



• Five scenes representing five nations

Since Isaiah 13:1 we have had five visions of different pagan nations^{☞1}, beginning with Babylon. Now Isaiah comes back to Babylon again and once more there are five scenes representing five nations (a desert^{☞2}; night-time^{☞3}; Arabs^{☞4}; a valley^{☞5}; Tyre^{☞6}). The nations are identifiable but are not so explicitly named. The first of the five visions is entitled:

☞1 13:1–14:27;
14:28–32;
15:1–16:14;
17:1–18:7;
19:1–20:6
☞2 21:1-10
☞3 21:11-12
☞4 21:13-17
☞5 22:1-25
☞6 23:1-18
☞7 see verse 9

• The 'desert by the sea' – a burden concerning Babylon

¹A burden concerning the desert by the sea.

The 'desert by the sea' refers to the area around what nowadays is called 'The Gulf'. It effectively means 'A burden concerning Babylon'^{☞7} but is deliberately vague. Isaiah is moving towards chapters 24–27 where no names are mentioned since he will be referring to the whole world.

• The people of God always tempted by worldly things

Isaiah's point is that paganism can give no help to God's people since they are in bad trouble themselves. Three examples are found in Isaiah 21: Babylon, Edom and Arabia. The people of God are always tempted to turn to the world: worldly philosophies, worldly attitudes, worldly lusts and impulses, worldly behaviour and lifestyle. 'Babylon' is used in the Bible as the greatest example of worldly seductiveness. Israel was tempted to look for help against Assyria by turning to Babylon. This is undoubtedly what Babylon's visit to Hezekiah^{☞1} was all about.

☞1 see Isaiah 39

1. Pagan powers can give no help to God's people

1. Pagan powers can give no help to God's people. Babylon is a country which is doomed to failure; it is entirely foolish for the people of God to link hands in any way with such people Isaiah sees (in prophetic vision) whirlwinds coming from the lowlands of Israel.

• Babylon is doomed

Like whirlwinds coming one after the other through the southland, it comes from the desert, from a dreaded land.

The interpretation of the whirlwind follows.

²A hard vision has been shown to me.

• Babylonians complain that the Assyrians are traitors

The prophet is seeing a vision of one people (Babylonians^{☞1}) complaining that another people (the Assyrians) are traitors and destroyers.

☞1 see 39:1-7

The betrayer betrays, the destroyer destroys.

• Babylonians call to attack Assyria

The Babylonians are wanting to overthrow Assyria. They call upon the people of Elam (Persians) and the Medes to join in attacking Assyria.

*Elam, get up! Media, lay siege!
I will bring to an end all groaning.*

• Later the Medes and Persians would overthrow Babylon

Yet actually one day the Babylonians would be just as much a persecuting power as the Assyrians. Eventually they in turn would fall at the hand of the Persians and Medes – the very people they are at present calling upon! Elam is the main city of Persia. In later times (the 530s) the Medes and the Persians would overthrow Babylon.

• Isaiah is distressed

Isaiah is in extreme distress as a result of his vision.

³*Therefore my body is full of pain,
pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labour;
I am twisted by what I hear,
I am terrified by what I see.
⁴My heart falters,
fear makes me tremble; the
twilight I longed for has
become a horror to me.*

He is in distress because he sees ahead years of suffering for Judah. The Assyrians are bad enough, but Isaiah knows they will be followed by the Babylonians and they will in turn be followed by the Medes and Persians.

• Meal-time discussion

Next Isaiah sees a meal-time discussion taking place.

⁵*They set the tables,
they spread the rugs,
they eat, they drink.*

• Luxury – Babylonians want Judah's help

The meal-time discussion is full of luxury. The Babylonians want to give a good impression. They are planning rebellion against the Assyrians and want Judah's help. They call for war.

*'Get up, you officers,
oil the shields!'*

Isaiah sees something rather different. In symbolic vision he is to post a watchman to look out for what is happening among the nations.

• Isaiah is to send a watchman – alert to what is happening among the nations

⁶*This is what the Sovereign Lord says to me:
'Go, post a lookout
who will tell what he sees.'*

The watchman sent by Isaiah must be on the lookout for what is about to happen.

