

Isaiah 30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 30. Ah, stubborn children, declares the Lord, who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin, who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt.

Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation. For though his officials are at Zoan, and his envoys reach Haines, everyone comes to shame through a people that cannot profit them, that brings neither help nor profit, but shame and disgrace.

An oracle on the beasts of the Negev. Through a land of trouble and anguish, from where come the lioness and the lion, the adder and the flying fiery serpent, they carry their riches on the backs of donkeys, and their treasures on the humps of camels, to a people that cannot profit them.

Egypt's help is worthless and empty, therefore I have called her Rahab who sits still. And now, go, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.

For they are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord, who say to the seers, Do not see, and to the prophets, Do not prophesy to us what is right.

[1 : 22] Speak to us smooth things. Prophecy illusions. Leave the way. Turn aside from the path. Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel. Therefore, thus says the Holy One of Israel, Because you despise this word, and trust in oppression and perverseness, and rely on them, therefore this iniquity shall be to you like a breach in a high wall, bulging out and about to collapse, whose breaking comes suddenly, in an instant.

And its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel, that is smashed so ruthlessly, that among its fragments not a shard is found with which to take fire from the hearth, or to dip up water out of the cistern.

For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, In returning and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. But you were unwilling, and you said, No, we will flee upon horses, therefore you shall flee away, and we will ride upon swift steeds, therefore your pursuers shall be swift.

A thousand shall flee at the threat of one, at the threat of five you shall flee, till you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill. Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.

For the Lord is a God of justice, blessed are all those who wait for him. For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry, as soon as he hears it, he answers you.

[2 : 54] And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your teacher, and your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, This is the way, walk in it, when you turn to the right, or when you turn to the left.

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!

And he will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and bread, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. In that day your livestock will graze in large pastures, and the oxen and the donkeys that work the ground will eat seasoned fodder, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork.

And on every lofty mountain, and every high hill, there will be brooks running with water, in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. Moreover, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the Lord binds up the brokenness of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

Behold, the name of the Lord comes from afar, burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke. His lips are full of fury, and his tongue is like a devouring fire.

[4 : 16] His breath is like an overflowing stream that reaches up to the neck, to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction, and to place on the jaws of the peoples a bridle that leads astray.

You shall have a song, as in the night when a holy feast is kept, and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the Lord, to the rock of Israel.

And the Lord will cause his majestic voice to be heard, and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger, and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and storm and hailstones.

The Assyrians will be terror-stricken at the voice of the Lord when he strikes with his rod, and every stroke of the appointed staff that the Lord lays on them will be to the sound of tambourines and lyres.

Battling with brandished arm, he will fight with them, For a burning place has long been prepared. Indeed, for the king it is made ready, its pyre made deep and wide, with fire and wood in abundance.

[5 : 16] The breath of the Lord, like a stream of sulphur, kindles it. The section of Isaiah, running from chapter 28 to 39, speaks to Judah in the years prior to 701 BC, and the invasion of the Assyrians under Sennacherib, concluding with a narrative account of the events of the siege and other key events in King Hezekiah's reign.

The subsection we are currently looking at focuses more directly upon Judah, and runs from chapter 28 to 33, a series of chapters containing five woe statements.

Faced with the rising Assyrian threat, especially considering the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, Judah and its leaders were tempted to turn to Egypt for aid.

These intentions had likely been alluded to in the preceding chapter, in verses 15 and 16. Ah, you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, Who sees us?

Who knows us? You turn things upside down. Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, He did not make me? Or the thing formed say of him who formed it?

[6 : 20] He has no understanding. There were also warnings about the unreliability of Egypt back in chapter 20, in the context of the recapture of Ashdod by the Assyrians in 711 BC, as we read in verses 3 to 5 of that chapter.

Then the Lord said, As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt.

Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope and Egypt their boast. In chapters 30 and 31, however, Isaiah addresses the plan to go to Egypt for aid much more directly. The Lord is the one to whom Judah should be turning, rather than the unreliable Egypt, from whom they will not receive the help for which they are hoping. The plans in question might have been the last roll of the dice, perhaps one forced upon Hezekiah by those around him, when all other avenues of help seem to have failed.

The history of Israel and Judah with Egypt was, of course, extensive. Most notably, the Lord had delivered them from Egypt by Moses at the time of the Exodus. At that time, the Lord had warned them about returning to Egypt and of the dangers of looking to Egypt for military aid, going back there to get horses and chariots.

[7 : 39] King Solomon had ended up forming a marriage treaty with Egypt, marrying the daughter of the king of Egypt. He became an intermediary for Egypt in its trading in the region. Most troubling of all, he ended up emulating the pharaohs in various ways, not least in his turning from the Lord, toleration of idols, and subjection of his people to a sort of bondage.

Key enemies of Solomon took refuge in Egypt and, after Solomon's death, Shishak, king of Egypt, came up against Jerusalem and plundered it in the fifth year of the reign of Rehoboam, Solomon's

son, stripping it of many of Solomon's treasures.

Alliance with Egypt, then, had very bad precedent. Judah's attempt to ally with Egypt was an act manifesting their stubborn rebellion against the Lord. John Oswald notes that their adding sin to sin in verse 1 might refer to their adding of the sin of concealment to their sin of alliance with Egypt. Another possibility is that this recalls the earlier sin of Judah during the reign of King Ahaz when they turned to Assyria for help during the Syro-Ephraimite war against the word of the Lord. Assyria had crushed Damascus and then also Israel, but now was turning to Egypt for aid against the Assyrians from whom they had earlier sought help.

Rather than turning to the Lord, their God and their true king, they returned to the idolatrous Egyptians from whom he had once delivered them. Egypt was at that time under the 25th dynasty, ruled by Nubians from Cush, who had taken over Egypt.

