
Isaiah Series 1

Lesson 4

“Isaiah 10:5-34”

Objective - To understand the meaning of specified passage from Isaiah for both the original audience, and what it came to mean to those that came later; especially to the Jews of the first century A. D. The passages were specifically selected because of their usage in the Gospel of Mark, either as direct quotes, or as allusions. The goal is to understand this material better in its original context, to its original audience, and in the fall to be able to examine the Gospel of Mark with a better understanding of the role of Isaiah in the theology of that Gospel and of the church.

Materials - Commentaries, Journal articles, Targums, Books.

Procedures

1. We will seek to set the basic background for the writing of the book of Isaiah.
2. Choose the texts that are applicable to Mark's Gospel.
3. Translate those texts from the Masoretic Text, with reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targum of Isaiah.
4. I will search commentaries, journal articles, and books for understanding of these texts both to their original audience and to later Judaism, especially the Judaism of the 1st century A. D. and the early church.

⁵ Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, their rod is my indignation. ⁶

Against a profane nation I sent it, and against the people of my fury I gave charge to plunder and to spoil the booty and it trampled them as mud in the street. ⁷ But he does not agree with this, and he does not value this in his heart, for to exterminate them is in his heart and to cut off not a few nations. ⁸ For he says, “Are not my princes all kings? ⁹ Is not Calno like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad? Is not Samaria like Damascus? ¹⁰ In which manner they attained from my hand, the kingdom of idols; whose images were greater than Jerusalem and Samaria. ¹¹ According to that which I did to Samaria and its idols I will do to Jerusalem and its idols. ¹² When the Lord finishes his work on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem he will make a visit against the great fruit of the heart of the king of Assyria and upon its haughtiness, the glory of his eyes.” ¹³ For he says, “In the strength of my hand I did this, in my wisdom, for in my being intelligent I have caused the removal of borders of peoples and their treasures I plundered, and I brought down the strong to descend, the ones dwelling there. ¹⁴ My hand found them like a nest, the property of the peoples, and as if to gather eggs being abandoned, the whole

earth I gathered and there was not the fluttering of a wing, or the opening of the mouth, or chirping. ¹⁵ Does the axe exalt over the one who wields it, or the saw magnify itself over the one moving it? Does the rod exalt itself, even as the rod is exalted that is not a tree? ¹⁶

Therefore, the Lord Yahweh Sabaoth will let loose wasting disease on the fat ones, and instead of riches, burning fire will be kindled to burn like fire. ¹⁷ The light of Israel will become as fire and his holy one as a flame and it will burn and devour his weeds and thorn bushes in one day. ¹⁸ And the glory of his forest and his orchard, like a soul and until flesh perishes and becomes disease ridden, the Lord will destroy. ¹⁹ And the remainder of the trees of the forest will become small in number so that a boy will be able to write them down. ²⁰ And in that day it will be that those that remain of Israel and those that escaped from the house of Jacob, who relied upon the one striking it and attacking them, upon Yahweh, the Holy one of Israel in time they will come to rely. ²¹ A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob, will return to the mighty God. ²² For although your people, Israel, were like the sand of the seashore, only a remnant will return. Annihilation is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. ²³

For destruction has been decreed by the Lord Yahweh Sabaoth in the midst of all the earth. ²⁴ Therefore, thus says the Lord Yahweh Sabaoth, "Do not be afraid of Assyria, my people dwelling in Zion, of when they smite you with a rod and lift up their staff against you in the way of Egypt. ²⁵ For in a very brief time, my indignation and my anger against their destruction will be directed. ²⁶ Yahweh Sabaoth will stir up a whip even as a blow, as when he struck Midian at the rock of Horeb; and his staff will be over the sea, and he will lift it in the way he did against Egypt. ²⁷ And it will be in that day that the burden will be removed from upon your shoulder and the yoke from upon your neck and it will be broken because it has grown fat. ²⁸ He has gone up from Aiath he has passed by Migron, depositing utensils at Micmash. ²⁹ They passed by at the pass of Geba lodging place and they spend the night, Ramah trembles, the hill of Saul flees. ³⁰ Let your voice cry shrilly daughter of Gallim, listen Laishah, answer her Anathoth. ³¹ Madmenah flees, the ones inhabiting Gebim flee for safety. ³² This very day, in Nob he stops, he waves his hand at the mountain of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem. ³³ Behold the Lord Yahweh Sabaoth, lopping off branches with terrible power and

