

A Brief Commentary on Isaiah 24:1–27:5

J. Webb Mealy

First Draft, June 6, 2018

This section of Isaiah (Isa. 24:1–27:5), called “the Isaiah Apocalypse,” is attached to no known historical context, and stays more or less completely eschatological in its focus. It is quoted or alluded to more than 20 times in the NT, almost always in an explicitly eschatological context. We are therefore admonished by Peter (2 Pet. 1:19-21) to pay close attention to it, to study it. It is a great failing of most Christian lay people, preachers, and scholars that they do not “pay attention to” crucial OT prophecies that undergird the whole way NT authors think about the future. The whole section is poetry and, much like the Book of Revelation, it requires patient reading and re-reading to understand how its words yield up the sense of a connected and meaningful eschatological narrative.

^{24:1} See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth
and devastate it;
he will ruin its face
and scatter its inhabitants—

God is going to have to turn the world back to primordial chaos in order to heal and cleanse it from the pollution and damage that has been perpetrated upon it by godless humanity.

² it will be the same
for priest as for people,
for the master as for his servant,
for the mistress as for her servant,
for seller as for buyer,
for borrower as for lender,
for debtor as for creditor.

³ The earth will be completely laid waste
and totally plundered.
The LORD has spoken this word.

Normally the rich and powerful manage to skirt the worst effects of pollution and war. They can flee war; they can live (or move) far from the toxic mess. Not this

time. Note: “the earth” does not here mean “the land of Israel/Judah.” The rest of the chapter will make clear that the context is global.

- ⁴ The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers,
the heavens languish with the earth.
- ⁵ The earth is defiled by its people;
they have disobeyed the laws,
violated the statutes
and broken the everlasting covenant.
- ⁶ Therefore a curse consumes the earth;
its people must bear their guilt.
Therefore earth’s inhabitants are burned up,
and very few are left.

The green earth and its people are dying. The heat is scorching, unbearable (cf. Rev. 16:8). The “everlasting covenant” here, because of the international, global context, refers to God’s “everlasting covenant” with Noah and humanity after the flood (Gen. 9:12, 16), which renews God’s covenant with humanity upon its creation in Gen. 1:28-29. God’s part of the covenant is that he will never again destroy the earth with a flood; humanity’s part, implicitly, is that it must never again fill the earth with violence and “ruin” the earth (Gen. 6:11, 13). It’s not possible to say whether we are looking here at a picture of runaway global warming, possibly together with complete destruction of the earth’s ozone layer, or at something like the aftermath of a nuclear conflagration. Either of these or a combination of them—or something worse—would fit the description. As always in the prophets, God has a plan to preserve a remnant of his faithful ones (v. 6d).

- ⁷ The new wine dries up and the vine withers;
all the merrymakers groan.
- ⁸ The joyful timbrels are stilled,
the noise of the revelers has stopped,
the joyful harp is silent.
- ⁹ No longer do they drink wine with a song;
the beer is bitter to its drinkers.
- ¹⁰ The ruined city lies desolate;
the entrance to every house is barred.
- ¹¹ In the streets they cry out for wine;
all joy turns to gloom,
all joyful sounds are banished from the earth.
- ¹² The city is left in ruins,
its gate is battered to pieces.

¹³ So will it be on the earth
and among the nations,
as when an olive tree is beaten,
or as when gleanings are left after the grape harvest.

John alludes to this section in Revelation 18 in describing the destruction of Babylon the Great. It is possible to interpret “the ruined city” as symbolically describing the civilization of the destroyers of the earth (cf. Rev. 11:18e). A little later “the ruined city” (vv. 10, 12) of those who have reveled in luxury (vv. 8, 11) will be referred to as “the fortified town” and “the foreigners’ stronghold” (25:2), making clear that Jerusalem *is not* the reference. “Among the nations” (v. 13a) indicates that the ruin is global rather than local. Once again there is reference to a remnant (v. 13cd).

