

Rel A 304 Reading Questions for Tuesday, October 10

Isaiah 13–23

Isaiah chapters 13–23 form a collection commonly known as “the Oracles against the Nations” or “the Prophecies against the Nations.” It’s an anthology of various prophecies dealing with Judah, Israel, and several neighboring countries. Similar collections of prophecies about neighboring countries can be found in other prophetic books like Amos, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

As arranged and edited together in their present form, these chapters echo several motifs from chapters 1–12 and extend Jehovah’s messages to the peoples beyond Judah’s borders. Below is a map of the ancient Near East so you can see the places you’ll be reading about.

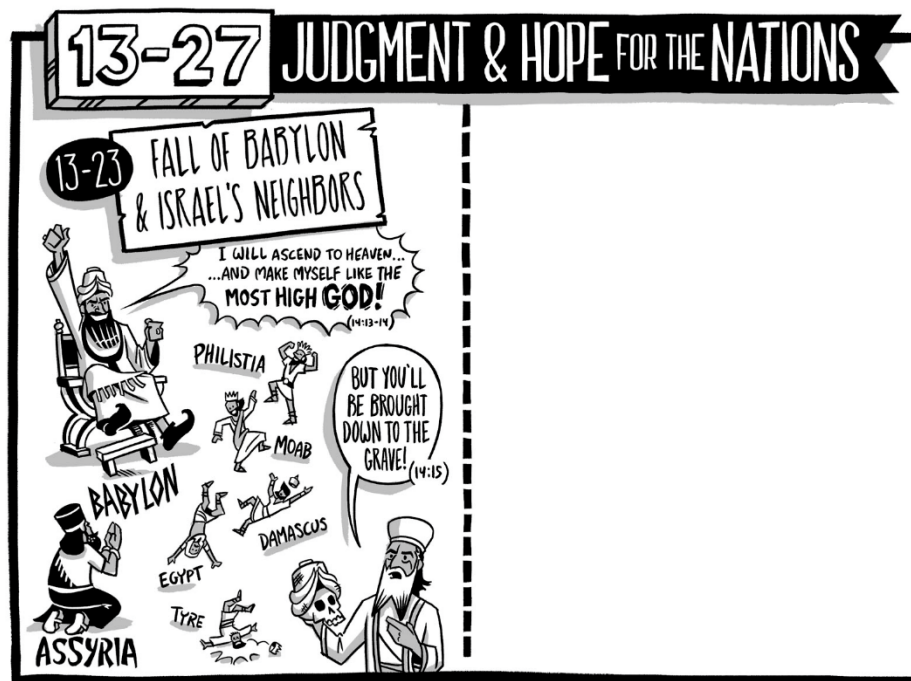


Scholars who have studied this section of Isaiah have identified several themes or motifs that run through these different oracles. Here’s a summary so you can watch for them as they pop up:

- 1) Isaiah 13–23 pronounce **divine judgment** upon enemy nations, implying the salvation of Israel and Judah.

- 2) Isaiah 13–23 criticizes Jehovah’s own people, particularly the privileged, powerful leaders who were seeking security in **foreign alliances** rather than through trust in God.
- 3) Isaiah 13–23 assert that it is not the formidable empires of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, or Persia, but rather Jehovah who **controls world affairs**.
- 4) Isaiah 13–23 expound the theme of **pride**, which will be the undoing of these great empires. Although Zion (Jerusalem) may be in dire straits now, it is Babylon that will ultimately fail.
- 5) Isaiah 13–23 purposefully contain very few specific historical figures and events, allowing the messages to have a **generalized application**. They can speak to different audiences across many generations.
- 6) Isaiah 13–23 condemn Gentile nations, but these judgments stand in tension with a theme of inclusion; foreigners and outsiders are **invited to participate** in Israel’s salvation.
- 7) Isaiah 13–23 vehemently criticize **destructive human violence**. Even as Jehovah may use these great empires as tools to fulfill His purposes, this does not excuse the cruelty and exploitation that the powerful and wealthy inflict on the vulnerable and impoverished.

(This list is a summary of Hyun Chul Paul Kim, “The Oracles Against the Nations,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Isaiah*, ed. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020], 66–73.)



The Fall of Babylon Prefigures Universal Judgment (13:1–22)

This prophecy is a good example of one that can simultaneously talk about something specific while also using that specific thing to talk about more universal concepts. In this case, the specific situation is the fall of the Babylonian Empire, but precise historical references only appear in the final stanza (vv. 17–22) and many of the descriptions sound much too end-of-the-

worldish to apply *just* to the fall of Babylon. This sets a pattern you should follow in these chapters: see if you can identify any concrete historical situations, but then also ask yourself how these prophecies could apply to other wicked or exploitative nations in other places or times.

