

Ancient Israel's Neighbors

Isaiah was God's prophet who was called to preach, teach, and prophesy to the entire known world, not just to those who lived in his kingdom. He prophesied to Arabia (Isaiah 21:13–17), Assyria (10:12–19), Babylon (13:6–22; 21:1–10; 47:1–15), Edom (34:1–15), Egypt (19:1–25), Ethiopia (20:1–6), Moab (15:1–16:4), and Philistia (14:28–32).

ISAIAH 2:16

And upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures. . .

Tarshish, the precise location of which is unknown, was probably a prosperous and bustling Mediterranean seaport. Through Tarshish, Solomon imported luxury items, including gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks (1 Kings 10:22). Perhaps because of the city's wealth and affluence, the destruction of Tarshish and its ships symbolizes the Lord's judgment on the proud and arrogant (Psalm 48:7; Isaiah 23:1, 14).

ISAIAH 7:18

And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall hiss for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.

The fly and the bee often symbolize fighting soldiers (Deuteronomy 1:44; Psalm 118:12). These symbols are well chosen because "the flooding of the Nile brought . . . swarms of flies," and "the hill districts of Assyria were well known for their bees" (J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, 89).

In this case, Isaiah prophesies that the Lord will prompt the Assyrian armies, here referred to as "bees," to come down on Judah. Judah's punishment comes because of wickedness. That the "Lord shall hiss" to the bees is a symbol built on an actual ancient practice. The word "hiss" can also mean whistle (Isaiah 5:30). Cyrillus of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 400) wrote about beekeepers who whistled to bees to get them to return to their hives (John D. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 107).

ISAIAH 7:20

In the same day shall the Lord shave with a razor that is hired . . . by them beyond the river, by the king of Assyria, the head, and the hair of the feet: and it shall also consume the beard.

Isaiah prophesies that Assyria will invade Israel (Isaiah 7:17–25). His prophecy, set forth in symbolic terms, declares that Assyria would occupy the entire land. Assyria's intent would be to humiliate and strip Israel of its dignity, make it poverty-stricken, and deport its citizens from the land. Isaiah records that the Lord would use a razor to shave the head, beard, and hair of the feet of members of the house of Israel. The razor represents the

Assyrian king and his armies who customarily forced war prisoners to become slaves, and then humiliated and dishonored them by shaving them from head to toe.

The Assyrian invasion came upon members of the house of Israel because most of the people rejected the Lord and turned to idolatry and other gross sins.

ISAIAH 7:23-25

And it shall come to pass in that day, that every place shall be, where there were a thousand vines at a thousand silverlings, it shall even be for briers and thorns. . . . And on all hills that shall be digged with the mattock, there shall not come thither the fear of briers and thorns: but it shall be for the sending forth of oxen, and for the treading of lesser cattle.

This verse is part of Isaiah's prophecy regarding the impending Assyrian warfare against the kingdom of Judah (Isaiah 7:17-25). Because of the desolation of warfare, the vineyards would become neglected and overrun with thorns and briers (vv. 23-24). The farmlands that had once been cultivated, "digged with the mattock," would also be abandoned and become a pastureland for cattle and sheep (v. 25).

Isaiah prophesies that the fruits of the land would be lost with Assyria's invasion. The richest vines would become worthless, and briers and thorns would be found in place of vineyards.

ISAIAH 8:6-7

Forasmuch as this people refuseth the waters of Shiloah that go softly, and rejoice in Rezin and Remaliah's son; Now therefore, behold, the Lord bringeth up upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, even the king of Assyria.

Isaiah describes and then contrasts two forms of waters, the "waters of Shiloah" and "the waters of the river." The soft, rolling waters of Shiloah flow near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. They are controlled and inviting and bring life to those who drink them.

The waters of Shiloah represent Jesus, the King of Heaven, who is likened to the fountain of righteousness (Psalm 36:8-9; 1 Nephi 2:9; Ether 12:28).

The waters of the river represent the king of Assyria, who leads his great, destructive armies "like a flood" to "cover the earth" and "destroy the city and the inhabitants thereof" (Jeremiah 46:8).

Because the inhabitants of Judah rejected Jesus, the Lord sent against them the king of Assyria, or the strong and mighty waters of the river that would overflow its banks and cover the entire land with destruction.

