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“The problem with this chapter [Isa 24] is how to interpret it. From the two dozen or so commentaries I’ve consulted on this, I’ve noticed a pattern. Older commentaries declare that this chapter is not very apocalyptic at all; it simply closes out the preceding chapters of prophecies against particular nations, this one primarily focusing on the fall of Judah. More recent commentaries, heavily influenced by dispensationalism (more on that fun word later), say that this is definitely about the apocalypse, complete with a tribulation, rapture...the whole shebang.” ~ Dr. Stephanie Wilsey [1]

“Because Isa 24–27 has been viewed as historically unmoored from the rest of the book – or even unmoored from history itself – anything goes.” ~ Christopher B. Hays [2]

“These are the days when anything goes. Every day is a winding road.” ~ Sheryl Crow [3]

As Christopher B. Hays articulately states in his quote above, *“anything goes”* when it comes to Isaiah 24-27 these days. This is surely a direct result of the modern tendency to rip the passage away from the immediate context of Isaiah’s own day, and instead force it onto the modern context of our day. Tracking on the approach of the *“older commentaries”* that Stephanie Wilsey mentions above, [4]

William Barker notes that the popular epithet for these chapters, i.e., *“Isaiah’s Little Apocalypse,”* is “misleading” and *“unhelpful”* since *“Isa. 24-27”* is not apocalyptic in form or function.”[5] When Isaiah 24–27 is torn from its historical and literary framework, modern interpreters impose end-times scenarios on it that bear little resemblance to Isaiah’s original setting or message. To parody Sheryl Crow’s lyrics, Isaiah 24 becomes *“a winding road”* where *“anything goes.”*

A good example of this *anything goes* approach that winds its way away from Isaiah’s form, function, and framework is ***The End Time Bible Commentary on Isaiah 24***, by Paul Macisker.[6] According to Macisker, *“This chapter describes the ruinous state of the earth by the end of the Great Tribulation”* and *“the defeat of the world’s rulers at the battle of Armageddon.”* For Macisker, it’s all about the people who *“miss the rapture”* and *“perish”* in history’s grand finale.

One is left to wonder what possible relevance missing a rapture prior to the end of the world would have had for Isaiah or his original audience. They wouldn’t be there, so why would they care? Why would Isaiah even bring something up that has nothing to do with his mission nor his message? His mission was to call Israel and Judah out for turning their back on God and turning to idols, and his message would consequently coincide with that mission. A message about doomsday, thousands of years away, would have absolutely no bearing on the people of his day.

But prophesying about the covenant curses that would bring chaos to their world for forsaking the Lord? That would have hit home, and Isaiah would have gotten right to the heart of the matter.

Isaiah’s readers didn’t need a sneak peek at Armageddon, or the end of the world – they needed a wake-up call about where they were heading, and why their own world was about to unravel. And Isaiah gave them just that in this chapter, just as God had called him to do (*Isa. 6:8-13*).

The Curses of the Covenant

Isaiah states that the *“highest people of the earth”* (*Isa. 24:4*) have *“broken the everlasting covenant”* and *“therefore a curse devours the earth”* (*Isa. 24:5*). The *“highest people of the earth”* would be God’s own people whom He had chosen above all the other peoples of the earth (*Amos 3:1*). [7] He entered into a unique covenant relationship with them (*Exod. 34:10*, *27*), and violating the terms of that covenant would not come without consequences.

In fact, those exact consequences are spelled out by Isaiah in a very specific way that strikingly parallels the general covenant curses outlined by Moses:[8]

- The people will be scattered ([Isa. 24:1](#)^L; [Deut. 28:64](#)^L)
- The lenders will become the borrowers ([Isa. 24:2](#)^L; [Deut. 28:44](#)^L)
- The land will be affected ([Isa. 24:4](#)^L, [7](#)^L; [Deut. 28:22-24](#)^L)
- The curse will come upon them ([Isa. 24:6](#)^L; [Deut. 29:20](#)^L)
- The small remnant will remain ([Isa. 24:6](#)^L cf. vs. [13](#)^L; [Deut. 28:62](#)^L)
- The fire of judgment will consume them ([Isa. 24:6](#)^L; [Deut. 32:22](#)^L)
- The wine will be destroyed ([Isa. 24:7](#)^L, [9](#)^L, [11](#)^L; [Deut. 28:39](#)^L)
- The city will be desolate ([Isa. 24:10](#)^L, [12](#)^L; [Deut. 28:52](#)^L)
- The houses will be empty ([Isa. 24:10](#)^L; [Deut. 28:30](#)^L)
- The treacherous will triumph over the innocent ([Isa. 24:16](#)^L; [Deut. 28:30](#)^L)

Isaiah isn't writing about the *"ruinous state of the earth by the end of the Great Tribulation"* or *"the defeat of the world's rulers at the battle of Armageddon,"* he's writing about the demise and downfall of the people of his own day because they had gone astray. They had violated the terms of the covenant. They had brought upon themselves the very judgments that Moses had warned about.