1. Look at the chapter heading for Isaiah 13 in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible. The heading identifies the destruction of Babylon as a _____ of the destruction at the Second Coming. This gives you a key for how you can liken this chapter to our situation in the latter days. According to the chapter heading, Babylon, representing the _____, will someday fall forever.
2. The book of Isaiah frequently contrasts Zion, the city of the covenant people, with Babylon, the city of those who oppose God. Go back and read Isaiah 1:7–9, which describes the destruction of Zion by foreign invaders. Now compare that with Isaiah 13:17–22, which describes the destruction of Babylon by foreign invaders. In many ways God’s judgments look the same, but there’s a crucial difference. What did Jehovah “leave” for Israel that was not promised for Babylon?

Gentiles Will Aid and Will Be Brought into Israel (14:1–2)

This brief oracle of hope is sandwiched between two sections about the fall of Babylon. It describes Israel going back to “their own land,” so it’s a good guess that this describes the return from Babylonian exile, but there are not a lot of historical specifics provided here. If this is (at least initially) about the return of the Jews from Babylon, the Persians would be the “people” that will “take them, and bring them to their place.”

3. Isaiah 14:1–2 seems to hint at the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon. Through this process of exile and restoration, who “shall be joined with them” and “shall cleave to the house of Jacob”? How does this relate to Israel’s mission in the Abrahamic covenant?

The King of Babylon in the Underworld (14:3–23)

This section is a *mashal*, or taunt song, directed against the once-arrogant king of Babylon. This taunting can get grotesque, but it’s also kind of fun and creative. It opens with, “How hath the oppressor ceased!,” with a very “Ding, dong, the witch is dead!” vibe.

In vv. 9–11 the underworld rises up to greet the newly deceased king of Babylon. Dead kings of ages past come up to greet him and ask, “Art thou also become weak as us? ... The worms [now]

cover thee.” Now we have a Halloween vibe. The dead kings’ inspection continues starting in v. 16, where they ask, “Is this the man that ... did shake kingdoms?!” The implication is, you may have been a hot shot as king of Babylon, but here in the realm of the dead you’re not much to look at.

Verses 12–15 take a bit more unpacking. It’s unclear whether it’s Isaiah talking or whether he’s still quoting the zombie kings, but either way these verses draw upon elements of ancient Near Eastern myths to describe the king of Babylon. (Is Isaiah *allowed* to use pagan mythology to make a teaching point? Well, if Elder Uchtdorf can give [a talk](#) based on *The Hobbit*, then why not?) In these myths, the assembly of the gods lives atop Mount Zaphon (צִפְּוֹן *tsāphôn* is the Hebrew word behind the King James Version’s “north” in v. 13). A young god named Helel (הִלֵּל *hēlēl* is the Hebrew word behind KJV “Lucifer” in v. 12) wanted to “exalt my throne” above the chief god, so he ascended this “mount of the congregation” and attempted a coup: “I will be like the most High.” He was instead “cut down” and thrust into the underworld. Isaiah compares the king of Babylon to this fallen god who had such delusions of grandeur only to have it all taken away.

4. Isaiah compares the king of Babylon to a god from an ancient Near Eastern myth. How are these two figures similar?

Now, I imagine some of you are going, wait a second, it says “Lucifer” here, I thought that was talking about the devil? Here’s the history behind that:

- The Hebrew phrase translated as “Lucifer, son of the morning” in KJV Isaiah 14:12 is *hēlēl ben-šāḥar* (הִלֵּל בֶּן-שָׁחַר), which literally means “shining one, son of dawn.” As I described above, Isaiah is drawing upon mythological titles to make a comparison with the fallen king of Babylon.
- Fast forward several centuries to Jesus talking with his apostles, where He tells them, “I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven” (Luke 10:18). Jesus seems to be borrowing from the wording of Isaiah 14:12 to make this observation.
- Based on Jesus’s use of Isaiah 14:12, Christians came to interpret Isaiah 14:12 as both a reference to the king of Babylon *and* a description of the fall of the devil.
- When the Old Testament was translated into Latin (the Vulgate version), the Latin word *lucifer* (‘morning star’ [=Venus] / ‘light-bearer’) was used to translate *hēlēl* in Isaiah 14:12.
- Next, because Christians were now interpreting Isaiah 14:12 as a description of the fall of the devil, and because the Latin Vulgate used the word *lucifer* in that description, Christians started turning that generic Latin word into a personal name.
- By the time the King James Version was translated in 1611, Isaiah 14:12 was being interpreted *primarily* as a reference to the fall of the devil—now known as Lucifer—so the translators simply used that name instead of translating *hēlēl* as “shining one” or something generic like that.

