never ‘termination’ but a change of place and of state with continuity of personal identity. Sheol is the ‘place’ where all the dead live (see Jb. 3:11–19; Ps. 49:9). Secondly, in Sheol there is personal continuity and mutual recognition; the king is recognized as he arrives (10). Those already there rise from their thrones, not because there are thrones in Sheol but to show that they are the same people as they were on earth. In the same way, Abraham was ‘gathered to his people’ (Gn. 25:8), and David looked forward to joining his infant son (2 Sa 12:23). Thirdly, Sheol is a place of weakness with loss, not enhancement, of earthly powers. The dead are ‘shades’ or ‘shadowy ones’ (see on verse 9), who describe themselves as having become ‘weak’ (10). In verse 11 Sheol is related to the grave and the decomposing corpse. This hints at the explanation of the weakness: in biblical understanding human beings are embodied souls/besouled bodies, but at death this unity is sundered and the body falls into the ground. How, then, can the spirit in Sheol be a complete person? The Old Testament awaits Jesus and the illumination of immortality (2 Tim. 1:10) to fulfil its hints of the resurrection of the body” (Motyer 1993: 143-44).

“What would earth be if death did not put a limitation upon human fallenness?” (Oswalt 1986: 316).

“Jesus’ use of v. 12 to describe Satan’s fall (Luke 10:18; cf. Rev. 12:8–10) has led many to see more than a reference to the king of Babylon. Just as the Lord addressed Satan in His words to the serpent (Gen. 3:14,15), this inspired dirge speaks to the king of Babylon and to the devil who energized him. See Ezek. 28:12–17 for similar language to the king of Tyre and Satan behind him” (*MacArthur Study Bible* on Isa 14:12-14).

Of 14:24-27, “This short oracle provides the transition from the general treatment of worldly pomp and power, symbolized by Babylon, in 13:1–14:23, to the concrete and particular expressions of it in Isaiah’s own day which now follow. First in line, naturally enough, is Assyria. In its size, its arrogance, and its oppressive imperialism it was the manifestation, *par excellence*, of the spirit of Babel in the eighth century BC” (Webb 1996: 84).

SOURCES CITED

J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 1993.

John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, NICOT, 1986.

Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, The Bible Speaks Today, 1996.

NOTES

14:4-21 is composed as a lament, but it *rejoices* over the death of the king. The parody reaches its climax in verses 20-21 with a wish that the king have no descendants and his name never be remembered (the opposite of what is typical in a lament).

Indications that this is more than a lament of a single king:

1. Chapter 13 speaks not of destruction of a single nation, but of the greatest nation at the end of time.
2. No single king (Assyrian or Babylonian) fits this description.
3. Verses 22-23 makes it clear that this is an oracle against an entire nation.
4. The oracle against Assyria is not a separate unit as the oracles against Philistia (14:28), Moab (15:1), Damascus (17:1), etc. Assyria is best understood as the present manifestation of the God-defying pride represented by Babylon.
5. Babylon was the first nation where mankind united in rebellion against God (Babylon=Babel; Gen 11). Thus it became a symbol for human pride in defiance of God's will. This climaxes in the final battle of evil against God in Revelation 17-19, where Babylon is destroyed.

SATAN

Passages about Satan sometimes used to see a reference to Satan in Isaiah 14:12-15.

Ezekiel 28:11-20 "...raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre...: "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; ... You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God...You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you...you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God...Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I exposed you before kings, to feast their eyes on you....All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more forever."

Luke 10:17-19 "The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" 18 And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. 19 Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you."

1 Timothy 3:6 "He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil."

Revelation 12:7-9 "Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him."

QUOTATIONS

Of 14:4b-21 "There is general agreement that this is one of the finest of Hebrew poems. It manifests a balance of terms, a forcefulness, and a power of imagery that is typical of the best of Hebrew poetry. The total impact is unforgettable. It is divided into four stanzas of almost equal length, each one describing a different scene" (Oswalt 1986: 315).

"Babylon was no newcomer to the world stage. It had a history reaching right back to the tower of Babel, and was therefore a fitting symbol of that arrogant pomp and power of the world that were characteristic of the nations as a whole in their rebellion against God. Babylon had already had one great period of glory in Isaiah's day, and it was soon to have another before its end came.... The story of Babylon was, for him, the story of all nations that defy God" (Webb 1996: 81).

"The fall of Babylon merges, in this oracle, with the final great *day of the Lord* (6, cf. 9), when *all* human arrogance will be judged, and *all* human pomp and power will be exposed for the hollow things that they are (cf. 2:12-22)" (Webb 1996: 81).

"The cosmic sweep of the poem led some early interpreters, and many since them, to see here a symbolic description of the fall of Satan. But if this reads too much into the text (and I think it does), it is equally misguided to reduce it to a description of the fall of a particularly earthly monarch. The king of Babylon here, like Babylon itself in chapter 13, is a representative figure, the embodiment of that worldly arrogance that defies God and tramples on others in its lust for power. It is this which lies at the heart of every evil for which particular nations will be indicted in the following chapters. It also lies at the heart of all the horrendous acts of inhumanity which human beings and nations still commit against one another today. That is why the tone of this song should not cause us any embarrassment. This is no cheap gloating over the downfall of an enemy, but the satisfaction and delight which God's people rightly feel at his final victory over evil. The same note of celebration is heard at the very end of the Bible where, again, Babylon is a cipher for all that opposes God and his purposes" (Webb 1996: 83).

"Just as 13:2-6 is a poem which uses 'day of the Lord' imagery and then associates it with the fall of Babylon (13:17-22) as an 'interim day', so here [14:3-23] the general idea of a hostile world power is personalized into the imaginative portrayal of the end of the world king and this, in turn, receives intermediate realization in the end of the imperial dynasty of Babylon (22-23). The more we think of chapters 13-27 as a study of the principles of world history merging forward into eschatology, the easier it becomes to see that from the start Babylon carries overtones of the 'city of emptiness' (24:10) whose fall is the end of all that opposes the Lord's rule" (Motyer 1993: 142).

"*Babylon* looms large in this section of Isaiah as both the historical city and empire and as the ancient locus of arrogant self-sufficiency (Gn. 11:1ff.)" (Motyer 1993: 136).