the tall being cut down and the exalted will be humiliated. ³⁴ And the thickets of the forest will be struck down with an axe, and Lebanon with its majestic forest will fall.

This section begins at what seems like a really odd place for us, at verse 5. It begins with an introductory “ah” (הוי) that distinguishes this material from the “outstretched hand” oracles that begin at 9:8. Those oracles are directed against Israel, but this section is primarily directed against Assyria.¹ Isaiah articulates faith on a grand scale, resisting safe, private, or conventional categories. Earlier in Isaiah, Assyria has been in view as a defining reality of the geopolitics (5:26; 7:17; 8:4, 7) of the audience’s world. Now, in this complicated, and at times unclear chapter the audience is plunged headlong into this world of geopolitics, face to face with the threats that come from the superpower and the temptations that have befallen the superpower. This chapter may be divided into four parts, with difficulty. The first of these parts is 10:5-19 and we will begin by examining this part.²

¹ Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39*, In *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, Volume XVI (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), p. 198.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, in the *Westminster Bible Companion* series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 91.

Before we do that however, let us explore a little background that will help us as we go through this section of Scripture.

The self-aggrandizing speeches of the Assyrian monarch in Isaiah 10:5-34 have for a long time piqued the interest of both biblical scholars and those that work in Assyriology. In an article by Michael Chan, he suggests that the various prophetic oracles and speeches (10:5-6, 16-19, 33-34) can be traced back to a historical familiarity with Assyrian royal idiom. These oracles, in Isaiah, have been crafted in such a way as to use that idiom to produce a theologically militant presentation of Yahweh's actions against the boundary-transgressing policies of the Assyrian king. The creativity of the language used to indict the Assyrian regime would have appeared to be amazingly familiar as Isaiah took language and metaphor associated with the Assyrian monarchical ideology and literature and transformed it in such a way to make the indictment against Assyria. The very words of the Assyrian regime will be turned, as it were, and will be used as evidence of their crime of arrogance against Yahweh and his people. The bombastic claims of the Assyrian regime will be usurped and used to show that the Assyrian king and his God Aššur have in fact acted as

usurpers of positions and praise that only properly belongs to Yahweh.

Such claims as are recorded by the Assyrian kings in their inscriptions and annals will be reformatted and revised by Yahweh to make his points.³

The first act of subversion occurs in verses 5-6 where we encounter the commissioning of Assyria as the rod of punishment. It is not Aššur, the Assyrian chief god, who is the power behind Assyria as would have been indicated by the Assyrian propaganda, but Yahweh who sent Assyria as an agent of his divine wrath. The use of the term “ah” (אָה) to begin verse 5 prepares the reader for the decidedly negative word of judgment and the role reversal that follows.⁴ In addition, the usage of the first person pronouns in this section indicate that the speaker of these words is none other than Yahweh himself. This is in contrast to verse 12 where we will find that the speaker is the prophet. The basis for the condemnation of Assyria is then cited in verses 7-11 and the focus of the condemnation is based upon Assyria’s

³ Michael Chan, “Rhetorical Reversal and Usurpation: Isaiah 10:5-34 and the Use of Neo-Assyrian Royal Idiom in the Construction of an Anti-Assyrian Theology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009), pp. 717-733.

