

Isaiah 31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 31. Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong. But do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or consult the Lord. And yet he is wise and brings disaster. He does not call back his words, but will arise against the house of the evildoers, and against the helpers of those who work iniquity. The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they will all perish together. For thus the Lord said to me, As a lion or a young lion growls over his prey, and when a band of shepherds is called out against him, he is not terrified by their shouting, or daunted at their noise. So the Lord of hosts will come down to fight on Mount Zion and on its hill, like birds hovering. So the Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem. He will protect and deliver it. He will spare and rescue it. Turn to him from whom people have deeply revolted,

O children of Israel. For in that day everyone shall cast away his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which your hands have sinfully made for you. And the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of man, and a sword, not of man, shall devour him. And he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall be put to forced labour. His rock shall pass away in terror, and his officers desert the standard in panic, declares the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

Isaiah chapter 31 continues chapter 30's warnings against turning to Egypt for aid. The Assyrians came against Judah in 701 BC, defeated 46 of their fortified cities, and besieged Jerusalem. In the crisis, the leaders of Judah turned their gaze to the south, to Egypt, for aid. Israel's history with Egypt justified profound wariness of such an alliance. A former alliance with Egypt during the reign of Solomon had ended badly, with Shishak of Egypt coming up against Jerusalem, and plundering it in the reign of Rehoboam, Solomon's son, in addition to his harbouring fugitives such as Hadad the Edomite, and Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who would later be thorns in the side of the house of David.

During his reign, Solomon became the leading weapons trader in the region, exporting Egyptian horses and chariots to the kings of the Hittites and the Arameans. However, in forming a marriage alliance with Egypt, and in going to Egypt for horses, Solomon had broken key commandments given to the king in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy chapter 17 verse 16, in one of the laws of the king, we read, Only he must not acquire many horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, you shall never return that way again.

[2 : 5 0] Horses and chariots were essential elements of any powerful ancient Near Eastern war machine, and Egypt was the best place to go to get them. Chariots, the tanks of their day, were one of the reasons why the Israelite tribes in the plains had struggled to dispossess the Canaanites in those regions of the land, who had iron chariots. While much of Judah's terrain was not well suited for chariots, they were a prestige war machine, and a large force of chariots and horses projected an image of power. In the right conditions, they could be immensely powerful. When Assyria came up against Judah, Sennacherib had a great number of chariots. When he marked Hezekiah and his forces at Jerusalem, the Rabshakeh had implied that even if the men of Judah were given many horses and chariots, they wouldn't have the competence to ride them. 2 Kings chapter 18 verses 23 and 24.

Come now, make a wager with my master, the king of Assyria. I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?

This chapter opens with another woe statement, building upon the message of the preceding chapter. Many in Judah had put their hope in military might and weaponry to save them. If only,

they reasoned, we had the latest chariots and the finest horses, we would be able to resist the Assyrians. However, the Lord, who was supposed to be their guard and their king, was utterly disregarded in their considerations. They put more store in technology and human might than they did in the creator of the universe. Trusting in their own shrewdness and real politic, they were unmindful of the wisdom of the Lord and of the certainty of his word and counsel, and yet he would bring disaster upon them and their machinations would not be able to withstand his plans. The Lord's purposes cannot be thwarted or frustrated. He acts with sure power and in accordance with his holiness against all evil. Much as in his message concerning the ultimately frail humanity behind the terrifying Syro-Ephraimite alliance in chapter 7, the Lord seeks to demythologise the might of Egypt. While Egypt was likely perceived as an immense and near irresistible power by many of Isaiah's contemporaries, the Lord contrasts them with him and their power with his power. The contrast is nothing less than that between man and God, between the frailty of the flesh and the immense power of the spirit. If Judah relied upon Egypt for its deliverance, it would find that Egypt would not be able to bear its weight. When the Lord stretched out his hand in judgment, Egypt would fail, as would Judah, with a devastating outcome for both. What is the alternative to looking to Egypt for aid? From verse 4 to the end of the short chapter, the Lord describes the help that he can provide to his people. He compares himself to a lion that has taken a lamb. Even were a whole band of shepherds to come against him, they could not scare him off, nor could they separate him from his prey. When the Lord comes to fight at Mount Zion, he will display the same persistence and ferocity in the face of all of their foes, protecting Zion from their clutches. The second comparison is to hovering birds, presumably over their nests and young when a predator comes near. Besides the fearless persistence of the lion, the Lord will lovingly shield his people as the mother bird might protect her chicks.

Similar imagery is used in the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 9 to 12. But the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness he encircled him. He cared for him. He kept him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions. The Lord alone guided him. No foreign god was with him. In such a manner the Lord would deliver his people. The prophet exhorts the people to turn back to the Lord, repenting of their iniquity. In verse 22 of the preceding chapter, Isaiah had declared, Then you will defile your carved idols overlaid with silver, and your gold-plated metal images. You will scatter them as unclean things. You will say to them, Be gone. In verse 7, the people's casting away of their idols is again described. As the Lord defends and redeems his people, the futility, impotence, and wickedness of idols will become apparent to the people, and they will entirely reject them. The Lord himself, not human power, would strike the Assyrians, causing them to flee. We might see the fulfillment of this in chapter 37 verses 36 to 37. And the angel of the

[7 : 29] Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and returned home, and lived at Nineveh. The Lord was described as the rock of Israel in verse 29 of the preceding chapter. Assyria has its own rock, perhaps in Sennacherib, perhaps in a mighty city, or perhaps in a false god. However, their rock would pass away, while the rock of Israel would stand unmoved.

Again in the preceding chapter, Isaiah had spoken of a thousand men of Judah fleeing before one, on account of the people's sin. This possibly looked back to Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 30 in the Song of Moses. However, the verse that follows that contrasts the Lord's people's source of strength with that of their enemies. For their rock is not as our rock, our enemies are by themselves. The chapter concludes by speaking of the Lord's bond with Jerusalem, but in terms of his fire that burns there, we might think back here to the description of Jerusalem as aerial, or altar at the beginning of chapter 29. The fire and furnace of the Lord makes us think of the altar, and also of the consuming holiness of the Lord that would destroy all that would violate the place of his dwelling. A question to consider. Verse 3 contrasts flesh and spirit. Where else in the Old Testament might we get a sense of what this contrast involves?