
ISAIAH 21: 1 The burden of the wilderness of the sea. As whirlwinds in the South sweep through, it comes from the wilderness, from an awesome land.

Prediction of the taking of Babylon by the Medes and Persians at the time of a great festival, Isa 21:1-9. Short application of the prophecy to the Jews, partly in the person of God, and partly in his own, Isa 21:10. Obscure prophecy respecting Dumah, Isa 21:11, Isa 21:12. Prophecy concerning the Arabians to be fulfilled in a very short time after its delivery, Isa 21:13-17.

The first ten verses of this chapter contain a prediction of the taking of Babylon by the Medes and Persians. It is a passage singular in its kind for its brevity and force, for the variety and rapidity of the movements, and for the strength and energy of coloring with which the action and event are painted. It opens with the prophet's seeing at a distance the dreadful storm that is gathering and ready to burst upon Babylon. The event is intimated in general terms, and God's orders are issued to the Persians and Medes to set forth upon the expedition which he has given them in charge. Upon this the prophet enters into the midst of the action; and in the person of Babylon expresses, in the strongest terms, the astonishment and horror that seizes her on the sudden surprise of the city at the very season dedicated to pleasure and festivity, Isa 21:3, Isa 21:4. Then, in his own person, describes the situation of things there, the security of the Babylonians, and in the midst of their feasting the sudden alarm of war, Isa 21:5. The event is then declared in a very singular manner. God orders the prophet to set a watchman to look out, and to report what he sees; he sees two companies marching onward, representing by their appearance the two nations that were to execute God's orders, who declare that Babylon is fallen, Isa 21:6-9.

But what is this to the prophet, and to the Jews, the object of his ministry? The application, the end, and design of the prophecy are admirably given in a short, expressive address to the Jews, partly in the person of God, partly in that of the prophet: "O my threshing" "O my people, whom for your punishment I shall make subject to the Babylonians, to try and to prove you, and to separate the chaff from the corn, the bad from the good, among you; hear this for your consolation: your punishment, your slavery, and oppression will have an end in the destruction of your oppressors." - L.

Verse 1

The desert of the sea - This plainly means Babylon, which is the subject of the prophecy. The country about Babylon, and especially below it towards the sea, was a great flat morass, overflowed by the Euphrates and Tigris. It became habitable by being drained by the many canals that were made in it.

Herodotus, lib. 1:184, says that "Semiramis confined the Euphrates within its channel by raising great dams against it; for before it overflowed the whole country like a sea." And Abydenus, (quoting Megasthenes, apud Euseb. Praep. Evang. 9:41), speaking of the building of Babylon by Nebuchadonosor, says, "it is reported that all this part was covered with water and was called the sea; and that Belus drew off the waters, conveying them into proper receptacles, and surrounded Babylon with a wall." When the Euphrates was turned out of its channel by Cyrus, it was suffered still to drown the neighboring country; and, the Persian government, which did not favor the place, taking no care to remedy this inconvenience, it became in time a great barren morassy desert, which

event the title of the prophecy may perhaps intimate. Such it was originally; such it became after the taking of the city by Cyrus; and such it continues to this day.

As whirlwinds in the south "Like the southern tempests" - The most vehement storms to which Judea was subject came from the desert country to the south of it. "Out of the south cometh the whirlwind," Job 37:9. "And there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house," Job 1:19. For the situation of Idumea, the country (as I suppose) of Job, see Lam 4:21 compared with Job 1:1, was the same in this respect with that of Judea: - "And Jehovah shall appear over them,

And his arrow shall go forth as the lightning;

And the Lord Jehovah shall sound the trumpet;

And shall march in the whirlwinds of the south." Zac 9:14.

ISAIAH 21: 2 A grievous vision is declared to me. The treacherous man deals treacherously, and the destroyer destroys. Go up, Elam; attack! I have stopped all of Media's sighing.

