

The Book of ISAIAH – Chapters 1-39

Catholic Scripture Study

Memory Verse: Isaiah 54:10

*For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*

Oracle Against Babylon (Isaiah 13:1-22)

I. INTRODUCTION

Chapters 1-12 of Isaiah contain prophetic warnings (oracles) of the severe judgments that await the people of Israel if they do not repent and turn back to God.

Now we come to the second great division of Isaiah's prophecies. Chapters 13-23 contain a series of oracles against the *foreign nations* as opposed to Israel.

Babylon heads the list of these foreign nations whom God had used to judge and punish Israel.

The sins of these nations are the same as those of Judah/Israel, namely, idolatry, wickedness, pride, arrogance, and the ruthlessness of evil people.

And the oracles against the nations are no better nor worse than those against Israel.

But here is the pivotal lesson: if the foreign nations are punished for their sins against God and man, how much more severely shall Judah be punished?

A. Summary

Essentially, we are confronted with the mystery of the absolute justice of the all-holy God, who cannot ignore the sins and idolatry of the nations forever.

Keep in mind that although there are specific messages for a particular nation and time in history, there are also principles of peace and justice that can apply to all people and all nations throughout history.

Political situations change, people and nations change, but God remains constant. God never changes.

II. AN ORACLE CONCERNING BABYLON (IS 13:1-5)

A. Overview

The first oracle in Chapter 13 concerns **Babylon**, a nation far removed in time from Isaiah, who prophesied in the eighth century BC (around 742 to 701 BC).

Because the prophecies concern Babylon long after Isaiah's time, many scholars assume that Isaiah could not have written them, yet we are explicitly told (13:1) that it was **seen** (i.e. in a vision) by Isaiah, the son of Amoz.

The oracle then is a divine revelation which has to do with Babylon and which was revealed by God to Isaiah the prophet in the eighth century BC.

Note: Oracles are the direct words of God given through the prophets for the people.

The oracle begins with the Lord calling a mighty army to enter **the gates of the nobles**, that is, the gates of Babylon. This will take place on the **day of the Lord**, which usually signified the image of the Lord coming in power to destroy the enemy.

The day of the Lord, besides destroying the land and sinners, will also be a time of cosmic disturbance. The stars, the sun, and the moon will not send out their light. Many people will be slaughtered.

Read: Isaiah 13:1-8

[1]The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.

***[2] On a bare hill raise a signal,
cry aloud to them;
wave the hand for them to enter
the gates of the nobles.***

***[3] I myself have commanded my consecrated ones,
have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger,
my proudly exulting ones.***

***[4] Hark, a tumult on the mountains
as of a great multitude!
Hark, an uproar of kingdoms,
of nations gathering together!
The LORD of hosts is mustering
a host for battle.***

***[5] They come from a distant land,
from the end of the heavens,
the LORD and the weapons of his indignation,
to destroy the whole earth.***

***[6] Wail, for the day of the LORD is near;
as destruction from the Almighty it will come!***

***[7] Therefore all hands will be feeble,
and every man's heart will melt,***

[8] and they will be dismayed.

Pangs and agony will seize them;

they will be in anguish like a woman in travail.

They will look aghast at one another;

their faces will be aflame.

B. The Evil Empire (Is 13:1)

Babylon is the centre of world power and idolatry hostile to God. It was the arch enemy of God, being responsible, under Nebuchadnezzar, for destroying the First Temple (Solomon's Temple) in 586 BC.

Since then others have taken over its role, especially the Romans for their destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70. Later, the author of the Book of Revelation will use Babylon symbolically to refer to the Roman Empire.

Babylon is the supreme symbol of human wickedness (e.g. Rev. 17-18). It tops Isaiah's list. Egypt and Assyria can receive God's blessing (Is 19:24-25), but Babylon is never forgiven.

These prophecies appear in the book of Isaiah not for the benefit of the Babylonians but for the people of God. From them Israel would learn that the hostile power of the world in its most powerful manifestation would finally be brought to ignominious defeat and ruin.

No power that sets itself against God, even one as arrogant and powerful as the Babylonian Empire, can prevail.

Thus, Israel would learn that God does not permit to go unpunished the wickedness of those who have set themselves against the Lord and against His anointed, and who oppose His people.

C. Gathering an Army against Babylon (Is 13:2-6)

The first part of the oracle describes the massing of a great army to attack Babylon: ***The LORD of hosts is mustering a host for battle (Is 13:4).***

Here God reveals himself as a mighty warrior accompanied by courageous men who will carry out his plans and designs in battle against the wicked Babylon. ***I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger . . . (Is 13:3).***

The gathering point for this army is a mountain on which a military standard (flag) has been raised. Around this standard the soldiers, summoned from distant lands, gather as a rallying point (13:2).

