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THE IDENTITY OF THE KING OF BABYLON
IN ISAIAH 14:4-21

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THE IDENTITY OF THE KING OF BABYLON IN ISAIAH 14:4B–21

INTRODUCTION

The identity of the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14 has perplexed scholars for millennia. The early church sometimes identified the king as Nebuchadnezzar, but most also saw a deeper meaning and believed Isa 14:12–14 referred to Satan. Many current scholars reject both views and offer a variety of alternatives. This paper proposes that the king of Babylon referred to in Isa 14 is Israel’s eschatological enemy, the Antichrist.

Three reasons support this thesis. First, Isa 14:4b–21 makes a comparison with a *real person*, not a typological, symbolic, or representative individual. Second, Isa 14:4b–21 is structurally connected to the preceding eschatological oracle (*massa’*) against Babylon in Isa 13. Finally, an analysis of Isa 13–14 reveals fifteen criteria which no historic king can claim.

THE KING OF BABYLON MUST BE A REAL PERSON

Some scholars point out that Isaiah 14:4b–21 is a proverb (*mashal*) and, therefore, does not refer to a specific person but to a representative person.¹ Some *mashals* are general and have unspecified nouns: 1 Sam 24:14, “from *evil men*;” Prov 10:5, “a wise son;” Prov 20:8, “A *king* who sits on the throne of judgment.” The addition of the construct chain “of Babylon,” however,

¹ Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles’ Wings*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 83; Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah: A Commentary* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel, 2008), 197; Marvin E Tate, “Satan in the Old Testament,” *Review & Expositor* 89, no. 4 (September 1992): 468; John L. Mackay, *A Study Commentary on Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, An EP Study Commentary (Webster, N.Y.: Evangelical Press, 2000), 341–42.

makes the representative view unlikely. Isaiah is not referring to a general, representative king; he is referring to a specific king, the king of Babylon.²

STRUCTURE OF ISAIAH 13–14

The structure and content of the oracle against Babylon argue that the battle in Isa 13:2–13, the Babylonian destruction in 13:14–22, and the regathering of Israel in 14:1–2 are still future. Not only is the context of 14:4b-21 eschatological, but 14:3–4a connects the *meshal* to the *timeframe* of the entire oracle. Isaiah 14:22–23 concludes the oracle against Babylon, further enveloping 14:4b–21 into the entire oracle.

Isaiah 13:2–13

Few scholars recognize a major break between vv. 13–14, but there are six clues why there is a major break here. First, “therefore” (על־כן) functions as a structural marker and concludes the first major section in verse 13.³ Second, there is an inclusio which sets Isa 13:9–13 off as a unit. Five words are repeated in 13:13: (1) day (יום), (2) Lord (יהוה), (3) wrath (עברה), (4) fierce (חרון), and (5) anger (אף) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Inclusio between Isaiah 13:9–13

9a. Behold, the day ¹ of the Lord ² is coming with cruelty,	9a הַיּוֹם יְהוָה ¹ -יְהוָה ² בָּא אֶכְזָרִי
9b. And wrath, ³ and fierce ⁴ anger ⁵	9b וְעִבְרָה ³ וְחֲרוֹן ⁴ אַף ⁵
...	...
13c. In the wrath ³ of the Lord ² of hosts,	13c בְּעִבְרַת ³ יְהוָה ² צְבָאוֹת
13d. And in the day ¹ of his fierce ⁴ anger ⁵	13d וּבְיוֹם ¹ חֲרוֹן ⁴ אַפּוֹ ⁵

² For a full analysis of the Isa 14:4b–21 *meshal* see Timothy A. Little, “The Identity of the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14:4b–21” (Ph.D. diss., Baptist Bible Seminary, 2018), 14–42.

³ על־כן also occurs in 13:7 and concludes the first minor section (2–8). Fry also recognizes the structural function of על־כן: “Line 13a concludes Yahweh’s speech (11a–13a) in the first person,” Mervin John Fry, “The ‘Oracle Concerning Babylon’: An Exegetical Study of Isaiah 13:1–14:27” (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1992), 70.

