

Isaiah 22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 22. The oracle concerning the valley of vision. What do you mean that you have gone up, all of you, to the housetops, you who are full of shoutings, tumultuous city, exultant town?
- You're slain or not slain with the sword or dead in battle. All your leaders have fled together. Without the bow they were captured. All of you who were found were captured, though they had fled far away.
- Therefore I said, Look away from me. Let me weep bitter tears. Do not labor to comfort me concerning the destruction of the daughter of my people. For the Lord God of hosts has a day of tumult and trampling and confusion in the valley of vision, a battering down of walls and a shouting to the mountains.
- And Elam bore the quiver with chariots and horsemen, and Ker uncovered the shield. Your choicest valleys were full of chariots, and the horsemen took their stand at the gates.
- He has taken away the covering of Judah. In that day you looked to the weapons of the house of the forest, and you saw that the breaches of the city of David were many. You collected the waters of the lower pool, and you counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall.
- [1 : 1 1] You made a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the old pool, but you did not look to him who did it, or see him who planned it long ago. In that day the Lord God of hosts called for weeping and mourning, for boldness and wearing sackcloth.
- And behold, joy and gladness, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine. Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. The Lord of hosts has revealed himself in my ears.
- Surely this iniquity will not be atoned for you until you die, says the Lord God of hosts. Thus says the Lord God of hosts, Come, go to this steward, to Shebna who is over the household, and say to him, What have you to do here, and whom have you here, that you have cut out here a tomb for yourself, you who cut out a tomb on the height, and carve a dwelling for yourself in the rock?
- Behold, the Lord will hurl you away violently, O you strong man. He will seize firm hold on you, and whirl you around and around, and throw you like a ball into a wide land.
- There you shall die, and there shall be your glorious chariots, you shame of your master's house. I will thrust you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your station.
- [2 : 2 4] In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your sash on him, and will commit your authority to his hand.
- And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut, and he shall shut, and none shall open.
- And I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honour to his father's house. And they will hang on him the whole honour of his father's house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons.

In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, The peg that was fastened in a secure place will give way, and it will be cut down and fall, and the load that was on it will be cut off. For the Lord has spoken.

The oracle with which Isaiah chapter 22 opens most likely relates to the invasion and siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC by Sennacherib and the Assyrians during the reign of King Hezekiah.

[3 : 27] Judah had rebelled against Assyria, turning to Egypt for support. The Assyrians came up against Judah, inflicting heavy losses. Sennacherib's prism, on which his campaign against Judah is described, boasts that he destroyed 46 of Judah's cities.

However, although it was besieged, Jerusalem was not one of these. The Lord's routing of the Assyrian invaders at Jerusalem is described in chapter 37, verses 36 to 37.

And the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.

Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh. Some have argued that, besides the reference to the events of 701 BC, the oracle also speaks to events of a later time, after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

They see this in such details as the reference to the destruction of the daughter of my people, in verse 4, and to the battering down of walls, in verse 5, which they argue fit far better with the events of 586 than those of 701 BC.

[4 : 36] Some have even seen an extensive reworking of an earlier prophecy, one chiefly seen in verses 1 to 3 and 12 to 14, to relate to a later situation. For others, the prophecy has become dislodged from any specific historical events altogether.

Brevard Charles, quite dissatisfied with such dehistoricisation of the prophecy, argues that the supposed tension between 701 and 586 references are greatly overstated.

He contends that the passage, in its canonical positioning, while historically grounded in the events of 701 BC, is clearly presented as foreshadowing the later events of 586.

It is not some later editorial reworking and misappropriating of an earlier text, but rather, in Charles' words, the narrative structure of a canonical corpus that comprises a holistic, unified story of God's purpose in history for his chosen people.

Recognition of the biblical text as scripture prepares the reader for the rich resonance that a holistic interpretation evokes, and functions without sacrificing the text's original historical mourning for a literary construct.

[5 : 42] Indeed, this is not unrelated to the reasons why people over two and a half millennia after the time of Isaiah, and the events to which he immediately referred, can continue to read his prophecies, and those of other prophets, with great benefit.

Although they have more immediate and specific reference and fulfilments, they also disclose deeper patterns and realities of the Lord's dealing with his people in the world. In chapter 21, there was a prophecy concerning Babylon, introduced as the oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea.

Chapter 22, a prophecy concerning Jerusalem, is introduced in a somewhat similar manner, as the oracle concerning the valley of vision. John Oswalt observes further similarities between these visions, including, in his words, the partying and lack of vision, the prophet's grief, the references to Elam, and the mention of a chariot of a man and horsemen.

