

Isaiah 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 03 November 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 16. Send the Lamb to the ruler of the land, from Selah by way of the desert, to the mount of the daughter of Zion. Like fleeing birds, like a scattered nest, so are the daughters of Moab at the fords of the Anon. Give counsel, grant justice, make your shade like night at the height of noon, shelter the outcasts, do not reveal the fugitive, let the outcasts of Moab sojourn among you, be a shelter to them from the destroyer, when the oppressor is no more and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples underfoot has vanished from the land. Then a throne will be established in steadfast love, and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David, one who judges and seeks justice, and is swift to do righteousness. We have heard of the pride of Moab, how proud he is, of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence. In his idle boasting he is not right. Therefore let Moab wail for Moab, let everyone wail, mourn utterly stricken for the raising cakes of Kir Harasath, for the fields of

Heshbon languish, and the vine of Sidma. The lords of the nations have struck down its branches, which reached to Jeza and strayed to the desert. Its shoots spread abroad and passed over the sea.

Therefore I weep with the weeping of Jeza for the vine of Sidma. I drench you with my tears, O Heshbon and Eliela, for over your summer fruit and your harvest the shout has ceased, and joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field, and in the vineyards no songs are sung, no cheers are raised, no treader treads out wine in the presses. I have put an end to the shouting. Therefore my inner parts moan like a liar for Moab, and my inmost self for Kir Harasath.

And when Moab presents himself, when he wearies himself on the high place, when he comes to his sanctuary to pray, he will not prevail. This is the word that the Lord spoke concerning Moab in the past. But now the Lord has spoken, saying, In three years, like the years of a hired worker, the glory of Moab will be brought into contempt, in spite of all his great multitude, and those who remain will be very few and feeble. Isaiah chapter 15 contained a lament for Moab, Judah's neighbour, a nation situated largely to the east of the Dead Sea. Moab was the son of Lot's eldest daughter through her incestuous relations with her father. Her sister bore Ammon, the forefather of the Ammonites, through relations with Lot too. Toward the end of the lament of the preceding chapter, Moabites were fleeing to Zoar, much as Lot and his family had done at the time of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, it's likely that some of the Moabites were intending to take refuge in Judah. The opening five verses of this chapter are challenging to understand, and various lines of interpretation have been followed by different commentators.

They seem to relate back to the description of refugees from Moab in the preceding chapter, whether or not there is a strong literary connection between the two sections or not. However, it is unclear whether these are the words of Moabite refugees appealing for asylum, or whether they are the words of Zion, exhorting Judah to make room for the refugees from Moab.

[3 : 1 1] An important associated question is whether we should read the section that follows as the response to the opening five verses, or as a more independent section or oracle. If the opening section is the message of Moabite refugees, and the verses that follow are Judah's response, it might seem as though the Moabite's appeal for shelter is denied.

Beyond this, there is the question of whether seemingly sincere messianic sentiments, such as those of verse 5, are conceivable in the mouth of Moabites. My inclination is to take the opening section as the words of the Moabites, and the section that follows as a more general reflection upon the situation facing Moab. This would give the opening five verses a more hopeful flavour. Read this way, Moab is sending messengers to Zion, describing their desperate plight and begging for asylum. They are a scattered and vulnerable remnant at the river crossing on the borders of their land, and also sending a message from a foreign land if Selah is in Edom. Alternatively, Selah

might refer to one of Moab's own strongholds, a place to which they had retreated. Comparing themselves to birds whose nest had been destroyed, they begged Judah to take them in and to show compassion for them in their time of crisis. The Moabites are presented as expressing confidence in the Lord's promise to establish the throne of David and peace through the reign of the Messiah, something that has already been referred to at several junctures in the book to this point. These could be read as words that the Lord or the prophet is putting in the mouths of the Moabites, presenting their appeal for sanctuary in an idealised way, suggesting that this is a way in which the Lord's promise of bringing the nations to Zion might be fulfilled in part. Zion and its Davidic king can be a site of sanctuary for the nations in their distress, a beacon of hope and righteousness to the needy and the oppressed of the nations. In such a manner the Lord would fulfil some of the promise of chapter 2 verses 1 to 4. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills and all the nations shall flow to it and many people shall come and say, Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of

Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall decide disputes for many peoples and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Verses 6 to 12 should, I believe, be read as a broader reflection upon Moab's pride and its downfall, although some, such as Christopher Seitz, argue that they should be understood as a rejection of the earlier request of Moab for asylum. If this is the case, then we would probably need to read the earlier statements of the Moabites concerning the Davidic Messiah as insincere flattery. I don't believe that this is persuasive as a reading. A consistent theme in Isaiah to this point has been the Lord's humbling of the pride of the peoples, and Moab's pride is well known. The nation of Moab is compared to a spreading vine. The vine of Moab spread throughout its land and beyond its borders, but now its branches are being cut off. With the cutting off of the nation's vine, its fruitfulness is being denied and the joy of harvest is being removed. Instead of the joyful cries of the harvesters and those treading out the wine in the presses, the nation is filled with mourning. Once again the Lord himself mourns for Moab, even as Moab, in its idolatrous worship, finds that its prayers and its sacrifices are offered in vain. We should recognize the extensive similarities between this passage and the prophecy concerning Moab in Jeremiah chapter 48, which also uses material from the book of Numbers. These similarities are especially noticeable in verses 29 to 36. We have heard of the pride of Moab. He is very proud of his loftiness, his pride and his arrogance, and the haughtiness of his heart. I know his insolence, declares the Lord. His boasts are false, his deeds are false.

Therefore I wail for Moab. I cry out for all Moab. For the men of Kir Haraseth I mourn. More than for Jazer I weep for you, O vine of Sidmer. Your branches passed over the sea, reached to the sea of Jazer. On your summer fruits and your grapes the destroyer has fallen.

Gladness and joy have been taken away from the fruitful land of Moab. I have made the wine cease from the wine presses. No one treads them with shouts of joy. The shouting is not the shout of joy.

[7 : 41] From the outcry at Heshbon even to Eliela, as far as Jehaz, they utter their voice. From Zoar to Horonayim and Eglash Shalishia, for the waters of Nimrim also have become desolate. And I will bring to an end in Moab, declares the Lord, him who offers sacrifice in the high place and makes offerings to his God. Therefore my heart moans for Moab like a flute, and my heart moans like a flute for the men of Kir Haraseth. Therefore the riches they gained have perished. In the commonalities between Jeremiah's material and the material from this chapter in Isaiah, perhaps we have evidence of a common tradition that lies behind both of them. This evidence is the way in which words of prophecy could be moved from one context to another. Words addressed to Moab at the end of the 8th century, for instance, could also be applied to Moab in the early 6th century. At the end of this chapter, however, words of more general judgment concerning Moab are applied to a very specific time scale.

Whether or not he did so through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord had previously spoken these words concerning Moab. Now, however, within a period of three years, the Lord would bring a signal destruction upon the nation of Moab. A question to consider, why might a Davidic kingdom receiving refugees from Moab be particularly appropriate?