Third, the agents and manners of destruction are vastly different. Isaiah 13:2–13 describes (1) an angelic army (13:3, 5) (2) which is led by the Lord (13:4), and they (3) destroy the earth and nearly all in it (13:12). Isaiah 13:14–22 describes (1) a Median army (13:17) (2) whose leader is unstated, and (3) they take no prisoners, plunder houses, rape women, and dash children (13:16). These battles are different. Fourth, first person verbs, found exclusively in Isa 13:3 and 11–13a, form an inclusio marking Isa 13:2–13 off as a unit. Fifth, the Lord’s “anger” (אף) is mentioned three times in Isa 13:2–13, occurring in the beginning (3), middle (9), and at the end (13), but it is not mentioned at all in Isa 13:14–22.

The sixth and most important reason is the presence of והיה (And it will be) in 13:14. This is the most important point because והיה occurs again in Isa 14:3, marking the second major division of the oracle against Babylon. והיה sometimes introduces a new section.⁴ The use of והיה coupled with the previous five points makes a substantive argument in favor of a major division after Isa 13:13. Dividing Isa 13 between vv. 13–14 is not without historic precedent either.⁵

Isaiah 13:14–14:2

Because והיה is functioning structurally in Isa 13:14, then it is most likely functioning structurally again in Isa 14:3. There are three additional exegetical reasons why there is continuity between Isa 13:22 and 14:1: (1) the traditional division of the text (there are no Masoretic division

⁴ cf. Isa 7:18, 10:12, 20, 11:10, 11 and 14:3 (note the Masoretic *p^etûhā*’ after 7:17, 10:19 11:9, 10 and the *s^etûmā*’ after 10:11, 14:2).

⁵ “The Divine judgment upon the world,” and 14–22, “The first act in the world judgment.” Thomas Kelly Cheyne, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 5th ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Company, 1889), 82–85. Kuenen sees three sections: 2–8, 9–13, 14–22, A. Kuenen, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in die Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Leipzig, Germany: O. R. Reisland, 1892), 2:84. Bredenkamp states, “Erst von V.14 an verdichtet sich das Gericht auf Babel.” Translation: “Only from V. 14 on does the text focus on Babel,” Conrad Justus Bredenkamp, *Der Prophet Jesaja* (Erlangen, Germany: Andreas Deichert, 1887), 92.

markers after 13:22); (2) the contrastive כִּי in Isa 14:1; and (3) the structural continuity between Isa 13:19–22 and 14:1–2.

The NKJV, KJV, NASB, ESV, and NLT have followed the stichography of BHS and segmented 14:1–2 as prose. The NIV, however, has correctly segmented 14:1–2 as poetry and 14:3–4a as prose.⁶ The relationship between Isa 13:22 and 14:1 is that of a contrast. There is a transition between these two verses, but it is not a completely new poem. There is a reversal in fortunes which takes place at the same *time*. *When* Babylon is destroyed, *then* Israel is restored.

The use of catchwords also binds the two chapters together and connect Isa 14:4b–21 to the oracle.⁷ The first and third verbs in Isa 14:1a–c are functioning as catchwords. The first verb, “he will have compassion” (יִרְחַם) contrasts with the Medes who do not show compassion toward the fruit of the womb (13:18b). The third verb “he will make them rest” (וְהִנִּיחָם) introduces a theological concept (rest) which is repeated in Isa 14:3a. Therefore, the first word (יִרְחַם) points back to Isa 13:18b and the third verb (וְהִנִּיחָם) points forward to Isa 14:3a (see Table 2).

Table 2. Catchwords in Isaiah 13:18–22

<p>13:18 וְקִשְׁתוֹת נְעָרִים תִּרְטֹשְׁנָה וּפְרִי-בֶטֶן לֹא יִרְחַמוּ¹ עַל-בָּנִים לֹא-תַחֲוִס עֵינָם:</p> <p>14:1 כִּי יִרְחַם¹ יְהוָה אֶת-יַעֲקֹב וּבָחַר עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִנִּיחָם² עַל-אֲדָמָתָם</p> <p>14:3 יְהִי בַיּוֹם הַהוּא הַנִּיחָם² יְהוָה לֵד מַעֲצָבָה וּמְרִגְזָה וּמִוֵּה-הַעֲבֹדָה הַקָּשָׁה אֲשֶׁר עָבַד-בָּהּ:</p>
<p>¹ connects the regathering of Israel to the Medes destruction</p> <p>² connects the regathering of Israel to the <i>mashal</i> בּוֹחַ</p>

While the verbs in Isa 14:1 bind the oracle together, 14:3a ties into the *timeframe* (cataclysmic destruction, devastation of Babylon, Median slaughter, Israelite regathering) of

⁶ The presence of established line forms, repetitions, word pairs, and even tricola argue that Isa 14:1–2 is poetry.

