

ISAIAH 14 AND HABAKKUK 2: TWO TAUNT SONGS AGAINST THE SAME TYRANT?

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The Babylonian king of Isaiah 14 and the proud one of Habakkuk 2 exhibit multiple similarities. In light of the historical record and related visions, this study contends that Isaiah 14 and Habakkuk 2 depict the same end-time monarch. In both oracles, recently liberated saints sing a taunt song about their recently fallen foe, as they reflect upon the tribulation period which they have just survived.

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Introduction

In both Isaiah 14 and Habakkuk 2, the ruler in view cumulates quite a résumé. He conquers the world (Isa 14:16–17; Hab 2:5, 8), ruins Lebanon (Isa 14:8; Hab 2:17), acquires slaves (Isa 14:3, 17; Hab 2:5), receives two taunts (Isa 14:4; Hab 2:6), and perishes to the glee of his former victims (Isa 14:1–8; Hab 2:5–6). Isaiah calls him the king of Babylon and the oppressor (14:4), whereas Habakkuk speaks of the proud one and the haughty man (2:4–5). If we can demonstrate that both predictions foresee an eschatological scenario, it stands to reason that the two seers envision one and the same despot. But before the futuristic overtones receive attention, one may consider the taunt song as a literary genre, and the stellar poetics of Isaiah 14.

The Taunt-Song Genre

Isaiah and Habakkuk frame their prophecies as a תּוֹעֵב (‘‘taunt song,’’ Isa 14:4; Hab 2:6). A taunt song comprises a special literary genre that expresses public humiliation and execration over the ill-fortune of an individual or group. Regarding Isaiah’s sardonic song, Sweeney says that ‘‘the song’s intention is to mock or taunt the Babylonian king. The song does not present the merits of the deceased, but instead focuses on his crimes and failures as a monarch insofar as he abused his land and

people (v. 20).”¹ Taunt songs incorporate a reversal of fortune: the strong king becomes weak (Isa 14) and the spoiler gets spoiled (Hab 2).² Isaiah 14 involves “personal animosity toward the defeated.”³ Indeed, disdain for the king surfaces in his non-burial (v. 20) and the extermination of his followers (v. 21).

Johnson echoes these sentiments in his assessment of the taunt songs in Isaiah 14, Micah 2, and Habakkuk 2. He writes,

Each of these has a dirge-like quality, and each anticipates some form of retribution which will make the person or persons concerned an object-lesson in the abuse of power. Indeed it is this aspect of the poems in question which gives them that suggestion of mockery or derision which has led to the view, now commonly accepted, that here לַשְׁמֵי, may best be regarded as denoting a ‘taunt song’ . . . The suggestion of derision, however, . . . is really quite secondary; and such a rendering seems to obscure what seems to have been the primary purpose of the poem, i.e., that of forecasting the plight of an individual or group of people in terms which imply the creation of a public example.⁴

Barrick classifies four biblical texts as taunt songs (Lev 26:36–37a; Isa 14:4; Mic 2:4; Hab 2:6). In his words, “These taunt songs exhibit assonance, concise wording, third person grammar in a second person context, a theme of judgment, an interrogative, and the use of the root *mšl* in the introduction.”⁵

What is more, taunt songs shame the proud, highlight God’s sovereignty, and convey the advance His kingdom program. They express someone’s final rejection and judgment with no hope for repentance. Taunt songs can be short (Mic 2:4) or long (Isa 14:4–21; Hab 2:6–20). Sometimes they include dialogue (Isa 14:8, 10, 13–14, 16–17; Hab 2:19).

The Poetics of Isaiah 14

The literary eloquence of Isaiah 14 comes to the fore in the masterful use of contrasts, role-reversals, and puns. The following list showcases Isaiah as a dynamic communicator:

¹ Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39 with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, Forms of the Old Testament Literature 16 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 228–29.

² A. S. Herbert, “The ‘Parable’ (Māšāl) in the Old Testament,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7 (June 1954): 189–90.

³ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., “Taunt,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 841.

⁴ A. R. Johnson, “לַשְׁמֵי,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East: Presented to Professor Harold Henry Rowley by the Society for Old Testament Study in Association with the Editorial Board of Vetus Testamentum in Celebration of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday, 24 March 1955*, ed. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas, *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 3 (Leiden, Brill, 1969), 166.

⁵ William D. Barrick, “The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 103.