⁴ Michael Chan, “Rhetorical Reversal and Usurpation: Isaiah 10:5-34 and the Use of Neo-Assyrian Royal Idiom in the Construction of an Anti-Assyrian Theology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009), pp. 717-733.

destructive intent.⁵ God sent Assyria against Israel, but the tool that he sent has taken on its own agenda and this is where Isaiah appears to take up the Assyrian propaganda and in this preparations are made, using this propaganda for the indictment against Assyria.

There are a number of challenges in these first few verses for us. One of those, for us as modern people, is the fact that God is angry and not simply a little angry, he is furious. In his fury (עֵבֶרָה) he sends his rod (מִטָּה) which is wrongly translated “club” in the NRSV. The idea is that the rod is the rod, or staff, of authority, or perhaps for us the idea of a scepter conveys some of the meaning here, indicating that it is to be used as an instrument of divine punishment. I think today it is often hard for us to see God as a source of punishment for wrongdoing in the here and now; we push such ideas of punishment to a point into the future at a time of final judgment. We must realize that we do not get to set the time, place, or form of judgment, this is the purview of Yahweh, he is the sovereign ruler of the universe and no one, or nothing else can rightfully step into this position. In his sovereignty, Yahweh chose to send Assyria, but in its arrogance Assyria oversteps

⁵ Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 199.

the mark taking credit for things that come from Yahweh. Assyria, represented by their king is shown to be arrogant thinking they have great strength and prowess in battle, that they are somehow better than the people they were sent to punish.

He sees the destruction of Israel and Judah to be the same as, maybe even less difficult than, the destruction of the other places that

he has destroyed such as

Calno, Carchemish, Hamath,

Arpad, Samaria, and

Damascus. Calno is

apparently the same as

Calneh in Amos 6:2 and is

located in Northern Syria.



Opinions differ as to the

exact location. It fell to Tiglath-Pileser in 738 B.C. Carchemish was a

city on the Euphrates River near the boundary between modern Turkey

and Syria. It was sacked repeatedly by the Assyrians in the ninth and

eighth centuries. Tiglath-Pileser III received tribute from it, and in 717

B.C Sargon finally destroyed the city and deported its inhabitants.


Hamath is a place that lies well to the south of the Orontes river in Syria. It was an important independent city and David had collaborated with its king. It was subdued by Assyria in 738 B.C. and a brief uprising was totally put down there in 720 B.C. Arpad always seems to be paired with Hamath and they are both mentioned as cities destroyed by Tiglath-Pileser III; Arpad was located about 25 miles north of modern day Aleppo.⁶

Samaria was the capital city of Israel and was built by Omri as the capital. In 733 B.C. Tiglath-Pileser invaded the land, the king, Pekah was murdered and Hoshea was put on the throne and tribute was imposed. When Tiglath-Pileser died (727 B.C), Hoshea rebelled against Assyria and Shalmaneser threw him into prison and besieged the city, which was finally fully subdued by Sargon II in 722 B.C.

Damascus was the capital city of Aram and one of the most ancient cities in the world. It was conquered in 732 B.C. and made a province of Assyria with an Assyrian governor.⁷ In all of this, the Assyrian king is shown to have a disdain for Jerusalem as being perhaps less than the

⁶ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Volume 24, Revised Edition (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. 188.

⁷ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, p. 188.



other religious centers that housed idols. In this section we get a glimpse of the world-view of the people of this era. It is not just about politics and mechanics they recognize the role of religion and the gods of the various nations in the affairs that today we would term affairs of state. It is noteworthy that idols are associated with not only Samaria, but also with Jerusalem. These writings take the point of view from the Assyrian perspective.

