

# Isaiah – Chapter 13

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## Babylon

Isaiah 13:1 - The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.

### REVIEW

Last week we closed the Book of Immanuel (chapters 7–12) with the remnant singing in chapter 12. After all the darkness of judgment, the anger of the Lord had turned away, comfort had come, and the Holy One of Israel was great in their midst. The people drew water with joy from the springs of salvation and called the nations to join the praise. That song was the perfect conclusion to the section that began with the sign of Immanuel. Now the prophet turns his eyes outward. The same God who judged His own people and preserved a remnant will now speak to the nations of the world. Chapters 13 through 23 form a series of oracles against the surrounding peoples. The first and longest of these is against Babylon, the empire that would one day destroy Jerusalem and carry Judah into exile. Yet even in this judgment oracle, the threads we have been tracing stay tight: the Holy One of Israel rules every nation, Zion will outlast every proud city, and the coming King is already in view.

### HISTORICAL BACKDROP

Isaiah delivered this message sometime during the reigns of Ahaz or Hezekiah, roughly 740-700 BC. In those days, Assyria was the dominant world power. Babylon was an ancient, culturally important city in southern Mesopotamia, but it was not yet the superpower it would become. It had occasional revolts against Assyria, often led by Chaldean princes such as Merodach-Baladan, but each time Assyria crushed the rebellion. When Isaiah spoke these words, no one in Judah would have imagined Babylon as the nation that would one day burn the temple and take them captive. Yet the Holy Spirit moved Isaiah to look ahead more than 150 years and name Babylon as the next rod in God’s hand. The near fulfillment came in 539 BC when the Medes and Persians under Cyrus conquered Babylon exactly as verses 17-22 describe. The language, however, also carries the larger “day of the LORD” tone that points to the final worldwide judgment still ahead. Authorial intent is plain: the Holy One of Israel is sovereign over every empire. He will judge all with a righteous judgment.

### Outline of the Oracle against Babylon

#### I. God’s Condemnation of His Foes (13:1-22, 14:12-32)

##### A. Babylon (13:1-22, 14:12-27)

##### 1. The destruction foretold (13:1-22)

##### a. The severity of the destruction (13:6-16)

(1) All the people will be paralyzed with fear as God destroys Babylon (13:6-8).

(2) The land will be devastated, and the people will be destroyed (13:9).

(3) The very heavens will be blackened (13:10); No light will shine from the sun, the stars, or the moon.

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- (4) Survivors will be as scarce as gold (13:11-13).
- (5) Babylon's armies will flee to their own lands like hunted deer (13:14).
- (6) The children will be killed and the wives raped (13:15-16): Everyone who is caught will be run through by a sword, and all their homes will be sacked.
- b. The source of the destruction (13:1-5, 17-22): God will raise up the Medes and Persians against Babylon.

### BIBLICAL OVERVIEW OF BABYLON: THE CITY OF MAN IN CONTRAST WITH THE CITY OF GOD

The Bible presents Babylon as far more than one ancient empire. From Genesis to Revelation, Babylon stands as the consistent biblical symbol of the proud, self-exalting city of man. It is the place where humanity gathers to make a name for itself, to defy God, and to oppress His people. God repeatedly sets Jerusalem against Babylon, the city God chose, the place where He dwells with His people, the center from which blessing and salvation flow to the nations. The contrast runs through the entire canon and helps us see why the Holy One of Israel pronounces such a heavy “burden” against Babylon in Isaiah 13-14.

#### **1. Genesis 11 – The Birth of Babylon (Babel): Rebellion and Confusion**

The story begins at Babel (the Hebrew name for Babylon). After the flood, humanity refused to scatter and fill the earth as God commanded (Genesis 9:1). Instead, they settled in the plain of Shinar and said, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4).

God confused their language, scattered them, and the city was called Babel— “confusion.” Here the pattern is set; Babylon is the city of human pride, unified rebellion against God, and the attempt to reach heaven by man's own effort.

In immediate contrast, God called Abraham out of that very region (Ur of the Chaldeans, near Babylon) and promised him a different kind of city: “I will make you a great nation ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3). The city of man versus the people through whom God would bless the nations, the contrast begins here and never ends.

#### **2. The Patriarchal and Early Monarchial Period – Babylon Remains a Lesser Power**

For centuries after Genesis 11, Babylon existed as an important cultural and religious center in Mesopotamia, but it was not the dominant world empire. Assyria, Egypt, and other powers rose and fell while Babylon stayed in the background. Scripture mentions it occasionally, but the focus remains on God's dealings with Israel. The city of man is present, yet God's covenant people are being formed in the land He promised.