So anyway, that's the story of how Lucifer became a devilish name, and it all starts with this passage in Isaiah. Even the Doctrine and Covenants picks up on this tradition by invoking Isaiah 14:12 in this description of the devil's fall: "We saw also ... that an angel of God who was in authority in the presence of God, who rebelled against the Only Begotten Son whom the Father loved and who was in the bosom of the Father, was thrust down from the presence of God and the Son, and was called Perdition, for the heavens wept over him—he was Lucifer, a son of the morning. And we beheld, and lo, he is fallen! is fallen, even a son of the morning!" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:25–27).

5. You don't need to include every technical detail, but briefly explain how Isaiah 14:12 led to Christians giving the devil the name "Lucifer."

Assyria's End a Pattern for All Nations (14:24–27)

Here is another example of Isaiah making a prophecy about a specific situation in his day and building into it, right there in the text, the potential for this prophecy to have applications to other situations later. Jehovah says he will "break the Assyrian" and remove their "burden" from off people's shoulders, and then that this "purpose," or plan, is "purposed upon the whole earth," upon "all the nations." In other words, God's act of stopping Assyrian oppression serves as a pattern for how He will end oppression in all nations.

Philistia's Oppressor Will Return Worse than Before (14:28–32)

This section addresses Philistia, the country to the southwest of Judah where the Philistines lived. It's hard to tell what the background is here, but one possibility is that since King Ahaz just died, the Philistines want to know if Judah's new king, Hezekiah, is interested in joining them against the Assyrians (who come from the "north," v. 31). What should Judah "then answer the messengers [ambassadors] of the nations?" The answer is that the people of Judah will trust in the Lord, not political treaties, to save them. Counseling against forming an anti-Assyrian alliance with Philistia would be completely in line with the counsel against foreign alliances we've seen in previous chapters.

The Tragic Fall of Moab (15:1–16:14)

Isaiah 15 and 16 go together and constitute a series of poems about the fate of Judah's neighbor Moab. A lot of the material has close parallels with descriptions of Moab in Jeremiah 48. Genesis 19 identifies the Moabites as descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, making them relatives of the Israelites. The two nations often coexisted peacefully, but at times came into conflict. The book of Ruth identifies a Moabite woman as one of David's ancestors. Isaiah describes the fall of Moab, which was devastated during Isaiah's lifetime by—you guessed it—the Assyrians.

6. The one narrating the Moabite prophecy—Isaiah, Jehovah, or both—occasionally lets the reader know what they are feeling as they visualize the bloody destruction. In these passages (see especially Isaiah 15:5; 16:9, 11), what is the narrator’s emotional state? Moab was often an enemy of Israel and Judah, but was he happy to see the Moabites finally go down?

7. Isaiah 16:1–5 form a distinct subsection within the Moabite revelations found in Isaiah 15–16. What are the Judahites commanded to do as Moab is destroyed? (Be sure to compare the KJV with the Class Translation, since the former can be a little unclear here.) Note the pairing of the twin virtues “justice” and “righteousness” that we have seen in Isaiah before.

Aram and the Northern Kingdom of Israel Will Fall (17:1–14)

This section brings together images of destruction for both Aram/Syria (Damascus was its capital) and the northern kingdom of Israel. You should recall that in the Syro-Ephramite War, King Rezin and King Pekah led these two countries in an invasion of Judah, and we’ve already seen Isaiah predict their fall (see Isaiah 7:1–9).

Messengers to Warn Cushite Egypt (18:1–7)

This and the next several sections deal with Egypt. Here is some helpful background: “For over a thousand years, Egypt had dominated and controlled the area just south of them, which they called Cush (referred to as Ethiopia by the King James Version writers but as Sudan and a little of Ethiopia today). This area was so thoroughly incorporated into Egyptian control that the inhabitants of Cush adopted much of Egyptian culture and in many ways thought of themselves as Egyptian. More and more Cushites gained positions of power and trust in Egypt. During a time when a number of governmental and economic elements were weak within Egypt proper, these elements were strong in Cush, leading to a Cushite becoming king of all Egypt. It is during this powerful dynasty that Isaiah lived. Thus, he often refers to Egypt as Ethiopia or Cush. The Cushite dynasty represented a resurgence in power, and the kings often attempted to extend Egypt’s power and to play a role in international politics in a way that had not happened for some time in Egypt’s history. They were successful in some ways and failed in others. The interplay between Cushite Egypt and ascending Assyria often took place via proxy wars involving Israel and Judah, since they were part of the land bridge between the two powerhouses. As Assyria grew powerfully and geographically, Egypt worked to protect itself by trying to help the countries between Assyria and Egypt be independent of Assyria. They offered to help these countries rebel; thus, Judah was caught between the rising new power and the resurging old

one.” Kerry Muhlestein, *Learning to Love Isaiah: A Guide and Commentary* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2021), 155.