Covenant breach and calamity were about to become a reality for God's Old Testament people.

This is exactly what happened in the conquests at the hands of Assyria and Babylon, which both resulted in their exile. The people were scattered, the land was devastated, only a small remnant remained, the cities were desolated, and the houses were emptied.

But Wait, There's More!

We've all seen those retro TV commercials where you think the advertisement is over, and then the announcer chimes in and says, *"But wait, there's more!"*^[9] This isn't unlike some modern-day approaches to Isaiah 24. Tracking on the older commentaries,^[10] they'll often agree that Isaiah's context was *originally* about God's judgment of Judah in Old Testament times. But just like the narrator on that TV ad, there's always more. And that's where the straight path of sound interpretation ends, the road winds away into foreign territory, and the speculation begins.

For example, to his credit, Pastor Travis D. Smith concedes that the *"immediate sense"* of Isaiah 24 *"portrayed the path of destruction Babylon would inflict upon Judah,"* and the *"imminent application of Isaiah 24 was a revelation of Babylon's overthrow of Jerusalem and the seventy-year exile of Judah."*^[11] So far, so good... But wait, there's more!

He then turns around and suggests that *"Isaiah 24 may also imply God's universal judgment during the Tribulation that will conclude with Christ's reign over the earth at His*

Second Coming.” Smith’s use of the word “may” is a careful hedge, and his reluctance underscores his uncertainty. Perhaps, in the back of his mind, even he is aware that Isaiah’s context doesn’t exactly support such a reading?

The bottom line: when we veer off the path Isaiah lays out, his words become that *winding road* where *anything goes*. And authors like Macisker and Smith want that road to lead straight into the end-times narrative they’ve mapped out for our future. But the path on which Isaiah is tracking in his 24th chapter is all about *his* people and *his* time, and the punishments they’d face. It’s about those facing exile, the reasons for that exile, and the results of that exile.^[12] In short, it’s about the curses of the covenant bringing chaos to the lives of those who’ve violated that covenant – *in real time, in their own time*.

The City of Chaos

With that said, [Isaiah 24:10](#)[Ⓛ] identifies a very real consequence in their own time – the collapse of their capital city. The prophet speaks of “*the city of chaos*” being “*broken down*” and “*every house*” being “*shut up so that none may enter*” ([Isa. 24:10](#)[Ⓛ]). This takes place when “*the inhabitants of the earth* (i.e., land <e’rets>)^[13] *are burned, and few men are left*” ([Isa. 24:6](#)[Ⓛ]). This is a fitting description of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BC ([Jer. 52:12-13](#)[Ⓛ]). As a result, these “*inhabitants*” were “*scattered*”, so that their land (e’rets) was made desolate ([Isa. 24:1](#)[Ⓛ]).

According to the *winding road* interpretation of Isaiah 24, however, this is about “*today’s sophisticated weaponry*” and “*could be an allusion to the potential of nuclear warfare.*”^[14] Once again, veering off Isaiah’s course means *anything goes* regarding his discourse. Supposedly, the *city of chaos* does “*not refer to Jerusalem*” after all, but to the “*desolation of cities in general*” when the entire earth is “*wasted and empty as a result of this universal destruction.*”^[15]

But by staying on the straight and narrow road, and obeying the traffic regulations of Biblical interpretation, one charts a very different course and arrives at a very different destination. That road keeps us grounded in the world Isaiah knew. That road points us in the direction of the message he meant to convey. And that road leads to the crumbling streets of ancient Jerusalem – *the true city of chaos*.

The phrase “*city of chaos (to’hu)*” ([Isa. 24:10](#)[Ⓛ]) is literally “*the city of formlessness.*”^[16] This is the same word that is used in the creation account, where the earth was “*formless (to’hu) and void*” ([Gen. 1:2](#)[Ⓛ]) before God brought order, meaning, function, and purpose to His creation ([Gen. 1:3ff](#)[Ⓛ]). To understand the connection to Old Testament Jerusalem, and what Isaiah is telegraphing by making this connection, we can gain helpful insights from the prophet Jeremiah:

“I looked on the earth (e’rets), and behold, it was a formless (to’hu) and void; And to the heavens, and they had no light” (Jer. 4:23^L).

In this verse, Jeremiah is echoing the language of [Genesis 1:2^L](#), but he is speaking to and about the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem ([Jer. 4:3^L](#), [4^L](#), [5^L](#), [10^L](#), [11^L](#), [14^L](#), [16^L](#); cf. [5:1ff^L](#)). He highlights Jerusalem’s current sinful state and the resulting destruction that will come as a result – *bringing chaos to the nation and the city*.

