

## Isaiah 24:5

### What am I to make of Isaiah 24:5? Are Gentiles responsible for violating the Mosaic covenant every bit as much as the Jews? Or, does Isaiah 24:5 only speak of the Noahdic covenant?

“Behold, the LORD lays the earth waste, devastates it, distorts its surface and scatters its inhabitants. And the people will be like the priest, the servant like his master, the maid like her mistress, the buyer like the seller, the lender like the borrower, the creditor like the debtor. The earth will be completely laid waste and completely despoiled, for the LORD has spoken this word. The earth mourns *and* withers, the world fades *and* withers, the exalted of the people of the earth fade away. 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” (Isaiah 24:1-6, NASU).

The content of Isaiah ch. 24, describing God’s inevitable judgment on the world, is something that has probably been too widely overlooked in regard to understanding salvation, and what only the work of the Messiah can redeem people from. That God will issue severe desolation and calamity upon unrighteous sinners can be easily detected by a survey of Isaiah 24. That this chapter depicts the world at large, in a condition of rebellion and corruption against the Creator, is also easily detected.

There should be no disagreement from an historical reading of Scripture, that Israel proper has been found in violation of the Mosaic covenant, and this is the precise reason why the New Covenant providing permanent atonement for sin and forgiveness would have to be inaugurated (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27).<sup>1</sup> *But what about the nations at large?* Are we to assume that those of the world at large, perhaps total pagans, are to be regarded as breakers of the Mosaic covenant as well? Are they to all be viewed as though they were *gerim* (גֵּרִים) or sojourners who would enter into the community of Ancient Israel, and whose overall adherence to the Torah was widely indistinguishable from the native? Or, are the nations of the world at large, just held accountable for a small series of moral and ethical principles, per the so-called Noahide laws of Judaism?<sup>2</sup>

The assertion of Isaiah 24:5 is, *ki-avru torot chalfu choq hei’peiru b’rit olam* (קִּי־עָבְרוּ תּוֹרוֹת הַלְּפֹי חֹק הַפְּרוּ בְרִית עוֹלָם), “because they have transgressed the Torot, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant” (Jerusalem Bible-Koren). Much understandably comes down to how a reader approaches the presence of *torot* (תּוֹרוֹת) or “laws,”<sup>3</sup> and *b’rit olam* (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) or “eternal/everlasting covenant.” The violation of these Divine institutions is something that *ha’eretz* (הָאָרֶץ) or “the earth” is responsible for, making it a problem for all of humanity.<sup>4</sup>

There are interpreters of Isaiah 24:5 who view *b’rit olam* (בְּרִית עוֹלָם), as only being in regard to the covenant God made with Noah in Genesis 9:16,<sup>5</sup> and this problem would not constitute the nations at large being

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<sup>1</sup> For a further discussion, consult the article “What is the New Covenant?” by J.K. McKee, appearing in his book *The New Testament Validates Torah*.

<sup>2</sup> Consult the FAQ, “Noahide Laws.”

<sup>3</sup> The Septuagint rendering of Isaiah 24:5 has the singular *ton nomon* (τὸν νόμον) or “the law.”

<sup>4</sup> Among some Jewish interpreters, it is noted that “*The earth* could also be translated as ‘the land’ (i.e., the land of Israel), in which case this section would fer to the Israelites and Judeans, not all humanity. In that case, *the ancient covenant*...refers to the laws given to Israel through Moses” (Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 829).

<sup>5</sup> Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 106; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 179.

held liable for breaking any successive covenants that followed. A Jewish commentator like I.W. Slotki notes some of the options that sit before the reader on how to approach *b'rit olam*:

"The Torah of Moses was given at Sinai between God and Israel (Rashi). Others refer the phrase to the Noahide covenant made between God and the human race after the flood (Gen. ix. 16). [According to] this covenant every member of the human race is subject to certain moral laws, one of which is the prohibition of murder (Gen. ix. 5f) (Abarbanel)."<sup>6</sup>

The presence of *torot* or laws being mentioned does certainly give the interpreter of Isaiah 24:5 some options, which would make limiting this verse's content to the Noahic covenant more than a bit confining. At the very least, a Christian commentator like John N. Oswalt directs how the laws in view include principles which are included in the Torah of Moses, but does draw the conclusion how the general covenant in view is likely the Noahic covenant:

"Isaiah is thus using law here just as Paul uses it in Rom. 1-3. It is not so much the revealed law of the Jews, although the principles are the same. Rather, it is the fundamental principles of human behavior that are as accessible, and as incumbent, as the elementary principles of physics. Whether or not persons recognize the principles, living in any other way than in accord with them must ultimately destroy us, as the history of numberless fallen civilizations ought to teach us. Thus while the *eternal covenant* may have specific reference to the Noahic covenant in Gen. 9:1-17 with its prohibition of bloodshed, its broader reference is to the implicit covenant between Creator and creature, in which the Creator promises abundant life in return for the creature's living according to the norms laid down at Creation."<sup>7</sup>

