

Isaiah 34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 34. Draw near, O nations, to hear, and give attention, O peoples. Let the earth hear, and all that fills it, the world and all that comes from it.

For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host. He has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter. Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise.

The mountains shall flow with their blood. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their hosts shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens. Behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction. The Lord has a sword. It is sated with blood.

It is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the Lord has a sacrifice in Bosra, a great slaughter in the land of Edom.

[1 : 02] Wild oxen shall fall with them, and young steers with the mighty bulls. Their land shall drink its fill of blood, and their soil shall be gorged with fat. For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion.

And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulphur. Her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched. Its smoke shall go up for ever.

From generation to generation it shall lie waste. None shall pass through it for ever and ever. But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it. The owl and the raven shall dwell in it.

He shall stretch the line of confusion over it, and the plumb line of emptiness. Its nobles, there is no one there to call it a kingdom. And all its princes shall be nothing. Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses.

It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches. And wild animals shall meet with hyenas.

The wild goat shall cry to his fellow. Indeed there the nightbird settles and finds for herself a resting place.

[2 : 09] There the owl nests and lays and hatches, and gathers her young in her shadow. Indeed there the hawks are gathered, each one with her mate. Seek and read from the book of the Lord.

Not one of these shall be missing. None shall be without her mate. For the mouth of the Lord has commanded, and his spirit has gathered them. He has cast the lot for them. His hand has portioned it out to them with the line.

They shall possess it for ever. From generation to generation they shall dwell in it. The oracles concerning the nations in Isaiah chapters 13 to 23 were followed by a more general statement of judgment upon the whole earth and prophecies of redemption in chapters 24 to 27.

Many commentators see chapters 34 and 35 as serving a similar function for the oracles that especially focused upon Judah and Jerusalem in chapters 28 to 33. The attention given to Moab in chapters 24 to 27, Edward Young notes, might be compared to the way that Edom is singled out in chapters 34 and 35.

Moab is the representative nation in the first general eschatological prophecies, and Edom functions in a similar capacity here. These chapters describe the comprehensive breadth of the Lord's judgment.

[3 : 23] We might, Christopher Seitz remarks, observe the similarities between the opening of chapter 34 and Isaiah chapter 24 verses 1 to 6. Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.

And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest, as with the slave, so with his master, as with the maid, so with her mistress, as with the buyer, so with the seller, as with the lender, so with the borrower, as with the creditor, so with the debtor.

The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered, for the Lord has spoken this word. The earth mourns and withers, the world languishes and withers, the highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt.

Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left. The place of chapters 34 and 35 within the wider text of Isaiah has been a matter of debate.

[4 : 32] Parallels with the language of Jeremiah have led some to argue that these chapters come from a later date, and are dependent upon Jeremiah, although one could readily counter by arguing that the dependents could run in the opposite direction.

Charles Torrey argued that these two chapters form an introduction to the second half of the book, more typically identified as chapters 40 to 66, regarded by most commentators as coming from a later hand, although more conservative commentators typically strongly dispute this assessment. Gary Smith highlights the parallels that Jacques Vermeulen and Hugh Williamson observed between chapters 13 and 34, which Williamson lays out as follows. A. Preparation for war, chapter 13 verses 2 to 4, chapter 34 verse 1.

B. Killing of the nations, chapter 13 verses 5 to 9 and 14 to 16, and chapter 34 verses 2 to 3. C. Cosmic upheaval, chapter 13 verses 10 to 13, chapter 34 verses 4 to 5a.

D. Capture of the city, 13 verses 17 to 19, and 34 verses 5b to 8. E. Land becomes a desert, chapter 13 verse 20, and chapter 34 verses 9 to 10.

[5 : 47] F. Wild animals live there, chapter 13 verses 21 and 22, chapter 34 verses 11 to 15. These parallels would serve to bracket the larger section of chapters 13 to 35, which contain all of the oracles against the nations and the oracles against Judah.

The narrative material concerning the 701 BC Assyrian crisis that follows might be related to the material concerning the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war that precedes the section.

The Great Isaiah Scroll, one of the best preserved of the Dead Sea Scrolls, likely dating from the 2nd century BC, has a break in its text between chapters 33 and 34.

William Brownlee made the intriguing case that chapters 1 to 33 and 34 to 66 represent two paralleled panels of the book. Chapters 7 to 8, the material concerning Isaiah's address to King Ahaz during the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war, most obviously parallels with chapters 36 to 39, which relates Isaiah's address to King Hezekiah in the years around the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC. But Brownlee argued for an even more extensive mapping of one half onto the next. Brownlee's thesis involved the doubtful speculation that the text of Isaiah that the Qumran scribe originally employed only contained the first 33 chapters and that he had used a different text of Isaiah to complete the book.

[7 : 12] That larger text of Isaiah was, according to Brownlee, one whose latter half was produced not by Isaiah himself, but by a later Isianic school. The similarities of language between chapters 34 and 35 and later chapters, along with possible structural relations, are worth considering.

While we might discard some of the more speculative arguments for the text belonging to some later hand, we should appreciate the ways in which these chapters can both look forward and look backward within the text of Isaiah and in the process recognise something more of the overarching unity and structure of the book.

The opening verses of the chapters summon all of the nations to attention, much as the opening verses of chapter 24 did. The judgment, as there, is described in comprehensive and cosmic terms. In the Lord's anger, he sentences the nations to destruction. They would suffer an ignominious death. The bodies of their unburied slain, exposed and rotting, would fill the air with their putrefying stench.

