

Isaiah – Chapter 21

Babylon, Edom, and Arabia

Isaiah 21:9-10 - "Now behold, here comes a troop of riders, horsemen in pairs." And one said, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon; And all the images of her gods are shattered on the ground." O my threshed people, and my afflicted of the threshing floor! What I have heard from the LORD of hosts, The God of Israel, I make known to you.

CONTEXT

Isaiah 21 belongs to the larger collection of “oracles against the nations” (Isaiah 13–23). These pronouncements demonstrate Yahweh’s sovereign rule over all peoples and empires, not merely over Israel and Judah. The three nations addressed here, Babylon (under the title “the wilderness of the sea”), Edom (called Dumah), and Arabia, were real geopolitical entities in the 8th century BC whose histories intersected with Judah’s experience under Assyrian pressure.

HISTORICAL BACKDROP

Babylon is in southern Mesopotamia (modern central-southern Iraq), between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The region featured extensive marshes, lakes, and canals near the head of the Persian Gulf, giving rise to the poetic designation “wilderness of the sea” or “desert by the sea.” The city itself is next to the Euphrates. In Isaiah’s lifetime (roughly 740–680 BC, during the reigns of Uzziah through Hezekiah), Babylon was not yet the world empire it would become. It existed as a proud but subordinate city-state or province within the Assyrian Empire, periodically rebelling against Assyrian overlords (notably under Merodach-Baladan in the late 8th century). The Babylonian Empire arose only after Assyria’s collapse (Nineveh fell in 612 BC). Under Nebuchadnezzar II it reached its pinnacle, conquering Jerusalem in 586 BC and exiling Judah. Its own fall came swiftly in 539 BC when Cyrus the Great of Persia (with Median forces) entered the city, traditionally during Belshazzar’s feast (Daniel 5). Scripture repeatedly highlights Babylon’s pride, polytheism (especially the worship of Marduk/Bel and the legacy of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11), and role as an instrument of judgment that itself became arrogant and oppressive toward God’s people.

Edom occupied the rugged, mountainous territory of Seir southeast of the Dead Sea, extending into what is now southern Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia. Its terrain, high plateaus, deep wadis, and natural fortresses, made it highly defensible. The name Dumah (used in Isaiah 21:11) is both a place name linked to the region and a Hebrew word meaning “silence” or “stillness,” creating an obvious wordplay with Edom. Edomites were descendants of Esau (Genesis 36), making them kin to Israel, yet Edom was a persistent rival. In the 8th century BC, they lived under Assyrian influence. Biblical texts record their long-standing hostility, refusing Israel passage during their campaign to Canaan (Numbers 20), later raiding Judah, and, according to Obadiah, gloating over or participating in the plunder of Jerusalem around the time of its destruction in 586 BC. Their pride in their inaccessible strongholds and their violence against “brother” Jacob form the basis for divine judgment.

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Arabia, in this context, refers primarily to the northern and northwestern fringes of the Arabian Peninsula, including key oases and trade routes. Tema was a major oasis in northwest Arabia; Dedan (or the Dedanites) lay farther south along caravan routes; Kedar was a prominent Ishmaelite tribe (Genesis 25:13) known for black goat-hair tents, wealth from trade and livestock, and skilled archers. These nomadic groups controlled segments of the incense and spice trade routes connecting southern Arabia to Mesopotamia and Israel. In the 8th–7th centuries BC they interacted with the Assyrian Empire through tribute, trade, or military conflict; Assyrian kings conducted campaigns into the desert fringes. Scripture notes their “glory” (wealth, military capacity, and independence) as the object of coming judgment.

According to Scripture, God addresses these nations because they embody human pride, idolatry, and opposition to His purposes for Israel and the world. Babylon represents the archetypal proud empire that exalts itself against God and oppresses His people. Edom exemplifies fraternal betrayal and gloating over Israel’s suffering. Arabia illustrates that even remote desert powers with their own splendor are not exempt from the reach of the God of Israel. The oracles in Isaiah 13–23 collectively assure Judah that no surrounding power, whether enemy or seemingly neutral, is outside the judgments of God. They also address the obvious concern and larger biblical theme. How will Israel become the prominent nation with all of these mighty and aggressive, rich, and wicked nations surrounding them? This section demonstrates that God will judge the nations according to their idolatry, immorality, violence, and pride against the one true Creator God.

EXPOSITION OF ISAIAH 21

The Oracle Concerning the Wilderness of the Sea/Babylon (1-10)

Verses 1-2 – The opening title, “the oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea,” employs the standard prophetic term *massa*’ (“burden” or “oracle”), signaling a weighty, divinely authorized pronouncement of judgment. As stated, the designation “wilderness of the sea” is a poetic reference for Babylon. The region of southern Mesopotamia featured a vast plain interspersed with marshes, lakes, and the influence of the Persian Gulf, allowing it to be portrayed as a desolate plain (“wilderness”) and a watery expanse (“sea”).

