

THE FALL OF BABYLON—HISTORICAL OR FUTURE?

A Critical Monograph on Isaiah 13:19-20
Abridged by the Author

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"And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation; neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there" (Isa. 13:19-20).

While the writer was reading through the Book of Revelation, his attention was drawn to the extensive references to the city of Babylon, especially in chapter 18. The question was raised in his mind as to whether or not all of this description was symbolic, for this had been the earlier teaching given to the writer.

This question led to a more thorough study of the prophecies pertaining to Babylon in the Old Testament, and it was at this time that doubt arose that these prophecies had been literally fulfilled in the historical destruction of Babylon. The Old Testament passage which so forcefully confronted the writer was Isaiah 13. The apex of this prophecy is verses 19 and 20 which give the important statement concerning Babylon's fall.

A more specific statement of the problem as it confronted the writer in these verses would be: Is the fall of Babylon as prophesied in Isaiah 13:19-20 an historical event of the past, or does it await a future fulfillment?

In the writer's attempt to achieve a proper conclusion to the problem, he has not limited himself to the text and its context alone, but has attempted to gather the most important truths from all of the various passages dealing with the fall of Babylon. His interpretation will be set forth under three main divisions: The Argument from History, The Argument from the Present, and The Argument from Eschatology.

THE ARGUMENT FROM HISTORY

Explanation of the phrase "the fall of Babylon" and a historical sketch of its decline—Although Babylon has been conquered many times in history, the phrase "the fall of Babylon" is generally understood as referring to the capture of Babylon by the armies of Cyrus the Great in the year 539 B.C. John C. Whitcomb states concerning Babylon: "Its capitulation to Cyrus in 539 B.C. was so important as compared to these other disasters, that it alone is called 'The Fall of Babylon' in history."¹

The capture of Babylon by the armies of Cyrus took place during the sixteenth through the nineteenth days of the seventh month (October), 539 B.C. The Nabonidus Chronicle records the capture as follows: "The 16th day...the armies of Cyrus entered Babylon without battle...In the month of Arahshamnu, the 3rd day, Cyrus entered Babylon, green twigs were spread in front of him--the state of 'peace' (sulmu) was imposed upon the city."²

therefore hear this, thou that art given to pleasures, that sittest securely, that sayest in thy heart, I am, and there is none else besides me; I shall not sit as a widow, neither shall I know the loss of children: but these two things shall come to thee in a moment in one day, the loss of children, and widowhood; in their full measure shall they come upon thee" (Isa. 47:8-9).

For Babylon to suffer widowhood and loss of children was unthinkable to the natural mind; yet both the loss of commercial relationships with other nations and depopulation would come upon Babylon suddenly and completely. This suddenness is described as "in a moment, in one day." And the completeness of desolation is referred to by the term, "in their full measure," which has its root in the verb *tamam*, "to be complete." Consequently, Babylon is to experience a very sudden and complete cutting off of all commercial relations and population. Barnes states concerning these important verses: "This is designed, undoubtedly, to describe the suddenness with which Babylon would be destroyed. It would not decay slowly, and by natural causes, but it would be suddenly and unexpectedly destroyed. . . . Babylon would be in the situation of a wife and a mother who is instantaneously deprived of her husband. . . . in full measure; completely; entirely."⁸

That Babylon's commercial relationships were by no means cut off suddenly is made clear in a statement by Jacobs concerning these transactions which took place even during the Sassanide period (226-636 A.D.): "The contributory factors to the greater wealth of Babylonian Jewry were as follows. The Sassanians, unlike the Romans, were not a commercial race. . . . This provided for greater commercial opportunities for Jews in the Sassanide Empire. One example of this is the government monopoly in the trade in silks in the Roman Empire which prevented Jews in Palestine from trading in this commodity, and the extensive trade in silks in Babylon."⁹ Further on he states: "Of the industries connected with clothing, dyeing was one of the most important in Babylon. . . . The famous Babylonian dye was known all over the ancient world."¹⁰

According to Scripture, the fall of Babylon would come suddenly, in a twinkling of an eye, in one day. This seems directly to contradict the record concerning the fall of Babylon as set forth in the historical sketch. Therefore, a literal fulfillment of this phase of the prophecy has not yet come.