- The Israelites oppress (גָּש, v. 2) the Babylonians after the Babylonians oppress (גָּש, v. 4) the Israelites.
- The Israelites taunt (גָּשַׁל, v. 4) the king who becomes like (גָּשַׁל, v. 10) other rulers (גָּשַׁל, v. 5).
- The turmoiled earth becomes still and quiet (v. 7).
- The trees live but lumberjacks die (v. 8).
- The Babylonians cut down (כָּרַת) trees (v. 8), but Yahweh cuts off (כָּרַת) Babylon (v. 22).
- The still and quiet Sheol becomes active (v. 9).
- The strong and glorious ruler becomes weak and humiliated (v. 10).
- The luxurious king gets a bed of maggots and worms (v. 11).
- The music of the king's harps/follies (נָבַל) descends to Sheol (v. 11).
- The one who defeats the nations undergoes defeat (v. 12).
- The morning star's intentions (דָּמוּה) fail (v. 14), but God's intentions (דָּמוּה) prevail (v. 24).

Such superb poetry enhances the prophetic message. With that glimpse at the oracle's special literary elements, the focus now shifts to the timing of the fulfillment for the prophecies at hand.

The Circumstances of Isaiah 14

The prophecy concerning Babylon in Isaiah 13:1–14:27 contributes to a series of oracles in the book that forecast the destinies of particular Gentile nations. While chapter 13 addresses the demise of Babylon and the Day of Yahweh, chapter 14 focuses on the restoration of Israel and the doom of Babylon's dictator. Four reasons support the notion that chapter 14 awaits a yet future fulfillment.

First, the Israelite restoration of verses 1–4 lacks a past historical match. According to the prophet, the Israelites govern their captors, experience rest when they return to the promised land, and free harsh slavery in Babylonia. Gentiles accompany the Israelites to the land, and the recently liberated believers taunt their recently fallen oppressor, the king of Babylon. As Motyer succinctly states, “What actually happened at the return from Babylon (539 BC) in no way fulfilled this.”⁶ Similarly, Heater contends that readers fail to “take the language seriously” if they assign the fulfillment to antiquity:

The return of the Jews under Zerubbabel was rather pathetic in comparison to Isaiah's description. Only a relatively small number of Jews returned. They were living among the ruins of Jerusalem, and their efforts to rebuild the temple were met with staunch resistance by the Gentiles (whereas 14:2 says the Gentiles will be servants). The language of the passage forces the interpreter who is

⁶ Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 18 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 117.

trying to take the language seriously to see a future for Israel that far exceeds what happened when Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem.⁷

Proponents of an ancient fulfillment face the challenge of explaining verses 1–4, given the disparity with history. In order to alleviate the tension, some scholars take the language as figurative or symbolic. Concerning the return permitted by Cyrus, Leupold admits, “Peoples did not literally ‘take them and bring them to their proper place.’” Rather, the language is an “idealized coloring bordering on hyperbole.”⁸ For Young, Israel’s captivity in Babylon symbolizes their captivity to sin, Babylon represents a type of the antichrist, and deliverance from Babylon typifies the deliverance that Christ offers. Of verse 2 he says, “This promise was not fulfilled in the return of the Jews from Babylonian bondage, but is being fulfilled when the Gentiles who oppose God are conquered through the house of Israel, the Israel of God, the church, and are subdued by the Holy Spirit and made heirs of the promises.”⁹ With these types of approaches, however, one finds it difficult to be objective in determining the text’s meaning.

Second, no ancient ruler fits the profile in Isaiah 14. The monarch in view enslaves and maltreats the Israelites (14:2–4). He reigns over Babylon (v. 4) and becomes a global dictator and conqueror, running roughshod over the earth (vv. 16–17). Wherever the king goes he causes רָר , generating “turmoil” for his slaves (v. 3), “stirring up” Sheol (v. 9), and causing everyone to “tremble” (v. 16). He descends to Sheol and participates in conversation (v. 10).¹⁰ Of him it says, “you have been cast out from your grave” (v. 19). The king devastates his own country and murders his own citizens (v. 20). His citizens experience genocide, pillage, and rape when their city falls (13:14–18; 14:20–22). The Medes destroy the king’s country (13:17–22). Ultimately he lacks a burial and a successor (14:20–21).

On target is Oswalt’s remark. He states, “the attempt to identify a precise historical figure is probably futile. . . . None of the kings of the Neo-Babylonian empire (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar or Nabonidus) fits, nor do any of the Assyrian kings of Isaiah’s day (Sargon II or Sennacherib).”¹¹

Nevertheless, commentators like Wildberger suggest an ancient Babylonian ruler such as Nebuchadnezzar.¹² After all, only Nebuchadnezzar came close to global dominance among the ancient Babylonian lords. But Cobb responds proleptically:

⁷ Homer Heater Jr., “Do The Prophets Teach That Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt In The *Eschaton*?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 1 (March 1998): 29–30.