⁷ Watson defines a catchword, “A secondary function [of keywords] is to indicate the structure of a poem. Finally, such words may function as *catchwords* linking separate verses or stanzas [emphasis his],” Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 288.

13:22b and 14:1a by referencing the *day* (13:6a, 9a, 13d, 22d) when the *Lord* (14:1a,) gives Israel *rest* (14:1c) (see Table 3).⁸ Fry also agrees with this exegesis, “Line 3a picks up the theme of vv 1–2, the coming compassion of Yahweh for Jacob/Israel in a reversal of fortunes between Israel and its oppressors ‘on a day’ now not only of Yahweh’s burning anger (as in Isa 13:9b) but also of his giving rest to Israel (הניח, Isa 14:3a) as he sets (הניחם) them on their own soil (Isa 14:1c).”⁹

Table 3. Timeframe of the *Mashal*

13:14 וְהָיָה ¹ כְּצָבִי מִדָּח ... 13:22 וְעָנָה אֵימָם בְּאֵלֵינוּ וְתָנִים בְּהִיכְלֵי עֲנָג וְקָרֹב לְבֹא עִתָּהּ וְיָמִיהָ ² לֹא יִמְשָׁכוּ: 14:1 כִּי יָרַחֵם יְהוָה אֶת־יַעֲקֹב וּבָחַר עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָלְוָה הַגֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם וְנִסְפְּחוּ עַל־בֵּית יַעֲקֹב: ... 14:3 וְהָיָה ¹ בְּיוֹם ² הַנִּחֵם ³ יְהוָה לֵךְ מֵעֲצָבָהּ וּמִרְגִזָּהּ וּמִן־הַעֲבֹדָה הַקְּשָׁה אֲשֶׁר עֲבַדְבָּהּ: 14:4 וְנִשְׂאֵת הַמִּשְׁלָל ⁴ הַזֶּה עַל־מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל
introduces a new section in 13:14 and 14:3 והיה ¹ connects to the timeframe of chapter 13 ביום ² The temporal also connects to the regathering of Israel in 14:1–2 ביום ³ The temporal ⁴ Isaiah 14:3–4a introduces the <i>mashal</i>

The implications of this structural analysis for understanding the identity of the king of Babylon cannot be understated. *When* Babylon is destroyed *and* Israel is restored, *then* Israel will lift up the *mashal* (Isa 14:4b–21) against the king of Babylon. The *mashal* against the king of Babylon is tied directly to the events in Isa 13:2–14:2.¹⁰

⁸ Blenkinsopp recognizes the connection between 14:1 and 14:3, “The link is by catchword—Yahweh gives Israel rest on its land (*himiḥām* 14:1); Yahweh gives you respite from your troubles (*hāniāh* 14:3).” Joseph Blenkinsopp, ed., *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 286. Blenkinsopp fails to note the corresponding “day.”

⁹ Fry, “The ‘Oracle Concerning Babylon,’” 94.

¹⁰ For a full structural analysis of Isa 13–14 see Little, “Identity of the King of Babylon,” 48–74.

ESCHATOLOGY IN ISAIAH 13:2–14:2

Having argued that the *mashal* connects to the timeframe of Isaiah 13:2–14:2, this section now argues that Isaiah 13:2–14:2 is eschatological. Isaiah 13:5 declares the cosmic comprehensiveness of the Lord’s destruction; it is revisited in 13:9–11 and summarized in 13:13. The extent of the human destruction is most clearly illustrated in Isa 13:12. Motyer explains, “This verse is a fearful image of extermination: people with the same scarcity value as the most precious metal.”¹¹ While Isa 13:2–13 more clearly refers to an eschatological judgment, Isa 13:14–14:2 could refer, theoretically, to a historic destruction of Babylon and regathering of Israel. For example, Oswalt claims Isa 13:2–13 is eschatological, but then claims 13:14–22 is historical because “there is a turn toward more this-worldly imagery with a special emphasis upon the savagery with which the proud city will be thrust down.”¹² The previous section on structure demonstrated that Isa 13:19–14:2 is a single unit which introduces the king of Babylon in Isa 14:4. Thus, Oswalt would have to find four fulfillments: (1) Median slaughter; (2) eternal devastation of Babylon; (3) Israelite regathering; and (4) the identity of the king of Babylon. This section focuses on the first three.

