

ISAIAH'S LITTLE APOCALYPSE

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

"So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high, and the kings of the earth, on earth. And they will be gathered together like prisoners in the dungeon, and will be confined in prison; and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and His glory will be before His elders."

—Isaiah 24:21–23

I have always been fascinated by Isaiah's "Little Apocalypse," which is chapters 24 through 27. When I was nineteen, I remember riding in a car with a friend and trying to convince him that Isaiah 24:1–6 referred to the pollution of the 1960s and 1970s. It was not! I was taking that passage out of its context. It speaks of the mounting sin that will be judged during the seven-year tribulation, a time future to our day.

NATHANIEL WEST

Many years ago, I also remember reading a book written in the late 1800s by Presbyterian scholar Nathanael West (1826–1906) entitled *The Thousand Years in Both Testaments*.¹ "West was widely admired for his piety, knowledge of the Scriptures and theological understanding."² Also, "he was a linguist, adept in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Sanscrit, as well as in French and German."³ West's book provided much help to me in understanding the "Little Apocalypse", especially the similarities between the Old Testament passages and Revelation 19 and 20 in the New Testament. About thirty years earlier West published a huge tool that combined inductive Bible study with theological analysis,⁴ which no doubt provided him a great foundation of biblical knowledge and theological understanding throughout the rest of his productive life.

West says that "the New Testament 'Apocalypse of Jesus Christ' is but the Old Testament *Yom Yehovah*, [Day of the Lord, TDI] in which the Lord reveals Himself for the redemption of His people, and that the *Esehata* [last days, TDI] in that Apocalypse are only what we find elsewhere in Old Testament predictions."⁵ Isaiah's Little Apocalypse focuses upon the judgment of the nations, as West notes in the following: "The judgement predicted in the preceding context is that of the proud nations, and Israel's land, to which is added the dissolution of the present cosmic order; xxiv:1–30."⁶

JUDGMENT UPON THE EARTH

The "Little Apocalypse" follows a major section on the judgment of specific Gentile nations in chapters 13–23. The emphasis of God's end-time judgment shifts from individual Gentile nations to the entire earth. "Similar images of destruction, death, and ruin were used to describe the demise of individual cities and nations, but now one finds a climactic curse on all humanity and the whole earth"⁷ "The cycle of prophecies which commences here has no other parallel in the Old Testament than perhaps Zech. ix—xiv," declares Franz Delitzsch. "Both sections are thoroughly eschatological . . . and uses them as emblems of far-off events of the last days."⁸ Delitzsch insists that chapters 24 through 27 are clearly prophecies about the end times and not a reference to near events in Isaiah's day. He continues as follows: "The revelation of all the last things,

which the Apocalypse of the New Testament embraces in one grand picture, commenced with Obadiah and Joel; and there is nothing strange in the fact that Isaiah also, in ch. xxiv.—xxviii, should turn away from the immediate external facts of the history of his own time, and pass on to these depths beyond.”⁹

The purpose of the Lord’s end-time judgment that will take place during the seven-year tribulation is said to be retributive for the sin the inhabitants of the earth (that is “earth dwellers”) have committed. “The earth is also polluted by its **inhabitants**, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty. Therefore, **the inhabitants of the earth** are burned, and few men are left” (Isa. 24:5–6; emphasis added).

WHAT ABOUT THE EARTH DWELLERS?

The concept “earth dwellers” originates in the Old Testament, where participial forms of *yâshab*: are used in construct with *‘eres*, almost fifty times. Often “earth dwellers” in the Old Testament is translated “land dwellers” or “inhabitants of the land,” since the context refers to a localized area of land or country such as Israel. However, in a global context the phrase is best rendered “inhabitants of the earth” (Ps. 33:14; Isa. 24:6, 17; 26:21; Jer. 25:30; Zeph. 1:18). A similar phrase, *têbêl yâshab*, “world dwellers,” occurs five times. All five instances of “inhabitants of the world” appear within a global context (Ps. 33:8; Isa. 18:3; 26:9, 18; Lam. 4:12).