• Faithful in his task

⁷*'When he sees riders,
with pairs of horses,
riders on donkeys or
riders on camels, let
him be alert,
fully alert.'*

So – in Isaiah's vision – a watchman is appointed who is faithful in his task.

• An answer

⁸*And he, lion that he was, shouted out,
'Constantly, daily, my lord, I stand on the watchtower;
every night I stay at my post.'*

Eventually he gets an answer.

• Babylon falls to the Persians and Medes

⁹*'And look! Here come men riding horses,
with pairs of horses.'*

The watchman appointed by Isaiah gets the news: Babylon falls at the hands of the Persians and Medes.

*And he spoke and said:
'Babylon has fallen, has fallen!
All the images of its gods lie
shattered on the ground!'*

Isaiah adds his comment.

*¹⁰O my people, crushed on my threshing floor,
I tell you what I have heard
from Yahweh Almighty,
from the God of Israel.*

• **Judah's only hope is in God**

There is no point in trusting Babylon any more than there was in trusting Assyria. Poor Judah will be like grapes trodden down and crushed. The nation's only hope is in God alone.

• **The Christian has to look to God for**

- (i) Understanding
- (ii) Protection
- (iii) Happiness
- (iv) To worship

In certain key areas of life the Christian has to look to God alone. (i) God alone is the source of understanding. He gives us a true view of life. (ii) God is our protection and security. When Assyrians rise up, Babylon is no help! (iii) Babylon offers pleasure and comfort and cleverness. 'They set the tables, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink.' But its temptations always prove useless. Happiness and cleverness are to be found in the will of God. (iv) Babylon demands we worship its gods – but idolatry always offends the God of the Bible.

2. The world has no sense of timing

2. The world has no sense of timing. The next oracle concerns 'Du-mah' – a town in Edom whose name resembles 'Edom' and means 'silence'.

*¹¹The burden concerning Dumah.
Someone calls to me from Seir,
'Watchman, what is left of the night?
Watchman, what is left of the night?'
¹²The watchman replies,
'Morning is sure to come, but also the night.
If you would ask, then ask;
and come back again.'*

• **The world has no answers – wisdom has to come from God**

The picture is of a watchman patrolling the streets at night. Someone calls to him, 'How much longer will the darkness continue?' The watchman has an entirely useless answer. 'I've no idea,' he says. 'The morning will come sometime but I don't know when. Meanwhile, the night is still here. Ask me again sometime.' The point is: the world has no answers and no idea what is to happen next in the story of the world. Our ultimate wisdom has to come from God.

3. The nations of the world are in trouble and cannot find it within themselves to save themselves

3. The nations of the world are in trouble and cannot find it within themselves to save themselves. The Arabs are an example.

*¹³The burden upon the Arabs.
You caravans of Dedanites,
you must stop overnight in the thickets of Arabia.
¹⁴The inhabitants of the land of Tema
brought water to meet the thirsty;
they were there with bread to meet the wanderer.
¹⁵For they scatter from the swords,
from the drawn sword,
from the bent bow
and from the weight of war.*

• **The Dedanites are running from trouble in a war they cannot win**

*¹⁶For this is what the Sovereign Lord says to me:
'Within one year, like the years of a hired man, all the pomp of Kedar will come to an end.
¹⁷The remnant of the bowmen, the warriors of Kedar, will be few.' For Yahweh the God of Israel has spoken.*

The Dedanites are an Arabian tribe. Tema and Kedar are places within their territory. The tribe is in bad trouble. They are running from trouble but must stop overnight¹. Some nearby Arabs from Tema – their fellow tribespeople – come to give them help². The Dedanites are running from a war which they cannot win³.

1 21:13
2 21:14
3 22:15

• They will be reduced to almost nothing within a year

• The whole pagan world is in trouble – we should find our strength in God

But within a year (measured with the exactness with which a man on contract would know the last day of his service) the Dedanites will be reduced to almost nothing. Everything the people of Kedar were so proud of will cease.

The whole pagan world is in trouble. As Babylon can give no help to Israel, as Edom has no sense of the timing of God, so the Arabs are in trouble and cannot find it within themselves to save themselves. Isaiah wants to persuade us to find our strength in God.