This is God's army, armed with ***the weapons of his indignation*** (13:5), advancing on Babylon.

Historical Note: The mighty Babylonian Empire was destroyed in 538 BC by Cyrus, king of the Persians about, 150 years after Isaiah's prophecy.

D. The Day of the Lord (Is 13:6)

Wail, for the day of the LORD is near . . . is addressed to the Babylonians.

The destruction of Babylon will take place on the day of the Lord, which usually signified the image of the Lord coming in power to destroy the enemy.

The destruction of Babylon by ***the Almighty*** will cause hands to fall limp, hearts to melt, dismay and anguish (13:7).

There would be various manifestations of this day, and the destruction of Babylon would be one of the most forceful. It would

also be a type and even a beginning of the final judgment to come at the end of time. Isaiah sees both together.

Note: In the book of Revelation Babylon is portrayed as the type of the great enemy of God.

III. THE DAY OF THE LORD (CONT'D) (13:9-22)

A. Overview

The day of the Lord, besides destroying the land and sinners, will also be a time of cosmic disturbance. The stars, the sun and the moon will not send out their lights.

Many people will be slaughtered.

Read: Isaiah 13:9-22

***[9] Behold, the day of the LORD comes,
cruel, with wrath and fierce anger,
to make the earth a desolation
and to destroy its sinners from it.***

***[10] For the stars of the heavens and their constellations
will not give their light;
the sun will be dark at its rising
and the moon will not shed its light.***

***[11] I will punish the world for its evil,
and the wicked for their iniquity;
I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant,
and lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless.***

***[12] I will make men more rare than fine gold,
and mankind than the gold of Ophir.***

***[13] Therefore I will make the heavens tremble,
and the earth will be shaken out of its place,
at the wrath of the LORD of hosts
in the day of his fierce anger.***

***[14] And like a hunted gazelle,
or like sheep with none to gather them,
every man will turn to his own people,
and every man will flee to his own land.***

***[15] Whoever is found will be thrust through,
and whoever is caught will fall by the sword.***

***[16] Their infants will be dashed in pieces
before their eyes;
their houses will be plundered
and their wives ravished.***

***[17] Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them,
who have no regard for silver
and do not delight in gold.***

***[18] Their bows will slaughter the young men;
they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb;
their eyes will not pity children.***

***[19] And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms,
the splendor and pride of the Chaldeans,
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah
when God overthrew them.***

***[20] It will never be inhabited
or dwelt in for all generations;
no Arab will pitch his tent there,
no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there.***

***[21] But wild beasts will lie down there,
and its houses will be full of howling creatures;
there ostriches will dwell,
and there satyrs will dance.***

***[22] Hyenas will cry in its towers,
and jackals in the pleasant palaces;
its time is close at hand
and its days will not be prolonged.***

A. The Outpouring of Judgment

The day of the Lord is a horrific day for sinners – those who oppose God and persecute His people. It is a day of human helplessness and terror. No help is possible.

Note: The oracle applies specifically to Babylon, but it also points to the final judgment, and all the judgments of God throughout history, e.g., in the Twentieth Century, World Wars I and II.

Reflection: Are we not also, like the Babylonians, sinners who have turned against a holy God? We are indeed, but we have a refuge which God himself has provided, Jesus Christ!

The Lord has summoned his troops from distance lands to carry out His wrathful destruction of Babylon (13:3). **Behold, the day of the lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth the desolation and to destroy its sinners from it** (Isaiah 13:9).

The reason for God's wrath and anger is the idolatry of the people; the wickedness, pride, arrogance, and ruthlessness of evil people. God is not fickle, nor lacking in mercy. But the Lord cannot abide evil indefinitely, without eventually taking some action.

In our time, lamenting pornography, abortion, human trafficking, war, and terrorism, someone once said, "If God doesn't do something about us soon, He is going to have to repent for Sodom and Gomorrah."

The devastation depicted in Isaiah 13 against Babylon is horrific.

People will flee from their homes like hunted gazelles or a runaway flock (13:14). Men will die in battle: those who do not escape will be put to the sword and killed. Even the women and children of the Babylonians will not escape punishment: **Their infants will be dashed in pieces . . . and their wives ravished** (13:16-17).

