

ISAIAH

Chapter 13

A Prophecy Against Babylon

An oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw: ² Raise a banner on a bare hilltop, shout to them; beckon to them to enter the gates of the nobles. ³ I have commanded my holy ones; I have summoned my warriors to carry out my wrath— those who rejoice in my triumph. ⁴ Listen, a noise on the mountains, like that of a great multitude! Listen, an uproar among the kingdoms, like nations massing together! The LORD Almighty is mustering an army for war. ⁵ They come from faraway lands, from the ends of the heavens— the LORD and the weapons of his wrath— to destroy the whole country. ⁶ Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. ⁷ Because of this, all hands will go limp, every man's heart will melt. ⁸ Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at each other, their faces aflame. ⁹ See, the day of the LORD is coming —a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger— to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. ¹⁰ The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. ¹¹ I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless. ¹² I will make man scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir. ¹³ Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of his burning anger. ¹⁴ Like a hunted gazelle, like sheep without a shepherd, each will return to his own people, each will flee to his native land. ¹⁵ Whoever is captured will be thrust through; all who are caught will fall by the sword. ¹⁶ Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be looted and their wives ravished. ¹⁷ See, I will stir up against them the Medes, who do not care for silver and have no delight in gold. ¹⁸ Their bows will strike down the young men; they will have no mercy on infants nor will they look with compassion on children. ¹⁹ Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians' pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. ²⁰ She will never be unhabited or lived in through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherd will rest his flocks there. ²¹ But desert creatures will lie there, jackals will fill her houses; there the owls will dwell, and there the wild goats will leap about. ²² Hyenas will howl in her strongholds, jackals in her luxurious palaces. Her time is at hand, and her days will not be prolonged.

13:1–23:18† A series of prophecies against the nations (see also Jer 46–51; Eze 25–32; Am 1–2; Zep 2:4–15). They begin with Babylon (13:1–14:23) and Assyria (14:24–27) before moving on to smaller nations. (CSB)

Chs 13–23 Collection of 11 oracles. With the exception of ch 22, all are directed against heathen nations. (TLSB)

13:1–14:27 This prophecy concerns Babylon during the Assyrian empire rather than during the Neo-Babylonian empire. Thus the prophecy is actually against the Assyrian empire, Babylon being its most important city. From 729 B.C. on, the kings of Assyria also assumed the title “king of Babylon.” Note that there is no new “oracle” heading at 14:24, even though 14:24–27 clearly pertains to Assyria; so 13:1–14:27 forms a unit. (CSB)

We must not forget that what Isaiah wrote came from God. In that sense it is an oracle, a revelation. It did not come from the prophet’s imagination, not did it flow from his own experiences. It was from above. God revealed things that Isaiah could not have known from any other source. (PBC)

What a heavy burden these prophecies were! When the word oracle is used to introduce a revelation from God, most often it announces a heavy judgment – a harsh proclamation of punishment. These revelations inform Isaiah that all the enemies of God and His people will be destroyed from the earth. Isaiah groups these judgments together just as Jeremiah and Ezekiel did (Jeremiah 46-51; Ezekiel 25-32). (PBC)

13:1 See note on 1:1. (CSB)

oracle. The Hebrew for this word is related to a Hebrew verb meaning “to lift up, carry” and is possibly to be understood as either lifting up one’s voice or carrying a burden. Such an “oracle” often contains a message of doom. (CSB)

Babylon. See 21:1–9; 46:1–2; 47:1–15; Jer 50–51. Its judgment is announced first because of the present Assyrian threat and because Babylon would later bring about the downfall of Judah and Jerusalem between 605 and 586 B.C. Babylon was conquered by Cyrus the Persian (see 45:1; 47:1) in 539. Subsequently it came to symbolize the world powers arrayed against God’s kingdom (cf. 1Pe 5:13), and its final destruction is announced in Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17–18. Here, however, Babylon is still part of the Assyrian empire (see 14:24–27; see also note on 13:1–14:27). (CSB)

All Assyria. In the NT, Babylon is used symbolically as the embodiment of hostility to God and His people (Rv 14:8; 16:19; 17:5). (TLSB)

