
Isaiah Series 1

Lesson 5

“Isaiah 11:1-16”

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.

¹ A shoot will come forth from the stump of Jesse and a sprout from his roots will bear fruit. ² The spirit of Yahweh rests upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and of strength, the spirit of knowledge, and the fear of Yahweh. ³ He will take delight in the fear of Yahweh and not judge by the sight of his eyes and he will not adjudicate from what his ears hear. ⁴ In righteousness he will judge the poor, and in uprightness he will adjudicate for the humble of the earth (land); and he will beat the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath from his lips he will put to death the wicked. ⁵ Righteousness will be a belt around his waist and faithfulness a belt around his loins. ⁶ And the wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard with the young goat will lie down; the young bull and the young lion will graze together and a small boy leading them. ⁷ And the cow and the bear will graze together, their young ones will lie down and the lion like cattle will eat straw. ⁸ And a suckling will play upon the hole of a cobra and a weaned child upon the whole of a poisonous serpent will put his hand. ⁹ No one will act wickedly and no one will act corruptly in all the mountain of my holiness for

the earth (land) will be full of the knowledge of Yahweh even as the waters are covered by the sea. ¹⁰ In that day the root of Jesse will become the one whom stands for the people as a sign, the nations will inquire of him, and his resting place will be glorious. ¹¹ In that day the Lord will extend his hand a second time to acquire the remnant of his people which were left over from Aššur and from Egypt and from Hamath and from the coast by the sea.

This passage of Scripture from Isaiah is brimming full with imagery that has shaped the imaginations, the hopes, and the expectations of both Jews and Christians for centuries. It should be noted however, that the eschatological visions of Jews and Christians differ dramatically and so, as might be anticipated, their interpretations of this passage differs dramatically. Both communities of faith continue to turn to Isaiah to map a glorious future when the harsh realities of their present lives need to be overcome through hope for something better in the future.¹ With this verse we will investigate how the different perspectives, the different preconceived perceptions, change how this passage of

¹ Christopher Leighton and Adam Gregerman, "Between Text & Sermon," *Interpretation* 64:3 (2010), pp. 284-289.



Scripture has been, and is, interpreted. In doing this, perhaps we can grow in our understanding of others and their perspectives, but also, and more importantly, in our understanding of God and his word. I think this passage demonstrates, more than most, how what we take to a passage of Scripture determines what we take away from it. In such an examination there is much for us to consider. In examining Scripture we need to be searching for the message of God there and not a reflection of our own needs for comfort and rationalization.

Isaiah will revisit the theme of the defeat of Assyria later in his writings, but in chapter 11 he returns to a theme he had begun earlier; the theme is the wonderful kingdom that God was preparing for his own people. This vision of the future was shared with the people of God in order to encourage them in the face of the hardships and discouragements that would come to them. It was given in order to encourage them to find strength and to live faithful lives, even in the midst of hardship and darkness with an expectation of the future.² It does not matter whether the reader of this text is Jewish, or Christian this is the purpose of this text. What changes

² Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 88.

one's interpretation of this text are the expectations and perceptions of the audience. What is emphasized can change absolutely everything in interpreting this text.

As Isaiah describes the wonderful coming age it includes descriptions of the Messiah who would be a crucial part of ushering in the coming kingdom being described. Isaiah focuses on three aspects concerning the Messiah: the Messiah himself, the peace the Messiah would bring, and the people that God would gather.³ The passage is one element of a larger vision that began with a plea to not fear the Assyrians (10:24) and then culminated in the promise of Yahweh designing something better for his people than what they would experience at the hands of the Assyrians. This section is connected to chapter 10 and a clear and unifying theme in chapter 11 is the branch from Jesse's roots.⁴ What comes in chapter 11 comes against the backdrop of the devastation that will come on Jerusalem and Judea at the hands of the Assyrians. Yahweh will work a newness

³ Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, pp. 88-89.

