

## Lesson 10 Isaiah 13-20 The First Cycle of Oracles

### Introduction

Isaiah 7-12 showed us the triumph of God’s grace despite the sinful rebellion of His own people. God’s faithfulness to Israel focused in on a new kind of city ruled over by a new kind of king. We caught a glimpse in these chapters of Gentile inclusion into Zion. That’s a picture that needs developing.

How do the nations of the earth fit into the Jewish vision of redemption? What is the right relationship between God’s people and all people?

The question for us has relevance as we think about our relationship with the world in terms of power, economy, organization, strategy, security. When is it right to adopt good practices and ideas from our culture, and when have we gone too far to the point of adopting human values and human wisdom that contradict the values of God’s kingdom, or that replaced trust in God for security with trust in the world for security?

Understanding the relationship between God’s people and all people starts with understanding God’s relationship to all people. God is sovereign over every nation. Isaiah sees no problem prophesying to other nations. He doesn’t just stick to Judah and Israel. And he will prophesy to regional powers and superpowers.

Isaiah		
Book of the King 1-39		
The Universal Kingdom 13-27		
The First Cycle of Oracles The Reality of the Lord’s Promises 13-20	The Second Cycle of Oracles The World in Shadows 21-23	The Third Cycle Two Cities in Contrast: Endurance through to Glory 24-27
N ↑ <b>1. Babylon (13:1–14:27)</b> Political overthrow	N ↑ <b>1. The Desert by the Sea (Babylon) (21:1–10)</b> Religious overthrow	<b>1. The city of emptiness (24:1–20)</b> Broken laws (5) Broken gates (12)
W ← <b>2. Philistia (14:28–32)</b> A Davidic king will yet reign in Zion	↓ S <b>2. Silence (Edom) (21:11–12)</b> Indefinite continuance of things as they are	<b>2. Zion’s King (24:21–23)</b> ‘After many days’
→ E <b>3. Moab (15:1–16:14)</b> Moab in need, but through pride refuses shelter in Zion	→ E <b>3. Evening (Arabia) (21:13–17)</b> Desert tribes in need: no ultimate refuge in mutual security	<b>3. The great banquet (25:1–12)</b> All nations feasted in Zion save Moab, excluded by pride
📍 <b>4. Damascus/Ephraim (17:1–18:7)</b> Strong cities forsaken (9); the forgotten rock (10)	📍 <b>4. The Valley of Vision (Jerusalem) (22:1–25)</b> Strong cities forsaken (9); the forgotten rock (10); the city torn down (10)	<b>4. The city of God (26:1–21)</b> The strong city (1); the everlasting rock (4)
↓ S <b>5. Egypt (19:1–20:6)</b> Co-equal membership; Egypt, Assyria and Israel (19:24–25)	W ← <b>5. Tyre (23:1–18)</b> Holiness to the Lord (23:18)	<b>5. The final gathering (27:1–13)</b> The harvest from Egypt and Assyria (27:12–13)

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

Isaiah 13-27 organizes together 15 oracles to the nations. These oracles divide into three cycles of five. In the first cycle of oracles, we will consider the reality of the Lord’s promises. These oracles are spoken to clearly identifiable nations, Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Egypt. Each passage begins with the phrase, “The oracle concerning Babylon...” or “The oracle concerning Philistia...”. The word “oracle” can also be translated as “burden;” the burden concerning Babylon.

In the second set of five oracles, we will focus on the world in shadows. These oracles mostly use descriptive phrases, rather than the names of nations. But even though the references are less concrete than the references in the first five oracles, the nation under question is identifiable. In the final set of oracles, we will focus on two cities in contrast. These five oracles do not use the word “oracle” and they do not speak of nations in an easily identifiable way. Moving through the three cycles, things become less and less clear, or less and less concrete.