Jerusalem’s “*deeds*” had become “evil” ([Jer. 4:4^L](#)), for which God would repay them with “*evil from the north*” bringing “*great destruction*” ([Jer. 4:6^L](#)). A “*destroyer of the nations*” would make their “*land*” into a “*waste place*” and their cities would be “*ruins without inhabitants*” ([Jer. 4:7^L](#)). The inhabitants of the city are filled with “*wicked thoughts*” ([Jer. 4:14^L](#)), for which “*besiegers will come from a far country*” ([Jer. 4:16^L](#)). [17] They have “*rebelled*” by allowing “*evil*” to touch their “*heart*,” and their “*deeds have brought these things*” upon themselves ([Jer. 4:18^L](#)).

For this, “*disaster upon disaster is proclaimed*” and “*the whole land (e’rets) is devastated*” ([Jer. 4:20^L](#)). The inhabitants of Jerusalem are “*foolish people*” and “*stupid children*,” with “*no understanding*” ([Jer. 4:22a^L](#)). They are “*shrewd to do evil*” and don’t even “*know*” how “*to do good*” ([Jer. 4:22^L](#)).

This is the contextual backdrop leading up to Jeremiah’s citation of [Genesis 1:2^L](#) in [Jeremiah 4:23^L](#). Regarding the city’s sinful state and the upcoming judgment at the hands of the Babylonians, the Lord proclaims through His prophet, “*I looked on the earth (e’rets), and behold, it was formless (to’hu) and void*” ([Jer. 4:23^L](#)). So, why would Jeremiah quote Genesis 1 and apply it to the 6th century BC? What does the creation account have to do with Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day? What’s the connection between the city and the pre-creation chaos?

De-Creation Language and the Return to Chaos

Putting the pieces together, it’s not difficult to figure out what’s going on. In the language of the Biblical prophets (like Jeremiah and Isaiah), the original creation narrative – order ([Gen. 1:3ff^L](#)) out of chaos (1:2) – becomes a template to frame their own narrative regarding sin and judgment. A return to sin = a return to chaos, and de-creation is used to convey this. Hence, Jerusalem’s sinful state will bring judgment through the Babylonians and chaos through exile. The Land of Judah would be laid waste, and Jerusalem would become a city of ruins ([Jer. 4:7^L](#)) – *a city of chaos* ([Isa. 24:10^L](#)).

Conversely, a return to the Lord = a return to order, and re-creation language is used. Thus, Isaiah will later describe the return from exile and the restored city of Jerusalem in terms of a new creation – “*a new heavens and earth*” ([Isa. 65:17^L](#); [66:22^L](#)). [18] But that day would

be far down the road, only occurring once God's people had returned to the Lord and returned to their land. Neither prophet would live to see it.

But both prophets saw the consequences of sin in the same light and described it in the same way – *employing the theme of a return to chaos*. What Isaiah had foreseen in the 8th century BC would become a reality for Jerusalem in the 6th century BC, and Jeremiah would witness it with his own eyes and go on to lament it (see: Psalm 102, Jeremiah 52, and the book of Lamentations).^[19]

In short, Isaiah 24 isn't about the "*ruinous state of the earth by the end of the Great Tribulation*," it's about the ruinous state of the Land of Israel and Judah. It's about the waywardness of the great city Jerusalem, which would lead to its desolation. It's about the consequences that sin brings and the curses of the covenant. To avoid the *winding road* where *anything goes*, we need to follow the footsteps of the ancient prophets "*through the streets of Jerusalem*" ([Jer. 5:1](#)), the "*city of chaos*" ([Isa. 24:10](#)).

In our next installment, we'll continue to track their path and avoid the modern twists and turns – which only serves to twist the prophecy and turn it into a bad science fiction movie. It's not a "*Little Apocalypse*" about our times, but a big reality check about the fate of faithless Israel in Old Testament times.

Recap

Isaiah 24 isn't about the end of the world, the Great Tribulation, or Armageddon, or people being left behind after the Rapture. It's a historically grounded warning to the people of Isaiah's own day, mirroring the covenant curses Moses warned about in Deuteronomy. Those curses would bring the impending chaos of the exile. The modern penchant to rip Isaiah 24 from that context ignores the framework and literary structure of the passage, the intent of the prophecies leading up to this chapter, and even Isaiah's prophetic style. We need to stay on the path laid out by Isaiah and avoid the *winding roads* that lead to interpretive "*chaos*" – where *anything goes*.