The Old Testament instances where a global rather than a local context is intended are important, since preterists usually want to turn “earth dwellers” in Revelation into “land dwellers” and say that it refers to the land of Israel and a localized judgment.¹⁰ Peter Steveson says, “

It is true that *‘eres* often refers to Israel and the surrounding nations. It is also true, however, that *‘eres* often refers to the whole earth, e.g., 6:3; 8:9; 12:5; 14:9, 16; 49:13. In addition, the word *têbêl*, [24:]4, and the context of v. 21, argue that the passage [Isa. 24] refers to the whole earth. Applying *‘eres* this way gives us a natural conclusion to c[haps.] 1—23 in which Isaiah has broadened his message. He no longer focuses on his nation or the biblical world. He now includes a wider group of people.”¹¹

Isaiah 24:21 says, “So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high, and the kings of the earth, on earth.” The juxtaposition of “heaven” and “earth” in this verse would not make sense if *‘eres*, means merely “land” or the land of Israel. Isaiah 24—27 records prophecies of global judgment, and they record events that have not yet taken place.

Every global use of “earth dwellers” in the Old Testament appears in a judgment context, and nearly all occurrences speak of the future in the Tribulation. Of significance is the fact that both “earth dwellers” and “world dwellers” are used many times in Isaiah 24—27. “Chapters 24—27 have often been called the Apocalypse of Isaiah, because their focus is upon the worldwide triumph of God.”¹² God’s worldwide judgment will come on all humankind because of specific sins of “the inhabitants of the earth” (24:5–6; cf. vv. 6, 17). “For when the earth experiences Your judgments the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness” (26:9). Isaiah 26:20 says that Israel will be hidden away and protected “until indignation runs its course.” Since the remnant of Israel will be protected during the Tribulation, then what will be God’s purpose for the

judgment of this period? Verse 21 answers that question. “For behold, the LORD is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; and the earth will reveal her bloodshed, and will no longer cover her slain.” Thus one purpose of the Tribulation will be to punish the earth dwellers and put an end to their evil. This is similar to the statement in Revelation 3:10 that the Lord will “test those who dwell upon the earth.”

CONCLUSION

It is clear that in many instances in the Book of Revelation that John, under the infallible inspiration of the Holy Spirit is expanding upon items that have already been introduced in the Old Testament. There are many similarities in Isaiah 24:21–23 that are found in John’s expanded and clearer visions in Revelation 19 and 20. West clearly demonstrates that Isaiah’s “after many days” in 24:22 is in direct correspondence to the “thousand years” used six times in Revelation 20:1–7.¹³

Further, the language of “those who dwell upon the earth,” as used eleven times in Revelation is clearly taken from Isaiah 24—27 (Isa. 24:6, 17; 26:21). Isaiah’s context of global judgment against the entire earth and world (Isa. 26:9, 18) provides further insight into what is going on in Revelation. Such connections serve to expand our understanding of each passage as we can in this instance legitimately compare Scripture with Scripture. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Nathaniel West, *The Thousand Years in Both Testaments*, reprint (Fincastle, VA: Scripture Truth Book Company, nd, [1889]). Kregel has reprinted it in our day and it is entitled *The Thousand Year Reign of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1993).

² Gary S. Smith, “West, Nathaniel” in Daniel G. Reid, Coordinating Editor, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 1245.

³ Le Roy Edwin Froom, editor, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, 4 vols, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1954), vol. 4, p. 1184, fn. 15.

⁴ Nathaniel West, *The Complete Analysis of the Holy Bible: Or, How to Comprehend Holy Writ from its own Interpretation, Containing the Whole of the Old and New Testaments*, revised (New York: A. J. Johnson, 1868).

⁵ West, *The Thousand Years*, p. 35. (Emphasis original)

⁶ West, *The Thousand Years*, p. 36.

⁷ Gary Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, The New American Commentary, Vol. 15a, (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), p. 413.

⁸ Franz Delitzsch, *Isaiah, Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 7, trans. James Martin (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 421.

⁹ Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, p. 424.

¹⁰ Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1998), pp. 128–29; and Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), pp. 166–67, 229, n 18.

¹¹ Peter A. Steveson, *A Commentary on Isaiah* (Greenville, SC: BJU, 2003), p. 195, fn. 1.

¹² John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1 – 39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 440.

¹³ West, *The Thousand Years*, pp. 37–40.