The point made by Oswalt is that the *b'rit olam* or "eternal covenant" violated by the world at large, should not be thought in specific terms to just be the Noahic covenant. **More is intended by Isaiah 24:5.** Gene M. Tucker has to, although somewhat reluctantly, observe,

"Which covenant does the author have in view? The obvious answer is the covenant with Noah (Gen 9:1-17), since it is called 'an everlasting covenant' and extends to all people and creatures of the earth. On the other hand, the reference to laws and statutes leaves open the possibility that this is the Sinai covenant (Exod 19-Num 9)."<sup>8</sup>

J.C. Halton, even while choosing to view *torah* (תּוֹרָה) in the Book of Isaiah as largely pertaining to the Prophet's own teaching and declarations, still has to detail the following in his entry for "Law" in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*:

"While the book of Isaiah, along with most other OT texts, presents *tôrâ* as a divine gift to Israel, it does not picture *tôrâ* as Israel's exclusive possession. Instead, one way in which Yahweh intended for the knowledge of God's upright character (*sedeq* [שֶׁדֶק]) to spread was by expanding and making more prominent *tôrâ* among the nations."<sup>9</sup>

There are, to be sure, theologians and commentators, who see *b'rit olam* (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) or "eternal/everlasting covenant" in Isaiah 24:5 as being widely incorporative of much more than the Noahic covenant. Geoffrey W. Grogan is one who points out that pagans, even without God, should still be regarded as though they were at least violators of the moral statutes stated within Moses' Teaching:

"Modern society is becoming more concerned about the physical pollution of our environment. Isaiah here dealt with the even more tragic and urgent matter of moral pollution, which is as widespread and serious today as it was in the eighth century B.C. The language of v.5 might seem, on the face of it, to be especially appropriate to Israel, because of her possession of the Mosaic Law; but the content here makes it plain that the whole world is in view. Many commentators....see a reference to the Noahic covenant, especially in the phrase 'the everlasting covenant,' which also occurs in Genesis 9:16. It is possible too that the prophet had Genesis 3 in mind, particularly in view of his reference to the curse in v.6. The world as a whole did not possess the moral commandments of God in written form as in the Mosaic Law; but those laws nevertheless represent the will of God for mankind, and mankind is under judgment for their violation. The word 'disobeyed' implies at least some awareness of these

<sup>6</sup> I.W. Slotki, *Soncino Books of the Bible: Isaiah* (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 111.

<sup>7</sup> John N. Oswalt, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 446.

<sup>8</sup> Gene M. Tucker, "The Book of Isaiah 1-39," in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 211.

<sup>9</sup> J.C. Halton, "Law," in Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 495.

moral requirements in the human conscience (cf. Romans 1:18-32; 2:11-16), thus an element of deliberateness in sin.”<sup>10</sup>

Among commentators of the Book of Isaiah, the most wide-sweeping view of *b’rit olam* is probably found within the conservatively-acclaimed work *The Prophecy of Isaiah* by J.A. Motyer. He summarizes,

“The expression *the everlasting covenant* is used of the Noahic covenant (Gn. 9:16), the Lord’s covenant dispensation reaching back to Abraham (Ps. 105:10), the Sabbath within the Mosaic covenant (Lv. 24:8) and the Davidic covenant (2 Sa. 23:5) and its future Messianic counterpart (Is. 55:3; 61:8). While this whole passage is resonant with flood motifs, it would be mistaken to tie this covenant reference in any way exclusively to Noah, even though its ambience starts with him. Every covenant dispensation has its regulatory aspect, however undeveloped it may have been in comparison with the normative Mosaic system. This may be why Isaiah used the plural *laws*, so as to cover every period and aspect of covenant law-giving. Even Abraham, who lived [by] the broadest of divine precepts (Gn. 17:2), is said to have kept the Lord’s ‘laws’ (Gn. 26:5). In essence, the annulling of the covenant was the refusal to live in the fellowship in which God opened.”<sup>11</sup>

Walter C. Kaiser might have the most all-inclusive view of both *b’rit olam* or “the eternal covenant,” as well as *torot* or “laws,” as he describes the following for Isaiah 24:5 in his book *Preaching and Teaching the Last Things*:

“[T]he word for ‘laws’ is the Hebrew word *torot* (the plural for the word *torah*), meaning not just the law of God, but also all his authoritative instructions....Notice that this indictment affects all the peoples of the earth. Yet some are hesitant to refer the ‘everlasting covenant’ to the ‘Abrahamic-Davidic covenant,’ but attempt to instead refer it back to the Noahic covenant (Gen. 9:16). To be sure, God did call the covenant he made with Noah an ‘everlasting’ covenant. Moreover, it is also true that this passage in Isaiah 24 does contain allusions to the flood of Noah. However, it is best to understand this ‘everlasting covenant’ as the one that reached back to Abraham (Gen. 17:7, 13, 19; Ps. 105:9-10; cf. 1 Chron. 16:15-18), David (2 Sam. 23:5), and forward to a future Messiah (Isa. 55:3). The ‘law’ God had given to David was a ‘law/charter for all humanity’ (2 Sam. 7:19, translation mine), not one effective only for Israel. For just as the Abrahamic covenant was to be the means of blessing all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3), so it is a universal offer here as well.”<sup>12</sup>

