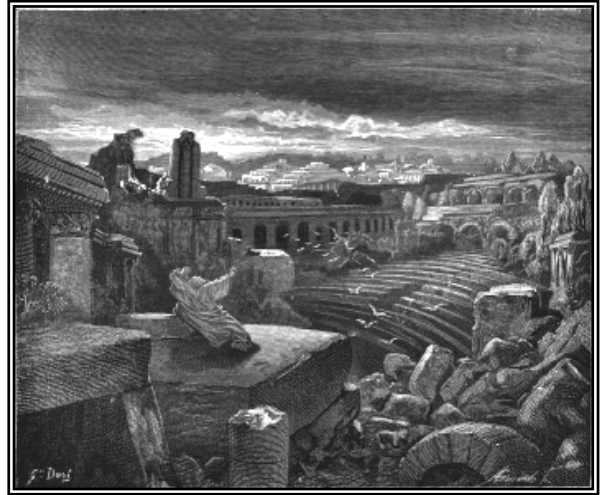


Isaiah 24-27: Isaiah's Apocalypse

BACKGROUND

- *Context:* "Isaiah 24-27, which culminates the long section of chapters 13-27, is sometimes called 'the Isaiah apocalypse.' Here Isaiah moves from oracles against particular nations to an apocalypse (an 'unveiling') regarding the entire world."¹
- The "leviathan" passage in Isa 27:1 bears strong similarity to "the ancient Canaanite epic of Baal, who vanquished the monster of the sea. This Canaanite material is reshaped to the divine truth it now conveys—truth which demolishes its pagan structure. Both here and at 51:9-10 the context is judgment, not (as in paganism) a supposed struggle in which, before he could proceed to his desired task of creating an ordered world, the creator-god first disposed of the opposition of the gods of disorder." [*The New Bible Commentary*]



Gustave Doré, 1832-83: "Isaiah's vision of the Destruction of Babylon" (Isa 13).

QUESTIONS

1. These chapters draw the end times into focus. They call to mind anticipation for God's justice and mercy, and the incredible blessings he will shower upon those who trust in him. As Barry Webb says,

There are both certainty and expectancy in the opening words of 24:1. The NRSV captures the sense well: 'Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth.' For Isaiah the final judgment was not only certain; it could happen at any moment. He lived every day in the light of it, just as we ourselves must do today as those who await their Lord's return. [cf. Lk 12:35-36]"²

Our outlook tends to be on the present, rather than the end times. After all, the end hasn't come in the 2,700 years since Isaiah wrote this.

Is there any value to focusing on the end? *Why is Isaiah focusing on it here—how does this benefit his audience?* Similarly, what was the purpose of Jesus' apocalypse in Lk 21:7-36 (hint: 21:34-36)? How can we be people of hope but also focused on that Day?³ Read 2 Pet 3:3-12 and 1 Thess 4:16-18, esp. 18.

¹ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, May 23.

² *The Message of Isaiah* (IVP).

³ And how can this influence your celebration of Advent?

2. Isaiah 24 has numerous parallels to the flood story in Genesis (6-9):

Both have references to the 'windows' [NIV, 'floodgates'] of the heavens' being 'opened' (cf. 18b and Gen 7:11); both refer to the 'everlasting covenant' (v. 5 and Gen 9:16); and in verse 6 the 'curse', in the context of the wine/vine theme of v. 7, links with Noah the vine-dresser and the imposition of the curse in the post-diluvian world (Gen 9:20, 25).⁴ [Add that, in 26:20, God shuts the door behind the remnant, as he did for the ark (Gen 7:16). Cf. Mt 24:37 and 2 Pet 2:4-10.]

Who is being called to account in Isa 24-27, and for what sin?

