Isaiah 29: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Isaiah chapter 29. Ah, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped, add year to year, let the feast run there round. Yet I will distress Ariel, and there shall be moaning and lamentation, and she shall be to me like an Ariel. And I will encamp against you all around, and will besiege you with towers, and I will raise siege works against you. And you will be brought low, from the earth you shall speak, and from the dust your speech will be bowed down. Your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and from the dust your speech shall whisper. But the multitude of your foreign foes shall be like small dust, and the multitude of the ruthless like passing chaff. And in an instant, suddenly, you will be visited by the Lord of hosts, with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise, with whirlwind, and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.

And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel, all that fight against her and her stronghold, and distress her, shall be like a dream, a vision of the night. As when a hungry man dreams, and behold, he is eating, and awakes with his hunger not satisfied. Or as when a thirsty man dreams, and behold, he is drinking, and awakes faint, with his thirst not quenched. So shall the multitude of all the nations be that fight against Mount Zion. Astonish yourselves, and be astonished. Blind yourselves, and be blind. Be drunk, but not with wine. Stagger, but not with strong drink. For the Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes, the prophets, and covered your heads, the seers. And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, Read this, he says, I cannot, for it is sealed.
And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, Read this, he says, I cannot read. And the Lord said, Because this people draw near with their mouth, and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men. Therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden. 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, He has no understanding? Is it not yet a very little while until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest? In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. For the ruthless shall come to nothing, and the scoffers cease, and all who watch to do evil shall be cut off, who by a word make a man out to be an offender, and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate, and with an empty plea turn aside him who is in the right. Therefore thus says the Lord, who redeemed Abraham concerning the house of Jacob, Jacob shall no more be ashamed, no more shall his face grow pale. For when he sees his children, the work of my hands in his midst, they will sanctify my name, they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel. And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding, and those who murmur will accept instruction.
[3:41] Isaiah chapter 29 is the second chapter in the larger section running from chapter 28 to 39, and in the subsection from chapter 28 to 33. In the preceding sections from chapters 13 to 27, Isaiah addressed the nations and the judgments that the Lord was going to bring upon them immediately through Assyria in the years around 701 BC, and later through Babylon. Chapters 13 to 23 contain the oracles concerning the nations, and chapters 24 to 27 a more general eschatological vision of the Lord's judgment and transformation of the earth. The chapters from chapter 28 also deal with the years leading up to 701 BC, and Assyria's invasion of Judah. However, the focus is

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now upon Judah itself, which seems to be turning to Egypt for aid, rather than to the Lord. There are five repetitions of woe in this larger section, in chapter 28 verse 1, in chapter 29 verse 1, verse 15, in chapter 30 verse 1, 31 verse 1, and 33 verse 1. In the preceding chapter, Israel was described as engaged in drunken revelries, insensitive to the dreadful fate that was about to come upon it.

The beginning of the woe oracle of chapter 29 speaks of another city that is dull to its situation in its celebration of feasts. Jerusalem's feasts here seem to be the feasts of the festal calendar, but the implication is that they are being celebrated in a manner that produces the same moral insensitivity, perhaps on the basis of some measure of the sort of presumption described back in chapter 1. They are continually going through the repeated motions of the annual feasts, yet are getting no nearer to God. The meaning of the term Ariel is debated by scholars, while various proposals for the meaning of the term have been advanced, for instance as Lion of God, the most likely is that it is a reference to the altar. The term is used with that sense in Ezekiel chapter 43 verses 15 and 16. This would be a fitting term for a description of Jerusalem that centres the cult of the temple, as the reference to the annual feasts in verse 1 might support. It would also be a fitting term for the wordplay at the end of verse 2, where Jerusalem is not merely referred to as Ariel, but where the Lord says that she will be to him like an Ariel. Jerusalem, the city of the altar, would become like an altar, with the nation the sacrifice to be offered upon it. David had encamped in Jerusalem, in verse 1, making it his capital. However, the Lord would encamp against the city, seen in the forces of the invading Assyrians. This encamping against Jerusalem would involve the erection of siege works and towers, for which the Assyrians were renowned. Jerusalem and Judah would be brought down to the dust and the earth, perhaps to be understood as a claim that they would descend to the grave, becoming little more than the shadowy ghost of a departed city. Yet although they might consider the foreign power that so defeated them to be invincible and invulnerable, that foe was actually like dust and chaff on the threshing floor, which would be easily removed when the wind of the Lord came upon them. And come upon them it would,
In theophanic language, which might recall the appearance of the Lord at Sinai, for instance, verses 5 and 6 describe the terrible advent of the Lord. In the face of the Lord's glorious appearance, the nations would be like a dream, which swiftly vanishes and is forgotten when one awakes.
[7:04] As the dream describes a man thinking that his hunger or thirst is being satisfied, when, in fact, he will await to discover that his hunger hasn't been assuaged nor his thirst quenched, so Assyria would find that Jerusalem, upon which it fancied it would feast, has been removed from its clutches. However, as verse 10 describes Jerusalem's own leaders as insensible, it is also possible that they are the ones referred to here, with the point being the unreality of a dream. As if frustrated with the insensitivity of the people to the word of the Lord, the prophet tells them completely to incapacitate themselves, like making themselves blind or drunk. In this they would merely be enacting the judgment of insensitivity to the word of the Lord that the Lord has afflicted them with. Earlier in the book, in Isaiah's commission, in chapter 6 verses 9 and 10, the Lord had said to him, Go and say to this people, Keep on hearing, but do not understand.

Keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. The judgment with which they were judged particularly afflicted their prophets and seers, those who were supposed to give the people guidance and vision from the Lord.
As the pressing issues of the day were those of foreign policy, the word of the prophets who had guidance from the Lord would be particularly important. Yet the vision of the Lord, described in verses 11 and 12, had become like a closed book to the people. The book was sealed, and even if it were opened, they would not have the wisdom and the knowledge to read it. All of their supposed worship and devotion to the Lord is superficial and hollow. They pay lip service to the Lord, they go through the religious motions, but their hearts are far from him, and what might appear to the unaware as genuine religious devotion is merely a rote following of the teaching of the priests. The Lord, however, is going to shake things up. He's going to bring a shock upon the people, performing wonders that dismay all of their wise men. Verses 15 and 16 describe what is likely the planning of the counsellors of Hezekiah, who are seeking to form an alliance with Egypt, rather than heeding what the Lord has said concerning the situation. The Lord had said that he would crush the Assyrians, and that they should not turn to Egypt, and yet they are acting as if they can keep their planning secret from him, as if he would not hold them to account. All of this is, as the Lord says, to

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turn things upside down.
It is the Lord who is the creator. It is the Lord who is the potter. It is the Lord whose plans will not fall to the ground. In their great presumption, they think that they are wiser than God. In just a short period of time, if only they would heed the Lord, there would be a dramatic reversal of the situation. Verse 17 might be referring to barren places made fruitful, or alternatively to the cutting down of great trees. It seems more likely to me that there is a reversal being emphasised here.
The great trees of Lebanon would be brought down, and the land would be made into a fruitful field, and on the other hand, the fruitful field would become a mighty forest of cedars. Great trees elsewhere represent the powers and rulers of a people. The mighty would be brought low, and the weak of the people lifted up. The spiritual insensitivity of the people described earlier in the chapter would also be addressed. Blindness and deafness would be reversed, and people would hear the word of the Lord. The poor and the meek would rejoice in the Lord. The ruthless, the scoffer, and those who watch to do evil would all be cut off. The ruthless are the cruel and oppressive. The scoffers are those who actively undermine the law of the Lord by mocking both it and the righteous, and those who watch to do evil are predatory oppressors. In the following verse, we see that these people are using the perversion of justice to get their ways. They are using false testimony, with a word making a man out to be an offender. They are using legal trips and traps to subvert and frustrate the righteous in his cause, and they are using the multiplication of empty words to obscure justice. In verse 22, the
[11:06] Lord brings the patriarchs into the picture, Abraham and Jacob. Jacob, who has formerly been ashamed looking at his offspring, will no longer be so. His descendants will come to honour the Lord as holy, and even those who have gone astray will be reformed.

A question to consider, at the end of this chapter, with the reference to Jacob and Abraham, issues of spiritual paternity are brought into view. What are some of the ways in which we see scripture using people's relationship with their forefathers as a means of exhortation and challenge?
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