B. The Attackers – The Medes and Persians

The Lord identifies the attacking army as the Medes. The Medes joined with Cyrus of Persia in defeating the Babylonians. The Medes are driven by revenge, not plunder (gold or silver). Thus, money will not deter them from taking revenge on the Babylonians (v. 17). They can't be bought off.

The prophet predicts that glorious Babylon will be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Historical Note: the Medes were a warlike people from the Zagros Mountains east of the Tigris River in what is today Iran. They were successively allied with Assyria, Babylon, and Persia.

Allied with the Persians and led by King Cyrus II (Cyrus the Great), they invaded Babylonia from the east in June of 539 B.C. and captured its capital, Babylon, in July of the same year.

In biblical chronology, this occurred near the end of the Babylonian exile (586 B.C. to 536 B.C.).

C. Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! (Is 13: 20-22)

The last few verses of Chapter 13 prophetically describe the utter destruction and desolation of once great Babylon (see Rev.18: 2-3, 10).

Desolation is a result of the judgment.

Gradually Babylon declined after she was conquered by Cyrus in 539 B.C. and became a great desert. It was eventually wiped off the face of the earth. She will not exist as an inhabited city, or even as a solitary city, like Jerusalem, after the banishment.

From generation to generation she will remain uninhabited.

How truly this prophecy has been fulfilled!

The Fall of the King of Babylon (Isaiah 14:1-21)

I. OVERVIEW (14:1-21)

Chapter 14 briefly describes the return of the people of Judah and Israel to their own land.

As far as Babylon is concerned, the Lord states that Sheol, the place of the dead, is preparing for the arrival of the Babylonians. All their luxury and pomp will go down to Sheol with them, and their bed will become a bed crawling with maggots and worms.

The “**Day Star**,” sometimes translated as the “Morning Star,” will fall from the heavens. The “Day Star” refers to the king of Babylon. The Latin Vulgate translated the phrase as Lucifer, a name applied to Satan by early church scholars.

When the king of Babylon dies, he will become carrion (rotting flesh), a trampled corpse with his name removed from the earth by the massacre of his sons and daughters.

II. RESTORATION OF ISRAEL

Chapter 14 begins with a word of blessing and comfort. Again Yahweh will show mercy, Isaiah declares, and again he will choose His people.

Once before he had shown mercy and once before he had chosen and rescued them when they were suffering oppression in Egypt. Centuries later they are in captivity again, this time in Babylon.

II

The warnings of judgment given to the people are balanced by the knowledge that God has the power to reverse situations.

(**Note:** In Scripture the Babylonian Captivity or Exile is often a type or symbol of the much greater bondage of sin).

Read: Isaiah 14:1-3

[1] The LORD will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land, and aliens will join them and will cleave to the house of Jacob.

[2] And the peoples will take them and bring them to their place, and the house of Israel will possess them in the LORD's land as male and female slaves; they will take captive those who were their captors, and rule over those who oppressed them.

[3] When the LORD has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve,

[4] you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon:

A. Return from the Exile (14:1-4a)

In the midst of the preceding scene of world-wide destruction and desolation (13:9-16) the Lord will have compassion on Israel: he will restore them to their own land and give them rest.

The returning exiles, joined by aliens (strangers, non-Israelites), are served by those who were once their oppressors, free at last from pain and turmoil.

The final detail in this description of the returning exiles is that, when they are finally settled in their own land again, they will sing a **taunt** (mocking song) against the king of Babylon (v. 4) who had devastated their land, destroyed their Temple, slaughtered their people and carried the remnant off to exile in far-away Babylon.

Its purpose of the taunt is to celebrate his demise (death).

The king, a tyrant, is cast into the nether world. The oppressors of God's chosen people at one time become servants of His people at a later time.

III. THE DEATH OF THE KING OF BABYLON (14:4-21)

Read: Isaiah 14: 4b-21

A. Rest for People on Earth (14:4b-8)

***How the oppressor has ceased,
the insolent fury ceased!***

***[5] The LORD has broken the staff of the wicked,
the scepter of rulers,***

***[6] that smote the peoples in wrath
with unceasing blows,***

***that ruled the nations in anger
with unrelenting persecution.***

***[7] The whole earth is at rest and quiet;
they break forth into singing.***

***[8] The cypresses rejoice at you,
the cedars of Lebanon, saying,
'Since you were laid low,
no hewer comes up against us.'***

Isaiah now prophesies a period of peace or rest for the people on earth. They are to have "rest" (v.7) from the repeated blows of the oppressor's rod (vv. 5-6). The Lord "has broken the staff (rod) of the oppressors.

What good news!

In the years between 855 and 555 B.C., we almost lose count of the number of times a rampaging Mesopotamian army devastated Israel

and Judah. What good news to know that the hammer blows are over.

