



Serving Notice on Babylon: The Canonical Function of Isaiah 13-14

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FOR WELL OVER A GENERATION, THE PREMISE HAS BEEN WIDELY ACCEPTED THAT chapters 40-66 of the Isaiah scroll are a later expansion of earlier material found in Isaiah 1-39. This view is so prominent that the terms First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and/or Third Isaiah are readily used in theological conversation, in seminary catalogs, course offerings, and in standard commentary and monograph titles. At no point in the scroll of Isaiah are the problems with these distinctions more apparent than in Isaiah 13-14. Here within the very heart of "First Isaiah," we encounter poetry that is unambiguously addressed to Babylon, anticipating the downfall of that empire.

How are we to understand the poetry in chapters 13-14? Do these chapters consist of small units which once had meaning in the eighth-century world?¹ Were

¹R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 129-138, discerns five originally separate units within chapter 13; he contends that in three, Babylon was originally Yahweh's instrument of destruction (13:2-3; 4-5; and 6-8). Only in the fifth originally separate unit (17-22) does Clements see the poem revised to be a word against Babylon. For an interpretation of the entire chapter against the eighth-century background, see J. R. Hayes and S. A. Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth Century Prophet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987).

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The day of Yahweh, announced in Isaiah 13-14, has structural and theological significance in the biblical book. It continues to announce judgment for any power that attempts to play God in the world.

they predictions about mysterious events to come in the distant future? Were they words originally spoken with reference to Assyria and then edited to refer to Babylon in a later generation?² Or are these chapters simply late additions to the scroll, inserted here by a redactor?

These are all questions that have been prominent in scholarship on the Isaiah scroll in past decades. As important as these diachronic questions of redaction may seem, there has been a growing consensus in recent years that it may be even more appropriate to ask first about the synchronic and literary character of the canonical text.³ Chapters 13 and 14 function significantly within the structure of the Isaiah scroll, expanding the announcement of judgment set out in chapters 2-4. They mark the beginning of a new section and cannot be discounted simply as additions to an earlier text. And because these chapters so clearly anticipate the fall of Babylon, it is appropriate to ask about their significance within the literary framework that exists within chapters 1-55 and to do so against the background of the late exilic era (562-539 B.C.), the time of the demise of Babylon and the rise of Cyrus of Persia.⁴

The Isaiah scroll seems clearly preserved as a catechetical commentary on the Torah. We need to recognize it primarily as a teaching document that emerged from the exilic and post-exilic communities both to preserve Isaiah's vision and to call people to live in faithfulness to the Torah. The exhortation in Isa 2:5 captures the fundamental concern of the scroll: "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

I. THE "DAY OF YAHWEH" PORTRAIT IN ISAIAH 13:1-22

The portrait set forth in 13:1-22 is both bold and compelling. A day-of-Yahweh event is described (see vv. 6, 9, 13); in this poem, the event is without question an occasion of war. An army is envisioned, assembling for battle on a high hill or mountain. Yahweh, the commander of this army, is heard to declare: "I myself have commanded my consecrated ones; I have called my mighty ones because of my wrath!" (v. 3). The identity of the warriors seems purposely left undefined:

²See John Bright, "Isaiah I," *Peake's Commentary* (London: Nelson, 1962) 499-500. In Isaiah 10:5-19, Assyria is portrayed as an "instrument of judgment" which will in turn also be judged.

³On the canonical approach to Biblical writings, see Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). He writes: "The classic example of an extended redactional process is, of course, the book of Isaiah. Moreover, it is not the case that three discrete collections from the pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic periods have been simply juxtaposed (the so-called First, Second and Third Isaiah). Rather, the process of the layering of the tradition each time includes the whole corpus so that First Isaiah contains some material equally as late as that of Third Isaiah" (171). See also, the helpful discussion in James Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992) 153-171. Sanders is equally committed to a canonical approach to the scriptures but disagrees with Childs. He states: "My greatest problem is his divorcing the development and growth of canonical literature from its historical provenances. When Childs says 'context,' he means literary context; when I say it I most often mean historical context" (166). Sanders reminds us that for centuries there was no common "final form" of the text; rather, there were various textual traditions that emerged as canon in different communities.

⁴See R. Rendtorff, "The Composition of the Book of Isaiah," *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). With H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), I think that Isaiah 56-66 needs separate attention as a later expansion of Isaiah 1-55.

“they come from a land far away, from the ends of the heavens, Yahweh and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy all the earth” (v. 5).

