

Isaiah 12–15

SCR 5303 Old Testament Prophets
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Introduction

Chapters 12–15 form a transition between two larger sections of Isaiah. Chapters 1–12 are prophecies against Israel, and 13–27 are prophecies against the nations. Chapter 12 is a conclusion to the first section, and chapters 13–15 begin the next.¹

Chapter 12 contains two brief psalms. In chapter 11, the tone changed from threat to promise, and chapter 12 concludes on a note of thanksgiving. Both psalms begin with “You will say on that day.” The first is verse 1–3; the latter, verse 4–6. They extol the Lord’s strength and salvation.

In the first psalm, the repetition of “salvation” (*yěšû‘â*) suggests the name Isaiah (*yěša‘yāhû*). This helps round out the section, which named Isaiah in 1:1. Perhaps the first psalm is addressed to Isaiah himself, while the latter is addressed to all the Hebrew people.²

Chapters 13–15 are prophecies against various nations. 13:1–14:23 is against Babylon. 14:24–27 is against Assyria. 14:28–32 is against Philistia. 15:1–16:14 is against Moab. The most interesting passage in these chapters is the “taunt” against the king of Babylon, 14:3–23. Many fathers take this passage to refer to the Devil, based on verses 12–14.

Cross-References

The short psalms in chapter 12 have many echoes in the New Testament. The “springs of salvation”³ are recalled when Jesus says He will give “a fountain of water springing up to eternal life.”⁴ Isaiah says, “Declare His name among the nations,”⁵ and Jesus will say, “Go, teach all nations.”⁶ And while Isaiah says, “For He has done great things,”⁷ Mary will

¹Joseph Blenkinsopp, editor, *The Anchor Bible*, volume 19 (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 271. See also Johanna Manley, editor, *Orthodox Adult Bible Study: The Book of Isaiah as Taught by the Holy Fathers*, Treasury of Blessings Series (Belmont, CA: Pericope, 1999) 58.

²*The Anchor Bible* 269–270.

³Isaiah 12:3.

⁴John 3:14.

⁵Isaiah 12:4.

⁶Matthew 28:19.

⁷Isaiah 12:5.

proclaim, “He who is mighty has done great things for me.”⁸

A prophecy in Ezekiel, against the prince of Tyre, is similar to the prophecy against the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14:

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Son of man, take up a lamentation for the prince of Tyre, and say to him, ‘Thus saith the Lord God: Thou art a seal of resemblance and crown of beauty. Thou wast in the delight of the paradise⁹ of God; thou hast bound upon thee every precious stone: the sardius, and topaz, and emerald, and carbuncle, and sapphire, and jasper, and silver, and gold, and ligure, and agate, and amethyst, and chrysolite, and beryl, and onyx; and thou hast filled thy treasures and thy stores in thee with gold. From the day that thou wast created thou wast with the cherub. I set thee on the holy mount of God; thou wast in the midst of the stones of fire. Thou wast faultless in thy days, from the day that thou wast created, until iniquity was found in thee.

“‘Of the abundance of thy merchandise thou hast filled thy storehouses with iniquity and hast sinned. Therefore thou hast been cast down wounded from the mount of God, and the cherub has brought thee out of the midst of the stones of fire. Thy heart has been lifted up because of thy beauty; thy knowledge has been corrupted with thy beauty. Because of the multitude of thy sins I have cast thee to the ground; I have caused thee to be put to open shame before kings. Because of the multitude of thy sins and the iniquities of thy merchandise, I have profaned thy sacred things, and I will bring fire out of the midst of thee. This shall devour thee, and I will make thee to be ashes upon thy land before all that see thee. And all that know thee among the nations shall groan over thee; thou art gone to destruction, and thou shalt not exist any more.’”¹⁰

Commentary

Some Fathers read 14:12–22 as a comparison between the king of Babylon and the Devil. Verse 12 reads:

“How you have fallen from heaven,
O Morning Star, son of Dawn!
You have been cut down to the earth,
You who have weakened the nations!

The Hebrew for the second line is *hêlêl ben šaḥar*.¹¹ *Hêlêl* is “day star” or “light-giver.” *Ben šaḥar* is “son of dawn.”¹² Jerome translated this passage as:

⁸Luke 1:49.

⁹“Eden” in Hebrew.

¹⁰Ezekiel 28:11–19.

¹¹*The Anchor Bible* 288.

¹²George Arthur Buttrick et al., editors, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, volume 5 (New York: Abingdon, 1956) 261.

quomodo cecidisti de caelo
lucifer qui mane oriebaris
corruisti in terram
qui vulnerabas gentes

Lucifer is literally “light-bearer,” from lux and fero. Jerome remarks on his translation in his *Commentary on Isaiah*. He writes:

For greater ease of understanding we translated this passage as follows: “How you have fallen from heaven, Lucifer, who arose in the morning.” But if we were to render a literal translation from the Hebrew, it would read, “How you have fallen from heaven, howling son of the dawn.” Lucifer is also signified with other words. And he who was formerly so glorious that he was compared to a bearer of lightning is now told that he must weep and mourn. . . . Nor was his pride satisfied with desire for the heavens, but it would break forth with such madness that he would claim for himself likeness to God.¹³

This passage, translated by Jerome, is why the Church calls the Devil Lucifer.