To these, he adds the fact that both of these prophecies seem to be operating on two different levels, referring to Babylon and Jerusalem in Isaiah's own time, but also to their later destinies in the 6th century.

The association of the two visions is possibly an indication of the intertwining of their destinies. In chapter 39, Isaiah would directly warn Hezekiah that, in throwing in his lot with Babylon, he was unwittingly allying himself with the very power that would one day destroy Jerusalem.

- [7 : 04] Linking an oracle concerning Judah with oracles against the nations is also an ominous sign that Judah is bringing similar judgments upon itself. The description concerning the valley of vision should probably be related to verse 5, with its reference to a valley of that name.

The opening verses of the oracle describe a chaotic and almost surreal scene of revelry, people on the housetops of Jerusalem celebrating, completely out of keeping with the severity of the city's situation.

Verse 13 implies that they were aware of the fact that death was likely very imminent for them, so it may not be the case that they believed that they were delivered. The cause of their celebrations may not have been the lifting or weakening of the siege, as many have presumed.

Alternatively, if that were the case, they are not confident that it will hold. Gary Smith wonders whether, given the descriptions of the preparations for the siege in the context, the people were celebrating because the siege preparations were complete, and though they considered their hopes of survival low, they wanted to have a party before dying.

The prophet cannot share in these hollow celebrations. He is weeping and in mourning at the terrible state of his nation. Many of their leaders have fled, and according to Sennacherib, over 200,000 captives and 46 cities were taken from Judah at this time.

- [8 : 19] In the section beginning in verse 5, Isaiah describes a sort of day of the Lord that is coming upon the people of Judah and Jerusalem, a great reckoning as enemy forces surround them in the valleys around their city.

The cities that formerly shielded Jerusalem have been overcome, and now Zion itself is surrounded. The references to Elam and Ker here might refer to mercenary forces within the army of the Assyrians.

Faced with these surrounding forces, Jerusalem's response, even in its weakness, is to trust in its own strength. It looks to the weapons of the House of the Forest, one of the great buildings built by Solomon within the palace and temple complex.

They collect waters from the reservoir and dig a tunnel to bring further waters into the city. They demolish some of the houses of the city in order to strengthen the walls. However, in all of their efforts, they fail to look to the Lord, the one whose providence and purposes stand over all things.

When they should have been weeping and calling out to the Lord, confessing their sins and repenting of their iniquities, they are rather found in engaging in feasting, trying to dull their awareness of the severity of their situation on the very eve of their potential deaths.

- [9 : 26] In a terrible statement with which this part of the oracle closes, the Lord declares that they will not be forgiven for this iniquity. In turning to wine and song, rather than turning to the Lord in the time of their distress, they had disclosed something of the true measure of their lack of spiritual concern.

The more general attitude of the people was more specifically manifested in some of the key figures within the realm. The prophet Isaiah is sent to see the steward Shebna. Shebna, a man over the administration of the household of the king and presumably in charge of much of the preparation for the siege, is found in the process of cutting a fine tomb from the rock for himself.

Rather than turning to his maker, he seems to be more concerned to prepare for his death by ensuring that he will get a grand burial. Shebna will not enjoy the burial that he hopes for. Instead, the Lord will hurl him away, casting him into exile in a foreign land.

Stripped of his office, his role will be given to Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah. In chapter 36, verse 3, we read of both of these figures again and here Eliakim is described as being over the household and Shebna as being the secretary, which might suggest that the removal of Shebna from his office happened very soon after the prophecy was delivered.

Eliakim's investiture is described in verses 20 to 24. Although the fate of the royal house of David has not been as prominent in this section concerning the prophecies and oracles against the nations, it was very prominent in earlier sections of the book of Isaiah.

[10:53] As the newly appointed steward, much of the managing of the royal house would now fall into the hands of Eliakim. Possessing the key of the house of David, he would enjoy immense scope of authorisation to act in the name of the king, much as we see in the figure of Joseph in Genesis chapter 41 and following.

He would be established by the Lord and the whole of his household would be increased in its status and dignity on account of his office. However, those given great status and blessings by the Lord should not presume upon their past gifts.

There is good reason to suppose that Eliakim fell into this trap. In the final verse, we learn that the Lord would remove the peg that was once secure and with it, all that once hung upon it, Eliakim's house and its dignity would fall to the ground.

A question to consider. In Matthew chapter 16 verse 19 and Revelation chapter 3 verse 7, the New Testament alludes back to this prophecy concerning Eliakim. How does it use this prophecy and how can our understanding of this prophecy help us to understand these New Testament passages better?