The poet clearly intends that the reader should ponder whether these combatants are of earthly or divine origin. The noise created by this strange army results directly in panic and fear as the charge is sounded: “Wail, for near is the day of the Lord; as destruction from the Almighty it comes!” (v. 6).

Only in vv. 17-19 do we learn from the poetry what we already know from the superscription: the destruction envisioned in this poem is an announcement of judgment for Babylon. Notice is served as the author declares:

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms,
The splendor of the Chaldeans' pride,
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah, when God overthrew them. (13:19)

To complete this announcement of destruction, the poet adds traditional poetry describing “utter desolation,” the aftermath of war:

It will never be inhabited or dwelt in for all generations;
.....
wild beasts will lie down there,
and its houses will be full of howling creatures. (13:20-22)

II. THE VISION OF JUDGMENT EXPANDED: ISAIAH 14:1-32

The vision of destruction for Babylon continues throughout chapter 14. The chapter begins with a word of reassurance for exiles (14:1-2) and continues with a lengthy taunt song (vv. 5-21) in which the author rejoices in the anticipation of Babylon’s fall from power. At the end, Yahweh declares: “I will rise up against them...and will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, offspring and posterity!” (14:22).

Two short poems in vv. 24-27 and vv. 28-31 reinforce the motif that all arrogant world powers, Assyria and Philistia included, come under the sovereignty of Yahweh. Yahweh’s word is announced: “This is the plan that is planned concerning the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations” (14:26). Then, chapter 14 concludes with a further word of reassurance to the faithful within the audience addressed: “The Lord has founded Zion, and the needy among his people will find refuge in her” (14:32).

III. ISAIAH’S “TWIN PILLARS”: ISA 2:6-22 AND 13:1-22

The superscription that introduces the Isaiah scroll reminds the reader that it is Isaiah’s “vision” that is preserved in this scroll; the opening chapter is widely recognized as an introduction or preface to the entire scroll. Chapter 2 is introduced by a new superscription “The word which Isaiah ben Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem” (2:1), marking the beginning of the opening section of the scroll; this section seems quite clearly to extend to the doxology in 12:1-6. Then, chapter

13 is introduced by a new superscription, “The oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah ben Amoz saw” (13:1), thus marking the beginning of a new second major section of the scroll. It is striking to note that well-defined day-of-Yahweh poems are included as the opening words of judgment in both the first and the second sections of the scroll. In 2:6-22, a day-of-Yahweh poem stands like a first pillar, announcing Yahweh’s word of judgment for the entire world, but here focused on Judah. In 2:12, the author declares: “for the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, all that is lifted up and high” (2:12).

Whether the specific mode of judgment envisioned in this text is an earthquake, a storm, or an event of war is not the critical issue. What is important is that Yahweh’s day is set forth as a time when “the haughtiness of people will be humbled, and the pride of everyone will be brought low” (2:11). All that is high and lifted up will be brought low: the cedars of Lebanon, the oaks of Bashan, high mountains, lofty hills, fortified walls, ships of Tarshish, beautiful craft, and the haughtiness of humankind (2:13-17).

This poem sets out a fundamental theme for understanding the entire Isaiah scroll. A day-of-Yahweh event is not a random or wanton act of violence; rather, it is a time when people gain a clearer perspective on reality, when they come to understand the results of arrogant conduct and when they discern what it means to be mortal creatures in the world.

A similar scene is envisioned in the poetry of 13:1-22, a text which stands, in a very real sense, as a second pillar, a second announcement of judgment within the scroll. Yahweh declares: “I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless” (13:11).

Each of these day-of-Yahweh poems (2:6-22 and 13:1-22) has an international perspective. Thus, while the poem in 2:6-22 is remembered with specific focus on Judah and Jerusalem, that text already provides a basis from which later generations could boldly announce Isaiah’s word of Yahweh for Babylon or other arrogant nations, even long after the lifetime of the prophet. In Isa 2:6-22, Isaiah’s message of judgment for Babylon was already implicit; in Isa 13:1-22, the message is made explicit.

In the later years of the exilic era, the community still remembered, perhaps all too well, the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. For them, Judah’s day-of-Yahweh, announced in 2:6-22, had already come! This was a painful reality with which the exilic community had to live. But that community also knew of the decline and impending fall of Babylon. Some knew of the rise of Cyrus of Persia. And at least a few were reflecting on Yahweh’s concern for exiles from Zion, those who were living among foreign peoples of the world even while Jerusalem lay in ruins.

