

# OpenTheo

## October 31st: Isaiah 13 & Mark 10:32-52

October 30, 2021



### Alastair Roberts

The fall of Babylon. James and John's request.

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## Transcript

Isaiah chapter 13. The oracle concerning Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw. On a bare hill raise a signal, cry aloud to them, wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles.

I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exulting ones. The sound of a tumult is on the mountains as of a great multitude, the sound of an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together. The Lord of hosts is mustering a host for battle.

They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the Lord and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land. Wail, for the day of the Lord is near, as destruction from the Almighty it will come. Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt.

They will be dismayed, pangs and agony will seize them. They will be in anguish like a woman in labour. They will look aghast at one another.

Their faces will be aflame. Behold the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light, the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.

I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity. I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless. I will make people more rare than fine gold, and mankind than the gold of Ophir.

Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger. And like a hunted gazelle, or like sheep with none to gather them, each will turn to his own people, and each will flee to his own land. Whoever is found will be thrust through, and whoever is caught will fall by the sword.

Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes, their houses will be plundered, and their wives ravished. Behold I am stirring up the Medes against them, who have no regard for silver, and do not delight in gold. Their bows will slaughter the young men, they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb, their eyes will not pity children.

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations. No Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there, but wild animals will dwell there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures.

Their ostriches will dwell, and their wild goats will dance, hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces. Its time is close at hand, and its days will not be prolonged. Azar chapter 13 opens a new section of the book.

This section, by various reckonings, runs up to either chapter 23 or chapter 27. It chiefly concerns the nations, but Judah is also frequently addressed within it. There are similarities between this section of the book.

Isaiah chapter 1-12 move from the period of the reign of King Uzziah to the Syro-Ephraimite war of the 730s BC and anticipates the Assyrian crisis that followed around 701 BC. In this new section it is Babylon that takes centre stage from the outset, and Assyria largely seems to have fallen out of view. Outside of the brief appearance in chapter 14 verses 24-27 it does not appear much.

Those words come at the end of the oracle concerning Babylon and have led some commentators to believe that what we have here is a later editorial reworking of material that formerly addressed Assyria. As it speaks about the downfall of Babylon at the hands of the Medes, it would seem to extend the historical scope of these chapters

of Isaiah from the 8th century threat of the Assyrians to the rise of the Babylonians at the end of the 7th century and their dominance through much of the 6th century before the Babylonian empire fell to the Medes and the Persians around 539 BC. There are certainly strong analogies to be seen between Babylon as depicted here and the nation of Assyria as we have seen elsewhere in the prophecy.

The nation by whom the Lord affects his judgement will itself be judged. The relationship between this section and that which preceded it might not be straightforwardly chronological in character but given the typological similarities between Assyria and Babylon we should not treat this section of the book as if it were detached from that which preceded it. The Neo-Babylonian empire succeeded the Neo-Assyrian empire at the end of the 7th century BC.

As I have already noted some commentators argue that the prophecy here originally referred to Assyria before being reworked to refer to Babylon. Babylon is certainly similar to and related to the Assyrian empire in various respects. Most commentators relate this chapter to Babylon in the context of its ascendancy and its destruction of Jerusalem at the end of the 7th century and beginning of the 6th.

However the work of Seth-el-Ansan, *The Burden of Babylon* has given more support to the claims of those who see chapters 13 and 14 of Isaiah as referring to the Babylon of Isaiah's own time rather than to a Babylon of almost 100 years later. John Oswald, one who follows El-Ansan's thesis, argues that Babylon was culturally dominant even though not the heart of the empire that it would later become. Babylon enjoyed some independence and Sargon II lost control of it to Meredith Baladan.

It functioned as, in his words, a symbol for Mesopotamia's glory and pride. In 689 BC Sennacherib crushed Babylon's rebellion and destroyed the city and its chief buildings, a far more destructive defeat of the city than that which it suffered later on in 539 BC. The greatest benefit of El-Ansan's thesis would be placing all of these events in the context of the Assyrian hegemony of the region.

This might make more sense of chapter 14 verses 24-27 and the reference to the death of Ahaz. However it still leaves us with the question of why Assyria doesn't have a more prominent part to play. There are also some more serious problems for El-Ansan's theory.

The oppressive Babylon mentioned here far more readily fits the Babylon that we have at the end of the 7th century and into the 6th than it does the Babylon of Meredith Baladan's time. Furthermore the role of the Medes in verse 17 seems also not to fit with the period of Meredith Baladan when the Medes were not opponents of the Babylonians at all. Putting these problems to one side, one of the things that these chapters do that fit in with what has happened previously is placing the nations in their proper perspective.

The Lord is over and the master of all of the nations. He is the one who controls and moves all of the playing pieces on the board. There is, as Oswald notes, a coherent argument to be observed here.