The whole area was enclosed with walls. The thickness of the wall was 30 feet, impregnable in appearance; the height was 50 cubits, the towers 60. The walls

were of burnt brick, and the greatest number of people were there. The countryside was very fertile and pleasant, etc. Nevertheless, against this seemingly invincible city Isaiah dares to prophesy that it is to be laid waste, and to such an extent as seems impossible, as would scarcely be believed even though God spoke from heaven. But the prophet describes the matter as if it were already being enacted before the eyes, and he uses grand and powerful words so that what seemed impossible might be believed all the more quickly. (Luther)

Isaiah lived before the Babylonian Empire, at the time when the Assyrians threatened Israel and Judah. In his own lifetime, the prophet witnessed the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians (722 BC). Yet here in these words God reveals to the prophet the destruction of Babylon, almost two hundred years in the future. The Medes and the Persians became the superpower after Babylon, but at the time of Isaiah, they were not yet a powerful force in the ancient Near East. Yet Isaiah announced that they would inflict God's judgment upon Babylon; Cyrus, after he destroyed the Babylonian Empire, issued the edict that allowed the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem in 538 BC. (PBC)

Isaiah ... saw. God revealed these things to Isaiah in a vision. (TLSB)

13:2 *Raise a banner.* See note on 5:26. (CSB)

Summoning God's people to His cause. (TLSB)

Those which are near Babylon. It is as if he were saying: "Your enemies are already on the mountains of the neighborhood and will assault you. They have given the signal, they are shouting to terrify the proud, they are raising the hands to show their power, that it is born both of daring and savageness. The towering mountain also denotes dominion, as elsewhere. They, that is, the enemies of the Babylonians, are to enter the gates of the noble. (Luther)

In ancient time, kings summoned their troops by giving signals from high and conspicuous spots. So it is here. God summoned His troops by raising the signal banners on a bare hilltop. It was bare so that nothing would obstruct the signal for war against Babylon. (PBC)

cry aloud. The terms "raise," "cry aloud," and "wave the hand" are all second person plural verbs, indicating that many are prepared to carry out the Lord's instructions. God is gathering an army to do His bidding. (TLSB)

them. All who answer the call to God's service. (TLSB)

13:3 *my holy ones.* Or "my consecrated ones," those set apart to carry out God's will. Cf. 10:5, where the Lord calls Assyria "the rod of my anger"; see also 45:1. (CSB)

That is, “My separated, chosen, prepared ones, namely, the Persians and Medes, whom I have prepared for My work and service.” Victory is the gift of God. (Luther)

wrath.† God must punish sin, particularly arrogance (see v. 11). (CSB)

13:4–5 The multitude has gathered together under the Lord of hosts. The Lord is behind the creation of these armies, and their purpose is to punish the iniquitous (vv 9, 11). Just as Assyria was once a weapon of the Lord’s wrath (10:5), so now another army—yet unnamed—will judge Assyria. The agent of judgment is later judged. (TLSB)

13:4 UPROAR AMONG THE KINGDOMS – The repetition shows the fervency and certainty of the matter, and the prophet sets forth what it means to raise a signal. The chariots rumble, the horses neigh, and the men shout, and the number of people is as large as if all the kingdoms of the nations were gathered together. In Hebrew it is “kingdoms” instead of “kings.” All this is said for the purpose of striking terror into the Babylonians. (Luther)

The LORD Almighty is mustering an army.† The Hebrew for “army” is the singular form of the word translated “Almighty.” God is the head of the armies of Israel (1Sa 17:45), of angelic powers (1Ki 22:19; Lk 2:13) and, here, of the armies that will destroy Babylon. (CSB)

He was so named because of the care with which war was waged for Him. He summoned, reviewed, and arrayed the soldiery and armed host of the Persians and Medes for the war, an army different from that which serves in religious affairs. (Luther)

As we read this account, we must try to understand it from the prophet’s perspective. In one sweeping panorama, he saw the destruction of Babylon in the future, and with it also saw the final judgment at the end of time. These two events blend in the prophet’s words. For us the destruction of ancient Babylon is an event in the past, and we wait for the coming of the final judgment upon the earth still in the future. We see both as separate events because time and history have given us a perspective Isaiah did not have. For Isaiah, both of these judgments fused together into one event. (PBC)

In the Scriptures Babylon became a symbol for all enemies who oppose God and threaten God’s people. One need only think of Revelation. In Revelation chapter 18, God revealed His judgment upon another Babylon when an angel announced, “With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again” (v. 21). At the time of John, the writer of Revelation, the earthly Babylon was nothing but ruins. The destruction of ancient Babylon by the Medes and Persians became a picture of God’s final judgment upon the unbelieving world. God brought about the judgment prophesied by Isaiah. He

meant what He said. He will bring about the final judgment on all His enemies as surely as He destroyed ancient Babylon. (PBC)