The invasion is depicted as arriving with the sudden violence of windstorms sweeping across the Negev. It originates “from the wilderness, from a terrifying land,” language that points eastward to the desert regions from which the Medo-Persian forces would eventually come. Verse 2 describes the vision as “harsh” (*qasheh*), severe and unrelenting. The characterization of the attacker as one who “still deals treacherously” and “still destroys” captures both the violence of imperial aggression and the repetitive cycle of one empire supplanting another.

God Himself issues the summons: “Go up, Elam, lay siege, Media.” Elam (in the southwest of modern Iran) and Media (to the northwest) together represent the core territories that

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would form the Medo-Persian Empire under Cyrus. The purpose clause is decisive. God declares that He has “made an end of all the groaning she has caused.” Babylon had functioned as an instrument of widespread oppression and sighing among the nations; that role is now being terminated by sovereign decree. This anticipates the historical fall of Babylon to Cyrus in 539 BC. The language also resonates with the broader “oracles against the nations” in Isaiah 13–23, where God demonstrates His sovereignty over every empire.

Verses 3-4 – Isaiah records his own visceral reaction to the vision. Anguish seizes his loins “like the pains of a woman in labor,” a common prophetic image for intense, inescapable distress (Isaiah 13:8, 26:17; Jeremiah 4:31). He is so bewildered such that he cannot hear and so terrified he cannot see. Even the evening twilight he had longed for as relief is turned into trembling. This is not mere emotional response but prophetic participation in the terror of the coming judgment. The prophet empathizes for foreign enemies and the manner in which they will be destroyed; his physical and emotional anguish reflects the gravity of what God is revealing about the fall of a world power.

Verse 5 – The scene inside Babylon shows human activity (setting the table, spreading the cloth, eating and drinking) juxtaposed with the urgent military command, “Rise up, captains, oil the shields.” The imagery can be read as portrayal of false security or as a realization of their soon demise and they are enjoying a last meal. Similar scenes of sudden reversal appear in Belshazzar’s feast (Daniel 5).

Verses 6-9 – God instructs the prophet to station a “lookout” (*tsopheh*), a term that carries both literal and prophetic overtones (Ezekiel 3:17, 33:1-9; Habakkuk 2:1). The watchman’s sole responsibility is accurate, diligent reporting of what he sees. The vision unfolds as a column of invaders appears, riders in pairs accompanied by trains of donkeys and camels. This mixed mounted force accurately reflects the logistical demands of a long-distance desert campaign exercised by Medo-Persian armies.

The watchman’s report reaches its climax with the emphatic double cry: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the images of her gods are shattered on the ground.” The shattering of the *pesilim* (carved images) of Babylon’s gods underscores the theological point that false gods and the powers behind them cannot deliver. Historically, this points primarily to Cyrus’s conquest in 539 BC (Daniel 5), however this is stated 160 years before the events.

Crucially, this same doubled announcement is taken up verbatim in Revelation 14:8 and 18:2 in the context of the final judgment of “Babylon the great.” Isaiah 21:9 thus functions as both historical prophecy and typological foreshadowing of the eschatological fall of the future Babylon. In this context, it is historical. In the future, the decree is the same but refers to a different falling of Babylon.

Verse 10 – The oracle closes with a direct address to God’s people: “O my threshed *people*, and my afflicted of the threshing floor!” The imagery of threshing and winnowing portrays

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severe affliction that both judges and separates (Isaiah 28:27-28; Amos 1:3; Micah 4:12-13). Judah has been treated like grain, beaten and sifted on the threshing floor. Isaiah faithfully delivers what he has heard from “the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.” The titles emphasize both God’s absolute power and military might and covenant relationship. The message is ultimately for the comfort and instruction of the afflicted remnant. The fall of Babylon is not random chaos but the outworking of YHWH’s purposeful judgment.

Why is Babylon Redressed?

1. Different Focus – Dramatic and Emotional
2. Places Emphasis on Babylon (Also mentioned in Isaiah 39, 43, 47, and 48)
3. Isaiah 21 is more of a historical fulfillment; Isaiah 13 is more about the day of the Lord.

The Oracle concerning Edom/Dumah (11–12)

This brief, enigmatic oracle shifts to Edom, here designated Dumah. The Hebrew *dûmāh* means “silence” or “stillness,” creating a deliberate wordplay with *’ēdôm* (Edom). It may also evoke the “silence” of desolation or the unresolved questions that hang in the night of distress. A voice from Seir (Edom’s mountainous, defensible homeland southeast of the Dead Sea) repeatedly and urgently questions the watchman: “Watchman, how far gone is the night?” The repetition conveys anxiety and the sense that the darkness of oppression or uncertainty has lasted too long.