Human empires raise themselves up to the level of God and human empires always fall. They cannot last. God will appoint a day for its destruction. That does not happen just at the end of human history, that is the recurring theme of human history. God allows one people to topple another. God's righteousness is revealed as He gives human beings over to themselves. Human armies clash with human armies. Evil on evil. The outcome is horrific. Verse 16,

<sup>16</sup> Their little ones also will be dashed to pieces      Their houses will be plundered  
before their eyes;      and their wives ravished.

This army by be God's consecrated ones, but it is not holy in the moral sense. It is holy only in the sense of being set apart for a particular use. When God calls one wicked people to execute punishment on another wicked people, that army is consecrated in the sense of being given a divine function. If the conquering people does not submit to the authority of God and refuses to live according to His holy character, that people will in turn be punished for the wickedness they do as they carry out the function God called them to serve.

This is one of the challenging truths of the Bible. God remains sovereign and people remain morally responsible. God gives over those who turn from Him.

#### *Fall of the City*

The first part of the oracle, 13:1-16, uses Babylon as a symbol of human pride and independence to be judged in the final day. In 17-22, Isaiah provides a specific, historical example of this kind of judgment. Motyer calls this an "interim fulfillment"<sup>1</sup>. How can we trust the prophet when he claims God will judge human pride on the last day? You know, something that is thousands of years in the future? The prophet's end times message is given support through predictions that occur much earlier, either in the time of the prophet or in the very near future.

Verses 17-22 predict the judgment of Babylon in a specific concrete instance that foreshadows the judgment of all humanity that will come at the end time. The prediction is pretty dire. Isaiah says that God is going to stir the Medes up against Babylon.

Barbarian peoples lived past the two rivers of Mesopotamia on the northern steppes. The Medes were one of these fierce barbarian people. The Medes would join forces with the Babylonians to topple the Assyrian empire. They help to conquer Nineveh in 612 BC. In fact, the Babylonians had to hurry. They had to rush to get up there so that they can be in on it. That happened 100 years after the death of King Ahaz, who we met in chapter 7. Later, the Medes would join up with the Persians. They may have been cousins. Both were from lands north of Mesopotamia. Daniel and Esther refer several times to the laws of the Medes and the Persians, they include them together. Cyrus the Great, the Persian, will lead the combined forces. Isaiah mentions only the Medes here. Daniel 5:31 does give credit to the military leader Darius the Mede for leading the host that defeated the city of Babylon in 539 BC. That is right after Belshazzar saw the writing on the wall and then Darius the Mede's troops came in. Isaiah's predicted complete destruction. Verses 20-21.

<sup>20</sup> It will never be inhabited      or lived in from generation to generation;  
Nor will the Arab pitch *his* tent there,      Nor will shepherds make *their* flocks lie down there.  
<sup>21</sup> But desert creatures will lie down there,      And their houses will be full of owls;  
Ostriches also will live there,      and shaggy goats will frolic there.

That kind of desolation did not come under Cyrus the Persian. So, this passage is sometimes brought up to question how literally we should take Isaiah's predictive prophecy.

The city of Babylon came under Persian rule, then it fell under the Seleucid rule, and it's still standing, that followed the conquest by Alexander, and later eventually declined into desolation. Here is how John Oswalt describes his understanding of this prophecy.

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 146.



the King James Bible translated this Hebrew word using a Latin word that means “light-bringer.” That Latin word was “Lucifer.” And it only ever appeared in English Bibles here in Isaiah 14:12. The name is not used anywhere else. And the Hebrew “helel” was probably never meant as a reference to Satan.

A little bit of trivia: Lucifer is not a Biblical name. Helel may be a literary reference to a Canaanite myth about an attempted coup in Heaven. The Canaanite story refers to lesser gods challenging the high god. So, it’s not too hard to make a comparison to Satan. But Isaiah’s focus throughout the oracle is on human pride. This is not a god challenging Yahweh. This is a creature challenging his creator. This is more like the Tower of Babel.

