

Isaiah 28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 15 November 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 28. Ah, the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim, and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley of those overcome with wine.

Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong, like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty overflowing waters, he casts down to the earth with his hand.

The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim will be trodden underfoot, and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley, will be like a first ripe fig before the summer. When someone sees it, he swallows it as soon as it is in his hand. In that day the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty to the remnant of his people, and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.

These also reel with wine and stagger with strong drink. The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink. They are swallowed by wine. They stagger with strong drink. They reel in vision. They stumble in giving judgment. For all tables are full of filthy vomit, with no space left. To whom will he teach knowledge? And to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from the milk?

Those taken from the breast? For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little. For by people of strange lips, and with a foreign tongue, the Lord will speak to this people. To whom he has said, This is rest, give rest to the weary, and this is repose. Yet they would not hear. And the word of the Lord will be to them, precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little, that they may go and fall backward, and be broken and snared and taken. Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers, who rule this people in Jerusalem. Because you have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement. When the overwhelming whip passeth through, it will not come to us. For we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter. Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone of a sure foundation. Whoever believes will not be in haste. And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line, and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter. Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand. When the overwhelming scourge passes through, you will be beaten down by it. As often as it passes through, it will take you. For morning by morning it will pass through, by day and by night, and it will be sheer terror to understand the message.

[2 : 54] For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on, and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in. For the Lord will rise up as on Mount Perizim. As in the valley of Gibeon, he will be roused to do his deed, strange is his deed, and to work his work, alien is his work. Now therefore do not scoff, lest your bonds be made strong. For I have heard a decree of destruction from the Lord God of hosts against the whole land. Give ear, and hear my voice. Give attention, and hear my speech. Does he who plows for sowing plow continually? Does he continually open and harrow his ground? When he has leveled its surface, does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put in wheat, in rows, and barley in its proper place, and emmer as the border? For he is rightly instructed, his God teaches him. Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cumin, but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod. Does one crush grain for bread? No, he does not thresh it forever. When he drives his cartwheel over it with his horses, he does not crush it. This also comes from the Lord of hosts.

He is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom. Isaiah chapter 28 begins what is generally seen as a new collection within the book, taking us through to chapter 39. There are a few subdivisions within this section, most notably the narrative section of chapters 36 to 39. Chapters 34 and 35 are also often treated as a distinct subsection, although chapter 33 is sometimes joined with them. Chapters 28 to 33 might relate to those chapters in a similar way as chapters 13 to 23 and the Oracles against the Nations, related to chapters 24 to 27, which move from the specificity of judgments upon particular cities and nations to a more general eschatological vision. These chapters are structured by five woe oracles, all introduced with the same word, variously translated as woe, ha, ah, or hey, a word that we have already encountered several times in the book of Isaiah, especially in chapter 5. While the earlier oracles against the nations addressed the earth with a wide angle lens, addressing nations and cities throughout the world from Babylon in the east to Tyre in the west, in this section the frame of the prophetic vision once again narrows to focus on Ephraim and Judah more particularly. Whereas chapters 7 to 12 dealt with the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war in the 730s BC, as Judah and Jerusalem under Ahaz were threatened by the anti-Assyrian alliance of the Arameans or Syria and Israel, these chapters speak to a situation after the removal of the Syro-Ephraimite threat through Assyrian intervention, leading up to the crisis of the Assyrian invasion in 701 BC, which is recounted in the narrative section of chapters 36 to 39.

Whereas Assyria had seemed to be King Ahaz's saviour in the 730s, now it is becoming clearer that Assyria would likely be Judah's doom and the foreign policy of Ahaz no longer seems so brilliant. Now Judah's hopes turned to Egypt. Isaiah addresses this developing crisis in these chapters, once again warning Judah against putting its hope in such an alliance rather than in the Lord. The section begins with Isaiah speaking to the rulers of the northern kingdom of Israel, the imminence of whose demise is probably generally apparent at this point. Samaria and Israel would fall to Shalmaneser V and Sargon II in 722 BC, leaving Judah next in line. At this point the fall of Samaria was likely inevitable.

