

Jeremiah 51:41

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

How is Sheshach taken! and how is the praise of the whole earth surprised! how is Babylon become an astonishment among the nations!

Analysis

How is Sheshach taken! and how is the praise of the whole earth surprised! how is Babylon become an astonishment among the nations! This lament expresses shock at Babylon's fall, using both its common name and coded name (Sheshach). **Sheshach** is an Atbash cipher for Babylon (substituting letters: in Hebrew alphabet, shin-shin-kaph = bet-bet-lamed = Babel). Jeremiah used this cipher earlier (25:26, 51:1 'Leb Kamai' = Chaldea) to speak about Babylon covertly, though by chapter 51 he speaks openly. The cipher emphasizes the certainty of fulfillment—even encoded, the prophecy stands.

The praise of the whole earth (təhillat kol-ha'arets, תְּהִלַּת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ) acknowledges Babylon's former glory—the world celebrated her achievements, architecture, and power. The Hanging Gardens were counted among ancient wonders; Babylon's grandeur was internationally renowned. **Surprised** translates nitkepasah (נִתְקַפְּסָה), meaning seized, captured, taken by force—the shock of sudden conquest. **An astonishment among the nations** (lə-šammah ba-goyim, לְשִׁמָּה בַּגּוֹיִם) reverses Babylon's status from object of praise to object of horror and wonder at God's judgment.

The three 'how' questions (ek, אֵיךְ) structure a funeral lament, expressing incredulous grief (compare Lamentations 1:1, 2:1, 4:1). This anticipates Revelation 18:10, 16, 19, where 'Babylon the great' falls and voices cry 'Alas, alas, that great city!' The pattern recurs: worldly glory is temporary; divine judgment is certain.

Historical Context

Babylon's reputation as 'praise of the whole earth' was well-deserved in antiquity. Nebuchadnezzar's building projects—the Ishtar Gate, the Processional Way, the ziggurat (possibly inspiring the Tower of Babel narrative), and the Hanging Gardens—made Babylon legendary. Greek historians and travelers marveled at its size and splendor. The city walls were so massive that chariots could drive on top; the city could reportedly withstand years-long siege due to internal agriculture and water. Yet in 539 BC, this 'impregnable' city fell in a single night to Cyrus's forces. The shock reverberated through the ancient world—the seemingly invincible empire collapsed. Over centuries, Babylon's glory faded further until the city became exactly what Jeremiah prophesied: an astonishment, an object of wondering horror at how the mighty fell. Archaeological ruins confirm the city's magnificence and subsequent abandonment. The fulfillment vindicates God's word and warns every generation that earthly glory is fleeting (1 John 2:17).

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. What does Babylon's fall from 'praise of the whole earth' to 'astonishment among nations' teach about the temporary nature of worldly glory and power?
2. How does the use of the cipher 'Sheshach' demonstrate God's sovereignty in being able to judge even when prophecy must be spoken covertly?
3. In what ways does this verse anticipate Revelation 18's description of eschatological Babylon's fall, and what does this teach about recurring patterns of divine judgment?

Interlinear Text

כָּל	תְּהִלַּת	וַיִּתְפַּשׂ	שֶׁשַׁחַךְ	נִלְכָּד הָאֵל יְיָ
H3605	and how is the praise	H8610	How is Sheshach	H349
	H8416		H8347	H3920
בָּבֶל	לְשֹׁמֶה הָיָה	אֵל יְיָ	קִיְיָ הָאֵל כָּץ	
	become an astonishment	H349	of the whole earth	
	H8047	H1961	H776	
בְּגוֹיִם:				
			among the nations	
			H1471	

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 25:26 (Parallel theme): And all the kings of the north, far and near, one with another, and all the kingdoms of the world, which are upon the face of the earth: and the king of Sheshach shall drink after them.

Isaiah 13:19 (References Babylon): And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.

Jeremiah 49:25 (Resurrection): How is the city of praise not left, the city of my joy!