¹⁴ They raise their voices, they shout for joy;
from the west they acclaim the LORD’s majesty.
¹⁵ Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD;
exalt the name of the LORD, the God of Israel,
in the islands of the sea.
^{16a} From the ends of the earth we hear singing:
“Glory to the Righteous One.”

These are the voices of the faithful remnant of all nations who are welcoming the glorious coming of God and praising God for delivering them from the oppressors of the earth. These three verses are a key background to Jesus’ teaching of the gathering of the elect “from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mk. 13:27 || Mt. 24:30-31).

^{16b} But I said, “I waste away, I waste away!
Woe to me!
The treacherous betray!
With treachery the treacherous betray!”
¹⁷ Terror and pit and snare await you,
people of the earth.
^{18ab} Whoever flees at the sound of terror
will fall into a pit;
whoever climbs out of the pit
will be caught in a snare.

Whereas a wonderful salvation is taking place for the faithful, something terrifyingly bad is happening among the godless on earth. A global, lethal betrayal is taking place, the effects of which cannot be escaped (cf. Rev. 17:15-18).

^{18c} The floodgates of the heavens are opened,
the foundations of the earth shake.

19 The earth is broken up,
the earth is split asunder,
the earth is violently shaken.
20 The earth reels like a drunkard,
it sways like a hut in the wind;
so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion
that it falls—never to rise again.

It appears that what is described in these verses is humanity's *second* "destruction of the earth" (Rev. 11:18e; cf. Gen. 6:11, 13; Mt. 24:22, 38-39). This time, however, the living earth will not recover from humanity's abuse. It will collapse and die and will need to be resurrected. It is time for a new creation.

21 In that day the LORD will punish¹
the host of the height in the height²
and the kings of the earth on the earth.³
22 They will be herded together
like prisoners bound in a dungeon;⁴
they will be shut up in prison
and be punished⁵ after many days.
23 The moon will be dismayed,
the sun ashamed;
for the LORD Almighty will reign
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before its elders—with great glory.

The day—which is to say, the moment in history—of this mortal earth's final collapse through humanity's abuse will also be the day of God's coming in glory to reign on the earth on Mt. Zion. The same day will also see rebellious angelic and human beings captured and imprisoned *together* in the underworld for a lengthy but unspecified period. That day, which the NT understands to be the same day as Jesus Christ's coming in glory to rule on the earth (cf. Mt. 25:31, 41; Rev. 11:15-18; 19:6-21; 21:23; 22:5), will explicitly *not* be the moment for the final judgment and disposition of rebellious angelic and human beings (vv. 21-22).

25:1 LORD, you are my God;

¹ Lit. "visit" (Heb. *paqad*). This verb can also mean "see to" or "deal with."

² Heb. *marôm*, "the high place," a way of talking about the divine realm where "the host," Heb. *tsaba'*, as in "the LORD of hosts, i.e. angelic armies, are conceived to operate (cf. Rev. 12:4, 7-9; 20:1-3).

³ NIV paraphrases, "the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below."

⁴ Lit. "the pit," Heb. *bôr*, which in the Psalms and the Prophets is a consistent metaphor for the underworld of the dead, often used in parallel with Sheol. See Pss. 28:1; 88:4; 143:7; 1:12; Isa. 14:15; 14:19; 24:22; 38:18; Ezek. 26:20; 1:14; 1:16; 2:18; 2:23; 2:24; 2:25; 2:29; 32:30.

⁵ Lit. "visited," the same verb (Heb. *paqad*) as in v. 21.

I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness
you have done wonderful things,
things planned long ago.
2 You have made the city a heap of rubble,
the fortified town a ruin,
the foreigners' stronghold a city no more;
it will never be rebuilt.
3 Therefore strong peoples will honor you;
cities of ruthless nations will revere you.
4 You have been a refuge for the poor,
a refuge for the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the storm
and a shade from the heat.
For the breath of the ruthless
is like a storm driving against a wall
5 and like the heat of the desert.
You silence the uproar of foreigners;
as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud,
so the song of the ruthless is stilled.

