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The Oracle Concerning Babylon

21: 1-10

The oracle concerning Babylon DIG: In Isaiah's day, Babylon sought allies among the other nations, including Judah (see Chapter 39), to help her resist Assyria. Why is that a faulty, even fatal hope? How does this dire vision affect Isaiah? Why is he so upset? What does this show you about him? Compare Isaiah 21:5 to Dani'el 5:1-30. What were the leaders of Babylon doing the very night of their final overthrow? What does that say about the people of Judah? If Judah hoped that Babylon might protect them from Assyria, how would she react to the news that Babylon has fallen?

REFLECT: What *Babylon* are you betting on to shelter you from the uncertainties of life? Knowing that such temporal security will be swept away, like Babylon, how do you feel? What can you do to fulfill that God-shaped void of insecurity? When was the last time you were betrayed? How did it feel? What could you have done differently? How does God enter into the equation?

There are two series of oracles. The first series, from **13:1** to **20:6**, is marked by great optimism. Even the world's super powers are subject to **ADONAI**, and **His** word is full of promises. The second series of oracles that starts here at **21:1** and ends at **23:18**, is very different. Even though the content of each **oracle** makes its subject clear, each oracle has an air of mystery, even foreboding. There is, in fact, an all-encompassing sense of doom and darkness around each one.

One of the classic examples of the failure of a web of deceptive alliances in our time is the story of Russia and Germany during World War II. One of Hitler's greatest fears growing out of World War I was of a "two-front" war. So, in order to secure his eastern flank while campaigning in the west, he negotiated what must surely be one of the most cynical alliances of all time. Knowing that he would one day attack Russia (already having said so in his book, *Mein Kampf*), he still got Russia to agree to a nonaggression pact. For his part, Stalin was frightened of the rapidly growing German war machine and congratulated himself for having effectively stopped it at his borders.

Both of these pirates had built their empires on lies and looting, and now they were announcing their “mutual understanding and trust.” It is amazing that Stalin could not see what sort of person Hitler was after all the promises he had broken from Czechoslovakia onward, but perhaps the Russian tyrant thought he saw a kindred spirit in Hitler. It may also be true that Stalin was afraid of his remaining generals (after the purges of 1937-1938) amassing power within the country if he permitted a great buildup with the pact.

In any case, once Hitler felt the west was secure, he turned to gobble up the great wheat field of Byelorussia and the Ukraine, sure that a cowed Stalin would hide behind the Ural Mountains and sue for peace. But if Stalin misread Hitler, Hitler also misread Stalin. Hitler did not know that he had kicked a bulldog. The former Orthodox priest had pursued his goals of absolute power for twenty years with incredible tenacity and stubbornness, and those traits would serve him well in “The Great Patriotic War.” Both men thought they had put something over on their neighbor that would be to their own advantage. But in the end, both countries were devastated.

This section is not referring to the fall of **Babylon** to the Medo-Persian Empire in 539 BC. The end of **the Babylonian** Captivity was something that **Isra’el** would rejoice in. Then **the Israelites** would look forward to the return to **their** homeland. This fall of **Babylon**, however, was terrifying and something to be feared. In 722 BC a Chaldean prince from the Persian Gulf region named **Merodach-Baladan (39:1)** had revolted against **Assyria**, captured **Babylon**, and was crowned king of **Babylon**. **Hezekiah**, king of **Judah**, and other members of his royal court felt that **Merodach-Baladan** would be able to break the strength of **the Assyrian** Empire (**to see link click [Ha](#) - The King of Babylon Sent Hezekiah a Gift**). But **Isaiah** warned **them** that would not happen (see **[Go](#) - Hezekiah and the Assyrians**).

In this **near historical prophecy**, **Isaiah** pictures an invasion from **the Desert by the Sea**, or from **Babylon** by the Persian Gulf, as being like an approaching **desert** storm (**21:1a**). The invader was probably **Merodach-Baladan** who arose suddenly from the desert regions to revolt against **Assyria**. The present **oracle** is probably **God’s** attempt to discourage **Judah** from joining **Babylon** in an alliance against **Assyria**. It plays the same role in relation to **Merodach-Baladan** and **Babylon** as **19:1-15** does in relation to an **Egyptian** alliance.⁶⁵ **Why should Judah trust Babylon when Babylon herself was doomed?**

Like whirlwinds sweeping through the southland, an invader comes from the desert, from a land of terror (21:1b). The **whirlwinds sweeping through the southland** refer to hot winds that move from the east, out of a **land of drought and**

death, where no one lives or even travels (Jeremiah 2:6). These storms come with deadly suddenness and force (**Job 1:19, 37:9; Jeremiah 4:11, 13:24; Hosea 13:15; Zechariah 9:14**).