Verse 2

The treacherous dealer dealeth treacherously, and the spoiler spoileth "The plunderer is plundered, and the destroyer is destroyed" - בוגד והשודד שודד habbaged boged vehashshoded shoded. The MSS. vary in expressing or omitting the I vau, in these four words. Ten MSS. of Kennicott are without the I vau in the second word, and eight MSS. are without the I vau in the fourth word; which justifies Symmachus, who has rendered them passively: ὁ αθετων αθετειται και ὁ ταλαιπωριζων ταλαιπωρει. He read בודש בוגד shadud. Cocceius (Lexicon in voce) observes that the Chaldee very often renders the verb בגד bagad, by בזז bazaz, he spoiled; and in this place, and in Isa 33:1, by the equivalent word אנס anas, to press, give trouble; and in Isa 24:16 both by אנס anas and בזז bazaz; and the Syriac in this place renders it by טלם talam, he oppressed.

All the sighing thereof have I made to cease "I have put an end to all her vexations" - Hebrews "Her sighing; that is, the sighing caused by her." So Kimchi on the place: "It means those who groaned through fear of him: for the suffixes of the nouns refer both to the agent and the patient. All those who groaned before the face of the king of Babylon he caused to rest;" Chald. And so likewise Ephrem Syr. in loc., edit. Assemani: "His groans, viz., the grief and tears which the Chaldeans occasioned through the rest of the nations."

ISAIAH 21: 3 Therefore my thighs are filled with anguish. Pains have taken hold on me, like the pains of a woman in labour. I am in so much pain that I can't hear. I so am dismayed that I can't see.

ISAIAH 21: 4 My heart flutters. Horror has frightened me. The twilight that I desired has been turned into trembling for me.

ISAIAH 21: 5 They prepare the table. They set the watch. They eat. They drink. Rise up, you princes, oil the shield!

Verse 5

Prepare the table "The table is prepared" - In Hebrew the verbs are in the infinitive mood absolute, as in Eze 1:14 : "And the animals ran and returned, ושוב ורצוּ ratso veshob, like the appearance of the lightning;" just as the Latins say, currere et reverti, for currebant et revertebantur. See Isa 33:11 (note), and the note there.

Arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield - Kimchi observes that several of the rabbins understood this of Belshazzar's impious feast and death. The king of a people is termed the shield, because he is their defense. The command, Anoint the shield, is the same with Anoint a new king. Belshazzar being now suddenly slain, while they were all eating and drinking, he advises the princes, whose business it was, to make speed and anoint another in his stead.

ISAIAH 21: 6 For the Lord said to me, "Go, set a watchman. Let him declare what he sees.

ISAIAH 21: 7 When he sees a troop, horsemen in pairs, a troop of donkeys, a troop of camels, he shall listen diligently with great attentiveness."

Verse 7

And he saw a chariot, etc. "And he saw a chariot with two riders; a rider on an ass, a rider on a camel" - This passage is extremely obscure from the ambiguity of the term רכב recheb, which is used three times, and which signifies a chariot, or any other vehicle, or the rider in it; or a rider on a horse, or any other animal; or a company of chariots, or riders. The prophet may possibly mean a cavalry in two parts, with two sorts of riders; riders on asses or mules, and riders on camels; or led on by two riders, one on an ass, and one on a camel. However, so far it is pretty clear, that Darius and Cyrus, the Medes and the Persians, are intended to be distinguished by the two riders on the two sorts of cattle. It appears from Herodotus, 1:80, that the baggage of Cyrus' army was carried on camels. In his engagement with Croesus, he took off the baggage from the camels, and mounted his horsemen upon them; the enemy's horses, offended with the smell of the camels, turned back and fled. - L.

ISAIAH 21: 8 He cried like a lion: "Lord, I stand continually on the watchtower in the daytime, and every night I stay at my post.

Verse 8

And he cried, A lion "He that looked out on the watch" - The present reading, אריה aryeh, a lion, is so unintelligible, and the mistake so obvious, that I make no doubt that the true reading is הראה haroeh, the seer; as the Syriac translator manifestly found it in his copy, who renders it by דקוא duka, a watchman.

ISAIAH 21: 9 Behold, here comes a troop of men, horsemen in pairs." He answered, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the engraved images of her gods are broken to the ground.

 Verse 9

Here cometh a chariot of men, etc. "A man, one of the two riders" - So the Syriac understands it, and Ephrem Syr.