13:5 COME FROM FARAWAY LANDS – The farthest horizon, where the sky appears to meet the earth. We would say “the ends of the earth.” (TLSB) God uses these people to do His will. (TLSB)

From the bounds of heaven. The Hebrews call the sky a dome, or horizon, as much as is seen, and they measure the sky according to the horizons. Likewise, there is the expression “God sits above the heavens of the heavens,” that is, above those which divers men inhabit. Here there is one heaven, and elsewhere there is another. Therefore, from the bounds of heaven means as much as the Babylonians can see. (Luther)

weapons of his wrath. Assyria was the club in God’s hand during Isaiah’s day, and Babylon itself would later serve as God’s weapon (see 10:5 and note). (CSB)

God uses these people to do His will. (TLSB)

THE WHOLE COUNTRY – Namely, of Babylon. (Luther)

13:6, 9 *day of the LORD.* See note on 2:11, 17, 20. (CSB)

13:6 *destruction.* Hebrew *shod*, forming a wordplay on “Almighty” (Hebrew *Shaddai*)—as also in Joel 1:15. See note on 5:7. For *Shaddai* see note on Ge 17:1 – (The Hebrew (*El-Shaddai*) perhaps means “God, the Mountain One,” either highlighting the invincible power of God or referring to the mountains as God’s symbolic home (see Ps 121:1). It was the special name by which God revealed himself to the patriarchs (see Ex 6:3). *Shaddai* occurs 31 times in the book of Job and 17 times in the rest of the Bible) (CSB)

Almighty. 'Eṣṣ is a name of God and means “Almighty,” whereby the prophets amplify the matter until it means “One whom no one can resist.” Therefore the Babylonians are frightened by the nearness of the time and place and by the unconquerable strength and power against them. The hands of the Babylonians will be enfeebled. This is what happens in a war with battle lines drawn up. Soon it is apparent which side is going to win. For the victors are swift, both horses and men. The others are alarmed. God gives courage, and He removes it. (Luther)

13:7 *hands will go limp.* Courage will fail. See Jer 6:24. (CSB)

Powerlessness in both action and emotion. (TLSB)

There will be no purpose in trying to resist the inescapable. The impact of the judgment will be so great that courage will fail every man that beholds its. (Leupold)

13:8 *Terror.* Holy war usually brings panic to the enemy (see Ex 15:14–16; Jdg 7:21–22). (CSB)

The judgment of God strikes terror in the heart of every sinful human. Sinners stand before the judgment of the almighty God. They can no longer make excuses or rationalizations. God will punish the world for its evil and sin. The day of the Lord is coming. It is a cruel day of “wrath and fierce anger,” as Isaiah announced. Ancient Babylon would not escape the judgment of God. (PBC)

pain ... labor. The prophets often compare the suffering of judgment and war with the pain and anguish that frequently accompany childbirth (see 26:17; Jer 4:31; 6:24). (CSB)

Image of a woman in labor involves not only her intensity but also the suddenness and inevitability of the event. (TLSB)

This figure of speech is often used in Scripture to denote great anguish, because there life is in doubt and there is more fear than hope. (Luther)

THEY WILL LOOK AGAST AT EACH OTHER – The most wretched lot is not only to be outwardly afraid at seeing the enemies but also inwardly at seeing the blanching fellow soldier. Where one is afraid, he will alarm ten others. Moses said in Deut. 20:8: “What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted?” Moreover, fright makes some turn pale but others flush, as here. (Luther)

FACES A FLAME – That is, red like fire. Some redden first before the pallor and then turn pale. (Luther)

Flushed red in fear or panic. (TLSB)

13:9 The moving of the heavens to darkness is an appropriate image of judgment. God is light (Ps 139:11–12; 1Jn 1:5); when His blessing is removed and replaced with His wrath, light is replaced by darkness. This lack of light is a sign of the Lord’s coming (Is 5:30). (TLSB)