#### **3. Isaiah's Day (740-686 BC) – Babylon on the Horizon**

When Isaiah wrote the oracle in chapters 13-14, Babylon was still not the superpower. Assyria ruled the known world. Babylon had moments of rebellion under Chaldean leaders

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like Merodach-Baladan, but each time Assyria crushed the revolt. Isaiah, however, looks ahead by the Spirit and sees Babylon as the next rod God will use to discipline Judah. The oracle is not reporting current events; it is prophetic foresight. Babylon will one day destroy Jerusalem and carry God's people into exile, yet that same Babylon will itself be judged. The Holy One of Israel remains sovereign over every rising and falling empire.

### **4. The Rise and Fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (626-539 BC)**

Under Nabopolassar and especially Nebuchadnezzar II, Babylon became the master of the ancient Near East. In 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, burned the temple, and took Judah into captivity (2 Kings 25). This was the darkest hour for the city of God. Babylon carried the vessels of the temple to the house of its gods and set up a golden image for the nations to worship (Daniel 1-3).

Yet even in captivity the contrast shines. In the book of Daniel, God repeatedly humbles Babylon's king. Nebuchadnezzar is driven to eat grass like cattle until he acknowledges, "I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever" (Daniel 4:34). Belshazzar's feast ends with the handwriting on the wall and the immediate fall of the kingdom to the Medes and Persians (Daniel 5). Cyrus the Persian takes Babylon in 539 BC exactly as Isaiah had prophesied more than 150 years earlier (Isaiah 44:28, 45:1). The city of man is judged; the city of God is preserved.

### **5. The Post-Exilic Period**

After the return under Zerubbabel and Ezra, Babylon faded as a political power. Yet the prophets and apostles continue to use the name Babylon as the enduring epicenter of the world system in rebellion against God. The city is not done, and God is not done with Babylon.

### **6. The New Testament and Revelation – Babylon's Final Judgment**

The apostles still speak of "Babylon" (1 Peter 5:13). But the fullest picture comes in Revelation 17-18. The great harlot "Babylon the Great" is dressed in purple and scarlet, drunk with the blood of the saints, and sits on many waters. She boasts, "I sit as a queen and I am not a widow and will never see mourning" (Revelation 18:7).

In one hour, her judgment comes. The kings and merchants, who grew rich from her, weep while heaven rejoices. Immediately, the contrast is complete: "I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2).

The city of man (proud, oppressive, idolatrous) falls forever. The city of God (cleansed, redeemed, and filled with the glory of the Lamb) descends as the eternal dwelling place of God with His people.

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**The Unchanging Contrast** – Throughout Scripture the two cities stand opposed:

- **Babylon** = the city of man’s pride, self-exaltation, idolatry, and oppression of God’s people.
- **Jerusalem/Zion** = the city of God’s choosing, the place of His presence, the center of His redemptive plan, judged for sin yet ultimately restored and glorified.

From the tower-builders who said, “let us make a name for ourselves,” to the final harlot who says, “I sit as a queen,” Babylon never changes. From Abraham’s call to the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, God’s purpose for His city and His people never fails.

This is why Isaiah can pronounce judgment on Babylon long before it became the world empire. The Holy One of Israel sees the end from the beginning. Every proud city that lifts itself against Him will be brought low, and the city He has chosen will be exalted. The message for Judah then and for us now is the same: do not fear the rising powers of this world. The Holy One rules them all, and the city whose builder and maker is God will have the last word.

### ISAIAH 13

#### EXPOSITION

**13:1** The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.

The word “oracle” (Hebrew *massa*) means a heavy prophetic burden, a formal message of judgment that the prophet must deliver. This is not a casual prediction. It is the next sequential piece of information for the deliverance of Israel and her return to prominence.

**13:2-5** – In this section we see a proclamation against Babylon. There is a question about the timing of this section. Is this eschatological or immediate? In verse 17, we see that God will call the Medes and the Persians which we see happen around 539 BC. But this seems to be the final judgment that takes place in Revelation 18.

Babylon has fallen many times in history, to the Assyrians, to the Medes and Persians, to Alexander the Great, to the Parthians. Babylon currently is a wasteland, and Babylonia (Iran) is not really a world power. Remember that the period of time we are in now is not found in prophetic history. Babylon will be rebuilt and it will be prominent once again.