The chapter opens with a new superscription as in chapter 1 verse 1 and chapter 2 verse 1. It's referred to as an oracle. As Christopher Seitz notes, this term is used on a number of further occasions in the chapters that follow. Many have seen this as a strong indication that we are dealing with a broader section of the larger book.

This indeed seems to be the case, although the material of these chapters is not only inclusive of oracles. There are also woes for instance and the oracles that we have are themselves varied in character. The chapter begins with the Lord setting up a signal, summoning people for battle.

We've already seen this sort of action back in chapter 5 verse 26. He will raise a signal for nations far away and whistle for them from the ends of the earth and behold quickly, speedily they come. The question however is, who are the consecrated ones? Is this Babylon in the period where it would judge the nations or is it referring to the Medes and the Persians who would judge them? It would seem that on our answer to this question hangs our reading of the verses that follow.

They seem to refer to a more general judgement of nations. Those who think that the consecrated ones are the Babylonians would think of places like Jeremiah chapter 25 verses 11 to 12. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. For such a reading, verse 5 would refer to the Babylonians' seventy years dominance of that region. However others see this as a reference to the Medes and the Persians that followed them.

This would connect these verses with the verses that immediately follow and the reference to the Medes being raised up against them in verse 17. If the consecrated ones are the Babylonians themselves however, we would be seeing here another pronounced example of the nation by whom the Lord judged others being judged itself as in the case of the Assyrians. The Day of the Lord would come upon the Babylonians.

The scripture speaks of many different days of the Lord. These various days of the Lord anticipate the great eschatological day of the Lord. They are full stops in the sentences of nations but they look forward to the greater end of all things, the final judgement when the Lord will judge all of the living and the dead.

The focus here is upon the sin of pride, the arrogance, the pomp and the hubris of

nations, something that Babylon seemed to represent in an almost archetypal manner, perhaps understandably given its association with the tower and the city of Babel. The Lord would sap them of courage, might and will, leaving them incapable of standing against their adversaries. The prophet uses the imagery of birth pangs, something that we see elsewhere in places like Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 31.

For I heard a cry as of a woman in labour, anguish as of one giving birth to her first child, the cry of the daughter of Zion, gasping for breath, stretching out her hands, woe is me, I am fainting before murderers. Alongside that imagery there is also cosmic imagery. Perhaps the purpose of this imagery is to humble a nation that worships celestial bodies.

We encounter similar imagery elsewhere in the book in chapter 34 verse 4 for instance. All the host of heaven shall rot away and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.

We also find it in other prophets such as Ezekiel chapter 32 verses 7 to 8. When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark. I will cover the sun with a cloud and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord God.

They would also be scattered and pursued as like a beast before the hunter. Children will be dashed to their death, wives will be raped and houses will be plundered. The psalmist might be referring to this in Psalm 137 verses 8 to 9. O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us.

Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock. As I have already noted, the reference to the Medes in verse 17 here would seem to fit a 6th century reference, far more than it would a reference at the end of the 8th or beginning of the 7th century. Many commentators see problems with the claim that the Medes conquered the Babylonian empire in the 6th century, arguing rather that it was the Persians.

However where scripture elsewhere refers to this, it tends to reference the Medes particularly. This is most clearly seen in the character of Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel, but also in Jeremiah chapter 51 verse 11. Sharpen the arrows, take up the shields.

The Lord has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it. For that is the vengeance of the Lord, the vengeance for his temple. Earlier chapters of Isaiah spoke about the judgement coming upon Judah and Jerusalem, referring to the total and final judgement upon Sodom and Gomorrah in the process.

In chapter 5 verse 17 it spoke of nomads eating among the ruins of the rich in the land,

and the way that the land would be returned to the state of wilderness. The judgement that Babylon would face would be far more severe and final. It would not even be a place for nomadic herdsman.

It would be a place filled with the eerie shrieks and cries of night-time animals, a city utterly desolate and humiliated. We find a similar account in Isaiah chapter 34 verses 10 to 15. There the prophet speaks of Edom.

Night and day it shall not be quenched, its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste. None shall pass through it forever and ever.

As human habitation is cut off, the city reverts to a place for wild beasts. All of this is a sign of the severity and the finality of the Lord's judgement. A question to consider.

Where in the New Testament do we see the symbolism of this chapter being used? In what ways could the judgement upon Babylon described here be understood as archetypal in character? Mark chapter 10 verses 32 to 52. And they were on the road going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.

And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him, and spit on him, and flog him, and kill him. And after three days he will rise.

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. And he said to them, What do you want me to do for you? And they said to him, Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory. Jesus said to them, You do not know what you are asking.

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? And they said to him, We are able. And Jesus said to them, The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized. But to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.

And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you.