ISAIAH 21: 10 You are my threshing, and the grain of my floor!" That which I have heard from the LORD of Armies, the God of Israel, I have declared to you.

Verse 10

O my threshing - "O thou, the object upon which I shall exercise the severity of my discipline; that shalt lie under my afflicting hand, like corn spread upon the floor to be threshed out and winnowed, to separate the chaff from the wheat!" The image of threshing is frequently used by the Hebrew poets, with great elegance and force, to express the punishment of the wicked and the trial of the good, or the utter dispersion and destruction of God's enemies. Of the different ways of threshing in use among the Hebrews, and the manner of performing them, see the note on Isa 28:27 (note).

Our translators have taken the liberty of using the word threshing in a passive sense, to express the object or matter that is threshed; in which I have followed them, not being able to express it more properly, without departing too much from the form and letter of the original. "Son of my floor," Hebrews It is an idiom of the Hebrew language to call the effect, the object, the adjunct, any thing that belongs in almost any way to another, the son of it. "O my threshing." The prophet abruptly breaks off the speech of God; and instead of continuing it in the form in which he had begun, and in the person of God, "This I declare unto you by my prophet," he changes the form of address, and adds, in his own person, "This I declare unto you from God."

ISAIAH 21: 11 The burden of Dumah. One calls to me out of Seir, "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?"

Verse 11

The burden of Dumah "The oracle concerning Dumah" - Pro דומה Dumah, Codex R. Meiri habet דומד Edom; and so the Septuagint, Vid. Kimchi ad h. 50. Biblia Michaelis, Halae, 1720, not. ad 50. See also De Rossi. Bishop Lowth translates the prophecy thus: -

11. The Oracle Concerning Dumah.

A voice crieth to me from Seir:

Watchman, what from the night?

Watchman, what from the night?

12. The watchman replieth: -

The morning cometh, and also the night.

If ye will inquire, inquire ye: come again.

This differs very little from our common Version. One of Kennicott's MSS., and one of my own, omit the repetition, "Watchman, what from the night?"

This prophecy, from the uncertainty of the occasion on which it was uttered, and from the brevity of the expression, is extremely obscure. The Edomites as well as the Jews were subdued by the Babylonians. They inquire of the prophet how long their subjection is to last: he intimates that the Jews should be delivered from their captivity; not so the Edomites. Thus far the interpretation seems to carry with it some degree of probability. What the meaning of the last line may be, I cannot pretend to divine. In this difficulty the Hebrew MSS. give no assistance. The MSS. of the Septuagint, and the fragments of the other Greek Versions, give some variations, but no light. This being the case, I thought it best to give an exact literal translation of the whole two verses, which may serve to enable the English reader to judge in some measure of the foundation of the various interpretations that have been given of them.

The burden of Dumah. - R. D. Kimchi says, "His father understood this of the destruction of Dumah (one of the cities of the Ishmaelites) by the inhabitants of Seir; and that they inquired of the prophet to know the particular time in which God had given them a commission against it. The prophet answered: The morning - the time of success to you, cometh, is just at hand; and the night - the time of utter destruction to the inhabitants of Dumah, is also ready." I have heard the words applied in the way of general exhortation.

1. Every minister of God is a watchman. He is continually watching for the safety and interests of his people, and looking for the counsel of God that he may be properly qualified to warn and to comfort.
2. Such are often called to denounce heavy judgments; they have the burden of the word of the Lord to denounce against the impenitent, the backslider, the lukewarm, and the careless.
3. When the watchman threatens judgments, some are awakened, and some mock: Watchman, what of the night? "What are the judgments thou threatenest, and when are they to take place?"
4. To this question, whether seriously or tauntingly proposed, the watchman answers:
 1. The morning cometh - there is a time of repentance granted; a morning of God's long-suffering kindness now appears: and also the night - the time in which God will no longer wait to be gracious, but will cut you off as cumberers of the ground.
 2. But if you will inquire seriously how you are to escape God's judgments, inquire ye.
 3. There is still a door of hope; continue to pray for mercy.
 4. Return from your iniquities.
 5. Come to God, through Christ, that ye may obtain salvation.

ISAIAH 21: 12 The watchman said, "The morning comes, and also the night. If you will inquire, inquire. Come back again."