This section is an interlude of praise to God for being the protector of the powerless and the poor in this evil age. Isaiah sees that God's protection goes out to the needy throughout the earth, not just to the nation of Israel. He celebrates the coming moment in which God will intervene to destroy the oppressive nations and reign on the earth in glory. At that moment, the stifling, oppressive power of the "ruthless" will be lifted in a single instant, and the exalted cities of the world's empires will become rubble. God's salvation is coming.

6 On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
7 On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
8 he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.

The LORD has spoken.

The faithful of all nations will be invited to God's enthronement banquet. Those who were spat upon for their faithfulness will be honored. The separation between heaven and earth, between God and humanity, will be taken away for all time (Rev. 21:1-4), and for these faithful crying and tears and death will be no more (Rev. 7:17; 21:4; 1 Cor. 15:54).

⁹ In that day they will say,
"Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

Privileged Christians are used to thinking of "salvation" strictly in terms of people being saved from the punishment they deserve for their sins. There is a crucial additional context for this word: when God comes in glory, God will save the faithful from those who oppress and persecute them (Lk. 1:71-75; 2 Thess. 1:3-10).

¹⁰ The hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain;
but Moab will be trampled in their land
as straw is trampled down in the manure.
¹¹ They will stretch out their hands in it,
as swimmers stretch out their hands to swim.
God will bring down their pride
despite the cleverness⁶ of their hands.
¹² He will bring down your high fortified walls
and lay them low;
he will bring them down to the ground,
to the very dust.

The picture here, in relation to one of Israel's and Judah's perennial enemies, is that they will be left swimming around in a cesspool of their own filth. Their power (symbolized by their impressive fortifications) will be thrown down, and in their exclusion from the LORD's banquet they will be utterly ashamed (cf. Lk. 13:28; Mt. 25:30).

^{26:1} In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:
We have a strong city;
God makes salvation
its walls and ramparts.
² Open the gates

⁶ NIV note: "The meaning of the Hebrew for this word is uncertain."

that the righteous nation may enter,
the nation that keeps faith.
3 You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.
4 Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD, the LORD himself, is the Rock eternal.
5 He humbles those who dwell on high,
he lays the lofty city low;
he levels it to the ground
and casts it down to the dust.
6 Feet trample it down—
the feet of the oppressed,
the footsteps of the poor.
7 The path of the righteous is level;
you, the Upright One, make the way of the righteous smooth.

The “lofty city” in this salvation song is the same city that was referred to above as “the city” (24:12; 25:2), “the ruined city” (24:10), “the fortified town,” and “the foreigners’ stronghold” (25:2). This is the great empire city that persecutes and oppresses the faithful and the poor. God’s and Christ’s coming in glory will throw it down and destroy it forever. In Revelation this city is known as “Babylon the Great” (Rev. 17:1–19:3).

8 Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws,⁷
we wait for you;
your name and renown
are the desire of our hearts.
9a My soul yearns for you in the night;
in the morning my spirit longs for you.

In response to the song, Isaiah prays as Jesus teaches his disciples to pray (Mt. 6:10; Lk. 11:2), expressing his yearning for the moment of the LORD’s glorious coming and the deliverance that it will bring.

9b When your judgments come upon the earth,
the people of the world learn righteousness.
10 But when grace is shown to the wicked,
they do not learn righteousness;

⁷ NIV note: “Or *judgments*.”

in the land of uprightness they do evil⁸
and do not regard the majesty of the LORD.

¹¹ LORD, your hand is lifted high,
but they do not see it.

Let them see your zeal for your people and be put to shame;
let the fire reserved for your enemies consume them.