Any human challenge to deity must be short lived. It can last no longer than the life span of a man.  
14:15-20.

- 15 “Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, To the recesses of the pit.  
16 “Those who see you will gaze at you, They will ponder over you, *saying*,  
‘Is this the man who made the earth tremble, Who shook kingdoms,  
17 Who made the world like a wilderness And overthrew its cities,  
Who did not allow his prisoners to *go home*?’  
18 “All the kings of the nations lie in glory, Each in his own tomb.  
19 “But you have been cast out of your tomb Like a rejected branch,  
Clothed with the slain who are pierced with Who go down to the stones of the pit  
a sword  
Like a trampled corpse.  
20 “You will not be united with them in burial, Because you have ruined your country,  
You have slain your people.  
May the offspring of evildoers not be mentioned forever.

*End of Human Pride: The Example of Assyria*

The oracle concerning the king of Babylon gives us a concrete, specific example of one human being who has declared his arrogant self-sufficiency before God, “I will be the captain of my own soul,” and yet, this is the result. Just as the city will fall, the empire will fall; every man and every woman who lifts themselves up will fall.

Now, the oracle concerning Babylon ends with a declaration of doom on Assyria. Babylon has been used by Isaiah in this oracle as a symbol of Mesopotamian power. Assyria is the concrete representation of Mesopotamian power during Isaiah’s lifetime. It is the nation ruling over the area. Like the fall of Babylon to the Medes, the downfall of Assyria serves as an even nearer interim fulfillment of the promised future overthrow of human pride and self-sufficiency.

Isaiah’s words encourage believing readers to acknowledge God’s sovereign power over whatever superpowers currently stand at the top of human affairs. Trust God, not the superpower. This is 14:24-27.

- 24 The LORD of hosts has sworn saying, “Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand, 25 to break Assyria in My land, and I will trample him on My mountains. Then his yoke will be removed from them and his burden removed from their shoulder. 26 “This is the plan devised against the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations. 27 “For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate *it*? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?”

Notice Isaiah using this phrase again, “this is the hand that is stretched out against the nations.” It is not only stretched against Israel and Judah as in earlier chapters. God’s hand is stretched out against every nation. We first encountered this phrase paired with the idea of a standard lifted up. That was in 5:25-26. Isaiah has created an inclusio for this oracle by beginning in 13:2 with a reference to God’s standard and ending here in 14:27 with a reference to God’s outstretched hand. This image of God’s sovereignty as King of kings creates bookends around the whole oracle.



The oracle begins and ends with prediction of certain ruin. In 15:1, the first verse, “Ar of Moab is devastated and ruined. Surely in a night Kir of Moab is devastated and ruined.” Then jumping to the end, 16:14, “Within three years as a hired man would count them, the glory of Moab will be degraded along with all his great population.”

That leaves us with the inner frame. In 15:2-4 Moab’s grief is expressed. “They have gone up to the temple and to Dibon, even to the high places to weep. Moab wails over Nebo and Medeba...” In the parallel section, 16:7-8, Moab’s grief is explained. Because God has heard of Moab’s excessive pride, “Therefore Moab shall wail; everyone of Moab shall wail.”

In both cases, the wailing of Moab is followed by the grief of God. That’s new information in this oracle. Isaiah has described for us the punishing of the nations for their wickedness. He has not, until now, talked about how that punishment affects the heart of God. 15:5, “My heart cries out for Moab.” And then later in 16:9 and 11, “Therefore I will weep bitterly for Jazer...My heart intones like a harp for Moab.”

God grieves, but He does not set aside His goodness in his grief. Moab persists in requiring God to give what a holy God cannot give. “Accept me according to my own way. Accept my definition of who you are and my definition of who I am. Accept my assertion of self-sufficiency. Accept my lifestyle. Accept my ruthless commitment to power, money, and fame. Accept my ongoing worship of my own gods on my own high places. Accept me without guilt, or repentance, or will to change.” God grieves, and Moab’s plea for shelter is rejected.

