

Isaiah 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 15, an oracle concerning Moab. Because R of Moab is laid waste in the night, Moab is undone. Because Ker of Moab is laid waste in the night, Moab is undone.

He has gone up to the temple and to Dibon, to the high places to weep. Over Nebo and over Medibor, Moab wails. On every head is baldness, every beard is shorn.

In the streets they wear sackcloth. On the housetops and in the squares everyone wails and melts in tears. Heshbon and Eliela cry out. Their voice is heard as far as Jehaz.

Therefore the armed men of Moab cry aloud. His soul trembles. My heart cries out for Moab. Her fugitives flee to Zoar, to Eglash Shalishia. For at the ascent of Luhith they go up weeping.

On the road to Horonaim they raise a cry of destruction. The waters of Nimrim are a desolation. The grass is withered, the vegetation fails, the greenery is no more. Therefore the abundance they have gained.

[0 : 58] And what they have laid up they carry away over the brook of the willows. For a cry has gone around the land of Moab. Her wailing reaches to Eglahim. Her wailing reaches to Beer-Elim.

For the waters of Dibon are full of blood. For I will bring upon Dibon even more. A lion for those of Moab who escape. For the remnant of the land. Isaiah chapters 13 and 14 contained oracles or prophecies against Babylon, Assyria and Philistia.

The historical context for the prophecy against Philistia was given as the time of the death of King Ahaz. Likely sometime toward the end of the 710s BC. However the context of the prophecy against Babylon is debated.

As it seems to relate to a situation where Babylon was a or the primary center of power in the wider world. This does not neatly seem to fit a late 8th century context.

A period of Assyrian hegemony. Babylon was a center of commerce, culture and power. And the kings of Assyria after Tiglath-Pileser III were kings of Babylon too. Babylon continuing to enjoy a high status for much of the period.

[2 : 03] Not merely being annexed into Assyria. While there have been some strong arguments made in favor of a late 8th century setting for the prophecy against Babylon in the preceding chapters. Neither these arguments nor the arguments for a 6th century context seem to resolve all of the questions that the content of the prophecy raises.

One possibility is that it is a telescoped prophecy. In chapters 15-16 we have an oracle against Moab.

Once again the precise historical context of the oracle is unclear. Although chapter 16 verses 13-14 speak of the fulfillment of a previously delivered word of judgment concerning Moab within three years.

Considering this some commentators claim that the Moab material might be traditional material relating to a time that has passed. Christopher Seitz suggests that traditional material may have been recontextualized.

Now related to the disaster about to befall Moab at the hands of the Babylonian empire. This however would be about a hundred years after the time of Isaiah. Other commentators such as Alec Matia contextualized the material within the broader Assyrian crisis.

[3 : 27] Which came through Sargon II in 715 and 711 BC. And then later through Sennacherib in 701 BC. We need not assume that the prophecies and oracles against the nations in this section of Isaiah are arranged chronologically.

It is entirely possible that they are ordered by a different principle. A further complicating factor here is the similarity between some of the material concerning Moab in these chapters. Especially chapter 16.

And material concerning Moab in Jeremiah chapter 48. When reading such scriptural prophecies. Where the specificity of dates, contexts and other particulars are difficult to ascertain.

Even the enemy of Moab in view here is vague. We ought to bear in mind that scriptural prophecy very commonly abstracts from the specifics of situations. To help us to recognize deeper and recurring principles that are in operation.

Principles that are of perennial or frequent importance. In such a manner, rather than losing ourselves in reconstructions of the original historical context. We can recognize the primary canonical purpose of such prophecies.

[4 : 33] In acquainting us with deeper principles that pervade history. Helping us to draw relevant insights for our own times. From words of the Lord to 8th century kingdoms. Moab was a trans-Jordanian nation.

Situated largely on a plateau to the east of the Dead Sea. Most of its territory was between the Zered Brook and the Anand River. Its capital was likely Kerr. Although there is not unanimity among scholars on that matter.

Moab was descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew. Their ancestor was born of the incestuous relations between Lot and his oldest daughter after the destruction of Sodom.

As a near neighbor, Judah had many interactions with Moab over the years. Israel had passed through Moab's territory on their journey to the promised land. And Reuben and Gad had taken possession of land to the north of Moab in the Transjordan.

From the defeated Amorite kings, Sihon and Og. Who had dispossessed Moab of that territory. Moses had died in the land of Moab. And saw the promised land from the top of Mount Nebo.

[5 : 32] Most notably, Ruth, the ancestress of David, was a Moabitess. While fleeing from King Saul, David had sent his parents to Moab for refuge. At several points in their history, Moab was at war with Israel or Judah.

In 2 Samuel chapter 8 verses 1 to 2, we learn that they were defeated during the reign of David and made to pay tribute to Israel. However, King Mesha later secured Moab's independence from Israel and dispossessed Reuben after the death of Ahab.

Our knowledge of Moab and its history is limited. Much of it coming from non-Moabite sources. Although there are some important archaeological confirmations of certain aspects of the biblical record concerning it.

The chapter presents us with a litany of Moabite places. From major cities and regions to smaller towns. With the disasters about to befall them. Jeremiah chapter 48 has some similar passages concerning Moab.

Especially in verses 1 to 5. Concerning Moab, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. Woe to Nebo, for it is laid waste. Kiriathium is put to shame.

[6 : 34] It is taken. The fortress is put to shame and broken down. The renown of Moab is no more. In Heshbon they planned disaster against her. Come, let us cut her off from being a nation.

You also, O madmen, shall be brought to silence. The sword shall pursue you. A voice, a cry from Horonaim. Desolation and great destruction. Moab is destroyed.

Her little ones have made a cry. For at the ascent of Luhith they go up weeping. For at the descent of Horonaim they have heard the distressed cry of destruction. We know where some of these places were.

Some, such as Dibon, Heshbon, Eliela, Jehaz and Neba, were former territories of Reuben and Gad. Most of them mentioned in Numbers chapter 32, where Reuben and Gad requested to be given their possessions in the Transjordan.

Reuben and Gad has subsequently lost these territories to Moab. The prophecy describes a devastation descending upon the land of Moab, extinguishing city after city, with the people of Moab going into mourning as a result of their distress and the great loss of life.

[7 : 37] They go up to their temple and their high places to call for divine intervention in their crisis. Everyone, even Moab's warriors, are crying out in grief and despair, powerless to arrest the disaster that is ravaging their land.

In verse 5, the Lord himself joins in the mourning, recognising the horrific suffering of the nation. Even as he is striking them, his heart mourns for them. Their flight to Zoar is, of course, ominously reminiscent of the flight of their forefather Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, when he too fled to Zoar, although he did not find secure enough refuge there.

As Gary Smith observes, however, the refugees' flight to Zoar might suggest that they are aiming to flee southwards to Judah or Edom, from an enemy coming upon them from the north.

The disaster striking the people of Moab afflicts their land too. Waters are dried up or spoiled. Grass withers. Vegetation is destroyed. The whole nation wails in their collective distress, their cry being heard from all of their borders.

Even as the waters of Dibon are full of blood, the disaster will not be stayed. Matthias suggests that this might be intended as an allusion back to the mirage of waters of blood that Moab saw in 2 Kings chapter 3 verses 22 to 23.

[8 : 51] Even after all of this suffering, there is still more to come. A lion, presumably a fierce predatory nation, will be brought upon them by the Lord. A question to consider.

Where in the book of Numbers do we find prophecies of destruction upon Moab?