Takeaways

It is important for us to stay on the right road. Sound interpretation does not ignore original audience relevance, historical context, and literary structure. Focusing on a solid interpretive path helps us steer clear of speculative detours. Isaiah wasn't writing to 21st-century Americans about "*today's sophisticated weaponry*" and "the potential of nuclear warfare." He was writing to Israelites eight centuries before Christ about the consequences of sin, the results of rebellion, and the chaos of life unraveling under God's judgment.

With that said, however, this doesn't mean Isaiah's words are inconsequential for us today. Sin still breeds chaos, and we need to stay on the right road and keep following the Lord. Grace doesn't erase accountability. We're called to live righteous and holy lives set apart from the chaos of the world around us. Sometimes our own lives take twists and turns of their own because we're not where we need to be with the Lord. If that's the case, remember: returning to a right relationship with God brings restoration – where chaos gives way to a new creation. This is just as true today as it was in Isaiah's day.

[1] Dr. Stephanie Wilsey, *Christian Musings for Today – It's Just a "Little" Apocalypse* – <https://bit.ly/452iHL4>.

[2] Christopher B. Hays, *The Origins of Isaiah 24–27: Josiah's Festival Scroll for the Fall of Assyria* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 96.

[3] Sheryl Crow, *Every Day is a Winding Road* – Lyrics <https://bit.ly/4mcY5Wz>

[4] Wisley points out that the "apocalyptic approach" is popular in "more recent commentaries, heavily influenced by dispensationalism." Ironically, these chapters were given the moniker "the Isaian Apocalypse" by Bernhard Duhm (See: Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Essays on the Book of Isaiah* [Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2019], 37). Duhm is the same liberal theologian who give us the idea of multiple authorship for the book of Isaiah (i.e., First, Second, and Third Isaiah). Furthermore, Duhm concluded that "no single prophetic writing exists in its original form" (*The Twelve Prophets*, 1912, pg. 31) – that is, every one of the Old Testament prophecies had been heavily modified and altered by later scribes and scholars, thus calling into question their veracity. Regarding some of Duhm's comments, whom he elsewhere agrees with, James D. Smart noted that they were a "perfect illustration of how a false assumption can lead the interpretation astray" (*History and Theology of Second Isaiah*, 1965, pg. 142). In short, Duhm singlehandedly did much to distort and destroy the integrity of the book of Isaiah, and his influence is still felt to this day – even in otherwise Evangelical circles.

[5] William D. Barker, *Isaiah's Kingship Polemic: An Exegetical Study in Isaiah 24–27* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 1.

[6] End Time Bible – Isaiah 24 <https://bit.ly/3IrvRsi>

[7] For more on this, see: Daniel E. Harden, *The Resurrection of the Dead: A Preterist Perspective* (United States: RefPret Books), 125-127, available here: <https://amzn.to/414J7cK>

[8] Adapted from Donald C. Polaski, *Authorizing an End: The Isaiah Apocalypse and Intertextuality* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 103.

[9] Made popular by infomercial salesman Ron Popeil.

[10] For how today's approach differs from the older commentaries, see: Dr. Stephanie Wilsey, *Christian Musings for Today – It's Just a "Little" Apocalypse* <https://bit.ly/452iHL4>

[11] The Judgment Day and An Invitation to the Great Feast (Isaiah 24; Isaiah 25) – "From The Heart of A Shepherd" by Pastor Travis D. Smith <https://bit.ly/44K5cyf>

[12] Technically speaking, the chosen people of Israel and Judah faced exile multiple times: the Assyrians captured the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8th BC, sending them into exile. And the Babylonians captured the southern kingdom of Judah in the 6th century BC, resulting in at least three different waves of forced exile.

[13] The Hebrew word *e'rets* is often used by those of Israel to refer to *their* land, Israel/Judah. One should not jump to the conclusion that it refers to the entire planet.

[14] Apostolic Faith Church – [Isaiah 24:1-23](https://bit.ly/3TG8huj) <https://bit.ly/3TG8huj>

[15] Apostolic Faith Church – [Isaiah 24:1-23](https://bit.ly/3TG8huj) <https://bit.ly/3TG8huj>

[16] Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "City, Earth, and Empire in Isaiah 24–27," in J. Todd Hibbard and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, ed., *Formation and Intertextuality in Isaiah 24-27* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 36.

[17] In [Jer. 4:16](#), once again the word *e'rets* is used – "from a distant land (*e'rets*). If one interprets *e'rets* in verse 23 as the planet, is Jeremiah saying in verse 16 that devastation would be caused by somebody from a distant planet? On the contrary – Jeremiah is contrasting their Land – Judah – with a "distant land" – in this case, Babylon.

[18] See the series "Isaiah's New Heavens and Earth," by Robert E. Cruickshank and Daniel E. Harden, starting [HERE](#).

[19] See: Robert E. Cruickshank, Jr., [A Walk Through Psalm 102](#)