II. Scriptures which show the catastrophic nature of Babylon's fall, in contradiction to the historical record.

The first passage forms part of the context of the verse which is the text of this study. "Every one that is found shall be thrust through; and every one that is taken shall fall by the sword. Their infants also shall be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses shall be rifled, and their wives ravished. And their (the Medes') bows shall dash the young men in pieces; and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children" (Isa. 13:15, 16, 18).

The language of these verses is the most descriptive that could be employed to picture the total, pitiless and barbaric slaughter of the inhabitants of Babylon. Concerning this cruelty pictured in verse 18, Calvin raises a great problem but fails to answer it, as do all other commentators holding to a historical fulfillment of these atrocities. He says: "But we do not read that the Medes exercised so great cruelty, and Babylon stood and flourished for a very long period after that calamity; and although the seat of the empire was removed from it, still it retained its name and reputation."¹¹ The problem is, that nowhere in the history of Babylon's downfall did a des-

truction of human life occur in any degree comparable to that which is pictured by these verses. Barnes, realizing that Cyrus certainly did not fulfill these prophecies, seems to hint that this may have been fulfilled when Babylon revolted against Darius I (Hystaspes) during the years 521-486 B.C., when he says: "as soon as Darius had taken the city, he 'levelled the walls, and took away the gates, neither of which things had Cyrus done before. Three thousand of the most distinguished of the nobility he ordered to be crucified; the rest he suffered to remain' (Herod. B. III. 159)." ¹²

The Behistun Inscription of Darius I (the son of Hystaspes and therefore referred to as Darius Hystaspes) records the suppressions of the two revolts of Babylon under his rule. The second suppression seems to be that to which Barnes has referred, being the most intensive of the two. "Thus speaks Darius the king: Thereupon I sent an army to Babylon. A Median, Vindaфра by name... I sent forth with orders as follows: 'Go, smite the army of the rebels.'... Vindaфра took Babylon and smote the army of Babylon, the rebels... (and) bound them (as captives)... Thereupon I give orders as follows: Arahu and the men who were his most prominent supporters shall be crucified in Babylon." ¹³

It is quite evident from Darius' own words that he did not carry on the wholesale slaughter of all the inhabitants of Babylon as it is set forth in Isaiah 13:15, 16, 18. Those who were executed were seemingly only the men who had taken a definite part in the revolt against the Persian rule over them.

The only other significant conquest of Babylon during the first three or four hundred years after its "fall" in 539 B.C. was when Alexander entered the city in 331 B.C. A description of this capture is as follows: "Babylon opened its gates to the conqueror of Darius (the III); and the Persian satrap, Mazaeus, surrendered the city and the fortress. Alexander retained Mazaeus as satrap of Babylon, and began the work of restoring the Babylonian temples, and pushed on eastward." ¹⁴

Again, there is no sign of a horrible destruction of life. It would seem, therefore, that there has been no literal fulfillment of verses 15 through 18; for these verses definitely picture the nature of Babylon's destruction as being catastrophic, and such a catastrophic destruction is not recorded in history.

A second passage showing the nature of Babylon's destruction particularly concerns the city itself. "Come against her from the utmost border; open her storehouses; cast her up as heaps, and destroy her utterly; let nothing of her be left" (Jer. 50:26). The phrase which is particularly descriptive of the destroyed city of Babylon is the last part of the verse: "cast her up as heaps, and destroy her utterly; let nothing of her be left." The word translated "heaps" is used in a two-fold manner elsewhere in Scripture. It may refer to "heaps of grain" (cf. Neh. 13:15 where it is translated sheaves; Ru. 3:7 and Hag. 2:16) or "heaps of rubbish." Sanballat mocked the remnant of the Jews as they attempted to build the wall of Jerusalem out of the rubbish of the destroyed city, when he said "What are these feeble Jews doing... will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, seeing they are burned?" (Neh. 4:2).