⁸ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1971), 253.

⁹ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, vol. 1, *Chapters 1 to 18*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1965), 434.

¹⁰ Sheol’s inhabitants have the ability to speak (1 Sam 28:7–19; Isa 14:10; Ezek 32:21; Luke 16:23–31; 1 Pet 3:19). Sheol is associated with worms and maggots (Job 17:14; Isa 14:11; 66:24; Mark 9:48). The identity of the “morning star, son of the dawn” (14:12–14) exceeds the scope of this study.

¹¹ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 314.

¹² Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 55.

“As for Nebuchadnezzar, he was a master-builder, both in the literal and political sense; and very far from being a cruel oppressor. ‘Thou hast destroyed thy land, thou hast slain thy people,’ is utterly inapplicable to him.”¹³ Moreover, in Isaiah 14 the tyrant’s successors are executed (v. 21), but when Nebuchadnezzar perishes, his son Amel-Merodach assumes the throne. In addition, if Nebuchadnezzar experienced spiritual conversion, the regenerate singers of the taunt song (vv. 1–4) would not have rejoiced over his death. And what evidence supports the idea that Nebuchadnezzar was cast out of his grave in one way or another (v. 19)?

Because no ancient Babylonian leader makes a good candidate, other scholars advocate an ancient Assyrian king. This kind of identification, however, presumes the existence of later scribal redactions. As Shipp acknowledges, “If the superscription is erroneous, then it is possible that Sargon II is the king referred to in both 14:4b and vv. 28–32.”¹⁴ But for Gray, Sargon’s situation does not replicate the situation in Isaiah’s song:

It is indeed recorded that Sargon was ‘not buried in his house’ (cp. v. 18); but this does not necessarily imply that he died a violent death, and lay unburied (cp. v. 19): moreover, Sargon certainly did not involve his country and people in ruin (v. 20): within twelve days of his death his son Sennacherib was recognized as king, and Assyria suffered no serious check for half a century after Sargon’s death.¹⁵

With no historical match in sight, still other scholars choose to regard the king of Babylon (v. 4) as purely illustrative or as a symbol of Babylon or evil. As Young puts it, “The king is not an individual, historical person, but rather the Babylonian Dynasty conceived as an ideal person.”¹⁶ While approaches like this enjoy the freedom of being detached from the details of the text, they tend to yield an inconstant interpretation. Namely, why take one nation as symbolic (Babylon), but another nation as literal (Israel), within the same textual unit (Isa 14:1–4) and within the same literary genre? If Israel is literal, one would expect Babylon to be literal as well.

Third, no generation to date has ever experienced the global rest, quiet, and exhilaration that Isa 14:7–8 articulates.¹⁷ In verse 7, the verb פָּצַח (“break forth *into singing*”) expresses overwhelming jubilation. Isaiah accounts for six of the seven occurrences in the OT (Ps 98:4; Isa 14:7; 44:23; 49:13; 52:9; 54:1; 55:12). Each occurrence arguably pertains to Yahweh’s eschatological restoration program. Concerning

¹³ William Henry Cobb, “The Ode in Isaiah xiv,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 15 (January 1896): 26.

¹⁴ R. Mark Shipp, *Of Dead Kings and Dirges: Myth and Meaning in Isaiah 14:4b–21*, Academia Biblica (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 162.

¹⁵ George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah: Introduction, and Commentary on I–XXXIX*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 251.

¹⁶ Young, *Isaiah*, 435.

¹⁷ Ronald M. Johnson, “Babylon the Great City, the Harlot: An Expository Study,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 4, no. 13 (December 2000): 347–48.

this word, Nell states, “In 14:7 it is explicitly used in relation to the eschatological peace . . . as result of God’s salvation.”¹⁸

Fourth, Isaiah 14 corresponds to other eschatological prophecies. For instance, the prophecy involving Babylon in Zech 2:6–13 shares multiple affinities with Isa 14:1–7. These include the following: The Babylonians subdue slaves who eventually plunder her; Yahweh chooses Israel; Gentiles unite with Jews; and the world is silent and rejoices. In Zechariah, Yahweh urges believers to flee Babylon before it is too late (2:6–7). Barker assigns the fulfillment to antiquity, soon after Zechariah received the prophecy in 519 BC. He must concede, however, that the reason why Zechariah exhorts the Israelites to flee Babylon remains unknown: “‘Flee’ (v.6) and ‘escape’ (v.7) imply that some imminent peril is coming on Babylon. Exactly what that peril is in the period immediately following 519 BC is historically uncertain.”¹⁹

