

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

God mustereth the armies of his wrath against the inhabitants of Babylon, Isaiah 13:1-6. The dreadful consequences of this visitation, and the terror and dismay of those who are the objects of it, Isaiah 13:7-16. The horrid cruelties that shall be indicted upon the Babylonians by the Medes, Isaiah 13:17, Isaiah 13:18. Total and irrecoverable desolation of Babylon, Isaiah 13:19-22.

This and the following chapter, - striking off the five last verses of the latter, which belong to a quite different subject, - contain one entire prophecy, foretelling the destruction of Babylon by the Medes and Persians; delivered probably in the reign of Ahaz, (see Vitrinia, 1:380), about two hundred years before its accomplishment. The captivity itself of the Jews at Babylon, which the prophet does not expressly foretell, but supposes, in the spirit of prophecy, as what was actually to be effected, did not fully take place till about one hundred and thirty years after the delivery of this prophecy: and the Medes, who are expressly mentioned Isaiah 13:17, as the principal agents in the overthrow of the Babylonian monarchy, by which the Jews were released from that captivity, were at this time an inconsiderable people; having been in a state of anarchy ever since the fall of the great Assyrian empire, of which they had made a part, under Sardanapalus; and did not become a kingdom under Deioces till about the seventeenth of Hezekiah.

The former part of this prophecy is one of the most beautiful examples that can be given of elegance of composition, variety of imagery, and sublimity of sentiment and diction, in the prophetic style; and the latter part consists of an ode of supreme and singular excellence.

The prophecy opens with the command of God to gather together the forces which he had destined to this service, Isaiah 13:2, Isaiah 13:3. Upon which the prophet immediately hears the tumultuous noise of the different nations crowding together to his standard; he sees them advancing, prepared to execute the Divine wrath, Isaiah 13:4, Isaiah 13:5. He proceeds to describe the dreadful consequences of this visitation, the consternation which will seize those who are the objects of it; and, transferring unawares the speech from himself to God, Isaiah 13:11, sets forth, under a variety of the most striking images, the dreadful destruction of the inhabitants of Babylon which will follow, Isaiah 13:11-16, and the everlasting desolation to which that great city is doomed, Isaiah 13:17-22.

The deliverance of Judah from captivity, the immediate consequence of this great revolution, is then set forth, without being much enlarged upon, or greatly amplified, Isaiah 14:1, Isaiah 14:2. This introduces, with the greatest ease and the utmost propriety, the triumphant song on that subject, verses 4-28. The beauties of which, the various images, scenes, persons introduced, and the elegant transitions from one to another, I shall here endeavor to point out in their order, leaving a few remarks upon particular passages of these two chapters to be given after these general observations on the whole.

A chorus of Jews is introduced, expressing their surprise and astonishment at the sudden downfall of Babylon; and the great reverse of fortune that had befallen the tyrant, who, like his predecessors, had oppressed his own and harassed the neighboring kingdoms. These oppressed kingdoms, or their rulers, are represented under the image of the fir trees and the cedars of Libanus, frequently used to express any thing in the political or religious world that is super-eminently great and majestic: the whole earth shouteth for joy; the cedars of Libanus utter a severe taunt over the fallen tyrant, and boast their security now he is no more.

The scene is immediately changed, and a new set of persons is introduced. The regions of the dead are laid open, and Hades is represented as rousing up the shades of the departed monarchs: they rise from their thrones to meet the king of Babylon at his coming; and insult him on his being reduced to the same low estate of impotence and dissolution with themselves. This is one of the boldest prosopopoeias that ever was attempted in poetry; and is executed with astonishing brevity and perspicuity, and with that peculiar force which in a great subject naturally results from both. The image of the state of the dead, or the infernum poeticum of the Hebrews, is taken from their custom of burying, those at least of the higher rank, in large sepulchral vaults hewn in the rock. Of this kind of sepulchres there are remains at Jerusalem now extant; and some that are said to be the sepulchres of the kings of Judah. See Maundrell, p. 76. You are to form to yourself an idea of an immense subterranean vault, a vast gloomy cavern, all round the sides of which there are cells to receive the dead bodies; here the deceased monarchs lie in a distinguished sort of state, suitable to their former rank, each on his own couch, with his arms beside him, his sword at his head, and the bodies of his chiefs and companions round about him. See Ezekiel 32:27. On which place Sir John Chardin's MS. note is as follows: "En Mingrelie ils dorment tous leurs epees sous leurs tetes, et leurs autres armes a leur cote; et on les enterre de mesme, leurs armes posees de cette facon." In Mingrelia they always sleep with their swords under their heads, and their other arms by their sides; and they bury their dead with their arms placed in the same manner. These illustrious shades rise at once from their couches, as from their thrones; and advance to the entrance of the cavern to meet the king of Babylon, and to receive him with insults on his fall.

The Jews now resume the speech; they address the king of Babylon as the morning-star fallen from heaven, as the first in splendor and dignity in the political world, fallen from his high state; they introduce him as uttering

the most extravagant vaunts of his power and ambitious designs in his former glory. These are strongly contrasted in the close with his present low and abject condition.