A CRUEL DAY – The prophet is picturing a war that will be altogether cruel and without compassion, and it will be thus by God’s design, that the enemies abuse their victory for barbarity. Therefore he calls the day of the Lord cruel. Wrath is a cruel thing, therefore Solomon says in Prov. 27:4: “Wrath has no mercy, or wrath is cruel.” It passes through without forbearance. Thus with many words he amplifies and heightens that cruelty. (Luther)

13:10 *stars ... sun ... moon.* † Cosmic disturbance is associated with the day of the Lord also in Joel 2:10, 31; Mt 24:29–30; Rev 6:12–13. Cf. Jdg 5:20. (CSB)

STARS – Orion is popularly called the staff of Jacob. And among the Hebrews there is often a general term which interpreters have rendered in a specific way. So perhaps it was done here too. Orion stands for many stars. (Luther)

SUN – This means that those who are in danger of death think that whatever they see will bring death. The sun, moon, and stars are darkness to their eyes, just as a sky overcast with clouds is called gloomy. But light refreshes. Thus depending on man's eyes, the sun is for him not bright, not cheerful, but gloomy. The prophet is speaking from the point of view of those who are near death, not from the viewpoint of the real cause. (Luther)

13:11–12 God punishes the earth's prideful people, nearly resulting in human extinction. (TLSB)

13:11 PUNISH WORLD FOR ITS EVIL – תַּיִבֵּל designates the inhabitable earth. (Luther)

arrogance ... pride. Cf. 2:9, 11, 17; 5:15. (CSB)

It becomes clear at this point that the distinctive nature of Babylon's sin was pride of empire. Such was also the spirit of Assyria (10:7-11) and Moab (16:6). All worldly empires become inflated with a sense of their own supreme importance. (Leupold)

13:12 *scarcer ... rare.* War will reduce the male population drastically (see 4:1 and note). (CSB)

gold of Ophir. Solomon imported large quantities of gold from this place (see 1Ki 9:28; 10:11 and notes). (CSB)

13:13 Human sin has affected the rest of creation, so creation feels the wrath of the Lord (Jer 12:4; Rm 8:19–23). (TLSB)

heavens tremble ... earth ... shake. Thunderstorms and earthquakes often accompany the powerful presence of the Lord (see notes on v. 10; 34:4; Ex 19:16). Hail may also be involved (cf. 30:30; Jos 10:11). (CSB)

He says, "I will make a marked change in the earth and in the horizon where men live, when I shall have humbled Babylon in such a way that they will have to change their horizon and depart and move elsewhere. Heaven will deny them its bounty, and the earth will cast them out." (Luther)

Isaiah's prophetic vision of judgment upon ancient Babylon anticipated the final judgment that Peter describes: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare" (2 Peter 3:10). (PBC)

13:14 LIKE A HUANTED GAZELLE – Vision changes from that of the Lord and His army's action to the reaction of the people. They will run like a fleeing gazelle or defenseless sheep. (TLSB)

Like a terrified gazelle chased by hounds or like a scattered flock, the kingdom will not be able to survive without protection. So contemptuously does the prophet speak of the greatest monarchy. These things are unbelievable to all men except those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. The Babylonians will not have a king but will run to look for a lord and protector, lest they be killed, and the foreigners in Babylon will flee to their own land, lest they perish with the Babylonians. (Luther)

SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD – Sheep possess no gift for gathering himself when they are once scattered. (Leupold)

EACH WILL FLEE – "Every man for himself" will be their motto on that day. They will deem themselves fortunate if they can save their own skin. (Leupold)

13:15 FALL BY THE SWORD – What a brutal and bloody vision of judgment! We sometimes sanitize the brutality and cruelty of war, but all wars, modern as well as ancient, are violent campaigns to destroy an enemy and all the enemy's resources to resist. Combat veterans know that. War is savage. So is the judgment of God upon His enemies. (PBC)

13:16 *infants ... dashed to pieces.* Invading armies often slaughtered infants and children; thus there would be no future warriors, nor would there be a remnant through which the city (or country or people) might be revived (see Ps 137:8–9; Hos 10:14; Na 3:10). (CSB)

down to infants, will be killed. Infants were often killed in war in order to destroy the next generation, who might rebel against the conquering nation. Also, nations did not have effective or compassionate ways to deal with refugees or prisoners of war. For these reasons, ancient warfare was often especially brutal. (TLSB)

wives ravished. Women also suffered greatly in war. With their husbands killed, they were often used as prostitutes (see note on Am 7:17). (CSB)