In the Septuagint, the first two lines read:

πῶς ἐξέπεσεν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ
ὁ ἑωσφόρος ὁ πρωὶ ἀνατέλλων;

The word ἑωσφόρος is literally “dawn-bearer.” I don’t know if ἑωσφόρος is used as a name for Satan the same way Lucifer is.

The King James Version retained the word “Lucifer,” but some modern Protestants criticize the application of Isaiah 14 to the Devil. Therefore modern translations say something like “morning star.” But this is confusing, because Jesus is the Morning Star in 2 Peter 1:19 (φωσφόρος), then again in Revelation 2:28 (τὸν ἀστέρα τὸν πρωῖνόν) and 22:16 (ὁ ἀστὴρ ὁ λαμπρὸς ὁ πρωῖνός).

Moreover, the modern translations lose the original sense. They liken the Babylonian king only to the “star” Venus, but in fact the Hebrew was a reference to a Canaanite deity. In the Ugaritic texts, Shahr was the god of dawn, and Helal was the Day Star. He is even called “Helal, son of Shahr.” In the Canaanite myth, he tried to surpass the other stars but was cast down by the sun.¹⁴ So when Isaiah alludes to this myth, he accuses the king of similar hubris and predicts a similar fall.

This myth is easier to understand if we recall how Venus moves in the night sky. It is the only planet with both a high magnitude and an orbit inside Earth’s. Its brightness means that it shines in the morning and evening even when the other stars are hidden. And since it is closer to the sun, it will not wander all over the sky as the other planets, but always be a little ahead or a little behind the sun’s path. Figure 1 shows the morning ecliptic with the sun just peeking over the horizon. Venus will be somewhere between the two points V_{max} and V_{min} . When Venus is ahead of the sun, it is hidden all night and rises in the early morning.

¹³Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah* 5.14.12–14, cited and translated in Steven A. McKinion, editor, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, volume 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 121.

¹⁴*The Interpreter’s Bible* 261–262.

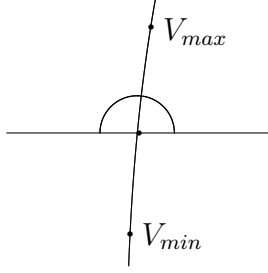


Figure 1: Venus on the ecliptic.

Venus moves back and forth on the ecliptic as the planets revolve around the sun. We can calculate its position at a given time t .¹⁵ First, we must show how Venus revolves around the sun relative to Earth. Let o_e be Earth's time to revolve and o_v be Venus's time to revolve, both in Earth days. We define these constants as:¹⁶

$$o_e = 365 \text{ days} \quad (1)$$

$$o_v = 255 \text{ days} \quad (2)$$

That means that Venus revolves faster than Earth. Their relative positions appear in Figure 2. Let E_0 be Earth and V_0 be Venus at time $t = 0$. E_t and V_t are Earth and Venus at some other time t . At those positions, Earth has traveled the angle α , and Venus has traveled β . So the relative lead of Venus is γ .

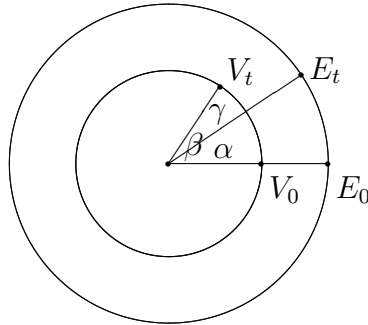


Figure 2: Venus and Earth as they orbit.

If we find γ in terms of t , we can hold Earth steady and imagine that only Venus is moving. This will simplify our equations. We know that:

$$\gamma = \beta - \alpha \quad (3)$$

¹⁵The following equations make some simplifications, such as giving the planets a circular rather than elliptic orbit, but they are close enough for our purposes. I owe thanks to Jason Franchak for helping me get them right.

¹⁶...new york library desk reference..

So first we must find α and β . The ratio of α to 2π radians is simply the ratio of t to 365 days (or o_e). Therefore:

$$\frac{\alpha}{2\pi} = \frac{t}{o_e} \quad (4)$$

Solving for α we get:

$$\alpha = \frac{2\pi t}{o_e} \quad (5)$$

Similar reasoning gives us β :

$$\beta = \frac{2\pi t}{o_v} \quad (6)$$

Now if we substitute into Equation 3, we get:

$$\gamma = 2\pi t \left(\frac{1}{o_v} - \frac{1}{o_e} \right) \quad (7)$$

This gives us γ in terms of t , or the movement of Venus relative to Earth.

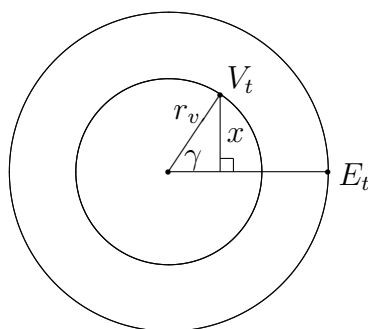


Figure 3: Position of Venus seen from Earth.

