

# OpenTheo

## November 8th: Isaiah 21 & Mark 14:26-52

November 7, 2021



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Oracles concerning Babylon and the Arabians. Betrayal and arrest in Gethsemane.

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## Transcript

Isaiah chapter 21. The oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea. As whirlwinds in the Negev sweep on, it comes from the wilderness, from a terrible land.

A stern vision is told to me, the traitor betrays, and the destroyer destroys. Go up, O Elam! Lay siege, O Media! All the sighing she has caused I bring to an end. Therefore my loins are filled with anguish.

Pangs have seized me, like the pangs of a woman in labor. I am bowed down so that I cannot hear. I am dismayed so that I cannot see.

My heart staggers. Horror has appalled me. The twilight I longed for has been turned for me into trembling.

They prepare the table, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink. Arise, O princes! Oil the shield. For thus the Lord said to me, Go set a watchman.

Let him announce what he sees. When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, let him listen diligently, very diligently. Then he who saw

cried out, Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed whole nights.

And behold, here come riders, horsemen in pairs. And he answered, Fallen, fallen is Babylon, and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground. O my threshed and winnowed one, what I have heard from the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, I announce to you.

The Oracle concerning Duma. One is calling to me from Seir. Watchman, what time of the night? Watchman, what time of the night? The watchman says, Morning comes, and also the night.

If you will inquire, inquire. Come back again. The Oracle concerning Arabia.

In the thickets in Arabia you will lodge, O caravans of Dedenites. To the thirsty bring water. Meet the fugitive with bread, O inhabitants of the land of Tima.

For they have fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow, and from the press of battle. For thus the Lord said to me, Within a year, according to the years of a hired worker, all the glory of Kedar will come to an end, and the remainder of the archers of the mighty men of the sons of Kedar will be few, for the Lord the God of Israel has spoken. At the beginning of the Oracles concerning the nations in chapters 13 and 14 there was a lengthy Oracle concerning Babylon which seemed surprising in the context.

Isaiah's ministry occurred during a period of Assyrian dominance in the region. Earlier in the period, in the late 730s BC, Israel and the Arameans were rebelling against Assyria, attacking Judah to bring it into their anti-Assyrian alliance under a puppet king. King Ahaz appealed to Assyria for aid and Assyria subdued Damascus, cut off support from Egypt and took territory from Israel.

Judah ended up in a far closer relationship with Assyria, one that was deeply compromising, both spiritually and politically. In 722 BC, after rebelling against Assyria again, Shalmaneser V came up against Samaria which fell either to him or to his successor Sargon II. Isaiah's Oracles against the nations largely seemed to belong to the period following this and leading up until the end of the 8th century when, in 701 BC, Assyria under Sennacherib would come up against Jerusalem and King Hezekiah.

This, however, raises challenging questions for us when we try to understand the prominence of Babylon in these prophecies and the seemingly minimal attention given to Assyria by contrast. Babylon didn't become the dominant power in the region until 100 years later. The Neo-Assyrian Empire began to crumble from around 630 BC after the death of Ashurbanipal, suffering a period of civil wars and rebellions by former vassal states.

In particular, the Medes and the Babylonians escaped Assyrian rule and turned against their former suzerain. Asur was taken in 614 BC, Nineveh in 612. In 609 they lost the Battle of Haran, after which they were no longer a state.

In 605 BC, at Carchemish, the Egyptians, with the remnants of the Assyrian army, were decisively defeated by Nebuchadnezzar, after which the Neo-Babylonian Empire was the unrivalled power in the region. The Babylonian Empire would last until 539 BC when Babylon fell to Cyrus the Great. All of this was a very long time off when Isaiah delivered his prophecies, yet the later chapters of Isaiah speak concerning this period, and these chapters of Isaiah have also long been read by people of various theological persuasions as also speaking concerning these more distant events.

