

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BABYLON, DUMAH, AND ARABIA

THREE burdens, or oracles, are grouped together in this chapter, all having a common interest to us because each country mentioned in its turn became prominent as an oppressor or enemy of Israel and Judah.

Verses 1-10 relate to Babylon, and here the prophet is looking far on into the future, for in his lifetime Babylon could scarcely have been recognized as even a potential enemy to the people of God. After Hezekiah's healing, as recorded later on in this book, messengers came from the apparently friendly king of Babylon to bring their felicitations to the Jewish king and to inquire as to the wonder done in the land; that is, the going back of the shadow on the sundial of Ahaz.

Hezekiah received this embassy without hesitation or suspicion, but Isaiah later informed him that the day would come when all that they had seen would be carried away to their distant land. God had already made it clear to His servant that Babylon was preeminently the enemy they had to fear. In this vision, however, he foreshows the doom of this great enemy, and that in a most graphic manner that fits perfectly with what actually took place in the day of its overthrow.

“The burden of the desert of the sea. As whirlwinds in the south pass through; so it cometh from the desert, from a terrible land. A grievous vision is declared unto me; the treacherous dealer dealeth treacherously, and the spoiler spoileth. Go up, O Elam: besiege, O Media; all the sighing thereof have I made to cease. Therefore are my loins filled with pain: pangs have taken hold upon me, as the pangs of a woman that travaileth: I was bowed down at the hearing of it; I was dismayed at the seeing of it. My heart panted, fearfulness affrighted me: the night of my pleasure hath he turned into fear unto me”
(verses 1-4).

It might seem strange to describe the great and prosperous city of Babylon as **“the desert of the sea,”** but God speaks of the things which are not as though they are, and Isaiah was looking forward prophetically to the hour when that great political, religious, and commercial center would be utterly destroyed and become but a part of the waste desert lands through which the Euphrates flowed.

In the Old Testament the literal city of Babylon was the original home of idolatry, and under its later kings was to become the great commercial center of the ancient world. Because of its opposition to God, it was at last entirely destroyed, as already depicted in chapter 13 of this book; as also in Jeremiah, chapters 50, 51.

Literal Babylon is to remain a waste forever; it is never to be rebuilt. But that city was, a type of a great religious, political, and commercial system which has been slowly rising for many centuries and is to come to the fullness of its power after the true Church has been caught up to be with the Lord. Of this Babylon we read in Revelation 17, 18, and it is a significant fact that when the angel called upon John to behold a vision of this mystical Babylon he took him out into a wilderness, for wherever Babylonish principles prevail, all true spirituality disappears and parched, arid wastes abound. So we need not be surprised at the designation of the vision here as **“the burden of the desert of the sea.”**

Isaiah foresaw in Babylon the treacherous enemy of everything divine, and yet it was the unconscious instrument in the hands of God for the chastisement of His rebellious people - the flail with which they were to be threshed in order to separate the chaff from the wheat. When God's purpose had thus been accomplished, Babylon itself was to be judged, and so terrible was that judgment that the prophet's whole being was stirred with deepest concern as the Spirit of God revealed to him the fearfulness of the overwhelming disaster which was to bring that pretentious city to an inglorious end. God even declared the names of the countries whose mighty armies would be used to this end. Elam is Persia, and Media was to be confederate with it. Together they took the chief cities of Chaldea, Ecbatana and Borsippa, and finally Babylon itself, as told in Daniel 5.

“Prepare the table, watch in the watchtower, eat, drink: arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield. For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth. And he saw a chariot with a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses, and a chariot of camels; and he hearkened diligently with much heed: And he cried, A lion: My lord, I stand continually upon the watchtower in the daytime, and I am set in my ward whole nights: and, behold, here cometh a chariot of men, with a couple of horsemen. And he answered and said, Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground. O my threshing, and the corn of my floor: that which I have heard of the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have I declared unto you” (verses 5.10).