**13:6-8** – Here is the key phrase, “the day of the LORD.” In Isaiah’s day, this pointed to the coming fall of Babylon. Yet the same expression is used throughout the prophets for the final global judgment that will come in the Tribulation period. The prophet sees the near event so clearly that it becomes a picture of the far event.

**13:9-13** – These verses move far beyond the fall of one city. The cosmic signs, the worldwide punishment of evil, and the shaking of heaven and earth belong to the final day of the Lord. The judgment on Babylon becomes the central point of the ultimate judgment on all human sin (idolatry, immorality, and violence).

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**13:14-16** – The horror of ancient warfare is described in plain terms. This is what actually happened when armies overran a city, and it serves as a sobering picture of what unchecked human sin produces.

**13:17-22** – Now we get into the specifics dealing with Babylon in the near (150 years) prophetic history. The Medes cared nothing for plunder; they came to destroy and conquer. Babylon, once the glory of the Chaldeans, would become an uninhabited ruin, exactly as history records. But this did not happen immediately and not finally. The site remains a desolation to this day. But the final destruction will happen during the Tribulation.

#### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Chapter 13 is one unified oracle. It begins with the Lord mustering an army against Babylon and ends with the city lying in perpetual waste. Between those bookends, the prophet lifts the language into the realm of “the day of the LORD,” showing that every proud nation shares the same destiny. The eschatological judgment on Babylon becomes a picture of the final judgment that will fall on the whole world system in the last days. The chapter is therefore both historically precise and prophetically expansive.

#### **Tying the Threads Together**

**The Messianic Hope** is quietly present even in judgment. The same Lord who raises up and casts down nations is the One whose zeal will establish the endless kingdom of the Child (9:7) and the righteous rule of the Branch (11:1). Every fallen empire only highlights the coming King who will reign in perfect justice.

**The Motif of the City** stands in sharp contrast. Babylon, the proud city of man, will be reduced to a haunt of wild animals. Zion, the city of God, though it will suffer under Babylon’s hand, will one day be the center of comfort and praise for the nations. The city that exalts itself will be brought low; the city the Lord has chosen will be lifted up.

**The Holy One of Israel** is at the center of everything. His holiness demands judgment on arrogance and oppression. Yet the same holiness guarantees that His purpose for His people will stand. No empire—not Assyria in Isaiah’s day, not Babylon in the next generation—can thwart the hand that is stretched out.

# The Prophetic Mosaic

## Revealing the Holy One of Israel

(Isaiah 1-13)

**The Sick Body and the Harlot City**  
Isaiah 1 presents a formal indictment where the nation is depicted as physically diseased from head to foot, and Jerusalem is exposed as a harlot.

**The Parable of the Worthless Vineyard**  
God is the Well-Beloved who clears stones and plants the best vines, yet vineyard produces only wild, stinking grapes of greed and injustice.

**Greed**  
**Drunkenness**  
**The Six "Woes"**  
Moral inversion (calling evil good)  
**Mocking God**  
**Self-Wisdom**  
**Corrupt Justice**  
**Self-Wisdom**

**The "Holy One of Israel" Revealed**  
Isaiah sees the Lord on a lofty throne, hearing the seraphim cry Holy, Holy, Holy, and is cleansed by a coal from the altar.

**The Sign of Immanuel**  
The virgin-born son, Immanuel (God with us), anchoring the Davidic covenant.

**Light in "Darkness of the Gentiles"**  
Christ as Wonderful Counsellor and mighty God

**The Shoot from the Stem of Jesse**  
The Messiah with the sevenfold Spirit rules in perfect righteousness.

**The Waters of Sidloah**  
**The Euphrates Flood**  
Symbolizing the overwhelming flood of Assyrian judgment.

**The 12 Promises of Restoration (from Isaiah 9)**

- Home given
- Land made glorious
- People see Great Light
- Tribulation multiplied
- Increased gladness
- Yoke broken
- Yard lowered
- Yoke mites orms bused
- Child given to us
- Government on his cheeks
- Endless increases of peace
- Kingdom upheld with justice

**"Great in Your Midst is the Holy One"**  
A song of joy, where the remnant draws water from the springs of salvation as God's anger is turned away.

**Zion vs. Babylon**  
Symbolizing human pride on answaid and its ruin.

**The Day of the Lord**  
Babylon as a symbol of human pride and self-exaltation that is ultimately brought to perpetual ruin.