Isaiah 13:14–18 describes a destruction that is implacable (17) and compassionless (18). The scene painted is apocalyptic, leaving few alive. The destruction of Babylon in 539 BC as described in the Cyrus Cylinder simply cannot be reconciled with the destruction described in Isa 13:14–22.¹³ There are five possible non-eschatological responses to this disparity: (1) Isaiah’s

¹¹ J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 139.

¹² John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 307.

¹³ “Without any battle, he made him enter his town Babylon (Š u . a n . n a), sparing Babylon (K á . d i n g i r . r a^{ki}) any calamity. He delivered into his (i.e. Cyrus’) hands Nabonidus, the king who did not worship him (i.e.

prophecy failed; (2) the prophecy was gradually fulfilled; (3) Isaiah employed stereotypical language; (4) the Cyrus Cylinder has been falsified; and (5) the prophecy was fulfilled spiritually or figuratively. Problems abound for all of these views.¹⁴ If Isaiah's prophecy had failed then he would be discredited as a prophet of the Lord. A gradual fulfillment struggles to find a terminus.¹⁵ The conquest in 539 BC was so mild that even an appeal to stereotypical language fails. The accuracy of the Cyrus Cylinder has been supported by archaeology and the Bible. The gradually fulfilled and spiritually fulfilled views both cannot account for the Medes. The attacking army in 539 BC was the Persians, not the Medes. There never has been a real Median conquest of Babylon. The conquest in 539 BC was not a real destruction, much less a slaughter of the inhabitants, so it cannot qualify. All later destructions of Babylon were performed by other nations.

Finally, the spiritually fulfilled view cannot account for the prominence of Babylon. If eighth century Isaiah was, according to Oswalt, figuratively creating a "powerful contrast between the temporary results of human pride and the ultimate results,"¹⁶ then why would he select Babylon as his illustration of pride? Assyria was the eighth century superpower whose arrogance was in full array on the walls of Jerusalem in Isa 36–37. Oswalt's explanation that Babylon was the "cultural and economic superior to the Assyrian cities in the north and was

Marduk)," James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 315–16.

¹⁴ For a full analysis see Little, "Identity of the King of Babylon," 99–108.

¹⁵ Proposed dates include the days of Strabo, AD 200, 400, and 1200. Hassler demonstrated that there has been continuous activity in Babylon up to the present day, Mark Hassler, "Isaiah 13:1–14:27: The Babylonian Tyrant and the Morning Star" (Th.D. diss., The Master's Seminary, 2013), 46.

¹⁶ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 309.

bidding for political sovereignty as well”¹⁷ is lacking. If Isaiah was only teaching a spiritual lesson, one would expect Assyria to be involved as either the conqueror or the conquered. These two problems render the spiritual interpretation view unlikely.

Similar problems abound concerning the regathering of Israel in Isa 14:1–2.¹⁸ When Isa 14:1 states, “God will make you rest,” this rest implies relief from war, peace in the land, and the fulfillment of divine Deuteronomic blessing.¹⁹ The Rab-shakeh promises in Isa 36:17 that he would come (בא) and take (לקח) Israel to a land like their own land. The people of Israel were familiar with being “taken” and “brought” somewhere. Isaiah uses this language but reverses it. Instead of being taken away from their land, they are being taken to their land (Isa 14:2ab). The regathering intensifies at the end of vs 2 and beginning of vs 3. Those who oppressed Israel will become Israel’s slaves. Heater believes Isa 13 refers to historic Babylon, but concerning Isa 14 he admits, “The language of the passage forces the interpreter who is trying to take the language seriously to see a future for Israel that far exceeds what happened when Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem (as in 11:11 ff).”²⁰ The regathering in 539 BC was accompanied by political turmoil and threats on all sides and cannot describe the fulfillment of Isa 14:1–2.