Furthermore, the Israelite restoration of Isaiah 14 involves Yahweh’s compassion on Israel (v. 1; Zech 1:17), foreigners uniting with Israel (Isa 14:1–2; 56:6–7), Israel’s harsh slavery (Isa 14:3; Jer 50:16, 33), and Yahweh settling the Israelites in their own land and giving them rest (Isa 14:2, 4; Ezek 34:13, 15). These distant prophecies demonstrate remarkable similarities of thought and expression.

In light of these four factors, the eschatological option remains the best choice. From this perspective, the newly liberated believers taunt their former persecutor as they look back over the seven-year tribulation period and recall his despotic character and career.²⁰ Specifically, they sing (1) before the messianic kingdom, because unbelievers are still alive, (2) during the transition period, because global dominion appears to be “up for grabs,” and (3) after the king’s death, because the king no longer controls the earth (Isa 14:21).

As for the NT implications, one could make a case that Babylon’s global dictator (Isa 14:4, 8–11, 15–17, 19–21) refers to the end-time beast of Revelation. Isaiah’s oracle allows for the possibility that this man returns from Sheol to mortal life (v. 19) which amazes unbelievers (v. 16) in accord with John’s revelation (Rev 11:7; 13:3, 12, 14; 17:8, 11).

The Eschatological Circumstances of Habakkuk 2

Like Isaiah, Habakkuk addresses international politics. In chapter 1, Yahweh tells the prophet, “in your days . . . I am about to raise up the Chaldeans” (vv. 5–6), a prediction that transpired in Habakkuk’s lifetime. In response to Yahweh’s revelation, the seer wants to know how long injustice will continue (vv. 12–17). The answer comes in chapter 2. There Yahweh reveals the end of human history under the curse,

¹⁸ Philip J. Nell, “פצח,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 3, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 654.

¹⁹ Kenneth L. Barker, “Zechariah,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 8, *Daniel–Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 748.

²⁰ Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God, and Angels* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 377.

and the transition to the Son's magnificent reign on planet earth. Indeed, the conquering Chaldeans of chapter 1 will eventually be conquered (chap. 2). Injustice will continue until the end time.

In chapter 2, Gentile nations sing a taunt song about a recently doomed dictator and their newly found freedom from his heavy hand (vv. 4–6). The taunt-song's five stanzas each commence with a "woe" (vv. 6, 9, 12, 15, 19), and the refrains unify the poem (vv. 8, 17). The taunt-song's lyrics mock an individual leader as opposed to a nation (i.e., the Chaldeans), based on the pervasive use of the grammatical singular forms (e.g., "His soul is not right within him," v. 4). Chapter 2 awaits a remote fulfillment for five reasons.

First, if chapter 2 pertains to the Neo-Babylonian Empire, the interpreter has a difficult time identifying the "remnant" who plunder the Babylonians (v. 8). Patterson favors an ancient fulfillment when he states, "the term probably refers primarily to those peoples and nations within the Neo-Babylonian orbit who escaped annihilation."²¹ But, a big difference exists between the mere escape of annihilation and the pillaging of one's pillager, as Habakkuk describes.

Second, a remote eschatological setting best suits verse 14 ("the earth will become filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh as water covers the sea"). The only other use of this expression in Scripture occurs in Isaiah's portrayal of the messianic kingdom (Isa 11:9). Indeed, the OT statements about God's glory filling the earth pertain to the eschaton (Num 14:21; Ps 72:19; Isa 6:3; 11:9; Hab 2:14).²² In Blue's assessment of Hab 2:14, "This verse is based on the declaration in Isaiah 11:9 with only minor alterations. . . . When the Messiah rules in His kingdom, knowledge of the Lord will be worldwide. Everyone will know of Him (cf. Jer. 31:34). So extensive and abundant will be that knowledge that it will be like water covering the sea."²³

Third, the taunt song's preamble implies a distant fulfillment: "the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay" (Hab 2:3). Here Yahweh goes out of His way to ensure Habakkuk and his audience that the prediction will eventually receive its fulfillment—just not any time soon.