¹² LORD, provide safety for us;
since everything we have accomplished you have actually done for us.⁹

Isaiah, after his prayer, seems to see a vision. He sees God's coming as King and Judge as the moment when God will teach the whole human world the truth about right and wrong. Then Isaiah sees the wicked (who had learned the truth when God came in glory) shown mercy.¹⁰ What mercy is this? In view of the immediate context, it appears to be a mercy that allows them to have access to "the land of uprightness" (v. 10), the territory of the righteous¹¹ citizens of the fully-manifested Kingdom of God (vv. 1-2). Rejecting the truth that they were taught, the wicked "do evil" or "act perversely," not realizing that God, in the current age of his full and glorious earthly Kingdom, will never again allow his faithful ones to be vulnerable to attack (vv. 1-3). The people pray for God's sovereign protection on the basis of complete faith—a faith founded in the recognition that God, their maker and sustainer and guide, has been the ultimate author of everything they have done for him (v. 12; cf. Phil. 2:13; 4:13). The wicked will realize their own vulnerability too late—at the moment that they are consumed by fire from God (v. 11). For this same theme of enemies attacking the city of the faithful (New Jerusalem, seat of God's glorious kingdom in the age to come) and being subjected to shame and fiery destruction, see Isa. 66:10-16, 22-24.

¹³ LORD our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us,
but your name alone do we honor.

¹⁴ They are now dead, they live no more;
their spirits¹² do not rise.

You punished¹³ them and brought them to ruin;
you wiped out all memory of them.

⁸ NIV overtranslates, "even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil." There is no *waw* to justify "even," and there is nothing to justify the words "go on doing evil" in preference to "do evil."

⁹ NIV has LORD, you establish peace [Heb. *shalōm*] for us;
all that we have accomplished you have done for us.

¹⁰ Or *grace*, in the sense of *unmerited favor* (Heb. *chanan*, an intimate characteristic of God, see Exod. 33:19).

¹¹ The ideas of "uprightness" (Heb. *'emūnah*) and "righteousness" (Heb. *tsedeq, ts^edeqah*) are closely associated with one another in the OT, especially in Psalms and Isaiah (e.g. 1 Sam. 26:23; Ps. 40:10; 96:13; 119:75, 138; 143:1; Isa. 11:5; 26:9-10; 33:5-6; 59:4).

¹² Heb. *r^epha'im*.

¹³ Heb. *paqad*.

¹⁵ You have enlarged the nation, LORD;
you have enlarged the nation.
You have gained glory for yourself;
you have extended all the borders of the land.

This section seems to meditate again on God's coming in glory, when he rescued the faithful from subjection under oppressive foreign powers. The oppressors have been wiped out; they are dead—banished from the earth to the underworld prison of the “pit” (cf. 24:21-23), from which they cannot rise.

¹⁶ LORD, they came to you in their distress;
when you disciplined them,
they could barely whisper a prayer.¹⁴
¹⁷ As a pregnant woman about to give birth
writhes and cries out in her pain,
so were we in your presence, LORD.
¹⁸ We were with child, we writhed in labor,
but we gave birth to wind.
We have not brought salvation to the earth,
and the people of the world have not come to life.

This section meditates on the contrasting experience of the oppressors and the oppressed at the moment of transition to God's Kingdom. The oppressors were laid under God's discipline and were utterly dumbfounded. They were confronted with the truth of God's ways (26:9b), and they had no excuse to offer, only perhaps a whispered prayer to be spared. The faithful, on the other hand, were equally distressed, but for a totally different reason. They had no energy to bring forth on the earth the justice and peace for which they longed with all their hearts. They had given their all, and were exhausted and disheartened.

¹⁹ But your dead will live, LORD;
their bodies will rise—
let those who dwell in the dust
wake up and shout for joy—
your¹⁵ dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead.¹⁶

Isaiah sees that resurrection is going to be God's answer to the despairing prayer of the faithful (vv. 17-18 above). When human power has come to an end (cf. Dan.

¹⁴ NIV note: “The meaning of the Hebrew for this clause is uncertain.” JPS Tanach (2000) has “Your chastisement reduced them to anguished whispered prayer.”

¹⁵ I.e. the LORD's dew.

¹⁶ Heb. *r^epha'im*. See v. 14 (cf. also Isa. 14:9; Job 26:5; Ps. 88:10; Prov. 2:18; 9:18; 21:16).