Isaiah 13:14–14:2, theoretically, could have been fulfilled historically. A historical study of Babylon, however, reveals that it has never been eternally destroyed as Isa 13 describes. Furthermore, the Medes have never conquered and slaughtered the Babylonians as Isa 13 states.

¹⁷ Oswalt, 308.

¹⁸ For a full analysis of the regathering of Israel see Little, “Identity of the King of Babylon,” 108–14.

¹⁹ Gary Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 306 n. 74.

²⁰ Homer Heater, “Do the Prophets Teach That Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt in the Eschaton?,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 1 (March 1998): 30.

Finally, Israel has never been regathered as Isa 14:1–2 explains. Thus, Isa 13:2–14:2 remains unfulfilled today.

THE KING OF BABYLON

When attempting to identify the king of Babylon, scholars are often selective in either their criteria, or their evaluation of the evidence. Isaiah 13–14 reveals, however, fifteen criteria. There are four contextual criteria: (1) cataclysmic destruction (13:5–13); (2) eternal devastation of Babylon (13:19–22); (3) Median slaughter (13:17); and (4) Israelite regathering (14:1–2). The *mashal* contains five attributes and six activities of the king of Babylon. These eleven criteria in Isa 14:4b–21 and the four contextual criteria create a list of fifteen criteria by which one can identify the king of Babylon.

Attributes of the King of Babylon

The *mashal* reveals five attributes of this individual: king of *Babylon* (14:4); brutal ruler (14:6); ruler of vast kingdom (14:6); king of kings (14:6, 9–14, 16); and exposed corpse (14:18–20).

Many kings proffered as the king of Babylon were never kings of *Babylon*. Three reasons argue, however, that the king of Babylon is the king of *Babylon*: (1) Isaianic context; (2) reference to the Chaldeans in Isa 13:19; and (3) destruction of “Babylon” in Isa 13:20–22. Roos, Ringgren, and Margueron all agree that there are no symbolic uses of Babylon in the Old Testament.²¹ Even if there was a symbolic Babylon in the OT, the use of “Chaldean” in Isa 13:19 would mitigate against a symbolic use here. Finally, the immediate context describes the

²¹ Deomar Roos, “Babylon in the Book of Isaiah,” *Concordia Journal* 30, no. 4 (October 2004): 350. See also Helmer Ringgren, “בְּבָבֶל,” *TDOT* 1:466–69; Jean-Claude Margueron, “Babylon (Place),” trans. Paul Sager, *ABD* 1:563–64.

destruction of an actual city named Babylon. These three reasons demonstrate that a symbolic interpretation of Babylon in Isa 14:4 is unlikely.

Second, the king of Babylon is a brutal ruler. Isaiah 14:6 states he “struck peoples with wrath, blows without ceasing; ruled with anger the nations; persecution without ceasing.” Oswalt makes a common error and applies this verse to the manner of his *conquest*.²² Isaiah 14:6, however, describes the manner of his *rule*.²³

Third, the king of Babylon ruled a vast domain. Also from Isa 14:6, the king of Babylon strikes “peoples” and “nations” (both words are plurals), indicating a vast domain. The king of Babylon’s vast domain is also displayed by the use of comprehensive terminology in Isa 14:4b–21. At his death, *all* the earth is still, and then breaks out into singing (14:7). He shakes the earth and kingdoms (14:16). He has influence over the entire world (14:17). The king of Babylon was not a minor ruler.

Fourth, one criterion that eliminates most prospective kings of Babylon is his exposed corpse (Isa 14:18–20a). Exegetically, strong arguments can be made for an exhumed corpse, resurrected body, or simply exposed corpse. Perhaps even all three have elements that are correct.²⁴ The text is too ambiguous to rule out any of these conclusions. However, the king of Babylon’s body will at least be left exposed, even if only for a time.

²² Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 316–17.

²³ Motyer explains, “The king is accused of malevolence, violence, a reign of terror (*unceasing blows*), and *relentless aggression*/‘persecution.’ In sum, the toleration of only one opinion and ideology and the suppression of all others,” Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 143.