God gave **Isaiah** a **vision** about **the Babylonian** uprising against **the Assyrian** empire. A **dire vision** had **been shown to him**, and **he** didn't like what **he** saw. Just because **he** prophesied about doom and bloodshed didn't mean **he** delighted in it. The same sensitivity that made **Isaiah** aware of what **the LORD** was saying to **him** also made **him** empathize with the human tragedy that **he** saw coming (**21:a**). This is why **Jeremiah** is called *the weeping prophet* (**Lamentations 1:16**).

Elam and **Media** were allies of **Babylon** in the 700s, **Isaiah** heard the battle cry for **Elam**, to **attack**, and **Media** (north of **Elam**) to **lay siege! Merodach-Baladan** and **Babylon** were encouraging **their** allies to join **her** in the attack on **Assyria**. But it was to no avail. Sennacherib launched a campaign against Elam in 694 BC and ravaged the land. In that sense **the traitor betrays (33:1)**, and **the looter takes loot**. Nevertheless, the **Babylonian** invader **Merodach-Baladan** thought **he** could **bring to an end all the groaning caused by the traitor, the Assyrian Empire (21:2)**. **She** had **caused** most of the nations in the area to groan under the devastation caused by **her** conquests. Evidently, **Merodach-Baladan** thought **he** could stop **the Assyrian** advance and liberate the entire Mesopotamia region.

The prophet then contrasted **his** feelings with those around **him**. **At this my body is wracked with pain, pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor; I am staggered by what I hear, I am bewildered by what I see (21:3)**. The prophecy **he** was about to utter had specific effects upon **Isaiah himself**. First, **his body is wracked with pain**. The Hebrew word here means *contortions, induced by cramps*. Secondly, **pangs seize him, like a woman in labor**, a simile often used by the prophets (**Isa 26:17; Jer 4:31, 6:24, 22:23, 30:6, 48:41, 50:43; Micah 4:9-10**). Thirdly, he is **staggered by what he** was hearing. **He** could hardly stand up. Fourthly, **he** was **bewildered by what he** was seeing in Jerusalem. The people around **him** were living their lives as if nothing was going to happen (**21:5a**), totally unaware of the impending danger. Possibly **Isaiah** had in mind the feasting that would occur when king **Hezekiah** received **Merodach-Baladan** and **his envoys** from **Babylon (39:1-8)**.

Isaiah declared: **My heart falters, fear makes me tremble; the twilight I longed for has become a horror to me (21:4)**. Fifthly, **his heart falters, in other words, he** suffered irregular heartbeats. Sixthly, **he** is so fearful, that **he** shook. And finally, **the**

twilight, which would normally be a relief to someone having a nightmare, only brought more horror. While **Merodach-Baladan** lived in a fantasy world thinking that **Babylon** could actually defeat **Assyria**, **Isaiah** saw the reality. Not only were the Judeans unsuspecting of the dangers ahead, neither were **the Babylonians themselves**.

The Babylonians, rather than living life as usual, should have been preparing for battle with **the Assyrians**. **Isaiah** said of **the Babylonians**, “**They set the tables, they spread the rugs, they eat, and they drink!**” Instead, **their** military leaders should have been saying: **Get up, you officers, and oil the shields (21:5)**. To **oil the shields** was the first step in the preparation for combat. And they would anoint **the** shield with **oil**, because swords, spears, and arrows would more easily glance off. **Shields** were made of bull-hide, of two or more thicknesses, stretched over a frame of wood, and sometimes strengthened with metallic rims, and ornamented in various places by pieces of metal. An occasional rubbing with **oil** was necessary to prevent the leather from becoming dry and cracked, and to keep the metallic portions from rust. This was especially necessary in getting ready for battle, hence, to **oil the shields** was equivalent to a preparation for war. When **shields** were not in use, they were kept in cases, or covers, probably made of leather, to preserve them from dust. To “uncover **the shields**” would be equivalent to a preparation for battle, and is an expression having the same meaning as **oil the shield**. Also see **Habakkuk 3:9**.⁶⁶ At the very last minute **the Babylonians** realized that they were in danger, but it was too late. Like the Titanic, they were about to go down.

God told **Isaiah** to have someone be on the **lookout** for the battle between **Babylon** and Assyria. **This is what ADONAI says to me: Go, post a lookout and have him report what he sees (21:6)**. **God** sent a **lookout**, or **watchman**, to **his** post and **Babylon** to its doom. Once appointed, **he** is told to **report what he saw**.