The latter meaning seems best to illustrate Jeremiah's prophecy concerning Babylon because of the next phrase: "and destroy her utterly." This phrase is the translation of one Hebrew word, the root of which is haram. The word means "to ban," that is, "to devote or pronounce sacred, to prohibit from common use." The use of this verb is very interesting in the light of Israel's re-

relationships to the heathen cities as they entered the promised land. Concerning this, Brown, Driver and Briggs state: "this (devoting) involved generally their (heathen) destruction; when a city was 'devoted' the inhabitants were put to death, the spoil being destroyed or not accepted (due) to the gravity of the occasion."¹⁵

The Biblical usage of this word is illustrated by several passages, one of which is quoted here. "And the city shall be devoted (haram), even it and all that is therein, to Jehovah...And they utterly destroyed (devoted) all that was in the city, both man and woman, both young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword (Josh. 6:17,21; cf. also I Sam. 15:3; Deut. 2:34 and 3:6.) Babylon, therefore, was to be "devoted" by her conquerors in that all that pertained to her was to be "heaped up" as rubbish and utterly destroyed.

Keil states concerning these verses: "All the property found in Babylon is to be collected in heaps and then burnt with the city."¹⁶ Such a catastrophic destruction has not been literally fulfilled by any of the Babylonian conquerors. Cyrus states that when he entered the city, "I gave proper attention to the needs of Babylon and its cities."¹⁷ Darius I evidently destroyed the walls in suppressing Babylon's second revolt in 514 B.C., but there is no evidence of his destruction of anything in the city.

Alexander attempted to rebuild the temples of the city and make it his capital but was stopped from doing so by an early death. Antiochus Soter (280-262 B.C.) reconstructed the temples of Ezagila and Ezida and called himself the "caretaker" of these temples.¹⁸

In the foregoing study it has been shown that the Bible prophesies Babylon's fall as a sudden, yet complete destruction and desolation of the city and all of its inhabitants. Contrary to this, history reveals that Babylon never was the object of such a judgment. Rather, it persisted as a commercial center and political community for hundreds of years after its supposed fall, finally coming to an end about 1100 A.D. by more natural causes.

THE ARGUMENT FROM THE PRESENT

The prophetic picture of the condition of Babylon following its fall.--For many years men have used the present condition of Babylon as "exhibit A" of a definite fulfillment of prophecy. Is it an undeniable fact that Babylon lies today in perfect accord with the prophecies concerning her? It is the opinion of the writer that this is not the case, and in refuting the generally accepted theory, the picture presented by several passages of Scripture will be compared with the facts concerning Babylon's present state.

Many passages which refer to Babylon's destruction present a picture which seems to contradict the existing condition of Babylon, if it is maintained that these prophecies have been literally fulfilled. Out of these Scriptures, those quoted below present objectively what the existing state of Babylon should be in this case. "It (Babylon) shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there. For out of the North there cometh up a nation against her, which shall make her land desolate, and none shall dwell therein, both man and beast. She (Babylon) shall be the hindermost of the nations, a wilderness, a dry land, and a desert. O Jehovah, thou has spoken concerning this place, to cut it off, that none shall dwell therein, neither man nor beast, but that it shall be desolate for ever" (Isa. 13:20; Jer. 50:3, 12; 51:62).

The present condition of Babylon and its surrounding territory.--The writer does not believe that these prophecies concerning the city have been fulfilled. A study of the present condition of the site of Babylon shows that there are even now flourishing towns and villages in this very location. Koldewey states concerning his viewing of the city of Babylon as follows: "The heights of Babil afford a fine view over the entire city...The villages on the left bank of the Euphrates--Kweiresh, where our house is, and Djumdjumma farther south--are so buried among the green date palms that one can scarcely catch a glimpse of even a wall. On the other bank are Sindjar and Ananeh also concealed in the same way."¹⁹ A map contained in Kaldewey's book²⁰ reveals that at the time he wrote this book (45 years ago) there were four villages, at least one farm, and many palm groves within the boundaries of the ancient city of Babylon.

