

# Isaiah 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Isaiah chapter 10. Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice, and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey. What will you do on the day of punishment, in the ruin that will come from afar? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth? Nothing remains but to crouch among the prisoners, or fall among the slain. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff in their hands is my fury. Against a godless nation I sent him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seeds plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. But he does not so intend, and his heart does not so think. But it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few. For he says,

Are not my commanders all kings? Is not Calno like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad? Is not Samaria like Damascus? As my hand has reached the kingdoms of the idols, whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols, as I have done to Samaria and her images? When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the boastful look in his eyes. For he says, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom. For I have understanding. I remove the boundaries of peoples, and plunder their treasures. Like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones, my hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples. And as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken, so I have gathered all the earth, and there was none that moved a wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped. Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it? Or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood. Therefore the Lord God of hosts will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled, like the burning of fire. The light of

Israel will become a fire, and his holy one a flame, and it will burn and devour his thorns and briars in one day. The glory of his forest and of his fruitful land the Lord will destroy, both soul and body, and it will be as when a sick man wastes away. The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few that a child can write them down. In that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the Lord, the holy one of Israel, in truth.

A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness.

For the Lord God of hosts will make a full end, as decreed, in the midst of all the earth. Therefore thus says the Lord God of hosts, O my people who dwell in Zion, be not afraid of the Assyrians when they strike with the rod, and lift up their staff against you as the Egyptians did. For in a very little while my fury will come to an end, and my anger will be directed to their destruction.

[ 3 : 35 ] And the Lord of hosts will wield against them a whip, as when he struck Midian at the rock of Oreb. And his staff will be over the sea, and he will lift it as he did in Egypt. And in that day his burden will depart from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck, and the yoke will be broken because of the fat. He has come to Aath. He has passed through Migron. At Mikdash he stores his baggage.

They have crossed over the pass. At Geber they lodge for the night. Ramah trembles. Gibeah of Saul has fled. Cry aloud, O daughter of Galim. Give attention, O Laisha. O poor Anathoth. Madmana is in flight. The inhabitants of Geben flee for safety. This very day he will halt at Nab. He will shake his fist at the mount of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem.

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. Isaiah chapter 10 speaks of the judgment yet to fall upon the southern kingdom of Judah by means of Assyria, and then of the Lord's judgment of Assyria itself. Addressing a situation after the Syro-Ephraimite war, and after the destruction of the northern kingdom, it looks forward to 701 BC and beyond. Under King Ahaz, Judah had looked to the Assyrians to help to deliver it from Israel and the Arameans. Tiglath-Pileser III had fought against these two nations, and helped to deliver Judah in the process. However, in the process of all of this, Judah had entered into a very religiously and politically compromising relationship with Assyria.

This is described in 2 Kings chapter 16 verses 7 to 11. So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, saying, I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria, and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me. Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasures of the king's house, and sent a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria listened to him. The king of Assyria marched up against Damascus and took it, carrying its people captive to Ker, and he killed reason.

When King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, he saw the altar that was at Damascus. And king Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest a model of the altar, and its pattern exact in all its details. And Uriah the priest built the altar in accordance with all that king Ahaz had sent from Damascus. So Uriah the priest made it, before king Ahaz arrived from Damascus. Tiglath-Pileser had been succeeded by Shalmaneser V, who had laid siege to Samaria, which most likely fell after his death to his successor Sargon II. It is likely that Sargon II was on the throne of Assyria when this prophecy was made. Sargon would be succeeded by Sennacherib, who had come up against Judah in 701 BC.