The watchman’s reply is terse and ambiguous: “Morning comes but also night. If you would inquire, inquire; come back again.” There will be a dawn of relief, yet night will return. The instruction to keep inquiring and return suggests an incomplete answer, a perpetual anxiety. Historically, Edom experienced cycles of pressure under Assyrian and later Babylonian dominance, with periods of relative respite followed by renewed subjugation.

The oracle resonates with the larger biblical portrayal of Edom as a perennial rival and betrayer of Israel (Numbers 20:14-21; Obadiah 1-14; Ezekiel 25:12-14, 35:1-15). Its cryptic quality leaves the timing and nature of final resolution open, pointing beyond immediate history. Edom’s judgment is developed eschatologically elsewhere: Obadiah frames it within the “day of the Lord” and Israel’s restoration; Ezekiel 35 pronounces doom on Mount Seir; and Isaiah 63:1-6 depicts the divine warrior returning from Edom with blood-stained garments, an image often understood as having ultimate fulfillment in the judgment of the nations at Christ’s return (Joel 3:19).

Like Babylon, Edom is not addressed just one time. Edom is mentioned 5 times. In Chapter 34, we have one of the longest and most poignant oracles against Edom in the Old Testament. Chapter 63 also has a powerful eschatological picture of judgment. Obadiah

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dedicates the entire book to addressing Edom while Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Joel and Malachi all have prophecies and judgments mentioned in brief.

The Oracle about Arabia (13–17)

The final oracle addresses the desert tribes of Arabia, focusing on the Dedanites (caravans/traders), the oasis of Tema, and especially Kedar, a powerful Ishmaelite tribe (Genesis 25:13) known for wealth, black tents, and skilled archers. Caravans are told they must “spend the night” in thickets, hiding or taking refuge rather than traveling openly. The inhabitants of Tema are commanded to supply water to the thirsty and bread to fugitives who have fled “from the swords, from the drawn sword, and from the bent bow and from the press of battle.” The imagery is one of sudden military disruption scattering desert populations and creating refugees.

Verses 16-17 give a precise time marker: “In a year, as a hired man would count it.” This refers to an exact contractual year, the period when a hired worker’s term ends and wages become due, emphasizing the certainty and imminence of the judgment. “All the splendor of Kedar will terminate,” and the once numerous and formidable bowmen among Kedar’s mighty men will be reduced to a small remnant. The oracle closes with the solemn authentication that “the Lord God of Israel has spoken.”

Historically, this aligns with Assyrian campaigns into the Arabian fringes in the late 8th and 7th centuries BC that curtailed Kedar’s power and wealth. God demonstrates that even remote desert tribes with their own “splendor” and military capacity are not beyond the reach of the God of Israel. While Arabia receives less explicit eschatological development than Babylon or Edom, it participates in the comprehensive judgment of the nations that surrounds the “day of the Lord” theme running through the prophets.

ESCHATOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

While Isaiah 21 has clear historical referents, certain elements are taken up in later Scripture with expanded, end-time significance. The double cry “Fallen, fallen is Babylon” (v. 9) is directly quoted in Revelation 14:8 and 18:2 in the context of the final judgment of “Babylon the great.” Edom’s judgment is linked in other prophets (Obadiah; Ezekiel 35; Isaiah 63:1-6; Joel 3) to the “day of the Lord” and the eschatological reckoning with all nations that are hostile to God’s people, often functioning typologically as an archetype of enmity that must be dealt with before Israel’s full restoration. Arabia receives less explicit eschatological development but participates in the comprehensive judgment of the nations that precedes or accompanies the day of the Lord.

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CONCLUSION

Isaiah 21 delivers a unified and sobering message through three distinct oracles: no surrounding nation, whether a rising world power like Babylon, a longstanding rival like Edom, or even remote desert tribes like those of Arabia, can serve as a reliable refuge or ally for God's people. Each oracle exposes the fragility of human glory, the certainty of divine judgment on pride and idolatry, and the futility of looking to political or military strength for security.

The dramatic watchman vision of Babylon's fall, the cryptic word to Edom about an unending night, and the precise judgment on Kedar's splendor together demonstrate that Lord's sovereignly directs the rise and fall of every empire and tribe according to His purposes. What appears to Judah as a chaotic and threatening world is, in reality, under the firm control of the Lord of hosts.

For the original audience living under Assyrian pressure and tempted to place hope in shifting alliances, this chapter removes every false confidence. For believers today, it offers the same assurance: the God who judged historical Babylon and who will ultimately judge every rebellious world system is the same covenant-keeping God who promises hope and escape from wrath. Our security is not found in the strength of nations, the wisdom of leaders, or the glory of human achievement, but in the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, who has spoken and who will bring His word to pass.