⁴ John D. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Volume 24 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. 211.

in the wake of the dismal state of affairs that come about due to the judgment.⁵

Isaiah's description of the ruler that would come reflects messianic expectations that were emerging in the First Temple period, during the time that Isaiah wrote. These expectations would develop through the centuries as Judah would be taken into captivity and then would return and rebuild the Temple in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah (The Second Temple Period). Such a vision represented an ideal king who would enact a sociopolitical transformation in which everyone, and especially the poor and powerless would receive justice, and the wicked would be punished in the way that they so richly deserved. This radical transformation reflects the core of Isaiah's vision. The establishment of this new age is firmly anchored in the location, and the security and peace, that will be necessary to make possible the realization of Yahweh's intentions for creation. As the agent of Yahweh, the ideal king will inaugurate this peaceable kingdom in that locale.⁶ This is where emphasis becomes a critical

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, in the Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 98-99.

⁶ Christopher Leighton and Adam Gregerman, "Between Text & Sermon," *Interpretation* 64:3 (2010), pp. 284-289.

factor in interpretation. The issues of location will prove to be a critical juncture for the interpretation of this passage.

This radical reconfiguration of the political landscape raises some troubling issues. One of those issues is what will become of those who are not a part of the camp of Israel? In this vision there is the expectation that other peoples (the Gentiles) will acknowledge and submit to the divine rule established on Yahweh's holy mountain.⁷ This question has been of crucial importance in the interpretive history of this passage and even more important as the emergence of the church comes onto the scene. The expectations that a person has are crucial as the process of interpretation of this passage begins. For some, this passage is seen as filled with hyperbole and unrealistic expectations to such a degree as to really be little more than a passage challenging their view of the world with a hope and an aspiration for something better, but without really expecting some grandiose intervention by God. For others, however, this passage represents a vision of literally earth shattering proportions and a whole range of expectations in between. Some of

⁷ Christopher Leighton and Adam Gregerman, "Between Text & Sermon," *Interpretation* 64:3 (2010), pp. 284-289.

these expectations will be important even at the point of translation as some words have a dual meaning such as the word that is translated either as “earth,” or as “land.” How one translates this word has a major impact on what is expected as the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Interpretations of this passage are often vastly different when interpreted by Christians and when they are interpreted by Jews. Perhaps this should be expected, but I think it is possible to learn a great deal by examining this passage from differing perspectives. Let us begin with an overview. Isaiah 11:1-5 begins the description of a new work that he would begin in the “land,” or the “earth.” The source of this new work would come through the line of Jesse. Isaiah goes back to Jesse because he is not proposing David’s successor, that had already come in Solomon and the other Davidic kings. Isaiah is proposing the coming of another one like David not simply his successor (cf. Jeremiah 30:9; Ezekiel 34:23-24; Hosea 3:5). As the Spirit of Yahweh came upon David from the time that he was anointed by Samuel (1 Samuel 16:13) so the Spirit of Yahweh would rest on this new David and empower him to fulfill Yahweh’s purpose.

Isaiah then describes the qualities that the Spirit would bring, wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and the fear of Yahweh (11:2). In Proverbs 1:1-7 wisdom, understanding, knowledge and fear of Yahweh are seen as foundational qualities of the the life that pleases the Lord.⁸


The concept of “the fear of Yahweh” appears again at 11:3, perhaps as a point of summation of this defining aspect of the Messiah’s relationship with Yahweh. Fear of Yahweh stands at the heart of the relationship between the Messiah and Yahweh and everything else flows from this relationship. This factor is central in being able to rule well and to govern with justice and righteousness.⁹ This concept (fear of Yahweh) is not something that is prized in the modern church and without this concept I wonder how it is possible for us to be the agents we need to be as part of Yahweh’s plans for creation? The fighting against evil and the promoting of justice are anchored deeply in this concept of fearing Yahweh. Without this anchor all is subject to the court of public opinion and devolves into the anarchy of pooled ignorance. The only true hope that has, or

⁸ Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, pp. 89-90.

⁹ Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, p. 90.

ever will exist, is for us to anchor deeply in our fear, our awe of Yahweh. Once we are anchored firmly here there are infinite possibilities for a future that is bright, just, and free from the wickedness of self-centered arrogance.