ISAIAH 21: 13 The burden on Arabia. In the forest in Arabia you will lodge, you caravans of Dedanites.

 Verse 13

The burden upon Arabia "The oracle concerning Arabia" - This title is of doubtful authority. In the first place, because it is not in many of the MSS. of the Septuagint; it is in MSS. Pachom. and 1. D. 2. only, as far as I can find with certainty. Secondly, from the singularity of the phraseology; for מִשָּׂא massa is generally prefixed to its object without a preposition, as מִשָּׂא בָבֶל massa babel; and never but in this place with the preposition בְּ beth. Besides, as the word בַּעֲרַב baarab occurs at the very beginning of the prophecy itself, the first word but one, it is much to be suspected that some one, taking it for a proper name and the object of the prophecy, might note it as such by the words מִשָּׂא בַּעֲרַב massa baarab written in the margin, which he might easily transfer to the text. The Septuagint did not take it for a proper name, but render it ἐν τῷ ὄρει ἐσπερας, "in the forest, in the evening," and so the Chaldee, which I follow; for otherwise, the forest in Arabia is so indeterminate and vague a description, that in effect it means nothing at all. This observation might have been of good use in clearing up the foregoing very obscure prophecy, if any light had arisen from joining the two together by removing the separating title; but I see no connection between them. The Arabic Version has, "The prophecy concerning the Arabians, and the children of Chedar."

This prophecy was to have been fulfilled within a year of the time of its delivery, see Isa 21:16; and it was probably delivered about the same time with the rest in this part of the book, that is, soon before or after the 14th of Hezekiah, the year of Sennacherib's invasion. In his first march into Judea, or in his return from the Egyptian expedition, he might perhaps overrun these several clans of Arabians; their distress on some such occasion is the subject of this prophecy. - L.

ISAIAH 21: 14 They brought water to him who was thirsty. The inhabitants of the land of Tema met the fugitives with their bread.

 Verse 14

The land of Tema "The southern country" - Θαιμᾶν, Sept.; Austri, Vulg. They read תֵּימָן teiman, which seems to be right; for probably the inhabitants of Tema might be involved in the same calamity with their brethren and neighbors of Kedar, and not in a condition to give them assistance, and to relieve them, in their flight before the enemy, with bread and water. To bring forth bread and water is an instance of common humanity in such cases of distress; especially in those desert countries in which the common necessities of life, more particularly water, are not easily to be met with or procured. Moses forbids the Ammonite and Moabite to be admitted into the congregation of the Lord to the tenth generation. One reason which he gives for this reprobation is their omission of the common offices of humanity towards the Israelites; "because they met them not with bread and water in the way, when they came forth out of Egypt," Deu 23:4.

ISAIAH 21: 15 For they fled away from the swords, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow, and from the heat of battle.

ISAIAH 21: 16 For the Lord said to me, "Within a year, as a worker bound by contract would count it, all the glory of Kedar will fail,

ISAIAH 21: 17 and the residue of the number of the archers, the mighty men of the children of Kedar, will be few; for the LORD, the God of Israel, has spoken it."

Verse 17

The archers, the mighty men of the children of Kedar "The mighty bowmen of the sons of Kedar" - Sagittariorum fortium, Vulg.; transposing the two words, and reading גִּבּוֹרֵי קֶשֶׁת gibborey kesheth; which seems to be right. The strong men of the bow, the most excellent archers.

For the Lord - hath spoken it "For Jehovah hath spoken it" - The prophetic Carmina of Marcius, foretelling the battle of Cannae, lib. 25:12, conclude with the same kind of solemn form: Nam mihi ita Jupiter fatus est; "Thus hath Jupiter spoken to me." Observe that the word נֹאֵם naam, to pronounce, to declare, is the solemn word appropriated to the delivering of prophecies: "Behold, I am against the prophets, saith (נֹאֵם naam, pronounceth) Jehovah, who use their tongues, וַיִּנְאֹמוּ נֹאֵם vaiyinu namu neum, and solemnly pronounce, He hath pronounced it;" Jer 23:31. What God says shall most assuredly come to pass; he cannot be deceived.