Under Merodach Baladan, Babylon had rebelled against Assyria following the death of Shalmaneser V in 722 BC. He had reigned over an independent Babylon until 710 BC when Sargon II overcame that rebellion and reigned from Babylon for a number of years. In 703 BC, Merodach Baladan led another short-lived rebellion, during which time he seemed to have encouraged Hezekiah in his rebellion against Assyria.

Sennacherib recovered Assyria's control of Babylon after nine months in 702 BC, but the Assyrians would again lose control of the city in 691 BC. In 689, after a nine-month siege, Sennacherib captured and sacked Babylon, flattening and flooding the city. The destruction of Babylon in 689 was unprecedented and would not even be repeated in 539 BC when Cyrus took over the city without it being destroyed.

Destroying Babylon would be like destroying a great historic city like Rome, Paris or London. Even though such cities are not the centres of imperial power that they once were, there are few finer cities in the world and people from all over the globe travel to and admire them for their history, culture, wealth and grandeur. Even though it was not the centre of the great world empire of the time, Babylon was such a city in the day of Assyria, treated with reverence even by the foreign powers that ruled over it.

Something of this reverence is seen in the fact that the Assyrian kings also claimed the throne and title of the king of Babylon, rather than simply removing its royal status. Sargon II even ruled his empire from there when he needed to consolidate his power in the region. Babylon would also have a similar importance in the time of Alexander the Great.

Destroying such a glorious city was nearly unthinkable. Commentators take various approaches to handling the material concerning Babylon in these earlier chapters of Isaiah. John Oswald describes the way that the common dating of the material of chapter 21 has shifted over the years.

The rise of belief in the Deutero-Isaiah hypothesis, which attributed chapters 40-55 of the book to a later period and author, writing at the end of the exile around 539 BC,

originally made a later dating of this material popular. However this reverted back to the time of Isaiah himself at the end of the 19th century. The oracle was referred to the defeats of Babylon in 710 and 702 BC and its sacking in 689 BC.

John Goldengate contrasts the oracle concerning Babylon in this chapter with that of chapters 13 and 14, suggesting that it is much more what we would expect of an oracle concerning Babylon in Isaiah's own day, mixed in with the other nations, rather than at their head and given particular prominence. The balance of scholarly judgement has shifted back again to the later dating of the 6th century, although Oswald notes that commentators are increasingly adopting positions that allow for both horizons to be in view. There are different ways in which this could be approached.

For some commentators, like Oswald himself, it seems plausible to see both references to the defeat of Babylon in the 8th and early 7th centuries on the near horizon and dark foreshadowings of a more distant horizon of Babylon's destiny in 539 BC. For others, earlier prophecies were remixed and elaborated by later hands to address situations current in their own later days. Andrew McIntosh, for instance, has made a case that Isaiah chapter 21 is a palimpsest, a prophecy concerning an earlier situation that has been recycled and reworked for a later time.

This position has been persuasive for many, but it seems to me it is not necessary to read the chapter in that way. The oracle begins in a mysterious manner, being introduced as the oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea. We should note that the following chapter begins in a similar fashion, the oracle concerning the valley of vision, perhaps suggesting that the two ought to be read together.

If the reference to the wilderness of the sea is not a textual corruption as some suggest, then we might take this to be a description, likely unflattering, of the marshy land of southern Babylon. Described in such a manner, it is certainly not auspicious as a source of aid. The evocative yet elusive description of the whirlwind from the wilderness has been understood by some to refer not to the subject matter of the vision, but to the vision itself.

The unsettling vision descends upon Isaiah like a storm. Elam and Mediah are called to go up against their adversary. These details would seem to fit a 6th century reference well, Elam and the Medes and the Persians who overthrew Babylon in 539 BC.

Elam and Mediah were allies of Babylon during the earlier period of the late 8th and early 7th centuries. However, Oswald questions whether this summons needs to be read as a literal prediction. Isaiah, he suggests, could be painting a more general picture of Babylon's destruction, rather than making a claim about the exact form that it would take.