At 11:6-10 we come to the peace that will come through the Messiah. Once Isaiah completed his description of the person of the Messiah he shifted to describing the societal transformation that would occur under his leadership. Under the leadership of the Messiah, society would experience true *Shalom*. Every aspect of existence would come into perfect harmony. Even the animals that have in the past been seen as a danger not only to each other, but to human beings would no longer be a threat. This harmony of nature is indicated by the pairing of people and animals that previously had been enemies. Even children will be able to safely play with them and lead them. Some have seen these images as a return to the Eden of Genesis, but the fact is we do not see the full development of the images in Genesis that Isaiah portrays. In Revelation there is a description that has remnants of the Genesis story for sure, but it goes far beyond what is seen there. It appears that what Isaiah



envisages is far beyond what we have in the beginning of the Genesis story. Perhaps it is the development of what would have become had sin not entered into the Garden. In that day, the root of Jesse would serve as a rallying point, a signal for the nations to come and inquire of him.¹⁰

The history of Israel was filled with battles of one kind or another from simple skirmishes to major conflicts with other nations like the conflict with Assyria was almost certain to be. One of the outcomes of all of these battles was the displacement of Israelite prisoners of war to many other parts of the world. Isaiah prophesied the return of a remnant from these displacements. The Messiah would take steps to bring his people home. Three nations are particularly mentioned in this prophesy (Egypt, Assyria and Babylon), but this gathering would involve many more reaching to the four corners of the earth. The Nile would be split so that those returning can cross over on foot and there is wording here that is reminiscent of the parting of the Red Sea in Israel's first deliverance. Isaiah 11

¹⁰ Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, p. 90.

describes the Messiah, the lasting peace that he will bring and the gathering of Yahweh's people to their home, to Jerusalem, to Israel.¹¹

All of this seems so straightforward and simple, but let us return to the point where we began by looking at this passage from a variety of perspectives in order to sharpen our understanding of the message of Yahweh to his people. One of the issues left open by this passage is what about the Gentiles? The inclusion of the Gentiles is expressed in terms of their willingness to subject themselves to the Jewish king. The ethic, not the cultic identity of either the Jews or the Gentiles appears in the vision of Isaiah. Paul uses Isaiah 11 in a key passage in Romans. In Romans 15:12 Paul invokes Isaiah 11:10, not as a passage of hope for the Jews only, but as also prophesying the one who rises to rule over the Gentiles as well. Certainly, it is the case that Paul maintains that Jesus is this ruler. Paul focuses attention on the universal dimensions of this passage in Isaiah and in it makes some important points: 1. that this Messiah will indeed rule over the Gentiles. 2. That the Gentiles need not become Jews to

¹¹ Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, pp. 90-91.

share in the salvific transformation that comes about by means of participation in Jesus Christ.¹²

The universalistic view of Paul does not exclude the Jews who fail to respond to the message of Jesus Christ. The call of God is irrevocable and even when the rejection of Jesus is initiated through some inscrutably mysterious fashion the rejection of the Jews is not final (Romans 11:25-29). In later Christian thought Paul's perspective appears to have been abandoned as in most Christian theology the Jews have been totally replaced by the Gentiles and through some form of magic the Jews are now in the place of the others, the Gentiles. Such a conception, this state of affairs led Christians in their evangelical zeal to seek to convince Jews to relinquish their rituals and customs and basically become Gentiles in order to enter the Church (cf Acts 11). This conception of salvation transforms Isaiah's vision into a paradigm that requires the Jews to recognize that their true covenantal destiny simply requires for them to merge with the church and share a commitment to faith in Christ in a manner that merges them together as one people. In reality, in such a conception,

¹² Christopher Leighton and Adam Gregerman, "Between Text & Sermon," *Interpretation* 64:3 (2010), pp. 284-289.