Nor is it just human beings who are glad to know that the reign of terror is over. The whole of creation, including the trees, are glad (v. 8).

B. The Underworld (14:9-11)

Read: Isaiah 14:9-11

***[9] Sheol beneath is stirred up
to meet you when you come,
it rouses the shades to greet you,
all who were leaders of the earth;
it raises from their thrones
all who were kings of the nations.***

***[10] All of them will speak
and say to you:***

'You too have become as weak as we!

You have become like us!

***[11] Your pomp is brought down to Sheol,
the sound of your harps;
maggots are the bed beneath you,
and worms are your covering.***

The picture changes from the earth to the underworld. In place of the peace and quiet that the tyrant's death has brought to the earth, the underworld is in an uproar.

All the kings in the underworld have been sitting on their thrones. Now they rise up, stretching their necks to get a glimpse of this newcomer. He's the one who sneeringly sent them on their way to this grim and dusty place (Sheol), and now he has come to join them!

In the end he's no stronger than they were. He could no more prevent his death than they could theirs.

14

Verse 11 is a masterpiece of sarcasm and irony. We see a funeral celebration where a gorgeously bedecked casket is carried past with **pomp** and with lovely music played by **harps** and other instruments.

“Beautiful,” we say. Then the picture suddenly changes. All is deathly still, and we see that the beautiful casket and its coverings are nothing but a writhing mass of maggots.

Human privilege, ambition, pride and outward show are no match for the grim reality of death and decay.

Note: What are “**the shades**” (v.9)? They are the feeble ghosts that are all that remain of those who were once **leaders of the earth** and **kings of the nations**.

C. How You Are Fallen . . . O Day Star (14:12-15)

**[12] "How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!**

**How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!**

[13] You said in your heart,

'I will ascend to heaven;

above the stars of God

I will set my throne on high;

I will sit on the mount of assembly

in the far north;

[14] I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,

I will make myself like the Most High.'

[15] But you are brought down to Sheol,

to the depths of the Pit.

The picture changes again, this time to heaven. What has this world emperor sought to do in his towering arrogance and pride and blasphemous ambition?

In effect, he has tried to take the place of the Holy One – of God Himself.

In vs. 13 – 14 this blasphemous egotist has made four boasts about what he will do:

1. He will rule even above the stars;
2. He will sit on the highest mountain top, from which the king of the gods rules;
3. He will ascend into the highest heaven (“above the tops of the clouds”); and
4. He will become equal to God himself.

When we make ourselves the most important thing in our world, we are usurping the rightful place of God.

This man, who sought to make himself equal to God, is mocked by death, which has taken him from the **heights** (v. 13) of his own arrogance **to the depth of the Pit** (v. 15) in one terrible moment.

D. Who is the “King of Babylon?”

The Day Star (or Morning star) – the Vulgate has “Lucifer,” refers to the king of Babylon mentioned in verse 4.

There has been much discussion as to whether the “king of Babylon” is a real historical figure or a symbol of the most powerful and evil leaders of the earth.

It need not originally have been about an actual king of Babylon, since there are no historical details and the only mention of his name is in the title (v. 4).

However, there have been some proposals as to the historical figure described as the king of Babylon. One proposal is that he is Nebuchadnezzar – the greatest Babylonian king, but he may also be representative of all powerful and evil world leaders.

In the Vulgate – the Latin translation of the Bible by St. Jerome - “Day Star” is translated as “Lucifer,” the “bearer of light.” Ever since the Middle Ages, “Lucifer” has been used as a name for the devil.

The pride of the king of Babylon is compared with the pride of a fallen angel Lucifer. **“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!”** (Isaiah 14:12).

Jesus’ words in Luke 10: 18, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven,” may be an allusion to this passage of Isaiah, meaning the downfall of the devil that results from the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

E. Satan or the Antichrist?

In Isaiah’s prophecy of the fall of the king of Babylon, who had vanquished and oppressed the people of Israel, some scholars find a clear reference of the Antichrist, or at least a type of the Antichrist.

Others see in the king of Babylon, who aspired to dominate the nations and to become like Yahweh, the figure of Satan.

Some church fathers have referred this verse to the fall of Satan, described in Luke 10:18. But the present passage pictures the end of the tyrannical reign. Inasmuch, then, as this passage describes a king’s downfall and removal from the scene it cannot apply to Satan.

More appropriately, it may apply to the Antichrist (a human being) who will appear on earth just before the Return of Christ. He is the imitator of Satan in evil desires, deeds and final destiny.