He could also be read as calling upon Babylon's allies to turn against it. This earlier

dating is strengthened by Isaiah's reaction to the prophecy. He is greatly dismayed by the news of Babylon's coming downfall.

In sharp contrast to the rejoicing over Babylon's downfall that characterises later prophecy concerned with the exile period. This would make a lot more sense of a situation where Judah was looking to Babylon for its rebellion against Assyria. The crushing of Babylon would be devastating news for Judah and the prophet is deeply dismayed by the vision.

Christopher Seitz raises a further possibility that Isaiah is dismayed much as Daniel is described as being dismayed when he sees visions of events that are very distant in time. Such a reaction is described of Daniel in places like Daniel chapter 7 verse 15, 28 and chapter 8 verse 27. Isaiah sees troubling and obscure visions but cannot make sense of them.

Readers of Isaiah have long seen in verse 5 a possible reference to Belshazzar's feast at the eve of the fall of Babylon. The banquet is prepared and enjoyed but the enemy has come upon them and they are quite unready. However one could also understand the people at the feast to be the enemies of Babylon who prepare for battle after their banquet.

Alec Mottier has even suggested that the meal may have been the meal that Hezekiah prepared for the Babylonian ambassadors in chapter 39. The prophet is described as a watchman much as Habakkuk in Habakkuk chapter 2 verse 1. I will take my stand at my watch post and station myself on the tower and look out to see what he will say to me and what I will answer concerning my complaint. As the divinely appointed watchman, Isaiah is instructed to declare what he sees, speaking out when he sees a procession of horsemen, riders on camels and riders on donkeys approaching.

The watchman, told what to look out for, perseveres in scanning the horizon day and night. Eventually the riders and the horsemen appear. These are the evidence of Babylon's doom.

Babylon is fallen and its gods with it. The prophet then addresses the people of Judah as the threshed and winnowed one, presumably referring to the fate that awaits them at the hands of the Assyrians without any Babylonian aid to support them. They will be trampled underfoot and beaten, much as grain on the threshing floor.

The object of the oracle of verses 11 and 12 is difficult to ascertain. Historically the reference to Seir led people to identify it as referring to Edom. Duma may be related to Idumaea.

Alternatively Duma was one of the sons of Ishmael along with Kedar and Tima who are both mentioned in the following oracle. Dedan, who is also mentioned in verse 13, was

one of the grandsons of Abraham by Ketora. The identification of Duma with Ishmael and the Arabian allies of Babylon seems to be the more likely identification.

Duma was an oasis in northern Arabia. The trade route through Duma would be important for the Edomites who would be eagerly awaiting news. The prophetic watchman is asked what time of the night it is.

Is there going to be a new dawn soon? The watchman's response is equivocal though. Morning is coming but so is night and the enquirer is encouraged to come back again when things are clearer. The Arabians were important allies of the Babylonians and Nabonidus even ruled from Tima when he left Babylon in 552 BC.

In verses 13 to 17 however we have an oracle concerning Arabia with refugees from the north fleeing from the sword coming into their desert land as Kedar is stripped of its glory. Much as Judah was encouraged to take in Moabite refugees, the Arabians of that region are encouraged to take in their brothers who have fled from the sword. A question to consider.

The prophet's involvement in the reception of the word of the Lord is pronounced in this chapter. The vision comes upon him like a whirlwind and sets him trembling. Later he is described like a watchman sleeplessly scanning the horizon.