IV. ZION AMONG THE NATIONS: ISAIAH 13-35

The parallel placement of the two day-of-Yahweh poems (2:6-22 and 13:1-22) provides an interesting departure point for considering other structural dimensions of the scroll. A pattern of conscious literary framing seems evident throughout chapters 2-12. Two further words of judgment (3:1-15 and 3:16-4:1) follow directly after the day-of-Yahweh poem in 2:6-22. But this cluster of judgment poems is both introduced and concluded with words of encouragement and hope (2:1-5 and 4:2-6). In a larger perspective, the poetry within the opening section of the scroll is framed by the hopeful vision of peace (2:1-5) and by the concluding doxology (12:1-6). From the perspective of the late exilic era, it does not seem at all accidental that the opening section of the Isaiah scroll (chapters 2-12) both opens and ends with words of hope and praise.⁵

Then the focus of the scroll shifts consciously to Babylon in chapters 13-14 and to other nations in subsequent chapters. It is a misnomer to speak of this new section only as oracles addressed to nations, for in fact, there are repeated references to Judah and Jerusalem.⁶ The so-called nation oracles do not appear to be ordered in any specific historical or chronological fashion; rather, they seem to be collected primarily as evidence that Yahweh's sovereignty extends to all other nations of the world. There is a sense in which the word of judgment first announced in Isa 2:6-22 now is clarified as coming to pass wherever and whenever arrogant nations fall.

Christopher Seitz has argued that the second section of Isaiah extends from chapter 13 through chapter 27, contending that "on literary and form critical grounds it is by no means clear that the subject of chapters 24-27 can be neatly distinguished from themes found in chapters 13-23."⁷ In support, he points specifically to the striking parallels in imagery of cosmic judgment in chapters 24-27 and in chapter 13. A similar case can be made, however, for discerning a fundamental unity of thought that extends all the way from chapter 13 through chapter 35. Zion is in exile among the nations. Through warfare and other troubles, those surrounding nations learn painfully what Zion has already learned: excessive pride and arrogance result eventually in humiliation. Yahweh alone is to be exalted, not arrogant rulers. In a striking manner, the poem in chapters 34-35 provides a fitting conclusion to this second section of the scroll. Like chapter 13, the poem in chapter 34 once again incorporates specific imagery of a day-of-Yahweh event: "For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of vindication for Zion's cause" (34:8).

⁵P. K. Ackroyd, "Isaiah 1-12: Presentation of a Prophet," *Studies in the Religious Tradition of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1987) 79-104.

⁶The poem in 22:1-14 recalls a past event described specifically as a day of Yahweh; the tragedy was that the people learned nothing from a close call, a brush with disaster. The poem in 22:15-25 suggests that the prophetic author could also think of a day of Yahweh for an arrogant individual, poor Shebna!

⁷C. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993) 118.

Yahweh is again depicted as a mighty warrior, now as the leader of a cosmic army or a singular hero who comes to judge arrogant peoples (here, epitomized by Edom). The poetry describing desolation (34:9-17) is reminiscent of the end of chapter 13 (verses 20-22); similarly, the promise of the restoration of Zion (chapter 35) recalls the hopeful words announced in 14:1-2, 22 and 32. Even as hopeful words framed the first section of the scroll (2:1-5 and 12:1-6), so now poetry of the day of Yahweh (chapters 13-14 and 34-35) frame the second section of the scroll.⁸ The words of comfort announced in 14:32 are now declared again:

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (35:10)

Throughout this section of the scroll, the events of judgment envisioned for each of the foreign nations (Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Syria, Egypt, Edom, Arabia, and the Phoenician cities Tyre and Sidon) were in all probability understood as separate days of Yahweh, times when judgment would come upon people for their particular crimes of arrogance or brutality.⁹ This is an important perspective for understanding the Isaiah scroll. The day of Yahweh is not simply a reference to one future event; the term is poetic rhetoric utilized within Israel's prophetic tradition to refer to past events, imminent events, or events envisioned in the distant future. When this rhetoric is used, Yahweh is almost always being described with the imagery of a sovereign ruler who is engaged in a military campaign, moving from one country to the next in succession. In Isaiah 13-14, Babylon's "day" is imminent!

V. CONCLUSIONS

Three observations emerge from this study of the canonical function of chapters 13-14. First, it seems that those who shaped the Isaiah scroll were deeply concerned to make sense of the memories of the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon. In a very profound manner, those memories influenced the way in which texts were arranged within the scroll. The events of the past destruction of Jerusalem are remembered as a day of Yahweh for Judah. This means that the word announced in 2:6-22 has in fact come to pass. In a very real sense, chapters 2-12 preserve a record of what Isaiah ben Amoz announced concerning judgment for Judah and Jerusa-

⁸Within this section, Isaiah 24-27 may be purposely located as a centerpiece in a chiasmic structure. On chapters 28-33 and the pattern of alternating words of judgment and promises of salvation found there, see G. Stansell, "Isaiah 28-33: Blest Be the Tie that Binds (Isaiah Together)," *New Visions of Isaiah*, ed. R. Melugin and M. A. Sweeney (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996) 68-103.