Immediately follows a different scene, and a most happy image, to diversify the same subject, to give it a new turn, and an additional force. Certain persons are introduced who light upon the corpse of the king of Babylon, cast out and lying naked on the bare ground, among the common slain, just after the taking of the city; covered with wounds, and so disfigured, that it is some time before they know him. They accost him with the severest taunts; and bitterly reproach him with his destructive ambition, and his cruel usage of the conquered; which have deservedly brought him this ignominious treatment, so different from that which those of his rank usually meet with, and which shall cover his posterity with disgrace.

To complete the whole, God is introduced, declaring the fate of Babylon, the utter extirpation of the royal family, and the total desolation of the city; the deliverance of his people, and the destruction of their enemies; confirming the irreversible decree by the awful sanction of his oath.

I believe it may with truth be affirmed, that there is no poem of its kind extant in any language, in which the subject is so well laid out, and 60 happily conducted, with such a richness of invention, with such variety of images, persons, and distinct actions, with such rapidity and ease of transition, in so small a compass, as in this ode of Isaiah. For beauty of disposition, strength of colouring, greatness of sentiment, brevity, perspicuity, and force of expression, it stands, among all the monuments of antiquity, unrivalled. - L.

Verse 1

The burden of Babylon - The prophecy that foretells its destruction by the Medes and Persians: see the preceding observations.

Verse 2

Exalt the voice - The word *lahe* (lahem), *to them*, which is of no use, and rather weakens the sentence, is omitted by an ancient MS., and the Vulgate.

Verse 3

I have commanded my sanctified ones - *mekuddashai* (mekuddashai), the persons consecrated to this very purpose. Nothing can be plainer than that the verb *kadash* (kadash), *to make holy*, signifies also to consecrate or appoint to a particular purpose. Bishop Lowth translates, *my enrolled warriors*. This is the sense.

Verse 4

Of the battle *For the battle* - The Bodleian MS. has *lemilchamah* (lemilchamah). Cyrus's army was made up of many different nations. Jeremiah calls it an *assembly of great nations from the north country*, Jeremiah 50:9. And afterwards mentions the kingdoms of *Ararat, Minni, and Ashchenaz*, (i.e. Armenia, Corduene, Pontus or Phrygia, Vitring.), with the kings of the Medes, Jeremiah 51:27, Jeremiah 51:28. See Xenophon. Cyrop.

Verse 5

They come from a far country - The word *meerets* (meerets) is wanting in one MS. and in the Syriac: *They come from afar*.

From the end of heaven - Kimchi says, *Media*, *the end of heaven*, in Scripture phrase, means, the East.

Verse 8

And they shall be afraid *And they shall be terrified* - I join this verb, *venibhalu* (venibhalu), to the preceding verse, with the Syriac and Vulgate.

Pangs and sorrows shall take hold on them *Pangs shall seize them* - The Septuagint, Syriac, and Chaldee read *yochezum* (yochezum), instead of *yochezun* (yochezun), which does not express the pronoun then, necessary to the sense.

Verse 10

For the stars of heaven *Yea, the stars of heaven* - The Hebrew poets, to express happiness, prosperity, the instauration and advancement of states, kingdoms, and potentates, make use of images taken from the most striking parts of nature, from the heavenly bodies, from the sun, moon, and stars: which they describe as shining with increased splendor, and never setting. The moon becomes like the meridian sun, and the sun's light is augmented sevenfold; (see Isaiah 30:26); new heavens and a new earth are created, and a brighter age commences. On the contrary, the overflow and destruction of kingdoms is represented by opposite images. The stars are obscured, the moon withdraws her light, and the sun shines no more! The earth quakes, and the

And the moon shall not cause her light to shine - This in its farther reference may belong to the Jewish polity, both in Church and state, which should be totally eclipsed, and perhaps shine no more in its distinct state for ever.

I will punish the world & will visit the world! - That is, the Babylonish empire; as *Isaiah* 13:19, 22, for the Roman empire, or for Judea, *Luke* 2:1; *Acts* 11:28. So the *universus orbis Romanus*, for the Roman empire; *Salvian*. lib. 5 *Minos* calls *Crete* his world: *Creten, quae meus est orbis*, *Ovid*. *Metamorph.* 8:9.

I will make a man more precious than fine gold-wedge of Ophir - The Medes and Persians will not be satisfied with the spoils of the Babylonians. They seek either to destroy or enslave them; and they will accept no ransom for any man - either for x*x x*x© (enosh), the poor man, or for x*x"x*x (adam), the more honorable person. All must fall by the sword, or go into captivity together; for the Medes, (Isaiah 13:17), regard not silver, and delight not in gold.

And the remnant - Here is plainly a defect in this sentence, as it stands in the Hebrew text; the subject of the proposition is lost. What is it that shall be like a roe chased? The Septuagint happily supply it, ἡ ἀγέλη τοῦ ἐλάφου, the remnant. A MS. here supplies the word יֶשֶׁבֶת (yosheb), the inhabitant; which makes a tolerably good sense; but I much prefer the reading of the Septuagint.

