

Isaiah 32: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 32. Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule in justice. Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. Then the eyes of those who see will not be closed, and the ears of those who hear will give attention. The heart of the hasty will understand and know, and the tongue of the stammerers will hasten to speak distinctly.

The fool will no more be called noble, nor the scoundrel said to be honourable. For the fool speaks folly, and his heart is busy with iniquity, to practice ungodliness, to utter error concerning the Lord, to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink.

As for the scoundrel, his devices are evil. He plans wicked schemes to ruin the poor with lying words, even when the plea of the needy is right. But he who is noble plans noble things, and on noble things he stands. Rise up, you women who are at ease, hear my voice.

You complacent daughters, give ear to my speech. In little more than a year you will shudder, you complacent women. For the grape harvest fails, the fruit harvest will not come.

Tremble, you women who are at ease, shudder, you complacent ones. Strip and make yourself bare, and tie sackcloth around your waist. Beat your breasts for the pleasant feels, for the fruitful vine, for the soil of my people growing up in thorns and briars.

[1 : 3 2] Yes, for all the joyous houses in the exultant city. For the palace is forsaken, the populous city deserted. The hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, a joy of wild donkeys, a pasture of flocks, until the spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field, and the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places, and it will hail when the forest falls down, and the city will be utterly laid low. Happy are you who sow beside all waters, who let the feet of the ox and the donkey range free.

In Isaiah chapter 28 to 39, we have prophecies more directly addressed to Judah in the period prior to and during the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, with the crisis itself and other events surrounding it being recounted in the narrative of chapters 36 to 39. The preceding chapters, Isaiah chapter 28 to 31, contained five woe oracles, particularly warning Judah of the danger of going down to Egypt for aid.

In chapter 32, the blessing that the people could experience from the Lord is contrasted with their current grim state and the disaster that they currently face. This continues the argument of the earlier chapters in this section, which draw similar contrasts. Behind these contrasts between outcomes is a deeper contrast between faith in and fear of the Lord, and faith in and fear of the nations. The interpreter of chapter 32 is immediately faced with the question of the identity of the king who will reign in righteousness, introduced to us in verse 1. Is this a future messianic figure? Christopher Seitz argues that it is not. This oracle does not foretell this king's advent, but speaks of him as a present figure. This king has already been foretold, he argues, back in chapters 7 and 9 during the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war. Here it is important to consider the ways in which the crises of the Syro-Ephraimite war and of the 701 BC Assyrian invasion are paralleled in these chapters in Isaiah, juxtaposing the two situations and the contrasting responses of Ahaz and Hezekiah. The woe oracles of the preceding chapters, Seitz argues, were not levelled against Hezekiah, rather their condemnations focus upon other leading figures in Judah. Hezekiah as the righteous king exemplifies wisdom and trust that contrasts with his contemporaries. Many commentators remark upon the wisdom style of this section, and this might give some support to an alternative reading, where the king described here is not an actual king, whether currently present

or foretold, but a portrait of what a wise and good king would be like.

[4 : 28] Brother Charles observes the similarity of the language used to describe the rule of the righteous king here, and the language used of the Lord's own righteous rule, back in chapter 25 verses 4-5.

For you have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat, for the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall, like heat in a dry place. You subdue the noise of the foreigners, as heat by the shade of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is put down. The righteous king is a means by which the Lord's own sheltering of his people is accomplished. He protects his people from the assaults of foreign enemies, and is also a refuge from injustice for those within the land. The justice he administers is like shade in heat, and refreshing and reviving water in the desert. Righteous kings are also exemplars for their people, setting the tone for the rest of the people by their behaviour and their just judgements. This is, of course, a recurring theme in the history of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Even in modern societies, the monarch can be seen as the leading layperson, and their behaviour and values have a significant impact upon the values of their subjects, either giving licence to their wickedness or encouraging their faithfulness. Through the righteous king, the Lord will address the spiritual dullness and insensitivity of the people, opening eyes and ears that have formerly been closed. The establishment of righteousness and justice on the throne transforms social values. Fools and scoundrels, here described in their false and wicked speech that misguides others, and their oppression of the poor and needy, are no longer held in honour and esteem, and no longer enjoy social status. Their despicable character is revealed for what it is when it is seen next to the noble and righteous ruler. It might be worth considering the attention given to the wisdom tradition during the reign of Hezekiah when reading this passage.

Large sections of the book of Proverbs were compiled during his reign. The book of Proverbs has several Proverbs concerning righteous kings and their profound positive influence over their realms and people. Proverbs chapter 16 verses 10 to 15. An oracle is on the lips of a king. His mouth does not sin in judgment.

A just balance and scales are the Lord's. All the weights in the bag are his work. It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness. Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves him who speaks what is right. A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it.

In the light of a king's face there is life, and his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. Proverbs chapter 25 verses 4 and 5. Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel.

[7 : 20] Take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness. Back in chapter 3, Isaiah prophesied against the wealthy women of Jerusalem. There we saw that the women represented the character of the society more generally.

They were the focus of its gaze, and they exemplified its values. Here in verse 9 and following, Isaiah again addresses such women, as he describes the disaster that must come upon the nation prior to its restoration.

Perhaps the women are here focused upon because they are especially associated with the joy and the fruitfulness of the nation. They are the ones who lead the songs at harvest time. The rich young women are the ones in whom the beauty and vivacity of the people are most fully seen.

They are the ones from whom new life comes. They are the ones living in the season of new love. Consequently, the instruction given to them to strip themselves of their finery, to humiliate themselves, to don mourning attire, and to take up a lament, makes the judgment stand out in its sharpest relief.

The cause of their mourning is the utter devastation of the once fruitful land, and of the prosperous and populous city. Formerly inhabited places will be reduced to wilderness ruins.

[8 : 30] However, this sets the scene for a remarkable reversal, described in the concluding verses of the chapter. The Lord would pour out his spirit, giving his personal presence and empowerment to his people, like water to revive the parched wilderness.

The effect of the spirit's advent would be miraculous fruitfulness and growth. Formerly barren lands would become fruitful fields, and fruitful fields would become glorious forests.

This fruitfulness is, in verse 16, directly connected with the coming of justice and righteousness. The just and righteous rule of the Lord heals and enlivens the land.

Behind much of the imagery of this section is a comparison between the Lord's justice in relationship to his people, and the rain and clouds in relation to the thirsty earth. The outcome of the coming of the Lord's justice would be peace, a sort of rest and well-being enjoyed in good relations with God, one's neighbour and the land.

There would also be quietness and trust, the confidence of those who know that the Lord will provide for all of their needs and protection, and who happily commit themselves to his charge. The nation that has just been overrun by a foreign army would now dwell in peace and in security.

[9 : 41] Verse 19 is a surprising interruption. Perhaps it's a reference to the judgment that Jerusalem will have to pass through before they are delivered. Alternatively, it might refer to the bringing down of the forest of Assyria.

Their city and power would be laid low, and the Lord's people would be lifted up. Verse 20 describes a situation of plenty, where the people have so many crops that they aren't afraid of them being destroyed by the waters, or by donkeys and oxen treading upon them.

A question to consider, what are some of the specific ways in which a just ruler can set the tone for the behaviour of their entire people?