

Isaiah 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 2. The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. Isaiah chapter 2. The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz, like the Philistines, and they strike hands with the children of foreigners. Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures. Their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is filled with idols. They bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made. So man is humbled, and each one is brought low.

Do not forgive them. Enter into the rock, and hide in the dust from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty. The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.

For the Lord of hosts is 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, against all the lofty mountains, and against all the uplifted hills.

Against every high tower, and against every fortified wall. Against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft. And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.

And the idols shall utterly pass away, and people shall enter the caves of the rocks, and the holes of the ground from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.

[2 : 2 9] In that day mankind will cast away their idols of silver, and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, to the moles and to the bats, to enter the caverns of the rocks, and the clefts of the cliffs, from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.

Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, For what account is he? The unity of Isaiah chapter 2 is not clearly apparent to many commentators. It begins with a very positive vision of the future glorification of Zion, but follows that with a series of escalating prophecies concerning its corruption.

Some commentators, like John Oswald, observe the recurrence of the expression the day of the Lord, or that day within it, as a sort of unifying thread throughout the material. While the material of this chapter might be composed of a number of different prophecies that have been joined together, it is by no means without thematic unity.

We can see such unity, for instance, in the themes of being lifted up or being brought low. An interesting feature of the first few verses of this chapter is the fact that we find them also in Micah chapter 4 verses 1 to 5.

This obviously provokes questions about the relationship between the two prophets, who prophesied around the same time, and this piece of shared material. The material is near identical. The chief divergences are the absence of Micah chapter 4 verse 4 and the truncated form of the material of verse 5 in Isaiah's version.

[3 : 59] Elsewhere in scripture we see similarities between prophetic books, one prophetic book citing another, or even common sources, but such extensive common material is a unique occurrence in the prophetic literature.

There are various ways that we might understand the presence of the prophecy within two different books. We could argue that they were both independently inspired to make a largely identical prophecy.

This is definitely possible, although it's not a popular, or perhaps the most plausible, position. Other more popular approaches include the positions that it is later material that has been inserted into the text of one or both of the prophets, that one of the two was quoting a prophecy of the other, or had part of the other inserted into their text, or that both were using earlier material.

There are various considerations that will inform our judgment on the question. Some commentators adduce the greater prominence of Zion within the theology of Isaiah as evidence that the prophecy most likely originates with him.

On the other hand, the omission of verse 4 of Micah's version in Isaiah's version might suggest that Micah's is the original, or alternatively, more fully quotes the original source.

[5 : 09] Then there are stylistic features. For instance, while Micah chapter 4 verse 4 is only found in Micah's version, the expression, For the mouth of the Lord has spoken, is Isianic in its style.

It's found in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 20, chapter 40 verse 5, and chapter 58 verse 14, but isn't really found elsewhere. Isaiah's account begins with the word that Isaiah the son of Amar saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which adds weight to the argument for the originality of the prophecy with Isaiah.

However, one could take the introductory formula in Isaiah as referring to something that Isaiah read in Micah or elsewhere. Just as we see Daniel reflecting upon the prophecy of Jeremiah's 70 years in Daniel chapter 9, so Isaiah might be reflecting upon the meaning of Micah's prophecy.

There are, of course, various examples of cross-fertilization among the prophets elsewhere, and as Micah and Isaiah were contemporaries, who almost certainly knew each other in person, we should probably be aware of thinking of their ministries as hermetically sealed off from each other.

The two prophets used the same material in different ways in their respective books. In Micah, for instance, the material opens a new section in the book. Some have suggested that there is a tension between the vision of the two prophets, based on the question of whether the nations would still worship false gods in the latter days or not, a question that's raised by Micah chapter 4 verse 5, and pressed by such as Marvin Sweeney.

[6 : 37] Such textual questions are challenging, not least when we bring Qumran scrolls with different forms of the text of Isaiah into the picture. We should also consider the various hands that were involved in the reception, recording, compilation, transmission, and ordering of Micah and Isaiah's prophecies during their lives and afterwards.

It is not unlikely that the same group were involved in shaping both, and at points like this perhaps we are seeing tantalizing indications of various unknown fingerprints upon the text, or indications of richer interactions between the authors and editors of these two prophetic books.

Perhaps Micah and Isaiah, both the men and the books, were in formative interaction from the time of their initial oral ministries to the final form of their respective texts.

We should also beware of depending too much upon the question of origins and sources, and failing to pay most attention to the literary form in which they come down to us in the final completed canon.

It is in that final form that they have authority in the life of the church. The chapter begins with a new superscription, the word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

- [7 : 45] Positions differ among commentators about what material this serves as the superscription for. Is it just the next few verses, or does it take us into later chapters? There is a remarkable shift here from the vision of Jerusalem and its sins in chapter 1.

There is a sense in these opening verses of the city and the people's destiny. Within this passage we also hear some of the words of likely earlier traditions, such as the songs of Zion in the Psalms, within which Mount Zion came to assume great significance.

Psalms 46, 48 and 76 are referenced by some commentators in this context. Psalm 46 verses 4 to 10, for instance. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage. The kingdoms totter. He utters his voice. The earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the Lord. How he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth.

- [8 : 54] He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.

Mount Zion is actually a very modest elevation. It is not even in one of the top 100 tallest mountain peaks in Israel. It is only about 2,500 feet tall.

But as the site of the temple, it is the mountain of the Lord. And according to this prophecy, it will function as the cosmic mountain, the mountain to which the whole world will gather, and the mountain that joins heaven to earth.