7:21; 12:7; Rev. 13:7), God's power will shine forth in glory (Isa. 24:23). This section connects particularly with 25:7-8, which speaks of God taking away the sorrow and the humiliation of the faithful and swallowing up death forever.

²⁰ Go, my people, enter your rooms
and shut the doors behind you;
hide yourselves for a little while
until his wrath has passed by.
²¹ See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling
to punish the people of the earth for their sins.
The earth will disclose the blood shed on it;
the earth will conceal its slain¹⁷ no longer.

God addresses the faithful, whom he calls, with affection, "my people" (cf. vv. 20, 11). In the new age of his fully-manifested Kingdom, they live with him in "his dwelling" (v. 21), which is the New Jerusalem, Zion, "this mountain," God's strong city gifted to the faithful (24:23; 25:6, 7, 10; 26:1-3). Consistent with the promise of total divine protection and safety celebrated in 26:1-3, God shepherds the faithful indoors for a brief moment so that he can deal with evil attackers outside Jerusalem's walls. He has a job to do that will not take long: "to visit the evil of the earth dweller upon him" (21b, literal).¹⁸ They wish to murder the faithful; God will turn their intention back on them. When he is done, there will be no burial for the attackers; their corpses will lie on the surface of the ground (26:21cd; cf. Isa. 66:22-24).

²⁷ In that day,
the LORD will punish with his sword—
his fierce, great and powerful sword—
Leviathan the gliding serpent,
Leviathan the coiling serpent;
he will slay¹⁹ the monster of the sea.

In the Old Testament, the dragon Leviathan is the symbol of huge and humanly uncontrollable danger.²⁰ In the day in which the LORD makes a final end of the human attackers of his people, he will also make a final end of cosmic evil, symbolized by Leviathan.

² In that day—
"Sing about a fruitful vineyard:
³ I, the LORD, watch over it;

¹⁷ Heb. *harag*, which, in Isaiah, usually connotes people slain on a mass scale, as in battle.

¹⁸ "Visit" is Heb. *paqad*; cf. 24:22.

¹⁹ As in 26:21d, the Heb. verb here is *harag*.

²⁰ Cf. Job 3:8; 41:1; Ps. 74:14; 104:26; Isa. 27:1.

I water it continually.
I guard it day and night
so that no one may harm it.

Early in Isaiah, the prophet sings an oracle about God's relationship with his people, who are symbolized by a vineyard—a vineyard that does not produce good fruit (5:1-8). In this section, in which the LORD himself speaks, he encourages Isaiah to sing again, this time about his people as a *fruitful* vineyard, a vineyard that is well cared for and protected (27:2-3). The vineyard here symbolizes the same community of the faithful that was pictured earlier as invitees to the LORD's coronation banquet (25:6) and the "strong city," the New Jerusalem (26:1-3).

⁴ I am not angry.
If only there were briars and thorns confronting me!
I would march against them in battle;
I would set them all on fire.
⁵ Or else let them come to me for refuge;
let them make peace with me,
yes, let them make peace with me."

Now God's voice is directed to those who might be thinking of introducing thorns and briars to his well-tended vineyard. He assures them that he has no animus towards them—but also assures them that if they do attack his beloved community, he will burn them up in a flash like so many weeds and thorns. The potential confrontation characterized here looks very much like that pictured in 26:10-11 and alluded to in 26:20-21. Nonetheless God goes a step further than simply assuring the would-be attackers of his vineyard that he is not angry—he invites them to come to him for refuge, the same refuge God provides for the poor.²¹ That is, he invites them to come under the umbrella of protection that he maintains for his beloved. He twice calls out to them, "Make peace with me!" This is a passionate plea for reconciliation. Notably, the appearance is that 26:20–27:5 prophesies the final end of human *and* cosmic enemies on the same occasion (see "on that day," 27:1).

²¹ Note the use of the same Hebrew word *ma'ōz*, protection, here and in 25:4.