

H.A. Whittaker, *Isaiah*, (CMPA Birmingham, 1st edition 1988, reprint 200): 195-198

At this point, then, it becomes necessary to establish fairly firmly the little known fact that in the bible "Babylon" and "Assyria" are used interchangeably of the same political power, so that constantly it is necessary to be on alert to know which of the two is being alluded to. The two kingdoms spoke virtually the same language. In the time of Isaiah, Assyria conquered Babylon, and then in the time of Zedekiah Babylon destroyed Assyria.

Here, then, are the details not to be ignored, about this Assyria-Babylon confusion:

1. Isaiah foretells the destruction of the might of the ambitious king of "Babylon" (14:4, 12) and then immediately in what is part of the same prophecy: "I will break the Assyrian in my land, and upon my mountains tread him underfoot: (v. 25). Later in this commentary it will be shown that the whole of chapter 14 has reference to Assyria, and so also 13: 19-22.
2. Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah, was taken captive to Babylon by the king of Assyria (Chr. 33: 11). Also, the Assyrians brought captives from Babylon into Northern Israel (2 Kgs. 17:24).
3. There are strong indications (see later commentary) that Babylon prophecy in Isaiah 47 is also about Nineveh. "These two things shall come upon thee in one day, the loss of children and widowhood". This did not happen to Babylon. Its greatness faded away very gradually.
4. Also, the language of verse 8: "thou art given to pleasures, that dwellest carelessly, that sayest in thine heart, I am, and none else besides me: I shall not sit as a widow, neither shall I know the loss of children", is quoted nearly a century later by Zephaniah (2:15) with reference to the destruction of Nineveh (v. 13). So either Zephaniah did not understand what Isaiah was writing about, or else he took in his stride the idea that Isaiah's "Babylon" was Nineveh, Sennacherib's capital.
5. Psalm 87, one of a block of "Korah" psalms, all of them about the experiences of Hezekiah's reign, makes mention of Rahab (Egypt) and Babylon, also Philistia, Tyre, Ethiopia, all of them important in Hezekiah's time, but makes no mention of Assyria which dominated and battered all of them.
6. Ezra 6: 22 refers to a contemporary "king of Assyria" more than a century after Nineveh had been reduced to a heap of rubble. He meant, of course the king of Babylon who "strengthened their hands in the work of the house of God."
7. Zech. 10:10, 11 foretells God's gathering of His people from Egypt and Assyria, and speaks of the pride of Assyria about to be brought down, when in fact Assyrian power had already disappeared. But Babylon was still there.
8. In the reign of Josiah, Pharaoh-nechoh went against "the king of Assyria" at Carchemish (2 Kgs. 23:29). But by that time it was no longer necessary to fear Assyria. It was the empire building of Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar, which Egypt feared then.
9. Micah, contemporary of Isaiah and Hezekiah, foretold that "thou shalt go even to Babylon" (4:10). Yet in the next chapter, Assyria is named as the threat: "This man (Hezekiah) shall be the peace when the Assyrian shall come into our land" (5:5).

10. Stephen quoted to the Sanhedrin the prophecy of Amos that “I (the Lord) will cause you (the northern kingdom) to go into captivity beyond Damascus.” But Stephen turned it into “beyond Babylon” (Acts 7: 43). How the learned men listening to him would have enjoyed exposing his inaccuracy, if indeed it were that! But they knew well enough the equivalence of Assyria (where the northern captives were taken) and Babylon.
11. Nahum also makes his emphatic witness. His prophecy about the destruction of Nineveh (1: 15) quotes Isaiah’s prophecy which had its primary fulfilment regarding Sennacherib’s invasion (52:7). Perfectly appropriated! But also Nahum alludes to the whoredoms, witchcraft, nakedness, and merchant” of Isaiah’s “Babylon” (3:4, 5, 16=47:3, 9, 15), when his subject is still the end of Nineveh.
12. With the exception of one detail, everything in Habakkuk’s prophecy suggest that he was a contemporary of Isaiah. That detail is: “the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation” (1:6). It can now be seen that even here the reference is to the Assyrian. “I will work in your days which ye will not believe.” If indeed Habakkuk spoke his prophecy in Nebuchadnezzar’s day, these words were irrelevant. But how appropriate to the deliverance in Hezekiah’s reign! Thus again Babylon language is found to be appropriate to Assyria.
13. An important general consideration: in 13:19 and repeatedly in Ch. 14, “Babylon” is represented as the supreme world-power, exercising a cruel tyranny over many nations and especially over Israel. But in Isaiah’s day, Babylon was either a conquered state of the Assyrian empire or was making sporadic attempts at rebellion from the Assyrian yoke. Thus the “Babylon” spoken of here must have been Nineveh, the bully of the world of that day.
14. The Exodus theme developed so fully in Ch. 12, with its allusions to the Song of Moses, requires a counterpart here in Isaiah. This, as already shown, God provided in the miraculous destruction of Sennacherib’s army; and the counterpart to Moses’ Song is the Song of triumph in 12:4-27 such as all Israel must have joyfully taken up.
15. It must not be overlooked that the kings of Assyria took special pride in their domination of Babylon: Sarton records as one of his royal titles: “Viceroy of the ‘Gods of Babylon.” Tiglath-pileser proudly called himself “King of Babylon.”

