

Isaiah 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 11. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his root shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear. But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples, of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious. In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.

He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, and those who harass Judah shall be cut off. Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not harass Ephraim. But they shall swoop down on the shoulder of the Philistines in the west, and together they shall plunder the people of the east. They shall put out their hand against Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites shall obey them. And the Lord will utterly destroy the tongue of the sea of Egypt, and will wave his hand over the river with his scorching breath, and strike it into seven channels, and he will lead people across in sandals. And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that remains of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt. Isaiah chapter 10 declared the Lord's coming judgment upon his people, describing the destruction brought by the Assyrians as if it were the great felling of a mighty forest, with the nation of Assyria serving as the Lord's axe.

Such imagery of the cutting down of the proud and the lofty trees of the land has been prominent throughout the book of Isaiah to this point, introduced in places like chapter 2 verses 12 to 13. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low, against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up, and against all the oaks of Bashan. Elsewhere, in places like chapter 5, the vineyard is made into a place of thorns and briars. Verses 5 to 6 of that chapter. And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

[3 : 1 7] I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. Another image of the cutting down of trees is found at the end of Isaiah's commission in chapter 6, verses 11 to 13 of that chapter.

Then I said, How long, O Lord? And he said, Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump. The preceding chapter ended with another image of trees being cut down, in verses 33 to 34 of chapter 10. Behold, the Lord God of hosts will lop the boughs with

terrifying power. The great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low. He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon will fall by the majestic one.

Commentators differ over whether this is referring to Judah, or the Lord's judgment upon Assyria with which much of chapter 10 is concerned.

Whichever of the two it is, within chapter 10 we do read of the Lord's judgment upon his people as a sort of deforestation of the land. Assyria is the axe of the Lord's wrath, and with Assyria he has been chopping down the proud and the lofty. The chopping down of the mighty trees of the land is so devastating that the Davidic dynasty itself is presented as if it were cut down beyond David himself, down to the very stump of Jesse, David's father. Jesse wasn't a man of great significance beyond being the father of David. When the Davidic dynasty is felled, he is all that remains. The axe of the Lord will leave little behind it. We might also think of the stump of Jesse as the reduced kingdom after the invasion of the Assyrians. The Assyrians in 701 BC came up to the neck of Jerusalem and almost wiped it out, and from that stump a glorious nation will arise. New life will spring up after devastation.

[5 : 29] Chapter 11 is a prophecy of great promise, speaking into a situation of near desolation and extinction, assuring the people that the Lord can build up from the rubble. The chopped and the charred stump of what was once the glorious Davidic dynasty stands in the wasteland of Judah. However, a small shoot emerges from a seemingly dead stump. It becomes a branch, and the branch bears fruit. The branch is a prophetic symbol referring to a messianic figure, one who will represent the Davidic kingdom and restore the temple, leading the people into a time beyond judgment. We read of the figure of the branch in Zechariah. Jeremiah also speaks of the branch in chapter 23 verses 5 to 6, and then later in chapter 33 verses 15 to 16. In the former chapter he writes, Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called, the Lord is our righteousness. In Isaiah chapter 11, the Davidic branch is life from the dead. David died, and then his dynasty seemingly died, but now it is rising again, and new life is coming up from it. The Davidic branch, the messianic figure, will be anointed by the spirit. The spirit of the Lord will rest upon him in a fourfold way. Verse 2 makes four parallel statements about the spirit in relation to the branch, but seven characteristics of the spirit are mentioned. The spirit is the spirit of the Lord, of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. These are the virtues needed by a great king, who can establish, protect, and rule his people well. The branch will be characterised by just rule. He will be in partial and equitable in his judgment and execution of justice. He will ensure that the poor and the meek receive justice, both righteously judging their disputes and ensuring that judgment is executed speedily. He will speak with an authority that cuts off oppressors and wrongdoers, and the result of the rule of the branch will be the establishment of a new Eden, an Eden that exceeds even the original. The original Eden was a garden in an almost entirely untamed world, but this new Eden will have a peace that flows out into the wider world. Predatory animals will have been tamed, and will coexist even with children and the more vulnerable domesticated animals.

We could take this imagery in a number of different ways. Perhaps it is a more literal account of the end of predation. Perhaps it's a more figurative account of peace more generally, or perhaps the animals more specifically symbolise predatory nations. The knowledge of the Lord, direct experience of his salvation and familiarity with his character and ways, will fill the earth. And when that day comes, the branch will stand as a signal in the midst of the nations, all of the nations flocking to learn from him. Back in chapter 5 verse 26, the Lord spoke of setting up a signal for the nations, summoning nations to come in judgment upon his people. Now, however, the Lord will recover the remnant of his people from the lands to which he scattered them. The nations that were once used to scatter them will now be used to gather them. He will raise the signal and draw them back. The once divided kingdom will be unified. A new exodus-like event will occur, and the people will be assembled from all of the corners of the earth, established secure over their enemies. Natural barriers will be removed or overcome, and Israel will be replanted, secure against its enemies. A deep challenge for interpreters of these words of Isaiah is whether they actually came to pass. Christopher Sites notes the higher standards to which prophecies of salvation seem to be held in scripture, observing Jeremiah chapter 28 verses 8 to 9.

There Jeremiah the prophet challenges Hananiah, saying, The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet. In the book of Isaiah to this point, we've had some very accurate prophecies both of judgment and of salvation, prophecies that would be fulfilled in the lifetime of the prophet who delivered them. However, interspersed with these, there are prophecies that seem to strain for a far greater fulfillment, a fulfillment that in its fullest sense does not seem to have occurred within the expected time frame. In some of these cases, we could argue for anticipatory or partial fulfillments, but the description of the messianic figure in this passage, for instance, does not seem to fit well the character of Hezekiah, and certainly not his son Manasseh.

Although life would come up again from the root of Jesse, and there would be some measure of a restoration, the prophecy of this chapter could not reasonably be said to be fulfilled in the years following 701 BC.

Some measure of a greater fulfillment could be said to occur after the Babylonian exile. At that time, some people who had been in exile would return to the land, and there would be something of a flourishing of the people. And yet, for all the blessing that the Lord gave to his people in that period, there was nothing of the scale of the promise that is given in chapter 2 verses 1 to 4, or here concerning the root of Jesse. The branch is still an anticipated figure in the book of Zechariah.

There is, of course, a much greater fulfillment of this to be seen in the figure of Christ, in whom the figure of the Davidic branch is fully realized. He will pacify the nations, subduing them to the authority of his word, teaching them peace and taming the once wild beasts.

[11:05] He is the one who has the Holy Spirit without measure, who gathers his people from all corners and accomplishes a new exodus, establishing a new people in security. Nations that were once at war with each other are gathered to the mountain of the Lord, where they seek the branch. The knowledge of the Lord covers the earth, with people of all tribes, tongues and nations, experiencing the salvation and goodness of God. Old enmities are overcome, and where once all trees were felled, a mighty forest of cedars rises, a temple of the Lord's dwelling by his Holy Spirit. Of course, even in the current day, we look forward to a yet greater fulfillment of this in the age to come.

Here then we see a feature that is common in much of biblical prophecy. In connection with the coming day of the Lord, people receive promises of, and a foretaste of, a much more glorious visitation in a yet distant horizon. A question to consider, reading this prophecy alongside that of chapter 2, what elements does this chapter bring to its vision of the future that were absent in that earlier chapter?