While there will continue to be disagreements among theologians, commentators, and interpreters on how to properly approach Isaiah 24:5—“The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant” (NASU)—one is on safe ground to conclude that not only is Israel proper held responsible by God for violating the Torah or Law of Moses, but so are the nations at large, even if the exact Torah obedience of the *gerim* or sojourners in Ancient Israel was not exactly the same as a native (i.e., the native who had a tribal inheritance in the Land of Israel). One of the specific indictments, after all, that the Apostle Paul will issue against the nations, is that they are “covenant-breakers” (Romans 1:31, American Standard Version).<sup>13</sup>

Some would claim, in contrast to Isaiah 24:5, that the nations at large should not be held responsible for violation of anything but the terms of the Noahic covenant. Psalm 147:19-20, for example, says, “He declares His words to Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; and as for His ordinances, they have not known them” (NASU). Is it not true that the Psalmist says of the nations, *mishpatim bal-yeda’um* (בְּלֹא יָדְעוּם מִשְׁפָּטֵי יְהוָה), “they do not know his rules” (ESV) or “they do not know his laws” (NIV)?

The main point of Psalm 147:19-20 is to detail how the Torah or Instruction of God was specifically given to Israel, and how the nations of the world are largely ignorant of God’s commandments. It is true that the Scriptures bear forth the principle that specific knowledge of many commandments and ordinances is necessary, in order to be held specifically accountable for their violation (cf. Romans 5:13).<sup>14</sup> Yet at the same time, as God’s image bearers (Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6; James 3:9), each human being has moral and ethical principles impressed onto the conscience. Knowing this is important, because Paul used it as a frame of reference to criticize various Jewish

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<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, “Isaiah,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 6:152.

<sup>11</sup> J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 199.

<sup>12</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching the Last Things: Old Testament Eschatology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 149.

<sup>13</sup> Grk. *asunthetos* (ἀσύνθετος); “bound by no covenant, faithless” (LS, 127); “**pert. to such as renege on their word, faithless.** The noun συνθήκη [*sunthēkē*] refers to a formal agreement or compact; an ἀσύνθετος [*asunthetos*] pers. does not keep an agreement” (BDAG, 146); “break their promises” (NLT).

*Asunthetos* is more often rendered as something like “untrustworthy” (NASU).

<sup>14</sup> Consult some of the thoughts in Chapter 24 of *Torah In the Balance, Volume I* by J.K. McKee.

Believers in Rome who may have boasted because of their circumcision, but who may also have been shown to be less-than-faithful Torah keepers, when pagans who lacked the Torah could actually keep its weighty principles via their conscience:

“[Y]ou, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For ‘THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU’ [Isaiah 52:5; Ezekiel 36:20], just as it is written. For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?” (Romans 2:21-27, NASU).

To a figure like James the Just, all it takes is violation of one single commandment of the Torah or the Law of Moses, to constitute a total violation of it. He says, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, ‘DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’ [Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18], also said, ‘DO NOT COMMIT MURDER’ [Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17]. Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law” (James 2:10-11, NASU). Here, the prohibitions against adultery and murder, from the Ten Commandments, are listed. These would surely constitute the sorts of principles imbued upon the human conscience by God as Creator. Violation of one of these commandments, either by a Jewish person who grew up in a Torah environment, or by a pagan from the nations, merits such a man or woman the status of: Law-breaker. Even without some specific knowledge of the Mosaic covenant, by violating its principles of conscience, one from the nations demonstrates the same base, fallenness and disregard for the Creator that a Jewish person who has specific knowledge of it likewise demonstrates when he or she breaks it.

There is a definite conflict of not only theology, but also spirituality, in the Messianic movement today, when various Messianic Jewish leaders and teachers might claim that the nations at large are not held responsible by God for breaking His Torah. A prophetic word like Isaiah 24:5 says something to the contrary: all of humanity is guilty before God’s Instruction. Thankfully, we can take an important cue from Romans 5:20: “The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (NASU). Even though the world at large stands condemned for violation of God’s Torah and His covenant, His grace has always been greater than His anger. “[S]o that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Yeshua the Messiah our Lord” (Romans 5:21, NASU).

To claim that Yeshua the Messiah was sacrificed only for Israel proper’s violation of the Torah, and not for that of the nations as well, is not the perspective presented in Titus 2:14: “[Yeshua] gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (NASU). Yeshua redeeming people *apo pasēs anomias* (ἀπὸ πάσης ἀνομίας) or “from all lawlessness” (ESV), is something that involves both the Jewish people and those from the nations, as “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, NASU). Likewise, all people who turn to Yeshua as Savior are beneficiaries of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27; Hebrews 8:8-12), and with it the promise for God’s Instruction to be supernaturally transcribed onto the heart and mind.