To an observer looking from Earth, the position of Venus relative to the Sun is x in Figure 3. r_v is the radius of Venus's orbit. We define this as:¹⁷

$$r_v = 67 \text{ million miles} \quad (8)$$

We can solve for x using γ . We know that:

$$\sin \gamma = \frac{x}{r_v} \quad (9)$$

Therefore:

$$x = r_v \sin \gamma \quad (10)$$

So now we know x in terms of γ , and we know γ in terms of t . Combining Equations 7 and 10 gives us:

$$x = r_v \sin \left[2\pi t \left(\frac{1}{o_v} - \frac{1}{o_e} \right) \right] \quad (11)$$

¹⁷....desk reference....

We can use this equation to find how far Venus is ahead or behind the sun at any given time. Another interesting calculation is to use Equation 7 and set γ to 2π . At 2π , Venus “laps” Earth. Solving for t tells us the period of Venus’s oscillation. It comes out to about 586 days.

This astronomy is the basis of the Chaldean myth. When Venus is ahead of the sun, it rises early in the morning and outshines every other star in the sky. But before it gets very far, the sun also appears, and Venus is lost. Venus is brighter than all the other stars, but when it dares to challenge the sun it is punished.

The Fathers preserved Isaiah’s original sense by interpreting the myth in terms of a fallen angel. Origen, for instance, cites both Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. He shows that Ezekiel cannot refer to an earthly king:

Seeing, then, that such are the words of the prophet, who is there that on hearing, “Thou wert a seal of similitude, and a crown of comeliness among the delights of paradise,” or that “From the day when thou wert created with the cherubim, I placed thee in the holy mount of God,” can so enfeeble the meaning as to suppose that this language is used of some man or saint, not to say the prince of Tyre?¹⁸

Continuing from Isaiah, Origen shows that the Devil was once an angel, created good. “For if, as some think, he was a nature of darkness, how is Lucifer said to have existed before? Or how could he arise in the morning, who had in himself nothing of the light?”¹⁹ But the Devil fell by his own wickedness.

Besides Jerome and Origen, other Fathers who refer Isaiah 14:12 to Satan include²⁰ Tertullian,²¹ John Cassian,²² Ambrose,²³ Augustine,²⁴ Cassiodorus,²⁵ Basil the Great,²⁶ and Simeon the New Theologian.²⁷ Chrysostom also comments on the passage, but he makes no reference to the Devil.²⁸ It is interesting that so many of these authors are Latin; perhaps they were influenced by Jerome’s translation.

Many of these Fathers give the reason the Devil fell, but Jerome states it most succinctly:

Lucifer fell, Lucifer who used to rise at dawn; and he who was bred up in a paradise of delight had the well-earned sentence passed upon him, “Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence

¹⁸Origen, *De Principiis* 1.5.4. All translations from this work are from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999) 2.4. See also Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.43.

¹⁹Origen, *De Principiis* 1.5.5.

²⁰For most of these citations, I have relied on *ACCS*.

²¹Tertullian, *Contra Marcionem* 5.11, 17.

²²John Cassian, *Institutes* 12.4.

²³Ambrose, *Exposition of the Psalms* 118.16.15–16.

²⁴Augustine, *Christian Instruction* 3.37; Augustine, *Explanations of the Psalms* 68.

²⁵Cassiodorus, *Exposition of the Psalms* 85.10.

²⁶Constantine N. Tsirpanlis, *Introduction to Eastern Patristic Thought and Orthodox Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 40–41 Tsirpanlis gives no citation, but perhaps his remarks are founded on Basil’s *Commentary on Isaiah*, which I’ve been unable to acquire.

²⁷Simeon the New Theologian, *Discourses* 4.2.

²⁸John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statues* 11.4.

will I bring thee down, saith the Lord.” For he had said in his heart, “I will exalt my throne above the stars of God,” and “I will be like the Most High.”²⁹

Liturgical Use

We read from these chapters in the sixth hour during the third and fourth weeks of Lent. During the third week, we read 11:10–12:2 on Thursday and 13:2–13 on Friday. During the fourth week, we read 14:24–30 on Monday. Then the readings jump to chapter 25.

Isaiah 13:2 commands, “Open your gates, ye princes.” This recalls the great Paschal exclamation from Psalm 23:7-8: “Lift up your gates O ye princes, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall enter in!” “Who is this King of Glory?” “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in war.”

Conclusion

The Fathers have ample warrant for reading Isaiah 14 as a reference to the Devil. By so doing, they preserve the original sense of the text. C.S. Lewis wrote that the greatest trick the Devil ever played was to convince the world he doesn’t exist. Some people today consider the Devil a Christian invention, foreign to Judaism. This passage is part of the basis in the Old Testament for believing that we indeed have an Adversary.

²⁹Jerome, *Letters* 22.4, trans. *NPNF* 2.6.23.