the Jews merely disappear into the midst of the new people of God the church.¹³

It should be obvious that this interpretation will not have been seen by the original audience, of Jews, or by preceding generations of Jews to be anything similar to a vision that will have brought them hope and courage in the light of their difficulties. For the Jewish people through the generations there have been some things about this passage that have been a focus of attention: One of those is the focus on the work that the Messiah accomplishes in the “land” not the “earth.” The Hebrew word that is translated as “earth” in verse 4 and 9 can properly be translated as “land.” When this is done the scope and the nature of the vision of Isaiah is transformed. The focus then becomes the initiation of this Messianic vision to the land of Israel and in particular to Mount Zion as its center. In such a focus there is an image of a Messiah that is focused on the land of Israel, and any affects that there are for the wider world are periphery transformative affects. Modern translations immediately make this split between Jewish and Christian perspective clear. In verse 4, the

¹³ Christopher Leighton and Adam Gregerman, “Between Text & Sermon,” *Interpretation* 64:3 (2010), pp. 284-289.

Revised Standard Version, overseen by an interdenominational group of Christian scholars renders the word *'eres* as “earth” in order to indicate the expansive realm of the Messiah.¹⁴

In the Jewish publication Society’s translation the *Tanakh*, however, the same word is rendered as “land” with the implication that it is referring to the land of Israel. By changing the way this one word is translated they are imposing a geographical focus if not limitation upon the Messiah’s actions that are envisioned here. One could, and many have debated which of these views more fairly represents Isaiah’s original perspective here, but there is no doubt that the difference in translations points to a real difference in religious traditions.¹⁵ There are many fruitful questions that we can ask at this point, but central to them all is how our religious traditions affect our understanding of Scripture. So often as we examine Scripture what we are really wanting is the short version the essentials, but repeatedly such a short version, such essentials, only appear as such because of our perspective that so often is dictated by

¹⁴ Christopher Leighton and Adam Gregerman, “Between Text & Sermon,” *Interpretation* 64:3 (2010), pp. 284-289.

¹⁵ Christopher Leighton and Adam Gregerman, “Between Text & Sermon,” *Interpretation* 64:3 (2010), pp. 284-289.

what we take to the text not what we take from it. This is dangerous ground and must be treaded with caution lest we be guilty of manipulating Scripture to make it into an idol of our own comfort.

Isaiah 11 has in more recent times become a part of the Jewish nationalistic liturgy that is read on Independence day in Israel. This text is also read on the 8th day of Passover, setting up parallel examples of divine redemption and assigning miraculous significance to the events of 1948. A conspicuous claim is made by such a linkage that the rise of the current state of Israel, largely made up of unbelieving Jews, is the fulfillment of Isaiah 11. Encounters with the historical interpretations of Isaiah should be a reminder to us that a sacred text can live many lives among the different communities of faith that search there. Of course not all interpretations are equal on exegetical, historical, or theological grounds. In noting the things that have been noted above we need to be very cautious as we steer a path between hermeneutical relativism that allows people to make a text say anything that they desire, and an absolutism that enshrines triumphalist disposition that blinds us to the wisdom of others, also created in the image of God. It is one thing to read the Scriptures in

order to contest injustice and to expose human hypocrisies: it is quite another thing to rely upon the Scriptures to elevate one's own nationalistic agenda over that of the rest of the world. It must be remembered that at the heart of these words of Isaiah, and of the rest of Scripture, is a quest for ethical behavior on the part of the people of Yahweh.¹⁶


The offering of sacrifices, the keeping of festivals, attendance of religious events and paying lip service to God are never to be seen as a substitute for real, heartfelt, ethical behavior that is anchored deeply in the fear of the Yahweh. From a Jewish perspective reading Isaiah 11 without considering the implications for the Jews is questionable on exegetical, moral and theological grounds. It is deeply problematic to look past the positive hopes that this passage was intended to bring to the Jews and only emphasize those that are for the nations. It must be remembered that in the context of Isaiah and his bold vision, that vision was Israel focused, and then world transformative. Neither of these concepts is absent from the text of Isaiah 11. In the early centuries of Christianity, Christians increasingly

¹⁶ Christopher Leighton and Adam Gregerman, "Between Text & Sermon," *Interpretation* 64:3 (2010), pp. 284-289.