Also as in the flood story, Isa 24 is a description of the *unmaking* of the world by God and the overwhelming of order with chaos. This chaos—the ruining (10), defiling (5) and wasting (3)—is the effect of human sin and disobedience (5). Even now, before the great unmaking of that Day, the Church is bathed in the rising waters of this chaos and lawlessness. What does it mean in this environment to be a follower of Jesus, through whom all things were made?

3. Knowledge and understanding are the currency in Isaiah's economy of salvation.⁵ The wicked do not know or understand: "*The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand*" (1:3); see also 56:11, 59:8; 27:11. Israel's sin is coupled with their lack of understanding (6:9: "*Be ever hearing, but never understanding*"), which leads to their exile ("*Therefore my people will go into exile for lack of understanding*") despite God's intentions for them: "*No matter how much grace they are shown, the wicked don't learn righteousness*" (26:10; see also the most excellent Jonah 2:8).

In the redemption of creation on the Day of the Lord, "*the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*" (11:9; see also 29:23-24). This is the purpose of God's judgment of the nations: "*When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness*" (26:9). This will not be without successes: "*So the LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the LORD. They will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the LORD and keep them. The LORD will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the LORD, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them.*" (19:22).

In the ultimate contrast with the wicked, the Messiah has "*the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD*" (11:2). The mission of the Suffering Servant is also tied up with knowledge: "*After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.*" (53:11).

In Jesus' preaching, knowledge and understanding are keys to salvation: "*When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.*" (Mt 13:19); "*The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them*" (Mt 13:11; but see also Lk 8:16-17). Even in the parable of the Prodigal, the ultimate parable of exile, the turning point is when the son "*came to his senses*"

⁴ Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 197.

⁵ Forms of *know* and *understand* appear 66 times in Isaiah—on average once per chapter.

(Lk 15:17)⁶. Because of the importance of understanding, Jesus emphasizes the attitudes of our hearts: “Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken” (Lk 8:18).⁷

- a. What knowledge is Isaiah referring to? (See 11:9; 12:4; 59:8; 26:10; 58:2.) What about Jesus?
 - b. Once you *know* the Lord, and the Gospel, should your focus change from learning to doing? (I.e., is greater *knowing* part of sanctification as well as salvation?) See, for instance, 2 Pet 1:5-9; Php 4:12; 1 Thess 4:3-5; and especially **Heb 5:11-6:2**. How and where should you target your learning?
 - c. Isaiah says the exile and the Day of the Lord both served to bring (some of) Israel and the nations to understanding and knowledge of the Lord. How might this redeem our view of hardship in our lives and the world? (Cf. the ever-popular Heb 12:6, 10.)
4. Is the Lord’s Supper a prefiguring of the Messianic banquet of 25:6-8? If so, why doesn’t our celebration of the Eucharist look more like a banquet, or even a meal? How have you seen other denominations and communities celebrate communion differently? Have you seen any variations which appealed to you?
5. Referring to Isa 26:16-18, Barry Webb [ibid., p. 111] writes

More perplexing, however, is the apparent harshness with which the Lord treats the very ones who are looking to him to save them. He chastises them so severely that they twist and turn like a woman in labor (16-17). And the result? Nothing but wind (19a)! Their commitment to the Lord brings them nothing but frustration and a sense of complete failure (18b).

D. A. Carson [*The New Bible Commentary*] says this is “all too applicable to the Christian Church” as well.

Discuss.



Fun Observation #1: The primary OT vision of the Messianic banquet, appears in the midst of praise (25:1-12).

Fun Observation #2: We all grow up with the knowledge that one day God will judge the world and set it to rights. This idea, the Day of the Lord, wasn’t fully developed until the writing prophets, beginning with Isaiah and the 8th-century crew. That means their fleshed-out vision of the end times—even that there *was* an end times—was truly new.

⁶ “Wait! What am I doing slopping Gentile swine?!”

⁷ Later we’ll explore the Messianic secret, and the knowledge that was hidden from the prophets (cf. 1 Cor 2:7-10; 4:1—**wow!**).