The mountains would flow with their blood, both land and air polluted by their death. Chapter 13 used cosmic imagery in describing the downfall of Babylon. In verse 10, for instance, for the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light.

[8 : 26] The sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light. And in verse 13, therefore I will make the heavens tremble and the earth will be shaken out of its place at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

Here again, the prophet uses such imagery, speaking of the heavens rotting away, the skies being rolled up and the host of the stars falling like leaves from a tree. Revelation chapter 6 verses 12 to

14 employs imagery that is likely dependent upon verse 4 of our chapter.

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked and behold, there was a great earthquake and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up and every mountain in Ireland was removed from its place. The host of heaven would refer to the gods and rulers of the nations whose power and thrones would be brought low.

To the surprise of many readers and commentators, the Lord now turns to address Edom more particularly. This, as we have noted, is comparable to the way that Moab is singled out in chapter 25 in the more general eschatological section that follows the oracles against the nations in chapters 13 to 23.

[9 : 44] Some ingenious yet unpersuasive theories have been advanced to explain its position here. For instance, the idea that Edom ought to be interpreted as man, a theory which Jung attributes to Edward Kassane.

The reference to Edom here is also an argument used against those who want to claim that all the material in the book of Isaiah comes from the hand of the prophet himself. Edom, they argue, is clearly a focus of prophetic condemnation and declarations of judgment following their participation in the destruction and plundering of Jerusalem in 586 BC when the city fell to Babylon.

Were this passage they maintained dated to the historical period around 701 BC, its material would be quite incongruous with the actual situation. We might note that Edom is excluded from the earlier material against the nations in chapters 13 to 23.

John Oswalt suggests that such explanations for the singling out of Edom here are quite unnecessary as its inclusion is readily understood on other grounds. First, Edom, on account of its association with Esau, was Israel's apostate and rejected twin and the most fitting contrast to it. Second, they had long been opponents to Judah. Formerly under the reign of Judah, they had broken free from Judah over a century earlier during the reign of Jehoram. During the reign of Amaziah, earlier in the 8th century, Judah had fought against the Edomites, defeating them.

[11 : 05] But then Amaziah set up the gods of Edom as his own gods and was judged. Amos, whose ministry overlapped with the time of the beginning of Isaiah's own, had prophesied against Edom too.

Earlier in Isaiah's own ministry, during the reign of Ahaz, the Edomites had defeated Judah in battle, described in 2nd Chronicles chapter 28 verses 16 and 17. At that time, King Ahaz sent the king of Assyria for help, for the Edomites had again invaded and defeated Judah and carried away captives.

Most importantly, the singling out of Edom here, like the singling out of Moab earlier, is not on account of Edom being the most threatening or prominent opposing nation, but is representative and typical.

In chapter 24 verse 21, the Lord spoke of punishing the host of heaven, presumably referring to the false gods of the nations. The sword of the Lord drinking its fill in the heavens, described in verse 5, probably refers to such a judgment upon the demonic powers.

Having been victorious in the heavens, the Lord's sword descends upon the nations of the earth, focusing upon Edom in particular, here described as the people devoted to destruction. The destruction of Edom is described as if it were some sort of sacrifice.

[12 : 16] The Lord's sword is preparing animals and peoples for a great sacrifice in the Edomite city of Bosra, also mentioned in chapter 63. Within the sacrificial system, animals represented people and the animals described here likely represent various classes of persons in the land of Edom.

Much as the hyperbolic language of mountains flowing with blood was used in verse 3, so the land surrounding the great sacrifice of Edom would be like the land surrounding an altar, drinking up the blood that is poured out upon it.

This would be a day of vengeance and a year of recompense, an appointed time of divine justice and judgment, within which the Lord would deliver his people and act against all of their foes.

The rest of the chapter describes what will happen to the people devoted to destruction that Edom represents. Their streams would be turned into pitch and their soil into sulphur, rendering their land a devastated and impassable wasteland.

We might here recall the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah, upon whom the Lord cast down fiery destruction. After the Lord prepared the altar and its sacrifice, the land of Edom would become an adjuring conflagration, its flames and smoke unquenched, ascending like an unceasing testament to the Lord's just judgment upon his enemies.

[13 : 31] Isaiah describes the removal of its rulers, the overgrown ruins of its former habitations and the wild beasts and birds that would dwell in its condemned strongholds and fortresses.

We should immediately recognize the similarities between these descriptions and those of Babylon in chapter 13 verses 20 to 22. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations.

No Arab will pitch his tent there. No shepherds will make their flocks lie down there, but wild animals will lie down there and their houses will be full of howling creatures. Their ostriches will dwell and their wild goats will dance.

Hyenas will cry in its towers and jackals in the pleasant palaces. Its time is close at hand and its days will not be prolonged. These similarities strengthen the case for a relationship between chapters 34 and 5 and chapter 13, bracketing the larger body of material between them.

Oswald suggests that while we might see Babylon as the distant example of doomed human pride, Edom is the much nearer one, Judah's closest neighbor. The longer list of the desert and wild animals here is one potentially surprising feature of the prophecy.

[14 : 40] In verses 16 and 17, the prophet seems to declare that the destiny of the people devoted to destruction has been thoroughly and comprehensively determined down to the specific breeds of birds and animals that will dwell in their ruins and the fact that they would have mates.

The sentence, down to the smallest detail, has already been decreed and it is certain that it will be enacted upon them at the divinely appointed time. A question to consider, where else in Scripture do we see the juxtaposition of Israel and Edom?