They shall - turn - They shall look - That is, the forces of the king of Babylon, destitute of their leader, and all his auxiliaries, collected from Asia Minor, and other distant countries, shall disperse and flee to their respective homes.

Every one that is found - Every one that is overtaken - That is, none shall escape from the slaughter; neither they who flee singly, dispersed and in confusion; nor they who endeavor to make their retreat in a more regular manner, by forming compact bodies: they shall all be equally cut off by the sword of the enemy. The Septuagint have understood it in this sense, which they have well expressed: -

â€œWhosoever is caught shall be overthrown,
And all that are collected together shall fall by the sword.â€•

[illegible]

Which shall not regard silver – Who shall hold silver of no account – That is, who shall not be induced, by large offers of gold and silver for ransom, to spare the lives of those whom they have subdued in battle; their rage and cruelty will get the better of all such motives. We have many examples in the Iliad and in the Aeneid of addresses of the vanquished to the pity and avarice of the vanquishers, to induce them to spare their lives.

Nor turn the mighty balance of the field.

It is remarkable that Xenophon makes Cyrus open a speech to his army, and in particular to the Medes, who made the principal part of it, with praising them for their disregard of riches.

- Cyrop. lib. v.

Their bows also shall dash â€œTheir bows shall dashâ€ - Both Herodotus, 1:61, and Xenophon, Anab. iii., mention, that the Persians used large bows לַחֲצִיזַיִם לַחֲצִיזַיִם : and the latter says particularly that their bows were three cubits long, Anab. 4. They were celebrated for their archers, see Isaiah 22:6; Jeremiah 49:35. Probably their neighbours and allies, the Medes, dealt much in the same sort of arms. In Psalm 18:34, and Job 20:24, mention is made of a bow of steel; if the Persian bows were of metal, we may easily conceive that with a metalline bow of three cubitsâ€™ length, and proportionably strong, the soldiers might dash and slay the young men, the weaker and unresisting of the inhabitants (for they are joined with the fruit of the womb and the children) in the general carnage on taking the city. כִּשְׁחָתוֹת (terattashnah), shall be broken or shivered to pieces. This seems to refer, not to כֶּשֶׁת׃ (nearim), young men, but to כִּשְׁחָתוֹת (keshathoth), their bows. The bows of the young men shall be broken to pieces.

And Babylon - The great city of Babylon was at this time rising to its height of glory, while the Prophet Isaiah was repeatedly denouncing its utter destruction. From the first of Hezekiah to the first of Nebuchadnezzar, under whom it was brought to the highest degree of strength and splendor, are about one hundred and twenty years. I will here very briefly mention some particulars of the greatness of the place, and note the several steps by which this remarkable prophecy was at length accomplished in the total ruin of it.

It was, according to the lowest account given of it by ancient historians, a regular square, forty-five miles in compass, inclosed by a wall two hundred feet high and fifty broad; in which there were a hundred gates of brass. Its principal ornaments were the temple of Belus, in the middle of which was a tower of eight stories of building, upon a base of a quarter of a mile square, a most magnificent palace, and the famous hanging gardens, which were an artificial mountain, raised upon arches, and planted with trees of the largest as well as the most beautiful sorts.

Cyrus took the city by diverting the waters of the Euphrates which ran through the midst of it, and entering the place at night by the dry channel. The river being never restored afterward to its proper course, overflowed the whole country, and made it little better than a great morass; this and the great slaughter of the inhabitants, with other bad consequences of the taking of the city, was the first step to the ruin of the place. The Persian monarchs ever regarded it with a jealous eye; they kept it under, and took care to prevent its recovering its former greatness. Darius Hystaspes not long afterward most severely punished it for a revolt, greatly depopulated the place, lowered the walls, and demolished the gates. Xerxes destroyed the temples, and with the rest the great temple of Belus, Herod. 3:159, Arrian Exp. Alexandri, lib. 7. The building of Seleucia on the Tigris exhausted Babylon by its neighborhood, as well as by the immediate loss of inhabitants taken away by Seleucus to people his new city, Strabo, lib. 16. A king of the Parthians soon after carried away into slavery a great number of the inhabitants, and burned and destroyed the most beautiful parts of the city, Valesii Excerpt. Diodori, p. 377. Strabo (ibid.) says that in his time great part of it was a mere desert; that the Persians had partly destroyed it; and that time and the neglect of the Macedonians, while they were masters of it, had nearly completed its destruction. Jerome (in loc.) says that in his time it was quite in ruins, and that the walls served only for the inclosure for a park or forest for the king's hunting. Modern travelers, who have endeavored to find the remains of it, have given but a very unsatisfactory account of their success. What Benjamin of Tudela and Pietro della Valle supposed to have been some of its ruins, Tavernier thinks are the remains of some late Arabian building. Upon the whole, Babylon is so utterly annihilated, that even the place where this wonder of the world stood cannot now be determined with any certainty! See also note on Isaiah 43:14 (note).

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