[9:04] While they had consolidated their rule in the land of Egypt by this time, the Egyptians were definitely not the powerful force in the wider region that they once had been. The prophecy underlines the fact that Egypt would not be an effective or reliable source for aid.

Verse 6 likely involves some sort of wordplay. The word for oracle is the same as the word for burden and is a word used elsewhere for burdens carried by beasts. The beasts of the Negev here probably describe the wild animals on the dangerous wilderness path between Jerusalem and the land of Egypt.

In seeking this alliance, Judah is sending riches into treacherous territory, not merely in the literal sense of the dangerous route that their envoys have to take, but metaphorically, in the futility of the venture more generally.

Even if they succeed in reaching Egypt with their treasures, Egypt itself is impotent and will be unable to help them. They should have learned that lesson from Ashdod a decade earlier.

Indeed, the Lord describes Egypt as Rahab who sits still. Rahab is the legendary sea monster, a monster that along with Leviathan can sometimes stand for foreign powers.

[10:10] Yet for all of its supposed might, this chaos monster isn't going to budge, not possessing sufficient power to act. This chapter began by describing Judah as stubborn children, and in verse 8, the prophet turns to characterize and expose their sinfulness more directly.

Books, scrolls, and tablets are not merely vehicles for text-bearing information. As physical objects themselves, they can serve a purpose. Whether as a literal instruction or as prophetic imagery underlining the seriousness of the message, the Lord commands Isaiah to write it on a tablet, with the tablet functioning as a memorial and a witness against them from that time forward.

The exact message in view is unclear. Presumably, it was some portion of this section from chapter 28 to 33, or maybe even the whole. Perhaps one of the reasons for this writing down of the message was due to their refusal to heed the message at that time.

After they had learned their error the hard way and were in a more chastened state of mind, then the witness of Isaiah's word against them could be heard. Their unwillingness to hear was displayed in active resistance to the seers and the prophets.

Like fools, they insisted upon flattery and obliging words. They have made up their minds and they are not about to allow the Lord to gainsay them. They declare that they do not want to hear any more of the Holy One of Israel.

[11:28] Probably not literally, but in their hearts that is the import. So the Holy One of Israel addresses them. Since they had so rejected his counsel, the judgment for their sin in this matter would hang like the sword of Damocles over their heads, dooming them to sudden and devastating disaster from which there would be no recovery.

Their one hope had been returning to the Lord in repentance, trusting in him and holding their nerve. However, they would not trust the Lord, trusting rather to their own schemes in order to escape the impending crisis, ultimately fearing the Assyrians much more than their God.

For this reason, the Lord would deliver them into the hands of their foes, empowering their enemies against them. Isaiah's words in verse 17 recall the words of Moses in his song in Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 30.

How could one have chased a thousand and two have put ten thousand to flight unless their rock had sold them and the Lord had given them up? Few would be left as they fled from the face of the Assyrians.

The flagstaff that remained on the top of the mountain might be a reference to the beleaguered Jerusalem which ultimately survived the siege even when the rest of Judah was overrun by the

Assyrians.

[12:37] Perhaps this fragile remnant explains the claim of the next verse where the Lord declares his intent to be gracious to them when the time comes. The chapter now turns to a positive message of salvation.

Judgment would not be the Lord's final word to the nation. They would be restored on the other side and the Lord would be gracious and merciful to them. The city that had once been devastated would be restored and they would be delivered from their distress.

Their present suffering, the bitterness of the bread and the water of the siege rations, would be for their teaching and he would again reveal himself as their teacher instructing them in the way that they should go presumably chiefly through the words of his prophets.

This word however would be near to them at all times giving them confidence of sure guidance as they move forward as a people. One of the immediate effects of the nearness of the Lord and his instruction would be the utter rejection of idolatry which they would completely abhor they would desecrate and violently cast away their false gods.

The Lord would bless the land with rain and fertility as he promised in the blessings of the covenant. As the people turned back to him they would experience the full measure of his goodness towards them.

[13:47] That goodness would enrich and heal every area of their lives and land. Instead of their current darkness and distress the coming of the Lord would be the advent of glorious light.

In another theophanic depiction of the glorious and dreadful coming of the Lord Isaiah describes the Lord coming in his wrath against the nations. More particularly Isaiah speaks of the name of the Lord coming.

John Watts suggests that this usage is unique. We would usually expect to hear of the glory of the Lord coming. The name of the Lord is connected with his character reputation and honour. It is the object of his people's worship and trust.

Exodus chapter 23 verse 21 also describes the name of the Lord being in the angel of the covenant sent before them in the Exodus. The description of the advent of the Lord also recalls the earlier description of the coming of the Assyrians in chapter 8 verses 7 to 8.

Therefore behold the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the river mighty and many the king of Assyria and all his glory and it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks and it will sweep on into Judah it will overflow and pass on reaching even to the neck and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land O Emmanuel.

[15:02] Now however a greater power is coming and those who once overwhelmed Judah would themselves be overwhelmed. The victory and deliverance of the Lord would cause the people to rejoice.

In chapter 28 verses 17 to 18 the Lord had warned Judah of the consequences of its alliance with Egypt 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.

Once again there would be a great reversal as the Lord struck the Assyrians with the same devastating power with which he had struck his people by them. The Lord himself would fight against his people's foes and as he did so they would worship.

He would do so with an appointed staff the means of Assyria's destruction has already been set apart for the purpose. Likewise a funeral pyre for Assyria has also been appointed just waiting for the time that its king will be laid upon it.

Assyria is doomed and when its day finally comes the Lord would light the pyre all the might of Assyria being consumed as its flames licked up its corpse. A question to consider how could we summarise the contrast between Egypt and the Lord as sources of help and assistance and as objects of trust that this chapter draws.

[16:30] ■■