The point of Isaiah is not to foretell that near inevitability, but to present Samaria and Israel as a cautionary lesson to Judah. The woe oracle of this chapter opens with an image of reeling drunkards of Ephraim, wearing a fading garland of flowers upon their heads. This comparison to drunkards illustrates the insensibility, instability and folly of the leaders of Israel. But the proud crown is not merely one worn by drunkards in their revelries, but Samaria itself, the proud crown of the rich valley on which its hill was situated.

Samaria, in its intoxication, is dulled to the terror that is descending upon it in the form of the invading Assyrians, compared in verse 2 to a natural disaster, an extreme hailstorm or tempest, a deluge that the Lord is bringing upon the nation that will submerge it. In its wake, the proud crown, the symbol both of Israel's decadent intoxication and of its capital, Samaria, would be trodden underfoot by the enemy, or plucked off and eaten like a first ripe fig, an ominous image perhaps making the hero wonder which other figs would ripen next. In contrast to the proud crown of Ephraim that would be trampled underfoot, is the Lord himself as the crown of glory of his faithful remnant, the Lord the true king of his people. Instead of the inebriation and moral insensibility of the judges and rulers of Samaria, the Lord would bring a spirit of justice and would empower the defenders of the nation.

[7 : 57] The whole ethos could not be more opposed. Commentators are divided on the question of the persons who are in view in verse 7 and onwards. Does this continue the description of Samaria and its leaders, or has the focus now shifted to Judah and its leaders? I'm inclined to see the verses referring to Judah and its leaders. The priests and prophets of Judah are no different from the rulers of Israel. They are no less intoxicated, staggering in their drunkenness, their vision blurred, and their judgment impaired. The prophet is the one who's supposed to give his vision to the people. The priest, judgments in accordance with the law. Both parties, however, here are utterly incapacitated by drink. This presumably refers to the iniquity of the people, but likely also to their excessive indulgence. Elsewhere, drunkenness is presented as a sign of divine judgment, so we should probably regard their intoxication as a sign that they are marked out for destruction. Just as a drunkard might spew up vomit upon the drinking tables, so the drunk prophets and priests of Judah are vomiting everywhere, covering everything with their filth. Perhaps there is a suggestion here that the tables in question include the table of the altar and the tables in the holy place at which the priests had to serve. The speaker in verses 9 and 10 is not clear. It might still be the prophet, or it might be that, just as revelers might engage in drunken mocking, the prophets and priests of Judah are ridiculing the faithful prophet. Some commentators have argued that these are the Lord's own words from the past. Gary Smith argues, I believe persuasively, that as there is no explicit reference to a different speaker introducing these verses, and as the teaching of verse 10 is presented in a derogatory fashion, the most likely option is that these are the direct words of Isaiah to the prophets and the priests of Judah, exposing the emptiness of their teaching. Their teaching is like the slurred and stumbling speech of drunken men, perhaps suited only for infants and young toddlers, who with their unsteady gait, lack of self-control and dignity, and clumsy speech would be the natural counterparts of such drunkards. Verse 10 likely marks their teachings then, presenting them as like the stuttering speech of a drunk, or the gibberish of a toddler, a cluster of repeating yet nonsensical monosyllables, which is apparent in the original Hebrew. On account of their failure in speech, the failure to bring light and knowledge through their teaching, the Lord would communicate with them in a language more appropriate, in the strange lips and foreign tongues of Assyrian invaders. The word of the Lord to them would sound much like their own drunken speech, but now in the mouths of an enemy nation that he had brought upon them, whose language they could not understand.