ISAIAH 10:5-6

O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

To fulfill his divine purposes, the Lord sends Assyria's wicked king and his armies to war against Israel. The Lord is actively engaged in this process. "I will send him," he says. The Lord controls all nations and their armies. "Do I not hold the destinies of all the armies of the nations of the earth?" he asks (D&C 117:6).

The Lord uses the wicked to destroy a people who have forsaken the covenant and committed spiritual adultery by worshiping foreign gods. Assyria represents the Lord's rod of anger, which is used to punish the apostate Israelites. They had apostatized from the truth and were the "people of [God's] wrath." Assyria's army would trample and tread Israel's wicked in the deep mud, or mire.

ISAIAH 10:14

And my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people: and as one gathereth eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped.

This prophecy pertains to Assyria's conquest of ancient Israel (Isaiah 10:5–19). Israel is compared to a bird's nest, eggs, wings, and call. (See 3 Nephi 10:4–6; D&C 10:65; 29:1–2 for other examples of bird symbolism.) The eggs in the nest represent Israel's riches, which Assyria has raided. Israel's inability to move its wings or to make a peep signifies that it, like a little chick, is helpless before Assyria's ravaging armies.

ISAIAH 10:15

Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? Or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it?

To fulfill his divine purposes, the Lord sent Assyria's wicked king and his armies to war against Israel. Assyria became the ax and saw in the Lord's hand, used to cut down the apostate Israelites, namely, those who had forsaken the covenant and committed spiritual adultery by worshiping foreign deities. However, Assyria and its king were proud enough to believe that they were greater than God, not realizing they were really tools in God's hand.

ISAIAH 14:22–23

For I will rise up . . . and cut off from Babylon the name, and remnant, and son, and nephew, saith the Lord. I will also make it a possession for the bittern, and pools of water: and I will sweep it with the [broom] of destruction, saith the Lord of hosts.

Isaiah prophesies that God would put an end to Babylon, the great city of ancient Babylonia known for its huge walls, celebrated gardens and parks, and beautiful temples. Babylon's destruction would be so great that both "son" and "nephew"—those who would produce additional generations to inhabit Babylon—would be destroyed.

Isaiah's words were fulfilled in 539 B.C. when Cyrus, king of Persia, defeated Babylon together with its evil rulers and residents. How complete was Babylon's destruction? The Lord said, "I will sweep it with the broom of destruction." Just as one sweeps a house to eliminate dust and dirt, so God swept Babylon of its foulness so that nothing, not even dust, remained. Its temples and gardens are gone, and Babylon now stands in ruins, a testimony that Isaiah's words were fulfilled.

Babylon is a perfect example of an evil place that was destroyed by the power of God. As such, Babylon is a type and a shadow of the wicked world that will be destroyed by God's power in the last days (D&C 1:16).

ISAIAH 21:15

For they fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, and from the bent bow, and from the grievousness of war.

The setting of Isaiah 21:15 is Tema, an oasis and important caravan stop on an ancient trade route on the Arabian peninsula. It was approximately two hundred fifty miles southeast of Aqaba. Isaiah speaks concerning the inhabitants of Tema who fled from a fierce battle that destroyed much of Tema's population. Their flight from both "drawn sword" and "bent bow" suggests they escaped from the heat of the battle.

The bow was a weapon used among many peoples in antiquity. Isaiah referred to the bow in several of his prophecies (Isaiah 5:28; 7:24; 13:18; 41:2; 66:19). In almost every instance, the bow alludes to war.

ISAIAH 23:1-3

The burden of Tyre . . . Be still, ye inhabitants of the isle; thou whom the merchants of Zidon, that pass over the sea, have replenished. And by great waters the seed of Sihor, the harvest of the river, is her revenue; and she is a [market place] of nations.

Tyre and Zidon (sometimes spelled Sidon) were famous Phoenician cities noted for their commerce, great wealth, and materialism. Tyre was so well-known by Mediterranean trading nations that it was called a mart, or market place, of nations. Its traders and merchants were so celebrated that they were equated with the "princes" and the "honorable of the earth" (Isaiah 23:8).

Zidon's merchants carried corn, dyed cloth, grain, wine, metal, horses, wood, and oil as they voyaged on the seas. Tyre was supported, or replenished, by Zidon's trading. The "seed of Sihor" refers to the grain produced near Sihor, and the "harvest of the river" likely refers to the great fishing industry in both Tyre and Zidon.