According to Herodotus, Babylon was built on both sides of the Euphrates in the shape of a square, and had a circumference of about sixty miles. If the description of Babylon by Herodotus is in any fair degree the true picture of ancient Babylon, then the present city of Hillah also lies within its ancient walls. In 1949, Hillah was a city of about 20,000 population consisting mostly of Arabs and Jews. It is the capital of the district in the immediate area of Babylon.²¹

On the basis of these facts, the statement of Newton nearly seventy years ago remains forceful: "In the midst of these ruins (of Babylon), too, we find date trees, gardens, and an inhabited village. How, then, can the final desolation which Scripture predicts have fallen upon Babylon? It is not yet, 'as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.' Not only do the Arabians still pitch tent there, but villages and groves, and a city, exist amidst its ruins."²²

In the light of these facts it is impossible for the writer to understand the prophecies concerning the complete desolation of Babylon to have been literally fulfilled. The flourishing city of Hillah lies within the area which is designated as Babylon, and is subject to these same prophecies.

THE ARGUMENT FROM ESCHATOLOGY

There is yet one very interesting group of verses that is very important in deciding whether the prophecies concerning Babylon have been fulfilled. It contains those Scriptures which relate the fall of Babylon to a definite eschatological setting.

Passages relating the fall of Babylon to the Day of the Lord.--The two verses chosen by the writer as the text for this study (Isa. 13:19,20) stand at the apex of one of the most graphic descriptions of the dreadful Day of Jehovah in all the Bible. That this is the theme of Isaiah's message in 13:1-6 is clearly shown by the following excerpt: "Wail ye, for the day of Jehovah is at hand; as destruction from the Almighty shall it come...Behold, the day of Jehovah cometh, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger; to make the land a desolation and to destroy the sinners thereof out of it... Therefore, I will make the heavens to tremble, and the earth shall be shaken out of its place, in the wrath of Jehovah of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger" (Isa. 13:6,9,13).

Isaiah is describing the future day of Jehovah in these verses in order to provide the setting for his great prophecy concerning the fall of Babylon. The day of Jehovah is the necessary setting for the destruction of Babylon for at least two reasons.

First, in the opening of this prophecy, Isaiah addresses his forthcoming message as "the burden of Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz did see." Delitzsch states concerning this intro-

duction: "In a book which could throughout be traced to Isaiah, there could be no necessity for it to be particularly stated, that it was to Isaiah that the oracle was revealed, of which Babel was the object. We may therefore see from this, that the prophecy relating to Babylon was originally complete in itself, and was intended to be issued in that form."²³ Thus, from the beginning (13:1) to its end (14:27) this is one prophecy with its message being the fall of Babylon, and its setting, the day of the Lord.

The second reason for making 13:2-16 the setting for the prophecy of Babylon's fall is found in verses 17 and 18. Verse 17 states: "Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them." To whom does the pronoun "them" refer? Its antecedent must be found in the preceding verses which describe the day of Jehovah, especially verses 14 through 16. Therefore, it is not possible correctly to interpret verses 17 through 20 as having been fulfilled in the past, while interpreting verses 2 through 16 as having a future fulfillment. The similarity of the descriptions in verses 18 and 16 also demand this close relationship (compare Jer. 51:2,6,11).

The conclusion drawn from this discussion is that if the fall of Babylon as prophesied in Scripture is to take place in the setting of the day of the Lord, then such a prophecy cannot have been fulfilled at any time during the past.

Passages relating the fall of Babylon to the Millennial Kingdom.--Prophecy not only relates Babylon's fall to the day of the Lord, but also to the events which mark the beginning of the Millennium. The passages which set forth this relationship are as follows: Isaiah 14:1-7; 48:14,20; Jeremiah 50:3-5, 18-20; and Habakkuk 2:14,20.

It has already been shown that the entire section of 13:1-14:27 is one great prophecy concerning the fall of Babylon. While 13:17-22 is the apex of the judgments upon the city, 14:1-7 presents the result of this destruction as it relates to God's chosen people, Israel. "For Jehovah will have compassion on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel, and set them in their own land: and the sojourner shall join himself with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob. And the peoples shall take them, and bring them to their place; and the house of Israel shall possess them in the land of Jehovah for servants and for handmaids; and they shall take them captive whose captives they were; and they shall rule over their oppressors. And it shall come to pass in the day that Jehovah shall give thee rest from thy sorrow. . . that thou shalt take up this parable against the king of Babylon, and say, How hath the oppressor ceased! the golden city ceased!" (Isa. 14:1-5).