#### **The Oracle Concerning Damascus/Ephraim**

The fourth oracle concerning Damascus quickly shifts focus to Ephraim, so we can call it “the Damascus/Ephraim oracle.” The two seen joined together here probably dates this oracle to the time of chapter 7, when the two kings joined together against Judah. It is quite possible that Isaiah wrote different pieces of the Book of the King at different points of his long career. And later in life he expertly wove together different prophecies and different writings to create the first third of the book of Isaiah. That would be one explanation for these various oracles that seem to have some connection to a historical situation, but they don’t give detail about the historical situation, not in this given form, not in this new context because Isaiah is here these oracles thematically.

For example, a delegation may have come from Philistia at some point to woo Judah into an anti-Assyrian alliance. And Moab would have suffered a major defeat by Assyria three years after Isaiah spoke his words to Moab. But Isaiah is not concerned in this present book with clarifying those events. He has gathered these writings with updates and transitions, and he has added new material to communicate theologically. As we have noted, the overarching theme is God’s sovereignty over the nations, both in His just punishment of self-sufficient human pride and in His faithfulness to keep His promises for a remnant of His people.

So, even though this oracle concerning Damascus seems to come from the historical period addressed in chapter 7, when the King of Assyria united with the King of Israel to attack Judah, our concern is not with the historical detail of that alliance. Isaiah now uses this oracle to focus on God’s wayward people.

In our list of oracles, the first three and the fifth are nations other than Israel or Judah. That is true of the oracles in the first cycle and it’s going to be true of the oracles that we look at in the second cycle. The fourth position is for God’s chosen people. Here it is Israel, the Northern Kingdom. In our next set of five oracles, it will be Judah in the fourth spot. Motyer points out an interesting fact about the geography of the other four nations mentioned in this cycle. In both cycles, one nation sits to the north of Israel, one to the south, one to the east, and one to the west. In this set of five, Babylon sits to the north; Philistia is on the coast, it’s to the west; Moab is across the Jordan, to the east; and Egypt is to the south. We will see the same pattern with different nations in the next set of five oracles. So, then we can ask, “What does this do for us? Why this literary arrangement?” It highlights the fact that Israel is surrounded by other peoples. We are encouraged to ask, “What is the

relationship between the chosen people of God and the surrounding nations; you know, both super-powers like Babylon and Egypt, as well as regional neighbors like Philistia and Moab?" Isaiah's development of the relationship between the people of God and the world is complex. Here are three realities.

1. The peoples of the world are opposed to the Kingdom of God and constitute a threat to God's people. In that sense, the fact that these nations surround Israel is menacing.
2. Nevertheless, the nations of the world exist for the people of God. Every nation belongs to the universal Kingdom. Every nation depends on the sovereignty of God for their existence. God places kings and God removes kings. There is some sense in which the governments and kingdoms of the earth exist to create basic order that exists to benefit the people of God. And they all owe allegiance to the people of God. God's people represent His Kingdom on Earth.
3. In another way, the people of God exist for the nations. God promised Abraham that he would be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:3). On Mount Sinai, God called Israel to be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). Priests serve as mediators to help others worship and serve God. And Israel was supposed to live according to the law of God as a witness to the nations (Deuteronomy 4:6).

So, Israel exists as a means by which others can come to know God. In this multifaceted relationship with the peoples of the world, the people of God may feel threatened, they may feel overwhelmed, they may feel awed by all the success of everybody else. They are not to solve that threat by turning to the world for help, by depending on the world, or depending on their own worldly strength and strategies. The people of God center their hope in the faithfulness of God so that, instead of fearing the world, they might be a witness to the world. We can see Israel's place, surrounded by these nations as an image of threat, but we can also see it as an image of special calling. They are central to God's plan for the nations.

This oracle to Damascus/Ephraim has two messages. The first is to God's people. The second is to the world.