²⁴ For a discussion of these views see Little, “Identity of the King of Babylon,” 148–55.

Fifth, the king of Babylon is the king of mortal kings. This is evident by the vastness of his kingdom (14:6), the activities in Sheol (14:9–11), the brightest star (14:12–14), and the trembling of the earth and kingdoms (14:16). Each of these descriptions compositely demonstrate that the king of Babylon is a “greatest of all time” kind of king. Further explanation is needed concerning the activities in Sheol and the brightest star.

In Isa 14:9–10, the king of Babylon’s greatness is revealed through his interactions with other deceased notable beings. Sheol is personified and performs three actions in Isa 14:9–11. First, Sheol trembles at his coming. Just as God is a trembler of the earth (13:13), so also is the king of Babylon (14:16), and this trembling follows him into Sheol (14:9). The second verb describes Sheol awakening the Rephaim. The parallelism with “kings of the earth” denotes the Rephaim were individuals of some exalted status, perhaps even god-like. The third verb describes Sheol making all the kings of the earth rise from their thrones to meet the king of Babylon. Sitting on one’s throne is a symbol of power. For Sheol to raise the kings from their thrones likely means a greater king has arrived.²⁵ Furthermore, the kings of the nations’ speech, “Even you have become like us” reveals their astonishment.²⁶ Oswalt also recognizes the contrast, “Although his glory had made him seem almost immortal, he too must bow to corruption and decay.”²⁷ Thus, the astonishment of the kings of the nations also argues that the king of Babylon is the king of mortal kings.

²⁵ For an explanation see Little, “Identity of the King of Babylon,” 130–34.

²⁶ Clements states, “Here, the shades ... of the dead rulers of earth are pictured as getting up from their thrones in astonishment to greet this great world-ruler who has come to share their fate,” R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 142.

²⁷ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 318.

Isaiah 14:12–14 is one of the most controversial sections of Isaiah 13–14. Traditionally, הילל בן שחר [shining one (Lucifer), son of the dawn] has been identified as Satan. Most likely, Isaiah is personifying the king of Babylon as a star. There are four reasons why הילל is the king of Babylon. First, the context argues for it. Second, the second person singular pronoun consistently refers to the king of Babylon.²⁸ Third, the immediate context supports personification. Isaiah first personified the talking trees (14:8). Then he personified Sheol and the dead kings who talk (14:9–11). Now, he personifies Venus, the morning star, which talks (in his heart) in Isa 14:13–14. All three are personified and all three “speak.” The personification of stars is not unprecedented either. In Job 38:7, the morning stars sing (כוכבי בקר), and in Num 24:16, “A star will come out of Jacob.”²⁹ Finally, הילל is a conqueror (חלש) of nations (Isa 14:12d). חלש is a rare root occurring only four times (Exod 17:13; Job 14:10; Isa 14:12; Joel 4:10). Exodus 17:13 states, “And Joshua defeated (חלש) Amalek and his people with the blade of the sword.” Just as Joshua defeated a nation (Amalek), so also the king of Babylon defeats nations. This description could not correspond to Satan.

If the king of Babylon is a historic king, then which king could be the king of kings? One king who has been identified as one of the greatest conquerors of all time is Alexander the Great. He even arrogantly considered himself divine. Cartledge explains, “Alexander was one of the

²⁸ “Youngblood explains, “The pronoun *you* links vv. 12–15 with the other verses of Isaiah’s taunt song. Beginning in v. 8 and continuing almost without interruption through v. 20, it refers throughout to the king of Babylon,” Ronald F. Youngblood, “The Fall of Lucifer (in More Ways Than One),” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. Bruce K. Waltke, J. I. Packer, and Sven Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 172.

²⁹ Concerning Num 24:17, Budd writes, “כוכב ‘a star’ cf. Isa 14:12 where this is a metaphor for a king, as should probably be understood here,” Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary 5 (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1984), 270.

first Greeks – though not quite the very first – to be worshipped as a god in his lifetime.”³⁰

Alexander claimed to be the son of Zeus.³¹ In Isa 14:13–14, the *thoughts* of the king of Babylon are described. A great king like Alexander the Great would very likely think such great and arrogant thoughts as contained in Isa 14:13–14. Even more so will the king of mortal kings.