The reference in verses 10-11 picks up on the same perspective that is demonstrated by the Rabshakeh. This perspective demonstrates that not only is Assyria directly opposed to the plan of Yahweh, but also shows a clear disregard for the clear limits that he had placed upon Assyria in being his instrument of punishment. The reputation of the idols of all these other nations, that had been conquered by Assyria, exceeded the reputation accorded to Yahweh and these accusations on the part of the Assyrian king represent slander and blasphemy against Yahweh and a direct challenge to his power and authority.⁸ The God of Jerusalem is seen by the Assyrians as the same as the other gods and as nothing special. This then sets

⁸ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, in The Old Testament Library series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 92.


the scene for this great superpower of the ancient world, who views his own power and authority as sufficient not only to defeat the God of Jerusalem, but to do what he set out to do in his and his nation's own power, cleverness, and wisdom.

In the imagery used by Isaiah here we can look at the Assyrian inscriptional evidence and see the way that the Assyrians portrayed themselves and it is interesting that they portrayed themselves as weapons in the hand of Aššur. This was the way that the kings of Assyria appear to have understood themselves. In using their own language against them, not only is the King of Assyria shown to be the puppet of Yahweh, but also Aššur is dethroned at the same time as Yahweh takes over the position of the one wielding the weapon from the position of power and authority. The primary justification for war according to the Assyrians was that they saw themselves as the instrument of Aššur and Isaiah inverts this divine commissioning to come from the Israelite God Yahweh rather than from the Assyrian god. Yahweh invades the sacred mystical space of Aššur and dethrones him and the other Assyrian deities. This is a creative reworking of their own propaganda in a subversive fashion. This is not such a farfetched

idea even to the Assyrians as the Rabshakeh in 2 Kings 18:25 indicates that it was Yahweh who sent the Assyrians to attack Jerusalem.⁹

The point though, of the Isaiah text, is that Yahweh is not like these other gods and he has not granted unqualified legitimating rights to his command to punish Judah and Israel. Contrary to what is found in the annals of the kings of Assyria, the Assyrian king fights as an agent of Yahweh, and is indeed answerable to him for all that he does. At verse 12 this point begins to be made as Yahweh indicates through the prophet that when he is finished with his work on Mount Zion, to punish Judah, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria. The indictment is now laid against Assyria indicating that they have claimed things that are in truth a lie and that they have gone beyond the mandate that they were given by Yahweh. Notice that in this indictment is the accusation of pride, which is actually given in several very powerful ways indicating that this is the primary source of the indictment against the Assyrian King. The rhetoric here takes for granted that Assyria, like every other nation, and every center of

⁹ Michael Chan, "Rhetorical Reversal and Usurpation: Isaiah 10:5-34 and the Use of Neo-Assyrian Royal Idiom in the Construction of an Anti-Assyrian Theology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009), pp. 717-733.



power, is subject to the governance of Yahweh. This is a claim that Assyria is ignorant of, and which Judah in their great anxiety fails to trust. In the worldview of the prophet, cowardice, bravery, cleverness, nor power mean anything in the grand scheme of things, only Yahweh determines how things will play out.¹⁰ Yahweh is in control of what happens and in the end he will have the final say and that say begins before the end.

The arrogant self-assertion of Assyria continues in verses 13-14. In this self-assertion, the arrogance is clearly apparent and the overstepping of the mandate of Yahweh is also made clear, especially in the boast of removing boundaries and bringing down kings. Assyria seizes what belongs to others with a sense of impunity and arrogance that is like a nest robber taking eggs.¹¹ This section sets up what will follow by laying the indictment and demonstrating that not only have things that are wrong been done but they have been done with an arrogant attitude of impunity that must be answered. This prophecy powerfully and forcefully indicates that no one, not even the great king

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 93.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 93.

of the world's superpower, is above the dominion of Yahweh and the stage is set for the sentence to be given. After all, Assyria is but a tool in Yahweh's hand.