[ 6 : 39 ] The chapter begins with another woe oracle in verses 1 to 4. This woe oracle is punctuated by the same statement as that used in chapter 9 verse 12, 17 and 21. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. There were a series of woes that began in the same way as this woe back in chapter 5, in verses 8, 11, 18, 20, 21 and 22, along with the statement concerning the Lord's continuing wrath. This has led many commentators to argue that at least some of the material of this chapter originally belonged with earlier material in the book, but was divided by intervening material in chapters 6 to 9. This position is by no means held by all commentators, however. The opening woe oracle of this chapter continues to be addressed to Judah, particularly focusing upon the injustice of its society and the failure of its rulers. Those who had not paid any concern to the fatherless and the widows and the poor of the people would not be heard when they appealed to the Lord for his help in the day of their trouble. In the day when the Lord came in judgment upon them, they would realize the futility of their wealth. They would lose all of the spoils of their injustice and merely experience the bitter wages of their iniquity. After this opening indictment of Judah and its leaders and the systemic injustice within their society, the Lord turns in judgment to Assyria. Assyria had vaunted itself as this great mighty power boasting against all of the nations that it had defeated. We might get some sense of the hubris and the pride of Assyria from the

Rabshakeh's speech in chapter 36. There he argues that Judah does not have enough idols and high places to really threaten the Assyrians. The Lord had used Assyria as the means of his judgment against Israel and Judah. The idea of a God taking the side of the enemies of his people in such a manner might have been strange to many of the people of Isaiah's day. Yet the Lord has used Assyria as the means of his judgment. It is by the Lord's command and decree that Assyria has been successful in breaking down all of these nations, chief among them Israel and Judah. However, Assyria puffed up in its pride has no realization of this. Assyria reasons that none of the nations are great enough to stand against him and his gods. The city of Samaria is little different from a city like Damascus.

It too is seen as a place of idols, a place of gods who can be overthrown with the city. The idea that the most high God claims the people of Samaria as his people would be strange to the king of Assyria.

His imaginative world is only populated by idols and false gods. He has no imaginative concept of the true God, the creator and the judge of all. Consequently, he fancies himself able to do as he pleases and baunts himself over all others, not humbling himself before God. He speaks of himself in his mind as if he were a God himself. To his mind, his strength and his wisdom are near divine.

He is the one that sets the boundaries of the world. Yet the Lord, as he does with the proud, would humble him. Assyria would fail to secure the sort of victory that they were looking for in Jerusalem. They would lose 185,000 people in one day. This is likely what is referred to in verse 16, the wasting sickness among the stout warriors of Assyria. After the Lord's great defeat of Assyria, Judah would cease to depend upon Assyria as its support. Rather, it would turn to the Lord.

[10:04] Verse 21 seems to be an allusion back to the name Shear-Jeshub, the son of Isaiah, whose name meant a remnant will return. Maybe the mighty God here also alludes back to chapter 9 verse 6.

Although Israel, as the descendants of Abraham, were like the sand of the sea, the Lord would wipe out most of them in his judgment. Reminding his people of his great deliverances and judgments in the past, the Lord encourages his people not to be afraid of the Assyrians. He would deliver them as he had delivered them in the time of the Exodus, and also as in the miraculous victory over the Midianites in the time of Gideon. As in the deliverance from Midian, the great victory would not be achieved by strength of human arms. The reminder of the story of Gideon's defeat of Midian also should draw our minds back to Isaiah chapter 9 verse 4. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. If the most immediate figure in view is the fulfillment of this as King Hezekiah, then both of these prophecies likely look forward to the events of 701 BC. The Lord would strike Judah with the rod of his anger in Assyria. He would destroy most of their fortified cities, and the waters of Assyria would come up to the neck of Jerusalem. However, as at the deliverance of the Red Sea, the Lord would lift up his staff against the people of Assyria, and make a path for his people to pass through that trial. The final verses of the chapter describe a force coming up towards Jerusalem. It does not seem to describe the course that was taken by Sennacherib in 701 BC. It is quite likely not intended to be taken literally, or perhaps it's referring to events that have not been recorded for us in the histories.

Commentators are divided about the referent of the final two verses. Is it a reference to Assyria, or is it a reference to Judah? I think it's most likely a reference to Judah, partly on the basis of the imagery, but also on the basis of verse 1 of chapter 11. The shoot that comes forth from the stump would naturally fit in with the imagery of the lopped boughs and the cut-down trees.

A question to consider, what lessons can we learn about divine providence from the image of Assyria as the axe in the hands of the Lord?