8. Why does Isaiah often refer to Egypt as “Cush” (or “Ethiopia” in the King James Version)? What was Egypt’s political situation in Isaiah’s time, and how did that affect Israel and Judah?

Egypt Will Fall into Chaos (19:1–15)

This section describes turmoil in Egypt as “the Egyptians [are set] against the Egyptians: and they shall fight every one against his brother.” When the Assyrians invaded during Isaiah’s day, Egypt erupted into civil war as the Cushite government fought to maintain control against native-Egyptian rebels who saw the Assyrians invasion as an opportunity to get their territory back. For many years the Cushites, Assyrians, and various native factions fought for control.

Egypt and Assyria Will Join Israel in Worship (19:16–25)

This section contains five prophecies of the future, each beginning with “In that day ...” It is not clear if these are five separate events or if some should be read together.

9. The Israelites often found themselves dealing with threats from enemy nations who wanted to conquer and control them. Yet the covenant God made with Abraham and Sarah required their family to bless all nations, and Isaiah foresaw that one day “all nations [would] flow unto” God’s temple (Isaiah 2:2). In Isaiah’s day the Israelites were caught between two Gentile superpowers, Egypt and Assyria, but in Isaiah 19:16–25, how does Isaiah envision the relationship between Israel and these Gentile enemies?

Isaiah Dramatizes the Conquest of Egypt and Cush (20:1–6)

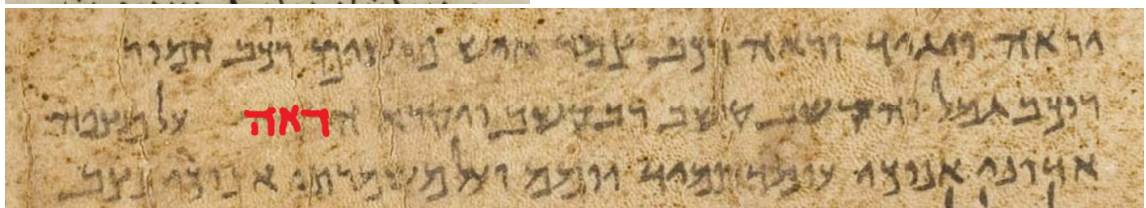
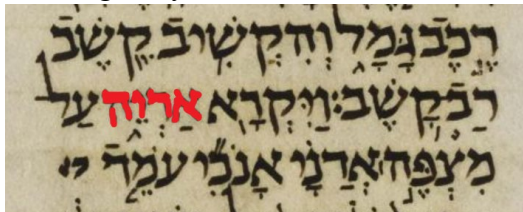
This prophecy provides a date, linking it to Sargon II’s invasion of Ashdod, a Philistine city on the Mediterranean coast, in 711 BC. Isaiah performed a symbolic action to demonstrate what would happen to the Egyptians, but people debate whether he was actually “naked” or merely removed an outer garment.

News of Babylon’s Fall (21:1–10)

This section describes yet again the fall of the Babylonians, who were not a superpower in Isaiah’s day but would assume Assyria’s position a century later. Verse 8’s “Babylon is fallen, is fallen” is famously quoted in Revelation 14:8, where the New Testament uses ancient Babylon to

symbolize the wicked world. In modern revelation, this same phrase is re-purposed to describe the fall of the devil from heaven, combining the imagery here with what we saw in Isaiah 14:12 (Doctrine and Covenants 76:27).

10. Earlier in our class, you learned that the King James translators had access to a limited number of biblical manuscripts, all dated to the Middle Ages, and that since their time we have discovered many earlier manuscripts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. No two ancient manuscripts are exactly alike because scribes made both deliberate and accidental changes. However, with so many more manuscripts available to compare, scholars can now determine much more accurately which variant readings are closest to the words of the ancient prophets and apostles. Let's look at an example in Isaiah 21:8. The top image shows the version of Isaiah used by the King James translators (this version of the Old Testament is called the Masoretic Text). The bottom image shows the same passage in a Dead Sea Scrolls copy of Isaiah that is over 1,000 years older. The word I have highlighted red reads differently in each copy (note that Hebrew goes right to left and was originally written with consonant letters but no vowels).