Fourth, verse 20 ("Be silent before Him, all the earth") coincides with similar eschatological excerpts that depict global silence. These excerpts include Zeph 1:7 ("Be silent before the Sovereign Yahweh, because the Day of Yahweh is near"), and the previously discussed passages of Isa 14:7 ("The whole earth is at rest *and* is quiet") and Zechariah 2:13 ("Be silent before Yahweh, all humans"). Such global silence lacks any parallels in the non-eschatological portions of Scripture.

Fifth, Habakkuk 2 resembles the end-time predictions about Babylon in Jer 25:12–38 and chapters 50–51. In Jeremiah 25, verses 1–11 predict Judah's seventy-year Babylonian captivity (ca. 605–536 BC), whereas verses 12–38 jump to the end

²¹ Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 187.

²² Abner Chou, *I Saw the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Vision* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 34, 54, 57, 62.

²³ J. Ronald Blue, "Habakkuk," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Old Testament ed.*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 1515.

time, “after seventy years are completed” (v. 12). In the end, Yahweh punishes Babylon, her king, and the other wicked nations of the world. By means of a detailed list, the prophet identifies the nations and kings who experience judgment after the seventy years, the last being the king of Sheshach (Babylon). Such a scenario lacks any historical precedent. Not even Nebuchadnezzar’s rampage following the Battle of Carchemish fits the situation.²⁴

Jeremiah’s Babylon prophecies remain unfulfilled to date. According to Jeremiah chapters 50–51, Babylon undergoes a violent destruction (50:39–40; 51:29, 37, 43, 62). At that time, all Israel will return to Zion and “join themselves to Yahweh in an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten” (50:5; cf. 31:31; 32:40). The Israelites shepherd prosperously in Bashan and Gilead, and no iniquity is found among them (50:19–20; Mic 7:14, 19). The prophet exhorts believers to flee Babylon for their lives while they still can (Jer 50:8; 51:6, 45). Since circumstances like this have not transpired in antiquity, one can anticipate a far-off fulfillment of chapters 50–51.²⁵

On the other hand, Heater sees the peaceful takeover of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BC as the fulfillment for chapters 25 and 50–51, a view that relies upon the presence of stereotypical language.²⁶ While this interpretation alleviates the apparent discrepancies over the historical record, it does not allow the predictions to unfold according to the details.

Multiple commonalities exist between Habakkuk 2 and Jeremiah’s predictions concerning Babylon. Both prophets indicate that the Babylonians will drink from the cup of wrath in Yahweh’s hand *after* the nations drink (Hab 2:15–16; Jer 25:15–17, 26–28; 51:7). Both reveal that the Babylonians will enforce slavery (Hab 2:5; Jer 50:33). Both foresee that Babylon will suffer a quick demise (Hab 2:7; Jer 50:44; 51:8). And both proclaim that the nations will labor to establish the city of Babylon, only to see their efforts consumed by fire: “peoples toil for fire, and nations grow weary for nothing” (Hab 2:13) and “the peoples will toil for nothing, and the nations become exhausted *only* for fire” (Jer 51:58; cf. 50:32; 51:25, 30, 32). Such extensive and unique overlap suggests that both seers discuss the same doom of Babylon. Therefore, if Jeremiah’s predications await fulfillment, then Habakkuk 2 must as well.

The NT appeals to Hab 2:3–4 three times (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:37–38). If we regard the proud one of Hab 2:4 as an end-time individual, the possibility exists that “he who is coming” (Heb 10:37) refers to that very individual. Indeed, both texts stress his imminence. It seems that for the writer of Hebrews, this man serves as the quintessential example of an unrighteous person who does not live by faith.

²⁴ cf. J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 516–17.

²⁵ Andrew M. Woods, “Have the Prophecies in Revelation 17–18 about Babylon Been Fulfilled? Part 5,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170, no. 677 (January–March 2013): 97–98.

²⁶ Heater, “Babylonia,” 43.

Conclusion

Based on the absence of historical confirmations and the presence of eschatological corollaries, this writer determined that Isaiah 14 and Habakkuk 2 comprise two taunt songs against the same end-time dictator. While on the cusp of entering the messianic kingdom, end-time believers incant these emotionally charged lyrics in order to publically excoriate the despicable despot who terrorized the planet. This despot receives multiple epithets in Scripture, including the king of Babylon and the oppressor (Isa 14:4), as well as the proud one and the haughty man (Hab 2:4–5). Moving to the NT, further designations arguably include the coming one of Heb 10:37 and the beast of Revelation.