Destruction is prophesied for God's people Israel because they have turned from God, worshiping idols and trusted in worldly alliances. Verses 7, 8, and 10.

<sup>7</sup> In that day man will have regard for his Maker And his eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel. <sup>8</sup>  
He will not have regard for the altars, the work of his hands, Nor will he look to that which his fingers have made, Even the Asherim and incense stands.

<sup>10</sup> For you have forgotten the God of your salvation      And have not remembered the rock of your refuge.  
Therefore you plant delightful plants                      And set them with vine slips of a strange *god*.

Though God does punish His people, the peoples of the earth will not be given complete dominion over God's chosen ones. The second half of the oracle concerns the peoples of the world. 17:13, 18:3, and 5,

<sup>13a</sup> The nations rumble on like the rumbling                      But He will rebuke them and they will flee  
of many waters,    far away,  
<sup>3</sup> All you inhabitants of the world                                      and dwellers on earth,  
As soon as a standard is raised on the mountains,      And as soon as the trumpet is blown,  
you will see *it*,    you will hear *it*.  
<sup>5b</sup> Then He will cut off the sprigs with pruning knives      And remove *and* cut away the spreading branches.

Isaiah's image in that last verse, verse 5 is one of pruning the nations. That's an interesting change. The judgment on the nations has to this point been communicated by Isaiah in terms of complete destruction. Pruning sounds like a removal of what is bad, so that the good might flourish. You're not cutting down or burning up the vine; you're pruning it. We get a hint in this last verse that God wants the remnant to include peoples other than just Jews. He has a plan for the Gentiles - 18:7,



Israel will not find security in Egypt from Assyria or in Assyria from Egypt. Assyria and Egypt must both find security in the God of Israel. That's the surprising message of the central section. Hope is not surprising. All of these oracles have offered a glimmer of hope in a couple of verses. The surprise here is that the hope is extended to the people of Egypt and the people of Assyria, the oppressors of Israel. What a shock Isaiah's words must have been to his Jewish audience! Listen to Isaiah 19:20–25, it all sounds like it should be spoken to Israel,

<sup>20</sup> It will become a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; for they will cry to the LORD because of oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and a Champion, and He will deliver them. <sup>21</sup> Thus the LORD will make Himself known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day. They will even worship with sacrifice and offering, and will make a vow to the LORD and perform it. <sup>22</sup> The LORD will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to the LORD, and He will respond to them and will heal them. <sup>23</sup> In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. <sup>24</sup> In that day Israel will be the third *party* with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, <sup>25</sup> whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance."

"Blessed is Egypt my people"? How does God call Egypt His people? "And Assyria the work of my hands"? God is molding Assyria? Really, Egypt and Assyria are to be given equal status together with "Israel my inheritance"? Each is given a third part? I mean, Israel does not even receive the double blessing of the eldest son. Each gets a third. They share the inheritance equally. It is one thing to prophecy the salvation of Gentiles in general. You know, send missionaries to save those pagans out there, like the Gentiles of chapter 2 that are going to stream into Zion. And there, the Jewish remnant may be seen as central. The Gentiles come for help. They submit to the preeminence of Israel. But here Isaiah gives Gentiles an equal part. And when Isaiah starts naming the particular Gentiles, the whole idea becomes repulsive. "Yes, let's include Gentiles. But not the Assyrians. Not the Egyptians." Remember Jonah's anger at God's compassion on Nineveh. These people deserve justice, not mercy. This is too close to home, God. These are our oppressors.

Black and White. Croat and Serb, Ukrainian and Russian, Han Chinese and Uyghur, Iranian and Iraqi, all together with their Jewish brothers and sisters. God is not the God of any regional people. God is the God of all nations. He is King of Kings, who is sovereign in His justice. Every people will be held accountable equally. And He extends mercy with impartiality. Every person from every people group is invited to seek refuge in Him.