The consequences of this arrogance will be felt by the sending of a wasting sickness upon the stout, or in the Hebrew text fat, warriors of Assyria. The sentence of Yahweh will come upon Assyria with the force of a burning fire and it will burn and devour all that is not useful and functional in the mission of Yahweh like thorns and briers are burned in a cultivated garden to make way for that which is functional and useful to the gardener. The destruction of Assyria will be devastating, and Assyria will be reduced to a number so few that even a child will be able count them. They will become nothing more than a remnant, what they have made Israel, and so what they have done to Israel will be done to them by Yahweh because of their arrogance and pride. Yahweh is an enemy of arrogance and pride; here of Assyria, but it is made clear that arrogance and pride are particularly repugnant to him and there is a sense in which wherever they may exist they exist as a challenge to the rightful purview of Yahweh alone. The only proper attitudes before Yahweh, and all who stand before Yahweh, are

humility and submission. Yahweh lays siege to those who fortify themselves behind walls of arrogance and pride. In an ironic twist the agent of judgment (the Assyrian monarch) becomes the object of judgement.¹²

At verse 20, we find a prophecy of hope for the people of Israel in the face of the judgment of Yahweh over them. Here it is promised that a “remnant” (שְׂאֵר) will survive and they will learn their lesson and after their ordeal they will not rely upon those things that they had expected to protect them before, such as political alliances, technology, superior numbers and physical strength. They will come to rely upon Yahweh in truth and when they return they will be a people overflowing with righteousness. This positive possibility is seen here and in verses 24; a propensity of Isaiah is to follow harsh judgment against Judah and Jerusalem with subsequent assurance. Note here what was seen as punishment for Assyria, being made a remnant, is perceived here of as a ray of hope and promise for Israel. In this context, assurance is reserved for the survivors. One of the great

¹² Michael Chan, “Rhetorical Reversal and Usurpation: Isaiah 10:5-34 and the Use of Neo-Assyrian Royal Idiom in the Construction of an Anti-Assyrian Theology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009), pp. 717-733.

forms of self-deception among those who fail to trust Yahweh is to trust in that which is the very agency of destruction. In our own era we have entrusted our safety precisely to a technological-military that is only in reality a false security and ultimately cannot save us.¹³

The promise here comes carried in three powerful terms: 1. the first is to “lean on Yahweh.” This is not calling for some kind of pietistic sentiment, this is a calling for real-world trust in Yahweh and has great implications for where we place our trust (In God we trust). Will it be in world governments, or will it truly be in Yahweh? 2. Verse 20 ends by using the term “truth.” This term is used to identify that the leaning is in reality upon Yahweh and not merely the appearance, or a half-hearted reliance upon him but the full thing with full weight. It is more than a slogan printed on money. To lean in trust requires a complete reorientation on the part of the person of faith. 3. That reorientation is signaled by the “return.” The return here is more than geography it is about an unreserved reengagement with Yahweh and accepting him as the true sovereign of his people. The people will no longer be tempted, or seduced to have alternative, or split loyalties. To be sure

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 94.

there is nothing easy, cheap, or obvious about the future called for by this “leaning upon” Yahweh.¹⁴

The words of assurance continue in verse 24-27a with a challenge to not be afraid of the Assyrians when the blow comes from the Assyrians upon them. The indication is that the wrath of Yahweh will only be for a short season and then he will turn against the Assyrians and put an end to their tyranny and the wrath of Yahweh will then be turned toward the “destruction” (תבִּלִּית) of Assyria. That day will come and it will be a day of deliverance that will be swift and the indications are that it will be miraculous in some way like Israel’s deliverance from Egypt was (Isaiah 36:1-22; 2 Chronicles 32:1-19; 2 Kings 18:13-37). Because of this passage, which seems to so accurately foretell what happened as Assyria besieged Jerusalem some have seen it as having been added later.¹⁵ There is no need to expect that the sovereign God of the universe does not know what will happen in the future and indeed more than knowing he makes it to come to pass.


¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 94-95.

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 95.

