

Chapter 13 begins a long section (continuing through chapter 35) devoted largely to foreign nations. The relevance to Judah is that these nations provide opportunities for the exercise of faith. Judah has a choice: It can put its trust in the nations, whether the powerful ones as protectors, or the smaller neighbors as allies. Isaiah writes to show that Judah should instead put its trust in God, who reigns over the nations. Some nations he uses for his purposes. All nations come under his judgment. In all this, he is irresistible.

Historical Background

The prophecy against the Philistines is dated *in the year King Ahaz died*, when Hezekiah became king. This was about seven years after Shalmaneser died (perhaps at the siege of Samaria) and Sargon took the Assyrian throne, probably as a usurper. Babylon, which had long been troublesome for Assyria to control, took advantage of the situation to rebel, and had its own king for a few years; Sargon regained control only just before Hezekiah's reign began. In the same period, Sargon took several Philistine cities, and completed the crushing of Ephraim by exiling the northern tribes of Israel.

13–14:23 — A Prophecy against Babylon

The prophecy against Babylon deals with events well in the future. This is consistent with history: About 100 years after Hezekiah's ascension, Babylon overthrew and destroyed Assyria, in alliance with the Medes (from what is now central Iran). Ten years later, Babylon captured Jerusalem and exiled Judah. Still later, the Medes combined with the Persians to overthrow Babylon; like Assyria, it would never regain its importance.

The downfall of Babylon is described as the Day of the LORD, which is an idiomatic term for a time when God will act to accomplish his purpose. Different times with different contexts can all be called the Day of the LORD; the reference is not necessarily or even primarily to an apocalyptic end of the world.

13:2–5 describe, in very poetic language, the gathering of God's army *to be weapons of his wrath— to destroy the whole country*. The term *holy ones* might suggest an angelic army, but subsequently the image is of *nations massing together*; God has chosen to use human armies to serve his purposes. 13:6–8 interrupt the narrative with the command to *wail*, a call to lament: the army will bring *the day of the LORD*, which will cause men's hearts to *melt with terror*.

13:9–16 return to the narrative with a description of *the day of the LORD*. The land will be *desolate*; the heavens will be *darkened*; men will be so decimated as to become scarcer than gold; both heaven and earth will shake. In the midst of this, God speaks directly to explain that this is punishment, for sin and for pride.

13:17–18 speak of the role of the Medes in Babylon's fall; they are an enemy that cannot be bought off and will fight implacably against them.

13:19–22 move further into the future, after the fall of Babylon. The fall happened explicitly because of their pride, which put them in opposition to God. As a result, the destruction of the capital city will be permanent; it will never be rebuilt. And indeed, Babylon was largely abandoned during the Hellenistic era, and has not been rebuilt.

14:1–2 interrupts this narrative with an explanation of where Israel fits into this word from God. *The LORD will have compassion on Jacob*. The language has what seems to be a deliberate evocation of the exodus, though this is not explicit. "*Settle them in their own land*" is clear. "*Make captives of their captors*" is not equally clear, but I see it as analogous to Israel carrying off the wealth of Egypt. But there is more here: *Foreigners will join them and unite with the descendants of Jacob*. This is a constant theme in Isaiah, that God's salvation will be for all people.

14:3–4 return again to the day of the LORD. It is a time of relief from suffering, but more important, it is a time when God's people will sing a *taunt against the king of Babylon* – a song that actually would be sung to humiliate a defeated enemy. It is a lengthy song, continuing through verse 20a, and a complex one. It begins with a simple recitation of facts in 14:4–6: Babylon has defeated and oppressed nations, and now in its turn is broken by God. But the song quickly turns poetic. 14:7–8 use the image of the cedars of Lebanon, an obvious symbol of haughty pride, rejoicing at the fall because now no one comes to cut them down. 14:9–11 move to Sheol,¹ the kingdom of the dead. The dominant image is that the dead kings retain thrones, but they are only shadows of their former positions of power. They greet Babylon, who has now also lost power and *become weak*.

14:12–15 take the form of a fable, with a moral. They speak of a heroic king or perhaps demi-god, called *son of the dawn*, who in his pride tried to *ascend to the heavens* and take a place higher than God's (*I will raise my throne above the stars of God*). Instead, he dies, and in the grave, all his glory is lost: for his pride, he was *brought down to the realm of the dead*. This end returns to song to the theme of Sheol, which continues through verse 20a. The dead question that he could ever have been powerful. In the midst of the terrible things this king had done is that complaint that *he would not let his captives go home*. This is a clear reference to the bitterness

¹ In Old Testament belief, Sheol, the grave, is a place of continuing existence after death – but nothing more than existence. Sheol is a place of emptiness. It is not even possible to praise God there.

with which the Babylonian captivity would be felt. Even in their weakened state, the other dead kings retain the dignity of a tomb, but the king of Babylon is cast out of his.