Such an accumulation of evidence is surely not to be lightly set aside. When the conclusion it points to is adopted not a few difficulties of exposition evaporate.

However a further complication is that many details in this “Babylon” burden, refuse to conform to a Babylon (or Nineveh) reference at all. The first 16 - or, more likely, the first 18 – verses seem to demand exposition with reference to Judah invaded by Assyrians. In this respect compare 17:3-14 in the “Damascus” burden which are all about Israel and Judah.

The details needing to be considered here are these”:

- V.2 “The high mountain”, and also v.4: “a multitude in the mountains” are phrases incapable of reference to Babylon or Nineveh, for both cities were in dead flat plains. Expositors, recognising the difficulty, read the words as a description of the warlike Medes (v.17) mustering in their mountainous homeland. But reference to God’s holy mountain is easy and obvious. Kay says this means the “levelled mountain” – a description well suited to the ‘mountain of the house’ (10:32) with its temple area at the top. This is only one of a series of details which Kay emphasizes pointing to judgement on God’s people, and yet he backs away from explicit identification with God’s mountain: Jerusalem!
- V.3 “My sanctified ones.” It is an uneasy interpretation to read this with reference to rough uncultured Medes going against cultured but utterly pagan Babylon. Nor is it much better to see the Assyrians, going against Zion, as God’s sanctified ones, even in spite of 8:7: “the Lord bringeth upon them...I will send him against a hypocritical nation...(10.6).” A much better parallel is with Joel 3:11: “thither cause thy mighty ones (thy Gabriels) to come down, O Lord” – and this is when nations come against Zion (v.16). “Them that rejoice in my highness (also v.3) *seems* to demand reference to angels (cp. 37:36). This Joel passage has the same double reference as these early chapters of Isaiah.
- V.5 “The Lord, and the weapons of his indignation.” But why should there be such violent divine indignation against Babylon, a city which hitherto had almost no contact with Israel? But read it as describing Assyrians “the people of his wrath” being used against Israel, and there is an easy parallel with copious similar phrases in Isaiah. “They came from a far country” – that is, they came to *Zion*. But go to Babylon (from Media?) would surely be more appropriate. The same phrase is used about Assyrian invasion of Judah (46:11: see commentary there). “To destroy the whole Land”. Is precisely and literally what the Assyrians set out to do in Judaea. Cp. V.9: “to lay the land desolate”. But the Medes and Persians made their conquest of Babylon with hardly any destruction, for the simple reason that there was almost no opposition.
- V.6 Quotes or is quoted by Joel (1:15); and there the primary reference is undoubtedly to Assyrian invasion of the land.
- V.8 The figure of “a woman that travaileth” comes also in Psalm 48: 5,6 regarding the Assyrian threat against Israel. “Their faces shall be as flames” is the very description used by Joel to describe the Assyrian invaders (2:6).
- V.9 “He shall destroy the sinners out of it”. How utterly inappropriate to Babylon, for “where there is no law, there is no transgression”; but Judea was full of sinners from end to end.

V.10 “Stars...sun...moon” all in a state of darkness or eclipse. But note in how many places are the heavenly bodies a figure of Israel (e.g. Gen 37: 9,10 Jer.3:35,36; Rev 6:12 and context; B.S. 6.0.1)

V. 13 “I will shake the heavens and earth”. Again, in 50:3; 51:6; Joel 3:16 the reference is to *Israel*.

V.16 “children dashed in pieces...wives ravished.” This is the very judgement denounced on the people of Nineveh (Nah 3:10), exactly in accordance with the bitter prayer of Ps 137:9: “Happy shall he be that that taketh and dasheth *thy* little ones against the stones”. (Thirtle has shown that the “Babylon” in this Psalm is Assyria: “Old Testament Problems”).

V.17 “I will stir up the Medes against them” can be read in either of two ways: (a) Median mercenaries in the Assyrian army used against Israel (b) Oppositely, Median inroads into Assyria after the disaster of 37:36.

As the exposition proceeds a number of other details will be found to conform readily to the two-fold interpretation (a) that “Babylon” is the power of Assyria: (b) that –as with 17:13-14 – the first 16 (or 18) verses here relate to Judah overrun and devastated by the ruthless armies of Sennacherib.

However, turning a blind eye to the indicators listed above, the moderns are determined to see in ch. 13-14 a “burden” composed in the Babylonian captivity about the destruction of Babylon (which, in any case, didn’t happen for more than another thousand years). The fact that the text says; “which Isaiah the son of Amoz did see, “is quietly ignored. And so is the long list of verbal connections, compiled by kay, between ch. 13-14 and the four preceeding chapters. Even the word “burden” is turned into a synonym for a message. Yet the AV is proved right by such examples as the following: “The Lord laid this burden upon him” (2 Kgs. 9:25) – more than a message, a weighty responsibility. “The burden of the word of the Lord for Israel....Jerusalem a burdensome stone unto all the people round about” (Zech 12:1, 3).