Verses 27b-34 insert an unsettling account of the assault against Jerusalem. This represents the route of the oncoming Assyrian army and where they will camp. Again here you will find commentaries that indicate that this was written after the fact, but it is clear that the audience is intended to understand that this is a prophecy of what will take place in the future as the axe of the Assyrian army falls upon Jerusalem. These words are meant to indicate that despite the arrogance and unrighteousness of Assyria judgment will indeed fall upon Judah and Jerusalem. This section removes any sense of false security, or complacency that may have arisen from the divine assurance in Isaiah 10:5-27 that Yahweh would punish Assyria.¹⁶ Assyria would indeed be punished, but so would Judah and Jerusalem for their lack of true faith in Yahweh. This passage is a powerful call for his people to trust and lean upon him in true humility, without pride, or arrogance.

The words of Isaiah here should indeed be a cautionary tale for the United States to take great care as the world's superpower to insure that they do not take credit for what belongs to Yahweh alone and to

¹⁶ G. C. I. Wong, "Deliverance or Destruction? Isaiah X 33-34 in the Final Form of Isaiah X-XI," *Vetus Testamentum*, 53 (2003), pp. 544-552.



recognize that he will punish arrogance even in those that are used as his instrument. Arrogance will bring the negative attention of Yahweh not only on an individual basis, but also on a national basis. We must recognize that Yahweh wields as much power today among the nations states of this era as he did in the 8th century B.C.

Synopsis

In this section of Scripture we come to a message that is primarily directed toward Assyria, but it also carries a message for all people and all nations, in all times, and in all places. In this section of Scripture it is made clear that Yahweh is using the nation of Assyria as a rod to punish disobedient Israel and Judah, but the instrument in the hand of Yahweh has a mind of its own and oversteps its mandate. Assyria begins to believe its own propaganda, that it is indeed somehow superior to the other nations and that it is somehow endowed with superior strength, wisdom, and power in such a way as to demonstrate this superiority: Of course Assyria believes that this superiority has come from its gods. This can be seen in the royal inscriptions that we still have to this day demonstrating this perspective. In a masterful manner the prophet Isaiah will use the very ideas and concepts of the Assyrians to turn the tables and to invade the sacred spaces of their gods and demonstrate that Yahweh is in control and ultimately superior to the gods of Assyria. This is a challenging perspective when you are looking at being crushed by this superpower.

Yahweh will allow Assyria to punish Israel and Judah, but at some point he will then turn to punishing Assyria for its arrogance and he will demonstrate to them the error of their attitudes and actions. In this masterful piece of literature we are able to see the geopolitical perspective that Yahweh wants his people to recognize; he is in charge and his plan will become reality. Whether a nation is being allowed to be a superpower, or not, is at the discretion of Yahweh. He raises up such powers and he destroys such powers. We find in this section the idea of the remnant used in both a positive and in a negative fashion. In one instance it is used to indicate the punishment of Yahweh (with Assyria) and in the next as a ray of hope (for Israel). In either instance, the element of humiliation is in view. Yahweh humiliates the proud and the arrogant and calls for those who would be his followers to have proper respect and acknowledge the role of Yahweh.

Questions

1. Why do you think we have this prophecy?
2. How do you feel about the fact that Yahweh uses this evil, and brutal regime to punish his people?
3. Why do you think Yahweh vents his fury on Israel and Judah?
4. What message do you think there is for us today in this concept of the fury of Yahweh?
5. What does it mean to be a superpower?
6. How might this passage about this ancient superpower apply to our world today?
7. How might this passage apply to us as individuals today?
8. What are some ways that we are called upon to lean upon God today?
9. What are some ways that the government of our own nation calls us to lean upon it rather than upon Yahweh?
10. How might this passage change the way we should view our nation?
11. How might this passage change the way we pray for our nation?
12. What might this passage change about the way you see the mission of the United States in the world?
13. What might this passage change about the way we view our security in today's world?
14. How do the ideas about remnant challenge your view of the world?
15. What are some ways that you think the United States could be more humble?