When he sees a military caravan of **chariots with teams of horses, riders on donkeys or riders on camels, let him be alert, fully alert (21:7)**. This was what **he** was supposed to be looking for.

The **lookout** was to **be alert, fully alert**. Even strong walls and double gates would not of themselves secure a city from the enemy. Men were therefore employed to watch day and night on the top of the walls, especially by the gates and this is what **Isaiah** saw. A figure of **a lookout** and his work is beautifully seen also in **Ezekiel 32: 2, 6-7**, and **Habakkuk 2:1**.⁶⁷

It is insightful how Muslims corrupt this same verse for their own uses. They teach that the Bible reads **an oracle upon Arabia**, instead of the correct translation, **an oracle concerning (NIV) or against (NKJ) Arabia** in **21:13**. Clearly, Satan is the father of lies

and there is no truth in him (**John 8:44**). Muslim doctrine states that **Isaiah** wrote these verses after **he** saw a vision of **a chariot of donkeys** and **a chariot of camels**, which once again is not how the text reads. The verse reads, **When the watchman sees chariots with teams of horses, riders on donkeys or riders on camels, let him be alert.** They teach, however, that **the chariot of donkeys** turned out to be **Yeshua** who entered Jerusalem on **a donkey**. They even quote **Matthew 21:5** and **John 12:14** to substantiate their misinterpretation of this Scripture. Then they ask, “Who then was **the chariot of camels?**” They say it could be no other than Muhammad who came about six hundred years after the birth of **the Messiah**, who they believe is a prophet of Allah. Therefore, they ask all mankind to accept Muhammad as “the Seal of the Prophets,” or the last of the Prophets. This is an amazing corruption of this text and shows to what extent that **the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (Second Corinthians 4:4).**

But **the lookout** grew impatient when **he** neither saw nor heard anything. **And then he shouted**, literally, *called out like a lion*, “How much longer do I need to keep on looking?” **Day after day, my lord** (another way of saying *sir*, responding respectfully to **Isaiah**, the one who appointed **him** in **21:6**) **I stand on the watchtower; every night I stay at my post (21:8).** When the answer finally came, **the watchman** saw what **he** was told to **look** for, **he** blurted out: **Look, here it is, here comes a manned chariot with a pair of horses (21:9a).** This verse gives us some insight into the demands of a prophet. **He** was determined to declare only what **he** saw, **his** character was unquestioned, and **he** was disciplined enough to wait until **he** was certain of **his** message. **The Assyrian** military procession (**21:7**) was returning victorious. That signified that **Babylon** had **fallen** and the **gods** of **Babylon** had been judged.



And Isaiah gave back the answer to him when **he** said: **Babylon has fallen, has fallen.** The repetition of the verb adds to the impact of the statement. **All the images of her gods**

lie shattered on the ground (21:9b). The prophets emphasize that when **God** judges **the gods of Babylon, He will punish them (Jeremiah 51:47 and 52).** In **46:1-2** we learn that **Nebo** was the son of **Bel Marduk** and these two most important gods of **the Babylonian** pantheon are now seen to be **stooped low** as if **they** were in carts to be carried away. **Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low.** The expressions, **bows down** and **stoops low**, evidently refer to the downfall of these **idols**, and of the system of idolatry of which **they** were the symbols. So utterly helpless are **Nebo** and **Bel**, that they cannot deliver **themselves** from captivity, and so worthless that **they** are counted only as **burdensome images that are carried about by beasts of burden.**⁶⁸

Isaiah says that they are **burdensome, a burden for the weary.** Furthermore, **he** tells us that **they** were **unable to rescue the burden.** These **gods** could not deliver **Babylon** from the invasion of Sennacherib. Now, **they themselves go off into captivity**, the property of **the Assyrian** king. It is important to see here that **the gods of Babylon** were **gods** that needed to be carried. That is his main point.

The emotional impact of this message on **the people of Judah**, who were hoping for **Babylon's** revolt against **Assyria**, was devastating. **They** had hoped that the alliance king Hezekiah had made with **Babylon** would break **the Assyrian** domination. But it was not to be. So, **the people of Judah** felt **crushed** emotionally, like a grain of wheat **on the threshing floor (21:10a).**

Isaiah reiterated that **his** message was from **God.** **He** was only telling what **he** had heard **from the LORD of heaven's angelic armies (CJB), the God of Isra'el (21:10).** **Judah** should not rely on **the Babylonians** to save them. This man from **the Desert by the Sea, Merodach-Baladan**, would not be successful. **They** should not hitch **their** wagon to **him.**