The Lord spoke against Tyre and its inhabitants, decrying its pride by calling it a harlot. He also warned its inhabitants to repent, or the city would become desolate. Tyre's inhabitants did not listen to the prophet and were destroyed. (vv. 16–18.)

Like many modern cities, the primary interests of the inhabitants of Tyre lie in obtaining material wealth. If modern cities' inhabitants are proud, glory in wickedness, and sell themselves to the ways of the world—they will share Tyre's fate. They will be destroyed when the Lord returns to the earth with great glory. Tyre, then, serves as a warning of the pitfalls of pride and materialism.

ISAIAH 36:1

Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the defenced cities of Judah, and took them.

While Hezekiah served as king over Judah, Sennacherib, the king of Assyria (704–681 B.C.), and his armies captured most of the fortified cities of Judah. This occurred during the “fourteenth year of king Hezekiah,” or approximately 701 B.C., the later years of Isaiah's ministry. After capturing most of the cities, Sennacherib sent his armies to Jerusalem to demand tribute and to inform Judah of the terms of surrender, which included the peoples' deportation (Isaiah 36:2, 8, 16–17).

ISAIAH 37:27

Therefore their inhabitants were of small power, they were dismayed and confounded: they were as the grass of the field, and as the green herb, as the grass on the housetops, and as corn blasted before it be grown up.

The great Assyrian nation, with its fierce and well-disciplined armies, destroyed other equally evil nations. During Isaiah's ministry, Assyria laid waste many nations, including the northern kingdom of Israel. The inhabitants of these conquered nations were powerless before the Assyrian army, as weak as fragile herbs before the scorching desert wind or as the grass on the housetops that cannot find root (Psalms 37:2; 90:5–6; Isaiah 40:6–8).

This scenario of Assyria at war anticipates the warring nations of the latter days, who will contend for land, power, and riches. They will thirst for blood. But as Assyria, its leaders, and its armies were destroyed according to God's plan, so also will the warring nations of the last days be annihilated at the second coming. Meanwhile, a righteous remnant of Israel will be saved as they worship in temples and obey God's words.

ISAIAH 41:25

He shall come upon princes as upon mortar, and as the potter treadeth clay.

This passage refers to King Cyrus of Persia, whom the Lord raised up to be a conqueror. Cyrus's military campaigns were so successful that he conquered the Medes, Lydians, and Babylonians and their dynasties of powerful princes and kings. Cyrus trod on kings and princes as easily as a potter treads on his clay to prepare it for his work.

This passage also refers to Jesus Christ. In ancient days, Israel was in bondage to an earthly conqueror, Babylon, but God called up Cyrus to deliver Israel. Today all people are in bondage, but their enslavement is to sin, false tradition, and death. In his great power, God has sent a deliverer in Jesus Christ. The Savior has the power to set people free spiritually if they will turn to him and accept his atonement. But to receive his blessing, they must be willing to submit to him, even as the clay does to the potter.

ISAIAH 45:2

I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron.

The end of Isaiah 44 and the beginning of Isaiah 45 speak of Cyrus, king of Persia, who is called the Lord's "shepherd" and "anointed." The Lord addresses Cyrus, although not yet born, calling him by name and appointing him to serve as a deliverer of captive Israel (Isaiah 45:1–2).

The Lord prepared the way for Cyrus to deliver ancient Israel, which was held captive by the Babylonians, by opening doors and making rough places smooth (vv. 1–2). In the same way, the Lord will open doors and prepare the way for his covenant people of the latter days to overcome sin. God exercised his power to break even the most imposing barriers—crooked places, gates of brass, and bars of iron—that stood in Cyrus's way. In a similar manner, God will exercise power to remove the barriers that prevent his followers from doing his will, if they will trust in him.

ISAIAH 47:2

Take the millstones, and grind meal: uncover thy locks, make bare the leg, uncover the thigh.

Isaiah describes the work of a female slave who uses a millstone to grind meal. She has to keep her hair from her face, as well as tie up her skirts to keep hair and clothing from hindering her work. This work of the female slave symbolizes the servitude into which Babylon, the wicked world, would be forced. It would be the end of a life of decadence.

Babylon was forced to serve its masters when it fell. The wicked serve their master, Satan. Satan promises the wicked a life of pleasure but delivers only bondage and pain. Only righteousness brings lasting rewards.