The final reason the king of Babylon is the king of mortal kings is because he makes surrounding kingdoms tremble. Torrey, claiming the king of Babylon is Alexander the Great, correctly explains:

The powerful and highly finished poem, 14^{4b-21}, celebrates *the death of a mighty king*, a great conqueror and oppressor, the greatest, apparently, that the world had ever seen....

Now the poem has been recognized by some modern scholars as having for its subject the death of Alexander, a far greater conqueror than any Assyrian or Babylonian ruler, a man who “shook the earth” as no other had shaken it. In comparison with *his* “yoke,” that of Assyria was negligible [emphasis his].³²

Torrey has correctly recognized the magnanimity of the king of Babylon. But even Alexander is only arguably the greatest conqueror of all time. Some contend Genghis Khan was the greatest conqueror of all time.³³ The king of Babylon will be an even greater king than Alexander the Great or Genghis Khan.

³⁰ Cartledge, 237.

³¹ Theodore Ayrault Dodge, *Alexander: A History of the Origin and Growth of the Art of War from the Earliest Times to the Battle of Ipsus, 301 BC, with a Detailed Account of the Campaigns of the Great Macedonian* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 497.

³² Charles Cutler Torrey, “Some Important Editorial Operations in the Book of Isaiah,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 57, no. 2 (1938): 116.

³³ Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Quest for God: How the World’s Greatest Conqueror Gave Us Religious Freedom* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 105.

Activities of the King of Babylon

Isaiah 14:4b–21 also reveals six activities of the king of Babylon: (1) harvests Lebanon’s trees (14:8); (2) makes the world a wilderness (14:17); (3) destroys cities (14:17); (4) puts Israel and Judah to forced labor (14:3, 17); (5) destroys his own land (14:20); and (6) kills his own people (14:20). Only activities two, four, five, and six are discussed below.

In Isa 14:16, the “ones who stare at [the king of Babylon]” “gaze” and “consider.” Two rhetorical questions convey their astonishment at the king of Babylon’s fall (“Is this the man who shook the earth; the one who made kingdoms tremble?”). The “gazers” continue “considering” through v. 17 by describing three atrocities of the king of Babylon. The first atrocity is that he makes the world (תבל) like the wilderness. The word “world” has the entire inhabited world in focus.³⁴ No historic king can claim to “make the world like the wilderness.”

The king of Babylon also puts Israel and Judah to forced labor (Isa 14:17c, “Its prisoners, he did not open the house”). Isaiah 14:17c seems anticlimactic. Gray agrees, “Unreadiness to release prisoners (ordinary, common captives, accord to [the MT]) is not the greatest of enormities; and therefore v.^{17c} comes as a rather violent anti-climax after the preceding description of the king’s creating world-wide desolation and terror.”³⁵ Gray’s understanding of the tricolon is correct, the last line should be the most climactic. The tricolon develops from the general (the world), to the specific (mankind).

The specific crime in Isa 14:17c has been allusive because of the misunderstanding of the masculine suffix on אַסִּירֵי. The masculine suffix refers to the “world,” thus the prisoners are the

³⁴ H. -J. Fabry, “תַּבֵּל,” *TDOT* 15:558. See also Joseph A. Alexander, *The Prophecies of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 299.

³⁵ George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah: I–XXXIX*, *International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 258.

world's prisoners, not just the king of Babylon's. The king of Babylon, however, is the subject of the verb פתח. Thus, the prisoners belong to the world, but the king of Babylon is the one responsible for their bondage. The king of Babylon appears to have organized a worldwide imprisonment in which every nation participates.

Four deductions can be made concerning the prisoners. First, the prisoners are imprisoned, not taken captive or deported.³⁶ Second, their imprisonment must be unlawful. If they were imprisoned lawfully, then it would not have been a crime. Third, the ones imprisoned must include Israel and Judah. The fall of the king of Babylon corresponds to the liberation of Israel and Judah (Isa 14:1–3). After the death of the king of Babylon, these Jewish prisoners are loosed and return to Israel with their captors as their captives (14:2). The prisoners may not be exclusively Israel and Judah, but the prisoners must include a significant portion of them to constitute a national regathering. The king of Babylon appears to have imprisoned Israel and Judah and put them to “hard bondage” (14:3).