It is stated by the prophet that "in the day that Jehovah shall give thee rest from thy sorrow" (which rest is pictured in verses 1 and 2), then it would be that they would take up the parable against Babylon and her king. Because of this definite relationship, it is necessary for writers who hold that the prophecies concerning Babylon's destruction are fulfilled, also to find an historical fulfillment for this "rest" which is promised for Israel in Isaiah 14:1-7.

In general, these commentators hold that "Israel" and "the house of Judah" represent the Jews in captivity at Babylon. Jehovah's choosing them means his delivering them from the land of captivity and placing them in their own land. Those sojourners who cleave to the Jew are the proselytes from Babylon; and the people that "bring them to their place" would be the favorable backing of Cyrus and others who aided the Jews in their return.

However, when these scholars come to the phrase "and they shall take them captive whose captives they were; and they shall rule over their oppressors" (14:2b), they either pass over it in silence or spiritualize it away entirely. Rawlinson admits this problem and then explains it away by this method of spiritualizing. He states: "This can scarcely have been intended literally. The Jews were at no time a conquering people, nor one that set itself to 'take captives.' The true meaning is that Jewish ideas shall penetrate and subdue the nations generally."²⁴ In applying these verses to the release from the Babylonian Captivity, Delitzsch states: "We have here in nuce the comforting substance of ch. 46-66."²⁵ It is a great puzzle to the writer how this statement can be made in the light of some of the promises made to Israel in that beautiful section of comfort. One such promise reads as follows: "and it (the fact of peace and prosperity, cf. verses 12, 13a) shall be to Jehovah for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off" (Isa. 55:13b). If this everlasting state of rest and prosperity for the Jew in his land started when the Lord led him out of the Babylonian Captivity, how can we explain the disasters which came to this people in the following centuries, culminating in the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and the subsequent dispersion of Israel throughout the entire world?

In discussing Isaiah 14:1-20 in relation to the doctrine of Antichrist, Alva J. McClain states: "The passage is primarily prophetic and it is addressed primarily to a future king of the final Babylon."²⁶ As an argument in favor of this position he states further: "Verses 1-4 prove the passage is prophetic, and belongs to the future day of Israel's rest and triumph."²⁷

Is, therefore, the fall of Babylon as prophesied in Isaiah 13:19-20 an historically fulfilled event? The writer has attempted to set forth the teaching of Scripture concerning this, by showing that such a destruction of Babylon as prophesied in Scripture has never occurred in history; that the present condition of Babylon does not represent what is prophesied in the Word of God; and that the prophecy itself is directly related to an eschatological setting.

This being the case, the conclusion is that this prophecy has not been fulfilled and therefore awaits future fulfillment in relation to a literal rebuilding of Babylon.

THE PROBLEM OF THE MEDES

If the prophecy concerning Babylon's fall as recorded in Isaiah 13:19,20 has not been fulfilled, there immediately appears a problem, in that Isaiah predicts Babylon's conquerors to be the Medes (cf. Isa. 13:17;21:2,3; Jer. 51:11,28). Although Cyrus, the conqueror of Babylon in 539 B.C., was a Persian, he had under his command the combined forces of Media and Persia (Dan. 5:27). Also, it was a Mede that he placed as "king" over Babylon (Dan. 5:31 and 6:6), and this Median king was subject to the "law of the Medes and Persians" (Dan. 6:15).

In view of these facts, how can it be maintained that it was not the work of these historic Medes which was actually foreseen by the prophet, but a destruction entirely future, not only to the prophet (as was the case of the Medes under Cyrus), but also to us today?

The writer's basic proposition is this. The "Mede" mentioned in such passages as Isaiah 3:17 cannot refer to the historical Medes under Cyrus and successive kings, because the characteristics describing them cannot be applied to the historical situation.