It gave Isaiah no pleasure to be able to predict the awful suffering to which Israel's enemies were to be exposed. His tender heart grieved deeply over the desolation and destruction that their idolatry and corruption were to bring down upon them. He speaks almost as an eye-witness of the scene of revelry which took place on Belshazzar's last night. In few but lucid words, he pictures the scene of terror that followed the influx of the troops of the allies who entered Babylon through the dry bed of the Euphrates, according to Herodotus, after Cyrus had turned away the water of that river some miles above the city. It is true that some modern historians reject this story, but whether Herodotus was right or not, in some way the Medes and the Persians overcame every obstacle to the taking of the city and thronged its streets, slaying old and young, while the princes of Babylon, utterly unprepared for such an unexpected assault, tried in terror to rally the defenders of the city.

But it was too late: **“In that night was Belshazzar . . . slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom”** (Daniel 5:30, 31).

Isaiah, himself, takes the place of a watchman and beholds with prophetic eye the chariots of the triumphant conquerors and hears the cry, so similar to that which we have in the New Testament, **“Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods hath he broken unto the ground.”**

And so at last this great fountainhead of idolatry was to be destroyed. That the vision was given by God, the prophet asserts solemnly even while he cries out as he realizes that Babylon’s destruction means the deliverance of Israel, whom he designates **“the corn of my floor.”** The burden of Dumah, given in the next two verses, is worthy of our most careful attention. It has a message which applies to any time ere the final judgments of God fall upon the earth.

“The burden of Dumah. He calleth to me out of Seir, Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night? The watchman laid, The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come” (verses 11, 12).

Dumah means *“silence”* and the Hebrew word is almost exactly the same as our English word *“dumb.”* It stands here as a synonym for the land of Edom, called also Seir. This was Esau’s inheritance, a rugged mountainous region inhabited by a nation of the Esau type - virile men of the open air, delighting in war and the chase. Esau himself, their progenitor, was revered as a great hunter and a fearless fighter. So closely related to Israel, they might have been expected to be their allies, but the opposite was the case.

The picture that we seem to have before us here is that of two watchmen on opposite sides of a great chasm. On the one side we may think of a city of the Judean wilderness, on the other an Edomite stronghold. As the watchmen pace back and forth upon the walls of these cities they are near enough to each other for their voices to be heard.

Many have been the predictions uttered by Jewish prophets of Edom’s coming doom, but these predictions were completely ignored by the Edomites. Now the voice from Dumah calls out in skeptical tones, **“Watchman, what of the night?”** That is, “How much of the night” or “How much of the night has gone?” He seems to mean, “How near is it to the time when Israel’s glory will be revealed as their prophets had been predicting?” The answer comes back, **“The morning cometh.”**

It is the declaration of a faith that takes God at His word and dares to believe that Israel shall then be brought into fullness of blessing, but the watchman adds, **“And also the night.”** The day of Israel’s glory will be the night of Edom’s doom. And then comes the serious entreaty, **“If ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come.”** It is the voice of God speaking through His servant, calling upon Edom, as representing the insensate men of a godless world, and pleading with them to make diligent inquiry as to what the Lord has actually revealed and to return from their sin and rebellion to Him who still says **“Come,”** and who waits to receive all who accept His invitation.

The burden of Arabia, though brief, contains much that we may not be able to explain clearly because of our limited knowledge of what actually took place in connection with the cities of the sons of Ishmael.

The burden upon Arabia. In the forest in Arabia shall ye lodge, O ye travelling companies of Dedanim. The inhabitants of the land of Tema brought water to him that was thirsty, they prevented with their bread him that fled. For they fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, and from the bent bow, and from the grievousness of war. For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Within a year, according to the years of an hireling, and all the glory of Kedar shall fail: and the residue of the number of archers, the mighty men of the children of Kedar, shall be diminished: for the Lord God of Israel hath spoken it” (verses 13-17).

Whether or not we are able to follow each detail here recorded, it is evident that Arabia was to suffer at the hand of the Assyrians in a very definite manner. For the time at least, the pride of the Ishmaelite tribes was to be humbled and their cities spoiled, yet there is no hint of their eventual destruction, as in the case of the Edomites, for Arabia is still to be blessed in the coming day and throughout all the centuries God has preserved these descendants of Abraham’s son, born after the flesh, whereas the sons of him who was born after the promise have been scattered throughout all the world because of their iniquities.

~ end of chapter 21 ~

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