But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. And they came to Jericho.

And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me. And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent.

But he cried out all the more, Son of David, have mercy on me. And Jesus stopped and said, Call him. And they called the blind man, saying to him, Take heart, get up, he is calling you.

And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, What do you want me to do for you? And the blind man said to him, Rabbi, let me recover my sight. And Jesus said to him, Go your way, your faith has made you well.

And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. As we move through Mark chapter 10, Jesus is moving towards Jerusalem. They are on the road, as they have been for the last few chapters, steadily travelling the whole length of the land down to Jerusalem.

They are travelling down for the Passover, so there are presumably many others on the way with them. And here Jesus makes the third prediction of his death. He is going to Jerusalem, he is ascending to the place where he will be condemned and crucified.

And his disciples are amazed and the followers have a sense of trepidation. They know that this isn't a regular journey to Jerusalem, but that the ministry of Jesus is arriving at a critical point. It is important that Jesus declares his death beforehand.

It is important to make clear that it is not an accident or fate overtaking him unawares. And Jesus predicts in incredible detail what will happen, the participants, what exactly they will do and what the result will be, that he will rise again on the third day. Having just described, however, the manner of his death, Jesus is approached by James and John, asking for prominent positions in his kingdom.

And Mark maybe spares a few of the brothers' blushes by telling the story in a way that hides the fact that they made the request through their mother, Jesus' aunt. They want to be on his right and left hand in his kingdom. They want the thrones of honour, or the highest places at the feast.

Yet Jesus makes clear that if they want those places, they will need to drink the cup placed before them. In chapter 14 verse 24 we read about Jesus' cup, the cup that he must drink, the cup of his suffering. They will also need to be baptised with Jesus' baptism.

Jesus states that one day indeed they will share in his suffering in this sort of way. When they do, they won't just be like the people on the right hand and the left hand in the feast, they will also have to be like the people that we see on Christ's right and left in

chapter 15 verse 27, the thieves on either side of him on the crosses. They will have to share in his suffering and it will only be through that that places of honour are enjoyed at the feast.

Jesus' reference to his baptism here is interesting. It seems strange to refer to Jesus' forthcoming death and resurrection as his baptism. What could be meant? Well, a number of things.

First of all, it's a transitional event. It's a passage from one form of life to another. Jesus' discussion of his baptism presents it as a sort of trial by ordeal, an entering into the waters of the grave or like Israel passing through the waters of the Red Sea.

And the Apostle Paul would later speak of Christian baptism in connection with Christ's death in Romans chapter 6 verses 1 to 8. We believe that we will also live with him. It is through dying with Christ that we end up living with him. It's through entering into his death and his suffering that we end up with honour in the Kingdom of God.

There will be people in these positions of honour, these places of honour at the feast, but these places aren't granted according to ambition. The other disciples at this point are indignant, but it seems that the irritation at James and John arises more from their desire for such honours rather than any principled opposition to what James and John were doing. In response, Jesus speaks to the whole group, pointing out that the pursuit of greatness and superiority is characteristic of the Gentiles.

They lord it over others. But this is not how the Kingdom of Christ is to be. It is not the case that there is no honour in the Kingdom of Christ, but it is not obtained through jockeying for power.

Rather, it is found in the way of humility and service. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. He came.

He is the one who has come from heaven. He has come on a mission, as angels would come on a mission. What is meant by the service here? Are we thinking about Christ assuming the position of a servant relative to a master, a sort of lowly manward service? It seems to me that the importance here is that of carrying out a charge.

He is one with a commissioned agency or ministry, not as one to be surrounded by attendants as a typical king. Jesus came to perform the task of the commissioned servant of Isaiah, not to get status for himself. The focus is not here upon Christ as the humble servant of men, but upon Christ as the one on a mission from his Father, a mission whereby he will give his life as a ransom for many.

In a similar way, ministers in Christ's church are not supposed to gather attendants round them as kings of the Gentiles would and assume status for themselves, the highest places and feasts, things like that. No, they are sent on a mission. They are



acting in Christ's name and that mission or ministry is to be for the good of all, not to set them over others.

Leaving Jericho, he is followed by a multitude of people. They are excited by this prophet, teacher and potential messiah. The blind man calls out to him as the son of David.

This is the first time that Jesus has been addressed in this way in the Gospel. The messianic secret, as it were, has slipped and the time is nearing for open revelation of Jesus' identity. Bartimaeus is the first person outside of the disciples to speak of Jesus in this sort of way.

We should also notice, once again, that Jesus is being addressed by someone socially marginal, without status, who wishes to get close to him but is rebuked by others and prevented by others. And once again, Jesus insists that the person be allowed access to him and explicitly calls for him. A question to consider, how might Bartimaeus be seen as a model of the disciple of Christ more generally?