Wives of those killed were often raped and forced into prostitution by the invaders (Am 7:17). These verses describe the harshness of war, but do not condone these practices. Sin is sometimes punished by sin. (TLSB)

13:17 *the Medes*. Located in what is today northwestern Iran. There was conflict between Assyria and Media during the eighth century B.C. Some, however, relate the fulfillment of this verse to the period when the Medes joined the Babylonians in defeating Assyria in 612–609 but later united with Cyrus to conquer Babylon in 539. See Jer 51:11, 28; Da 5:31; 6:28. (CSB)

Neo-Babylonian Empire, also called Chaldea (cf 23:13). Chaldea made an ideal center from which to wage guerrilla warfare against the Assyrians. In 612 BC, these Chaldeans were responsible for the final destruction of Nineveh, Assyria's capital. (TLSB)

13:18 BOWS WILL STRIKE DOWN THE YOUNG – They will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb, etc. Babylon, now the ideal and head of kingdoms, famous for its pride, victory, and domination, will be overthrown like Sodom, etc. He is not speaking of the manner of the overthrow but of the overthrow itself, so that nothing will remain, just as in Sodom there was nothing left nor anything restored. The Arabs carry their tents with them, they are a plundering people; especially the Ishmaelites are herdsmen and shepherds and are most of all occupied with cattle. (Luther)

13:19 *glory ... pride*. Babylon with its temples and palaces became a very beautiful city (see Da 4:29–30). The hanging gardens of Nebuchadnezzar were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. In 4:2 the Hebrew words for “glory” and “pride” were used to describe the “Branch of the LORD.” (CSB)

Babylonians. The Neo-Babylonian empire of 612–539 B.C. was led by the Chaldean people of southern Babylonia. Nabopolassar welded the tribes together c. 626, and his son Nebuchadnezzar became their most powerful ruler (605–562). (CSB)

Refers to Assyria (which ruled Babylon for a time), as it does throughout chs 13–14. (TLSB)

Sodom and Gomorrah. Previously Isaiah compared Judah to these cities (see 1:9–10 and note). (CSB)

Recalls the complete divine destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins (3:9). Such a comparison is also used in the NT for the end times (Lk 17:28–30; Rm 9:29; Rv 11:8). (TLSB)

13:20–22 See the similar description of the desolation of Edom in 34:10–15. Cf. Rev 18:2. (CSB)

Depicts complete abandonment and judgment on Assyria. Every aspect of their life will be gone. A once-great empire will go back to nature. (TLSB)

13:20 *never be inhabited.* Babylon was completely deserted by the seventh century A.D. (CSB)

This great destruction foreshadows the final destruction on Judgment Day, when these words will be completely fulfilled. (TLSB)

No, not by men, neither by sojourners nor strangers, but only by beasts that love the deserts, flying creatures of every kind and quadrupeds of every kind, which live by predation and shun the fellowship of men; and by hairy fauns and satyrs, in whose image demons appeared, as we believe, for the purpose of enticing men to idolatry. (Luther)

When Alexander the Great thought to rebuild Babylon, he employed ten thousand workmen for two months to clear away the rubbish from the foundations of a temple in Babylon. But Alexander never succeeded in rebuilding the city. God had reduced the once glorious and proud city to ruins. (PBC)

no Arab. Too desolate even for Bedouin tribes. (TLSB)

13:21 *wild goats.* This term is connected with demons (“goat idols”) in Lev 17:7; 2Ch 11:15. In Rev 18:2 fallen Babylon is described as a home for demons and evil spirits. (CSB)

Or, “goat demons,” emphasizing the superstitious horror that would leave the city uninhabited (2Ch 11:15). Reflects a curse that a rebellious city would be inhabited by wild beasts following its destruction (Is 14:23). (TLSB)

Ch 13 The Lord of hosts will consecrate an army for the destruction of Babylon. The punishment depicted here will find its most severe expression on Judgment Day, when sinners will face agonizing punishment and swift destruction. We, too, should fear God’s wrath and repent of all evil, iniquity, and pride. The Father consecrated Jesus to receive the punishment for our sins. His innocent hands were nailed to the cross; His side was pierced for our sins in the darkness of Good Friday, that He might become our light and salvation. • Lord of hosts, teach us to fear Your wrath and honor Your Commandments. Give us grace to lay aside all pride and arrogance and to rely solely on Jesus’ mercy. Amen. (TLSB)