rejected the notion that the Jewish people have any positive role to play in the fulfillment of this prophecy. Lest we forget, Jesus was born a Jew, died a Jew, and was raised a Jew. He became the new David. When we can express a willingness to hear the perspectives of others, we inevitably learn of those perspectives things that are troubling to us and perhaps even offensive.¹⁷

Hopefully in this process we can learn from one another and become more fully what Yahweh has called us to be as his followers. One of the issues that this passage brings to the forefront is that it presents a vision so large and so magnificent that it seems impossible and indeed I believe that is the point. Without the direct intervention of Yahweh there is absolutely no way that the vision that this passage of Scripture indicates can become a reality. This vision is truly a vision so large that it is indeed godlike. It is perhaps in part due to the atrocities suffered by the Jewish people, at the hands of those who claimed to be Christians that they have not been able to embrace a more encompassing vision. Perhaps it is because they emphasize the aspect of this passage that indicates that Yahweh will

¹⁷ Christopher Leighton and Adam Gregerman, "Between Text & Sermon," *Interpretation* 64:3 (2010), pp. 284-289.



punish the wicked, and in the eyes of those who are the descendants of the Nazi atrocities this is the perception that they have of those who claim Christianity to be their religion. As we allow the power of this passage to impact our souls we must never let our hearts be hardened, our minds be closed and our eyes blinded. If we fail to comprehend the ethical aspects of this prophesy, perhaps it is a prophesy not intended for us as a promise of good things, but as a promise of the judgment of Yahweh that will come. The concept of the fear of Yahweh rests as the heart and center of this passage and without that center all of it falls flat.

Synopsis

This is a passage that down through the centuries has brought hope in the midst of despair and injustice. The vision of what that hope entailed has differed markedly between the Jews and Christians. Examining how both groups have interpreted this passage should help both groups to understand the vision of Yahweh in bringing it to Isaiah in the first instance. For the Jews, the focus of this passage has been so centered on the land of Israel that they have failed to see the great affect not only on the Gentiles, but also upon all of creation. For Christians the focus has been so narrowly confined to the blessings to the Gentiles that there has been a reversal of the debate of Acts chapter 11 regarding whether, or not Gentiles needed to become Jews before they could come to salvation. In all of this, the focus of this prophesy is centered in the moral and ethical arena rather than in the religious practice of the people. Religious practice does not necessarily equate to ethical practice and here the emphasis is clearly upon justice and righteousness.

The vision given by Isaiah either has to be seen as figurative hyperbole, or else it is a vision so grand and all encompassing that it only becomes a possibility through the intervention of God. Creation itself is altered in this vision and true *Shalom* comes to the earth such as has never been known. The central character in this vision is the “root of Jesse” that will be the instrument of Yahweh in fulfilling his plan for creation and bringing into reality the vision of God. This passage was first given as a passage to bring comfort, courage, and hope to a people who were going to be crushed by successive superpowers, but the only fear that is to dominate their hearts is the fear of Yahweh. This is to be central in regulating their ethical behavior and in allowing them to persevere the hardships and temptations that they will face. In the end, for those who embrace this hope things will be put right, and the wicked will be punished for their wrongdoing. We must take great care to avoid allowing our historic prejudices to cloud our understanding of the word of God.

Questions

1. What do you think wisdom is?
2. How do you think we are meant to understand what true wisdom is?
3. Why do you think an important aspect of the savior prophesied here is fear of Yahweh?
4. Why do you think it is good that the one who comes will not judge by the sight of his eyes, or what his ears hear?
5. What do you make of the fact that the breath of his lips will put to death the wicked?
6. What are the implications of all of the changes among the animals here?
7. In verse 9, it says that no one will act wickedly. What do you think this means on a practical level?
8. Do you think that when this passage was originally given the original audience will have understood it as giving priority to the Gentiles?
9. Why do you think the focus of the passage returns again and again to the root of Jesse?
10. In what ways do you find the different ways of interpreting this passage challenging?
11. Do you think it is okay for the church to reinterpret this passage in a way that it never was interpreted before the time of the church? Why, or why not?
12. How might this passage be used to help heal the rift between Jews and Gentiles?
13. What hope does this passage bring to you today?