Where else in scripture do we find such images of the intensity of the prophet's relationship with the word of the Lord? Mark chapter 14 verses 26 to 52. And when they had sung a hymn they went out to the mount of olives and Jesus said to them you will all fall away for it is written I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered but after I'm raised up I will go before you to Galilee. Peter said to him even though they all fall away I will not and Jesus said to him truly I tell you this very night before the rooster crows twice you will deny me three times but he said emphatically if I must die with you I will not deny you and they all said the same and they went to a place called Gethsemane and he said to his disciples sit here while I pray and he took with him Peter and James and John and began to be greatly distressed and troubled and he said to them my soul is very sorrowful even to death remain here and watch and going a little farther he fell on the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass from him and he said Abba father all things are possible for you remove this cup from me yet not what I will but what you will and he came and found them sleeping and he said to Peter Simon are you asleep could you not watch one hour watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation the spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak and again he went away and prayed saying the same words and again he came and found them sleeping for their eyes were very heavy and they did not know what to answer him and he came the third time and said to them are you still sleeping and taking your rest it is enough the hour has come the son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners rise let us be going see my betrayer is at hand and immediately while he was still speaking Judas came one of

the 12 and with him a crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders now the betrayer had given them a sign saying the one I will kiss is the man seize him and lead him away under guard and when he came he went up to him at once and said rabbi and he kissed him and they laid hands on him and seized him but one of those who stood by drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear and Jesus said to them have you come out as against a robber with swords and clubs to capture me day after day I was with you in the temple teaching and you did not seize me but let the scriptures be fulfilled and they all left him and fled and a young man followed him with nothing but a linen cloth about his body and they seized him but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked Jesus makes three predictions in this chapter and there are three fulfillments Judas's betrayal the disciples desertion and Peter's denial and each of these three predictions is fulfilled in order by the end of the chapter after singing a hymn they go out to the mount of olives the hymn was presumably one of the psalms that ended the Passover meal psalms 113 and 114 were traditionally sung beforehand and afterwards psalms 115 to 118 would have been sung so presumably these are the things that Jesus would have sung at this point they go out to the mount of olives this continues the movements back and forth between the temple mount and the city and the mount of olives Jesus quotes Zechariah chapter 13 verse 7 to speak about the way that his disciples will forsake him strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered as usual it's important to hear the stories behind the stories this is another allusion from the one that we've seen in the triumphal entry to Zechariah the rejected messiah will be wounded and killed but the end of Zechariah is one of great deliverance and blessing to the nation and the wider peoples perhaps notably the last chapter of Zechariah begins with key references to the mount of olives Jesus foretells what's going to happen in his disciples forsaking of him but he also foretells the resurrection and the fact that he will meet them again in Galilee returning to where he first called them the scattered sheep and the struck shepherd will be reunited again Peter however told that they will forsake Christ has an excessive confidence in his own abilities he insistently denies that he will deny Christ puffed up he presents himself as the most faithful disciple and perhaps we should see a connection between the proud crowing cock and Peter himself in Mark we're told that the cock will crow twice and many have seen a contradiction between this and other gospel accounts I think it's quite natural to think that the other gospel accounts removed one of the references to the crowing of the cock because one is enough to get the point across the reference to the cock crowing twice here probably occurs because Mark's source is Peter himself and Peter has the most vivid memory of the event however most cocks that crowed would crow multiple times and would likely be joined by others it's a rather strange detail to camp out on as a contradiction Peter is the lead disciple he recognizes that Jesus will die but he thinks he is faithful enough to die with him perhaps he doesn't realize just how much pressure he'll be put under or perhaps he doesn't realize the type of pressure he'll be put under either way his pride at this point will soon be deflated by events Jesus goes to pray in the garden of Gethsemane he prays three times for the cup to be removed