The copy from the Middle Ages reads **אריה** (*'aryēh*), meaning a “lion,” and this is what you have translated in the KJV. In contrast, the Dead Sea Scrolls version reads **רעה** (*rō'eh*). The two words differ in the order of the first two letters, ר (*r*) and א (*'*), so most likely one of those two variants is the original reading, and the other resulted from a scribe accidentally reversing those two letters while copying the book of Isaiah. It would be like if you were texting and accidentally put “I’m going to the ilbrary.” After careful analysis, scholars agree that instead of the non-sensical “a lion” reading, the Dead Sea Scrolls preserve the original reading, “the *rō'eh*,” which means what? (Compare with the Class Translation to see.)

Ominous News from Dumah (21:11–12)

This enigmatic little prophecy seems to concern the region of Edom (Seir was in Edom, but the reference to “Dumah” is unclear).

Care for the Refugees in Arabia (21:13–17)

In this prophecy, certain inhabitants of Arabia are instructed to care for the refugees who will pass through their land, paralleling instructions you have already seen Isaiah give elsewhere.

A Warning of the Destruction of Jerusalem (22:1–14)

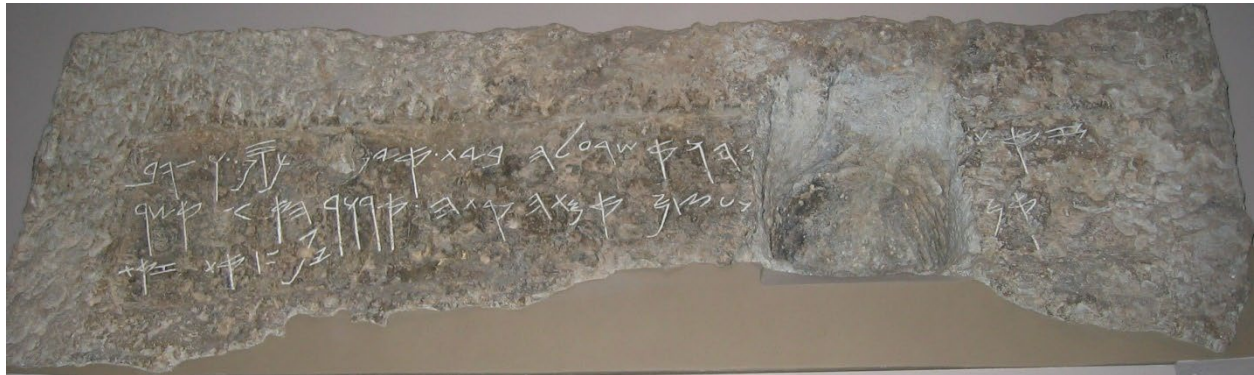
The immediate context of this section is Isaiah's certain knowledge that the Assyrians will devastate Judah and siege Jerusalem, something that many of the rulers could not or would not have the "vision" to see. The fact that he turned out to be right did not bring comfort to Isaiah: rather than "I told you so," he would say, "I will weep bitterly, labour not to comfort me" (v. 4).



11. In Isaiah 22:8–11 Isaiah describes many of the practical efforts the people of Jerusalem had undertaken to prepare for the Assyrian siege. To ensure their salvation, they looked to a grand armory build by Solomon (v. 8), they repaired breaches that had developed in the wall around the city of David (the original part of Jerusalem, v. 9), they broke down houses and turned them into a 22-foot-wide wall surrounding the Western Hill (the newer part of Jerusalem, pictured above, v. 10), and they carved an underground tunnel to channel in water from outside the city (vv. 9, 11). But despite all these preparations, what does Isaiah say they forgot to do?

A Corrupt Judahite Official Replaced (22:15–25)

This section describes the ousting of Shebna, who was the steward for the house of David, meaning he was something like a prime minister or royal vizier. His unclear what his full range of offenses were, but here Isaiah describes him carving himself an expensive tomb into a rock. Interestingly, archaeologists have discovered [an inscription](#) marking a tomb that many believe is the one Shebna made.



12. After Shebna loses his position, someone named Eliakim is named to replace him. Jehovah promises to give him “the key of the house of David” and sustain him in his efforts. If Eliakim “opens,” who can “shut”? If Eliakim “shuts,” who can “open”?

Phoenician Commerce Will Collapse for a Generation (23:1–18)

Tyre was a Phoenician city located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, north of Israel. (Sidon, mentioned a few times in this revelation, was also a Phoenician port city.) The Phoenicians’ trading empire made them extremely wealthy and powerful. However, like their neighbors, these cities would fall prey to the Assyrian army (v. 13).