Paul, of course, refers to this passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 in his discussion of tongues as a sign to unbelievers. If it didn't already occur in verse 7, by verse 14 the focus has clearly shifted to Jerusalem and its rulers, who are now explicitly addressed. The scoffers of Jerusalem need to learn the lessons from the fate of their brethren to the north. They seem to fancy themselves immune to the disaster that is coming, because they have made a covenant with death and an agreement with Sheol. It is likely given the focus of subsequent chapters that this refers to their turn to Egypt in their foreign policy, trusting Egypt to rescue them from the Assyrians. In the characterization of alliance with Egypt as a covenant with death and an agreement with Sheol, the suicidal character of Judah's foreign policy is exposed. It is also contrasted most sharply with the true covenant that the people were supposed to have with the Lord their God. Their covenant with Egypt was taking refuge in lies and falsehood and would ultimately not provide them with the security for which they hoped. Rather, they would find that, in looking to death and Sheol, they would descend to the grave.

Perhaps in death and Sheol, we might be expected to hear a reference to the false gods of Egypt, who lay behind its power. In contrast to the false refuge to which Judah and its leaders have turned, the Lord is establishing a true sanctuary in Jerusalem, which he describes in terms of the laying of a foundational cornerstone. We should probably see this cornerstone as a representation of the Lord's manifest covenant commitment to his people, seen in such things as the Davidic king, the strength of a faithful Zion, the Lord's keeping of his promises, and the restored community of the remnant. The statement, whoever believes will not be in haste, has been understood by some to be an inscription upon the cornerstone, by others to be a statement about its import. Either way, the point is that the person who trusts in the Lord will be established and will enjoy the confidence and calm that comes from that.

The refuge of Egypt, to which Judah's leaders were turning, would be swept away. However, the Lord's sure refuge would stand firm against all storms, established firmly upon the choice cornerstone, and built up with the true standards of justice and righteousness, in contrast to the structure of lies upon which the people were actually trusting. As their false refuge was destroyed in the time of crisis, their covenant with death and Sheol, the terrible powers to which they had turned, rather than to the Lord in the time of their distress, would prove ineffectual and would be swept away. Egypt would prove to be like a short bed with small blankets, and no amount of shifting around would keep Judah comfortable and warm in the bitter winter that was coming. Not only would the refuge fail them once, the failure of the refuge would be bitter, as time and again they would be battered by their foes without any relief.

Verse 21 seems to refer back to great victories that the Lord gave his people against their foes. At Mount Perizim, in 2 Samuel chapter 5 verse 20, the Lord had given David a great victory against the Philistines. His words on that occasion were, In the valley of Gibeon, in events recorded in Joshua chapter 10, the Lord had struck down many Canaanites who fought with Anani Bezak against the children of Israel, striking them down with large hailstones.

[14 : 02] These two great victories might remind us of verse 2. The Lord's might had been manifested in such deliverances in the past. However, the might of the Lord would now be against Jerusalem and Israel. The scoffing leaders of the people should cease immediately, lest matters become even worse for them, because the Lord had decreed the destruction of the land. They needed to come to terms with him as swiftly as possible. The concluding verses of this chapter have a very different tone.

They present the illustration of a wise small farmer who knows how and when to plough, sow, thresh, beat and prepare grain for bread, having been taught the ways of agriculture by God's teaching through the natural order. In learning and heeding these lessons, the farmer is able to conduct his work successfully and has the results to show for it at harvest time and in the final results of flour for bread and other produce. The Lord is often compared to a farmer dealing with his people as with a field of grain, a vineyard or as an olive orchard. The wise learn from the Lord and act accordingly.

The message of these verses is found in verses 26 and 29. Just as the wise farmer learns from the Lord, so ought the leaders of Judah to learn from him, heeding his counsel rather than following the example of doomed Israel, the teaching of their drunken priests and prophets, or turning to Egypt and the powers of death for security against Assyria. A question to consider. 1 Peter chapter 2 alludes to this passage in speaking of the building of the church upon Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone. How might Peter's use of this passage illumine the words of Isaiah and vice versa?