⁹See further, A. Joseph Everson, "The Days of Yahweh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974) 329-337. The fall of Jerusalem is recalled as a day of Yahweh in Lam 1:12; 2:1 and 21; the fall of an Egyptian army at Carchemish is remembered in Jer 46:12.

lem long before that destruction came. But the sin and guilt of Jerusalem, announced in 1:4, are declared to be at an end in 40:2. A new era of hopefulness is clearly announced. Thus, the memories of judgment could be framed with words of encouragement and hope.

Secondly, from the late exilic perspective, it is evident that those who shaped the Isaiah scroll were struggling to understand the enormous power and influence wielded by the great empires, Assyria and Babylon. Incredibly, within a generation, each of those great powers experienced the loss of power. At the time when the Isaiah scroll was constructed, Babylon's era of power seems to be at an end. Just as Isaiah had announced, world powers that once were "high and lofty" were being brought low! Yahweh's word of judgment is remembered for those whose lands are "filled with silver and gold...who bow down to the work of their hands" (2:7-8). Throughout the Isaiah scroll, Babylon is never depicted as a world power to be feared. In 13:17-19, 14:3-22, and in four of the other five texts that refer to Babylon (21:1-10; 43:14-15; 47:1-15 and 48:1-22), a common theme is sounded: the one who has made himself high and lofty will be brought low.¹⁰

Finally, the rise of Persian power under Cyrus in the years after 550 B.C. also appears to have had significant influence on the shaping of chapters 2-12 and 13-35, as well as 40-55. The specific references to Cyrus in 44:24-28 and 45:1-7 make clear that those who shaped the scroll were aware of a new reality in the world, a reality that would make a return to Jerusalem possible. Consistent with Isaiah's vision, they viewed the activity of Cyrus as new evidence of God's redemptive work in the world. It seems most probable that their hopes connected with Cyrus prompted them to include words of promise as a frame for chapters 2-12, as well as words of hope in Isa 14:1-2, 32; and in chapter 35. The redactors affirm that such words of hope were part of Isaiah's ancient vision. Yet it seems inescapable that, for them, these prophetic words of hope were now understood in a new and fresh light.

Thus, there is a sense in which the Isaiah scroll focuses on the past in chapters 2-12, the present in chapters 13-35, and the future in chapters 40-55. Chapters 2-12 are shaped from a conviction that world events have confirmed what earlier prophets proclaimed concerning Yahweh's word. Amos had used the poetry of a day of Yahweh to announce judgment for northern Israel (Amos 5:18-20); after the destruction of Samaria, his words were understood to be true; his word of the Lord had come to pass. A day of Yahweh had in fact come for Samaria! In similar fashion, Isaiah ben Amoz is remembered for his warning that a day of Yahweh was to come for Judah and Jerusalem and for other arrogant nations. And it came!

Now, in the late exilic era, world events were suggesting an impending day for Babylon. It was in such moments of reckoning that prophetic writers discerned the

¹⁰The exception is 39:1-8. For a discussion of this text and chapters 36-39, see C. Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny: Development of the Book of Isaiah: A Reassessment of Isaiah 36-39* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 182-191.

vindication of Yahweh as the one whose word stands forever amid the grass-like transience of nations and empires (40:8).¹¹

Over time, the name Babylon became, both within Judaism and later within Christianity, a symbol for any proud or arrogant earthly power. The name Babylon still is a powerful cipher within the biblical tradition for any tyrant nation or power that attempts to play God in the world. In this perspective, the message of Isaiah 13-14 continues to have a powerful and continuing prophetic message. Isaiah's word of judgment is still being announced for any nation or empire that abuses power or attempts to play God in the world. In Isaiah 13-14, notice is still being served! ⊕

¹¹The locution, day of the vindication of Yahweh (יִוְם דְּקִיּוּם לַיהוָה), found in Isa 34:8; 61:2; 63:4; and Jer 46:10, may express most clearly the polarity of thought associated with events described with day-of-Yahweh rhetoric. For those who are obedient and faithful, vindication will mean rescue and protection. For those who are arrogant and brutal, vindication will mean punishment and destruction. See further, G. E. Mendenhall, "The Vengeance of Yahweh," *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1973) 69-104.