For it is then that the Lord will "send forth his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. 24:31). Also, then "shall Jehovah go forth, and fight against those nations" (Zech. 14:3) who assemble themselves against Jerusalem and His people.

Once one realizes the great typology concerning Cyrus, it is quite in order to consider also the thought that the armies of Cyrus termed the "Medes" in Isaiah 13:17 would have typological significance. Foster suggested to the writer that the Medes represent the instrument by which Jehovah accomplishes the destruction of future Babylon. This suggestion may well be the Scriptural solution to the "problem of the Medes" and is strengthened by a study of Isaiah 44:28-45:4.

In the opening verses of Isaiah 13, the prophet describes the armies who will some day bring vengeance upon Babylon, and whom he later terms the "Medes," by saying: "I have commanded my consecrated ones, yea, I have called my mighty men for my anger, even my proudly exulting ones" (Isa. 13:3).

There are two phrases in verse three which are particularly interesting in relation to this interpretation. The first is the opening phrase of the verse, "I have commanded my consecrated ones." The pual participle, "my consecrated ones," is from the root qadesh which primarily means "to be separate," and thus, in relation to separation from sin, "to be holy." When used in relation to people or a nation, the primary meaning seems to be "separateness unto God." Thus God, in making his covenant with Israel, calls them "a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). In the previous verse (v. 5) he states: "ye shall be mine own possession from among all nations." Therefore, Israel was separated unto God for his possession.

There are other occasions in Scripture where this word is applied to a heathen nation; that is, it definitely refers to a people outside of the redemption relationship of the Lord. An example of this is to be found in Jeremiah 22:7, in which the Holy Spirit, in speaking of the judgment which would fall on disobedient Israel, states: "and I will prepare (sanctify or consecrate) destroyers against thee." However, this passage indicates quite clearly, as do the others, that the "separating" is unto a task and does not indicate the relationship between these destroyers and God.

It is the opinion of the writer that in Isaiah 13:3 the context bears out the idea that the primary designation is to a people set apart unto God, and thus for His own possession. If this be true, this phrase indicates that the term "Medes" in verse 17 is used typically to refer to that great host that follows the Lord from heaven to earth when His kingdom is established.

The second phrase is found in the last part of verse 3: "even my proudly exulting ones." The marginal reading is closer to the original: "them that exult in my majesty." This could hardly be said of any historical heathen nation, for there seemed to be one thing common to all nations used by God for chastisement of Israel. This was the fact that they became boastful of their might and authority and oftentimes spake blasphemously against the very God who gave to them their strength. The following passage concerning Assyria shows this common attitude of the heathen instrument of God. "Ho Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, the staff in whose hand is mine indignation! . . . Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so. . . shall I not, as I have done unto Samaria and her idols, so do to Jerusalem and her idols. . . For he hath said, by the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I have understanding; and I have removed the bounds of the

peoples" (Isa. 10:5,7,11). Never of such heathen powers could it be said that "they exult in my majesty." Therefore, this phrase certainly goes beyond the historical situation of the Medes who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. to their great future antitype, the armies of Messiah.

CONCLUSION

In his analysis of the important prophecy of Isaiah 13:19-20, the writer has sought to demonstrate that the fall of Babylon spoken of by the prophet has not yet occurred. From the historical standpoint, it is quite obvious that Babylon continued to exist as an important center of commerce and population for over 1,500 years after its "fall" in 539 B.C. Even today about 20,000 Arabs and Jews live within the boundaries of the ancient Babylon. Yet the Scriptures clearly indicate that its fall would be sudden, catastrophic, and complete. From the prophetic standpoint, it is important to recognize that Isaiah places the fall of Babylon within a context of purely eschatological events, involving the Day of the Lord and the return of Israel to their land in final blessing and rest. The question of the "Medes" in Isaiah 13 was resolved by a comparison with the Messianic symbolism of "Cyrus" in Isaiah 44-45. Thus, a study of this passage and its context, in the light of the history of Babylon in the past and present, has led us to the conclusion that Isaiah 13 speaks of the fall of the eschatological Babylon at the time of Christ's Second Coming in glory.

DOCUMENTATION

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