14:20b–23 leave behind the taunting song and give God's open declaration against the future generations of Babylonians. They are not to be spoken of; indeed, they are to be slaughtered. They will never regain power.

14:24–27 — A Prophecy against Assyria

Isaiah briefly turns to Assyria and its coming destruction. In doing so, he gives a general principle: *the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him?* If the key issue is who to trust, other nations or God, this principle should make the answer obvious.

There are other elements common to much prophecy. One is that God's action is ensured by an oath. Another is that God is action according to a *plan determined for the whole world*. The prophecy is against Assyria, but all the nations are affected by what God will do. As for Assyria itself, it will be crushed.

14:28–32 — A Prophecy against Philistia

As noted above, Sargon was preoccupied with Babylon (and internal rebellion) at the start of his reign, and had no resources to punish rebels like Philistia: *"the rod that struck you is broken."*² But such respite would not last: *from the root of that snake will spring up a viper*. What follows is a word picture of famine and death to follow. And indeed Assyria captured the Philistine city of Ashdod about three years later.

The envoys of that nation are likely ambassadors seeking for Judah to join Philistia in opposition to Assyria. Isaiah gives the answer that God wants Hezekiah to give: Judah was established by God and enjoys his protection. Therefore, we infer, an alliance with Philistia would be both ineffectual and wrong.

15–16 — A Prophecy against Moab

Moab was a small nation just east of the Dead Sea. Judah's relations with Moab were never as hostile as with Philistia, but rather a mixture of peace and strife. Moab too turned to local alliances to defend against Assyria, with poor success; in Sargon's time, it was paying tribute to Assyria. The thrust of Isaiah's word was that there was no help to be found in either alliances or tribute, but only in trust in God.

15:1–9 are a lament for Moab after an attack by Assyria. The people of northern cities are in mourning for the loss of southern ones, with hair and beards cut off and wearing sackcloth. This is followed by a poetic description of war refugees from the south, making their way through devastated lands, carrying what provisions they could. The section ends with the very bloodshed they were fleeing: *the waters of Dimon are full of blood*.

16:1–5 form a plea for these refugees to be taken in by Judah (*Zion*) and given *shelter*. The request comes with a gift (*send lambs as tribute*) to emphasize the seriousness of the request. The section ends with a prophecy of a much greater shelter, which in hindsight we can see to be Messianic: *In love a throne will be established... one from the house of David—one who in judging seeks justice*.

16:6–12 are a reflection on *Moab's pride*. The focus is on the vineyards, which are *trampled down*. This is clearly an extended metaphor for the desolation of the land after the invasion. 16:13–14 explain that there is worse to come: In three years, *her survivors will be very few and feeble*. It may be helpful to explain a literary touch here: *"Within three years, as a servant bound by contract would count them."* The picture is of an indentured servant, who would carefully watch his period of service. This would be a time of anxious anticipation.³

17 — A Prophecy against Aram and Ephraim

The text speaks of *a prophecy against Damascus*; for consistency, we refer instead to Aram, of which Damascus was the principal city. We also note that Ephraim is included in this prophecy, so that the two nations are discussed as one. This is perhaps a consequence of their alliance in the Syro-Ephraimite war, which would make it probable that this prophecy was from that time.

The essence of the prophecy is simple and stark: *Damascus ... will become a heap of ruins*, and both Ephraim and Aram will be powerless. Though they seemed to have glory, that will all vanish. Fields and trees that yielded abundant harvests will be suitable only for gleaning, gathering scattered remnants of food.

17:7–8 show some good coming from the destruction: *In that day people will look to their Maker* and reject the idols they previously depended on. It is unfortunate that they do so only upon having lost *their strong cities, when all will be desolation*.

17:10 begins a direct appeal to the people of Israel, exhorting them that *you have forgotten God your Savior*.⁴ The result is that though the people may be confident of good harvests, God can bring that to nothing. Again, nations can display great might, but their plans come to nothing when God chooses.

² Alternatively, the reference could be to the death of Tiglath-Pileser.

³ So Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, p 348. Others, e.g. Wildberger, *Isaiah 13-27*, p 152f, read this quite differently.

⁴ I believe that the reference is to God's saving work in the exodus.