and is joined by Peter James and John these are the same three disciples as were present at the transfiguration the raising of Jairus's daughter they're probably near enough to hear what Jesus is saying they have an intimate view into Jesus' prayer life at its most remarkable and powerful moment and yet they fall asleep Jesus challenges Peter in particular for his failure to watch one hour Peter the one who had been so proud and boastful about his ability to stand with Christ his ability to stand when all others would forsake and now Peter has failed just to keep awake Jesus charges them watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation into the trial or the testing or the tribulation that would test them beyond their capacity Jesus at the very beginning of the gospel had been brought into temptation by the spirit cast out into the wilderness facing the temptation of Satan in a position where he lacked the resources that he needed to eat and was tested to the limits of his strength a similar time of trial and testing and tribulation is opening up now and he will once again face off with Satan himself and the disciples are on the brink of that moment and they're falling asleep they're not prepared three times they are tested and three times they fail in contrast to Jesus in the wilderness the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak they're zealous particularly Peter but they lack the ability to carry it through in practice and I think Jesus' words here reflect his own struggle he himself knows what it is to feel temptation the struggle to persevere with his vocation when his flesh is crying out against what the cross means against the pain and the agony and all the other things that the cross represents if anyone's spirit is willing Christ is but if anyone is facing a battle with the flesh and its instinctive desire to avoid suffering and pain and hardship Christ is facing that struggle in this we're seeing a contrast between Christ and his disciples Christ who watches and prays as he prepares for the temptation this testing that he will go through and the disciples as the weakness of their flesh overcomes them and they cannot stand in the hour that they need to stand Christ is tempted in every way as we are tempted to fall back tempted to divert from the path that the father has set before him tempted to give up the cup that had been handed to him but he perseveres he faces temptation and does not sin and in this he provides not only a contrast with us but also an example to us after returning the third time Jesus says it is enough the matter for which he wanted their presence is now settled and his betrayer is at hand Judas comes with the mob we're told he's one of the twelve we know that Judas is one of the twelve already but it tells us that to underline the point this is one of his closest friends he's been betrayed by someone he's invested the last three years of his life in he's been close to this person he's trusted this person he's given power to this person to do miracles in his name this person has witnessed all that Christ has done and now he's turning against him and he betrays Christ with a kiss an act of greeting to single him out from the others but the cruelty and the wickedness of the betrayal is heightened by the manner in which it occurs this act of greeting and love and tenderness and friendship is exploited as a means to destroy someone betrayal with a kiss might remind us of the story of Joab and Amasa in second Samuel chapter 20 verses 9 to 10 one of those who's with Jesus a bystander identified as Peter elsewhere strikes the high priest servant and Jesus points out that they could have taken him in the temple



he was teaching there openly by day and yet here they are arresting him like some criminal like some brigand this of course is all part of the plan of the chief priests and the scribes they wanted to arrest Jesus by stealth because they didn't want the crowd to have notice of it they wanted this all to go down as quietly and behind the scenes as possible so that there would not be unrest at the time of the feast this however happens in order that the scriptures might be fulfilled Christ is numbered with the transgressors it says in Isaiah chapter 53 and the disciples now all flee there's a reference here to a young man in a linen garment who was seized but ran away naked it's rather surprising in the context and a bit comical none of the other gospels record this detail and many different suggestions about the identity of this figure have been put forward perhaps it was a disciple of Jesus who witnessed the event later became a witness to the event and was known among many in the early church others have suggested it was Mark himself Mark had a house in Jerusalem which some have identified with the site of the last supper and so maybe he was a witness to this event himself and he writes himself into his gospel without putting himself in by name others have seen some symbolic import in Amos chapter 2 verse 16 he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day declares the Lord when God judges and this event of crisis comes people will flee away naked perhaps there is some reference here to the previous chapter Mark chapter 13 verses 15 to 16 reads let the one who is on the housetop not go down nor enter his house to take anything out and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak maybe we're supposed to hear the events of the previous chapter being played out in some way here a question to consider in the disciples falling asleep in the garden of Gethsemane and in the cock crowing bringing Peter to his senses we should be reminded of the centrality of the charge to be wakeful in the in Mark chapter 13 verses 33 to 37 we read be on guard keep awake for you do not know when the time will come it is like a man going on a journey when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge each with his work and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake therefore stay awake for you do not know when the master of the house will come in the evening or at midnight or when the rooster crows or in the morning lest he come suddenly and find you asleep and what i say to you i say to all stay awake reading mark 14 against the backdrop of mark 13 what parallels do you notice what do these parallels suggest and what can they teach us