The Book of Revelation reveals that a great battle was waged in heaven, in which Satan, and the rebellious angels (demons), were cast down by Michael the Archangel and his angels (Rev. 12:7-10).

Why did Lucifer and his angels rebel against God?

An ancient legend holds that Satan and the evil spirits were so jealous and outraged when they learned that God intended to create man in His own image and likeness that they rebelled in envy.

F. The Tragedy of the Fallen King (14:16-21)

***[16] Those who see you will stare at you,
and ponder over you:
'Is this the man who made the earth tremble,
who shook kingdoms,
[17] who made the world like a desert
and overthrew its cities,
who did not let his prisoners go home?'
[18] All the kings of the nations lie in glory,
each in his own tomb;
[19] but you are cast out, away from your sepulchre,
like a loathed untimely birth,
clothed with the slain, those pierced by the sword,
who go down to the stones of the Pit,
like a dead body trodden under foot.
[20] You will not be joined with them in burial,
because you have destroyed your land,
you have slain your people.
"May the descendants of evildoers
nevermore be named!
[21] Prepare slaughter for his sons
because of the guilt of their fathers,
lest they rise and possess the earth,
and fill the face of the world with cities."***

The final verses of this chapter (14:16-21) contemplate the tragedy of this mighty Babylonian king. He is said to have suffered an ignominious death and to have left behind no children (v. 21). His offspring will be destroyed.

Verses 16-20 show people staring at the mangled corpse of the tyrant lying in a heap of other corpses in a pit (v.19). This agrees with the idea of a battlefield death. Instead of a dignified death and an honorable burial, the corpse is abandoned in the field, perhaps in hasty retreat.

Far from being equal to God, this king is not even equal to the other kings he has killed. They at least have their own tombs, pride has none. It is thrown away as it was customary to throw away a miscarried fetus.

But not only does the proud king have no decent burial, he also does not have any continuing dynasty. Vs. 20b – 21 express the hope that the oppressor will have no offspring to carry on his name. Thus his destruction is complete. His very memory is blotted out.

This is entirely fitting, for his pride has not only destroyed the lands of others (v.17), it has destroyed his own land as well (v. 20).

This is the end of the pride that says it will sit on the throne of God: absolute and complete destruction.

IV. ORACLES AGAINST BABYLON, ASSYRIA, AND PHILISTIA (ISAIAH 14:22-32)

These oracles predict the destruction of Babylon, Assyria, and Philistia.

The first oracle seeks to remind us that the long taunt-song is about Babylon which has not been mentioned since verse 4.

In 14:22-23 the theme of the immediately preceding verses is continued and expanded. Not only will the king of Babylon have no offspring, and thus no living memorial, neither will Babylon itself.

The city is to be forgotten completely and to become merely a haunt for animals of the night and of the swamp. With Babylon there was

no deliverance, for there was no remnant. On Babylon alone comes doom and judgment, final, full, all embracing.

Historical Note: In our times, ancient Babylon is being rebuilt over the ruins of the original Babylon. The work was started by Saddam Hussein of Iraq in 1983 but has since been halted because of the instability of the country and lack of funds.

V. APPLICATION

A. Pride and Human Will

The sin of pride first appeared in the Garden of Eden when the serpent tempted Eve. *“You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”* (Gen 3:4-5).

Pride appears again at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:3-9), and here pride surfaces in the king of Babylon (Isaiah 14:13-14). The lengthy taunt against the king of Babylon (Is.14:3-22) shows that the exploitative, prideful man of power will end up as a corpse, just the same as all people ultimately will end up in a grave.

In our own day, who could better represent the “king of Babylon” than the two greatest murderers of all time: Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin?

Each, in his own way, expected to leave behind him an empire that would encompass the world. And because of their towering pride each one believed in his absolute right to destroy every single human being who in any way seemed to thwart their arrogant vision.

Each one was willing to reduce not only the world, *but his own kingdom* (v. 20), to destruction if necessary to achieve his goals.

What a sigh of relief the oppressed of the world breathed when each of these monsters died!

Their pride was brought down into the dust, and their particularly vicious cruelty no longer existed on the earth.

Preparation for Isaiah Week 15 Oracles against Moab and Damascus

1. Read Isaiah, Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17
2. Read Chapter 4, pgs 35-36, in *Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah*.
3. Answer questions 1-11 in *Come and See* (pg. 39-41).
4. Read the following paragraphs from the CCC:

Article 3 – Sacred Scripture

Section III – The Holy Spirit, Interpreter of Sacred Scripture –

Paragraphs - 109-114