The final two activities of the king of Babylon are discussed together, he destroys his own land and kills his own people. The LXX changes the pronouns from the second person to the first person in Isa 14:20b, “Because you destroyed *my* land and killed *my* people.”³⁷ The LXX appears to apply this text to Nebuchadnezzar. Smith makes Merodach-baladan the indirect destroyer of his own land: “The king’s selfish actions caused the destruction of his own nation and the deaths of thousands of his own people. Instead of blaming their destruction on their vile enemies, his own people will realize that the Babylonian king killed thousands of them by his

³⁶ According to HALOT, an אסיר is a “prisoner who is made to do all kinds of work,” HALOT, “אָסִיר,” 1:72.

³⁷ “διότι τὴν γῆν μου ἀπόλεσας καὶ τὸν λαόν μου ἀπέκτεινας.”

foolish actions.”³⁸ The LXX and Smith illustrate the struggle of applying Isa 14:20b to a historic king. The king of Babylon is unique because he destroys *his own* land and kills *his own* people.

As a result of this study, the following analysis is proffered:

Table 4. Criteria of the King of Babylon

Contextual Criteria			
Cataclysmic Destruction (13:5–13)		Median Slaughter (13:17)	
Eternal Devastation of Babylon (13:9–22)		Israelite Regathering (14:1–2)	
Attributes of the King of Babylon			
King of Babylon (14:4a)		King of Kings (14:9–16)	
Brutal Ruler (14:6)		Exposed Corpse (14:18–20a)	
Ruler of Vast Kingdom (14:6)			
Activities of the King of Babylon			
Harvests Lebanon’s Trees (14:8)		Puts Israel and Judah to Forced Labor (14:17c)	
Makes the World a Wilderness (14:17a)		Destroys His Own Land (14:20b)	
Destroys Cities (14:17b)		Kills His Own People (14:20c)	

Scholars have claimed that nine historic kings could be the Isa 14 king of Babylon:

Alexander the Great, Assur-uballit II, Belshazzar, Merodach-baladan, Nabonidus, Nebuchadnezzar, Sargon II, Sennacherib, and Tiglath-pileser III. This paper argued that none of these kings meet the four contextual criteria. Only one king can be labeled the “king of kings,” and this title goes to Alexander the Great. That Alexander is only debatably the greatest king illustrates that even he falls short of this label. Nevertheless, among the kings presented, Alexander shines brighter than all the others and, therefore, warrants this label. A full analysis of

³⁸ Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, 318.

these historic kings and their accomplishments cannot be articulated in this paper.³⁹ The table below serves as a summary.

Table 5. Summary of the Kings of Babylon

	Alexander the Great	Assur-uballit II	Belshazzar	Merodach-baladan	Nabonidus	Nebuchadnezzar	Sargon II	Sennacherib	Tiglath-pileser III
Contextual Criteria									
Cataclysmic Destruction (13:5–13)									
Median Slaughter (13:17)									
Eternal Devastation of Babylon (13:9–22)									
Israelite Regathering (14:1–2)									
Attributes of the King of Babylon									
Ruler of Babylon (14:4a)			✓	✓	✓	✓			
Brutal Ruler (14:6)									
Vast Kingdom (14:6)	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
King of Kings (14:9–16)	✓								
Exposed Corpse (14:18–20a)		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
Activities of the King of Babylon									
Harvests Lebanon's Trees (14:8)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Makes the World a Wilderness (14:17a)									
Destroys Cities (14:17b)	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓
Puts Israel and Judah to Forced Labor (14:17c)									
Destroys His Own Land (14:20b)									
Kills His Own People (14:20c)									
✓ = Meets criterion									

As one can see from the analysis above, not only do these historic kings not meet the criteria described in Isa 13–14, but they do not even come close. Isaiah 13–14 prophesies a future

³⁹ For an analysis of each king see Little, “Identity of the King of Babylon,” 167–90.

Egyptian-like captivity of Israel by a “king of Babylon.” The Lord himself will annihilate the armies of the king of Babylon and regather Israel where they will truly have “rest.” At this time, Israel will mock the king of Babylon by speaking Isa 14:4b–21 against their defeated foe.

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