We see Zion set over against the other mountains in places like Psalm 68 verses 14 to 18 too. When the Almighty scatters kings there, let snow fall on Zalmon.

O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan. O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan. Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain, at the mount that God desired for his abode?

- [9 : 52] Yes, where the Lord will dwell forever. The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands. The Lord is among them. Mount Zion becomes like Eden.

It's the beating heart of the world, the place from which all life flows, and to which it all comes. Elsewhere, water flows out of the temple on Zion, in places like Ezekiel chapter 47 and Joel 3.

But here there is a stream of nations, flowing up to Zion in pilgrimage, an image that we also see at the end of Zechariah chapter 14, which brings the two images together, living waters flowing out from Jerusalem, and the nations flowing up to her.

This would be a fulfillment of the Lord's purpose for his people, as a means of bringing his blessing to the nations. The nations come to Zion to learn the law and the ways of the Lord.

And the law and the word of the Lord also come out from Jerusalem, as their principles start to inform life elsewhere, and as the rule of God extends over the peoples.

- [11 : 04] The Lord's justice would be known on the earth, as he would judge between peoples and nations, settling disputes and establishing his judgment and rule. The outcome of the rule of the Lord among the nations would be peace, illustrated by the refashioning of weapons of war into tools of cultivation, and the freedom to abandon the practice and the learning of conflict.

Joel chapter 3 verse 10 presents a reverse image of this. There is another sharp shift in the tone of the text in verse 6. However, it does follow from what proceeds with the summons to walk in the light of the Lord.

King Uzziah had fought successfully against the Philistines, as we see in 2 Chronicles chapter 26 verse 6. He went out and made war against the Philistines, and broke through the wall of Gath, and the wall of Jabneh, and the wall of Ashdod, and he built cities in the territory of Ashdod, and elsewhere among the Philistines.

Under the reign of Uzziah, Israel had prospered, and had known military success against its neighbours. However, it seems that they had taken on some of the character of these surrounding nations, rather than the nations going up to Jerusalem to learn the ways of the Lord, as we see in the vision of the opening verses.

The Lord's people had been going out to the nations to learn their proud ways. By this point, the pride and the haughtiness of the nations is greatly in evidence among the people of the Lord. They have riches and weaponry and idols, all symbols of their pride.

[12 : 31] They have assumed all sorts of idolatry and pagan practices. If the expression at the end of verse 6 is properly understood as the striking of hands in the treaty, then it would seem that this situation is in part a result of their making treaties with other peoples.

The Lord had warned the kings against multiplying wives, multiplying gold, and also building a great war machine with horses and chariots. With the people's prosperity, felt wealth, the power of their war machine, and also their alliances with other peoples, they seem to have developed a spiritual complacency and pride that the Lord would bring low.

Isaiah makes a startling statement at the end of verse 9. Do not forgive them. He does not want the Lord to leave his people's sin and pride unpunished, just to wink at his people's hubris and self-importance.

This proud people, unless they humbled themselves quickly, would find themselves brought low by the Lord. He would humble their pride. He alone would be exalted in the earth, and any who would exalt themselves before him would be torn down.

The day of the Lord was often seen as a time of vindication and deliverance and salvation for the people. But within the prophets, we see that it has a negative aspect as well.

[13 : 45] It's the time when the Lord will come near to judge his people, and many will not be prepared. In verses 12 to 17, it is described as a time when the lofty pride of men would be lopped down.

The imagery at the beginning here of the chopping down of a forest is something that we find elsewhere in the book of Isaiah. Forest could represent the might of a people. It could also represent things like the temple.

Here the lofty cedars and the oaks of Bashan are probably the priests and rulers of the people and the nobility. If the mount of the glorious coming Jerusalem is going to be lifted up above the other mountains, here we see the inverse of that image, as everything else that would exalt itself before the Lord is brought down.

The juxtaposition of these two images, the raising up of the mountain of Zion and the house of the Lord, and the bringing down of all these other powers and lofty things on the earth, encourages us to understand these things in relationship to each other.

On the one hand, the going up to the mountain of the Lord and the lifting up of that mountain is a symbol of the humbling of man's pride. And on the other hand, the lofty cedars, oaks of Bashan, lofty mountains and hills, and all the high towers, are symbols of the idolatry of man's pride that stands directly against the true worship and knowledge of the Lord.

[15:00] In the coming day of the Lord, the idols and those who worship them would be utterly humiliated. As the Lord rises up, people would shrink away and descend down into the earth in caves of the rocks and holes of the ground.

Once again, the imagery of lifting or rising up and sinking or being brought down is extremely important in the context. In the light of this image of the rising up of the Lord's glory and the shrinking down of man's pride, the chapter ends with a stern warning.

Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath. For of what account is he? For all of man's pride, for all of his puffing up of his importance, man is very small, but a creature whose breath will soon pass from his lips.

Rather than being in the thrall of the pride of men, like the other nations, Judah and Jerusalem should learn from the initial prophecy. In which the nations speak among themselves, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob.

Isaiah presents the people with a similar summons. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. As Judah and Jerusalem look, not to the surrounding nations, but to the Lord in their midst, they will be raised up as the prophecy promises.

[16:13] A question to consider. What are some of the more particular temptations associated with the different forms of pride that Isaiah identifies among the people?

Why might such forms of pride have such a strong grip upon the hearts of sinful men? Why