

largely replaced. Assyria was demolished even before Judah was taken into captivity by the Babylonians. Babylonia was conquered by the Persians, then by the Greeks, then by Rome, and still later by the Arabs. Archaeologists study the remains of these great empires but see little in the present condition of these lands to suggest their ancient greatness.

Verses 17-19 contain beautiful pictures of the way God will bless His people, giving them abundant supplies of water. These statements would be particularly meaningful to people living in arid regions. Verse 19 describes a time when the wilderness will be changed into a beautiful garden - perhaps a glimpse of the time yet to come when all results of the curse will be removed (cf. Rom 8:18-23).

Verse 20 states the reason for all these blessings. They are given in order that Israel and all the nations of the world may see and understand the great power and goodness of God.

Immediately after these great promises to Israel, the LORD renews His challenge to the gods of the heathen.

(21) Set forth your case, the LORD says. Bring your strong arguments, says the king of Jacob. (22) Let them bring them, and tell us what will happen; explain the former events, that we may consider them, and know their outcome; or let us hear what is coming. (23) Declare what will come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; indeed, do good or do harm, that we may be dismayed as we observe it together. (24) Look, you are nothing, and your deeds are of no account. Whoever chooses you is an abomination.

The gods of the nations are challenged to predict the future or even to explain the meaning of the past. This challenge ends with an ironic assertion of the impotence of the heathen gods. The LORD declares that they do not even exist; they can do nothing, and all who follow them are utterly worthless.

This emphasis on the inability of heathen gods to predict the future points to one of the great themes of this section, the argument from fulfilled prophecy, which, like the emphasis on God's creative power, is stressed more often in this section of Isaiah than almost anywhere else in the Bible.