
Isaiah Series 1

Lesson 7

“Isaiah 34:1-17”

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 Draw near, oh nations, to listen, oh peoples, give your attention, let the earth listen and the fullness of the world and all its offspring. ² For the wrath of Yahweh is upon all the nations, and his fury upon all the armies, he will exterminate them, he will slaughter them. ³ Their slain will be flung out, the stench of their corpses will go up and the mountains will dissolve from their blood. ⁴ All the host of heaven will rot away and the heavens will be rolled up like a scroll and all their army will wither like a leaf on a vine and like a fig from a fig tree. ⁵ When the sword of heaven has drunk its fill, behold, upon Edom it will descend, and upon the people devoted to judgment. ⁶ The sword of Yahweh is filled with blood, it is covered with fat, with the blood of the best of the young rams and goats, the rams kidneys, for sacrifice to Yahweh in Bozrah,¹ and a great slaughter in the land of Edom. ⁷ Wild oxen will descend with them, and young bulls with the bulls, and their land will be saturated with blood and their soil will be made the best with fat. ⁸ For a day of vengeance is for Yahweh, a year of retribution for Zion. ⁹ And its streams will be transformed to pitch, and its dust to

¹ Bozrah was the ancient capital city of Edom.

sulphur, and its land will become burning pitch. ¹⁰ Night and day it will not be extinguished forever. From generation to generation its smoke will rise, it will be desolate; nothing will pass through it ever.

¹¹ The owl and the hedgehog will take possession of it, and the raven will abide in it, and he will spread out upon it the measuring line of emptiness and the stone of void.² ¹² Its noblemen will have nothing to call a kingdom and all of its princes will become nothing.

¹³ Thorns, will seize its citadel, weeds, and briers in its fortifications and it will become the habitation of jackals the haunt for ostriches.


¹⁴ Wildcats will meet hyenas there and the hairy demon upon its fellow demon will call; surely then Lilith will come to rest and will find a resting place. ¹⁵ There the arrow snake will make a nest and lay its eggs and hatch in its shadow; there buzzards will gather each with its mate. ¹⁶ Seek and read aloud from upon the scroll of Yahweh: not one of these things will be lacking; none will be without a mate. For his mouth has appointed it and his spirit has summoned them to assemble. ¹⁷ And he causes the lot to fall for

² (*tohu* and *bohu* as in Genesis 1:2).

them, his hand has apportioned for them with the line; they will possess it forever from generation to generation they will dwell in it.

Chapter 34 begins with a summons to all the nations to gather to hear a message from Yahweh. The prophecy that follows is an oracle regarding the divine wrath that is about to ensue as Yahweh sits in judgment upon the nations of the world.³ There is little in this oracle that appears to be uplifting, unless one takes the view that this passage indicates that Yahweh is not going to permit things to continue as they are: he is going to act, and this passage of Scripture is a clear indication that the status quo will not continue. God will act and before redemption can come evil must be cleared away. The prophesy is addressed not only to the nations, the human inhabitants of the earth, but to all that “fills” the earth. There is a sense of finality, and a sense that the trial has already been completed and now we have the pronouncement of the judgment of that trial. This is the sentencing phase of the trial, the evaluation of guilt has passed, the guilty verdict has already come and now the sentence is delivered. The message is delivered in such a manner as to be all

³ I. W. Slotki, revised by A.J. Rosenberg, *Isaiah*, in the Soncino Books of the Bible series (New York: The Soncino Press, 1983), p. 159.



encompassing and broadcast for all to hear. This is a message from the creator and judge of the universe to his creation. The judgment is delivered in the form of a poem that is carefully constructed with every single word carefully and purposefully placed. The elements of parallelism and euphony are carefully worked out in order to make these words memorable and songlike in their resonance with the ear.⁴ It is not really possible for us to replicate the parallelism, or the euphony of this beautiful poem into English, but I think it is important for us to understand that it exists in Hebrew. This made these words memorable and embedded them with a poetic power that increased their impact on the reader.

The words of this poem begin with this very dramatic and artistic appeal to the world to listen to the imminent judgment of Yahweh. The exhortation of this poem is one of the most elaborate in all of Hebrew Scripture employing powerful triad formulas. This triad formula is then followed by a six-fold address: nations and peoples, the earth and its fulness, the world and its offspring. This vast panoramic background sets the stage for the entire poem. The

⁴ James Muilenburg, "The Literary Character of Isaiah 34," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 59 (1940), pp. 339-365.

perspective of the poet, in this poem, is colossal in scope. This introduction will be followed throughout the poem and we will find many aspects of this poem that will relate to the breadth of the Hebrew world of the 8th century B.C. There will be cultural associations, demonological lore, and much that comes from the Hebrew cultural background.⁵ This poem is part of a large section of Scripture that extends into chapter 35 and gives an indication that Yahweh will not leave the world as it is, in bondage, drought, and oppression, but he will bring about a transformation. The first words of this poem introduce this theme and let the audience know that this is what is to come.⁶

Chapter 35 will have the ultimate theme of homecoming, but before the rehabilitative transformative events of chapter 35 are possible God must clear the ground of hostile forces; this is the work expounded in chapter 34. Chapter 35 focuses upon the restoration of creation to what Yahweh had always intended it to be (35:4 “Here is your God). The poet will seek every possible image to voice the

⁵ James Muilenburg, “The Literary Character of Isaiah 34,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 59 (1940), pp. 339-365.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, in the Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 268.

newness that is to come and overturn all conventional categories.

This poem is meant to convey the idea that the status quo is going to be overturned and a new era, a new governance, will come to replace the old in every single zone of reality. The judgment-grace pattern of chapters 34-35 anticipate the larger assertion of these same themes in chapters 40-55. There Babylon (like here Edom) will be eliminated as a threat in order that God's people may come home. The theme of chapters 34-35 assert themes that will dominate much of what is still to come in the book of Isaiah. Evil will be defeated and the governance of Yahweh becomes a pivotal hope for the church as well as for many within Judaism. The huge hopes and dreams that would follow and that stand at the heart of Christianity are rooted deeply in passages like this one in Isaiah.⁷

Chapters 34 and 35 together articulate Yahweh's savage defeat of the enemy and his powerful rehabilitation of Israel. As savage as is the defeat of the enemy so also there is the same level of intensity in Yahweh's salvation of his people. There is a connection between the two. The extreme negativity of chapter 34 needs to be seen in the


⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 268.

context of the more positive aspects of chapter 35, but for our purposes it is chapter 34 that is quoted by Mark in his Gospel (Mark 13:25 and allusion in 11:12-24). In the summons of Yahweh we see once again the worldview that is put forward by the prophet Isaiah and that is the perspective that Yahweh is absolutely sovereign over everything. He is able to exercise unqualified sovereignty over all the nations. Yahweh governs all peoples whether they realize it, or rather that they acknowledge it.⁸ In verse 2 we are informed that Yahweh is enraged against all the nations and in typical parallel fashion this is repeated in the next strophe as an indictment of all their vast numbers (hordes). As a result of the rage of Yahweh his judgment is that they are doomed, they are to be slaughtered.

In verse 3 we pick up the theme in the midst of the slaughter and the dead will be cast out. This is an indication that the dead will be left unburied.⁹ This last part of verse 3 is difficult to translate and you will find a variety of translations of this verse, but the best sense to me seems to be that so great will be the slaughter that the blood of the dead will melt the mountains. In verse 4, we are told that the

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 268-269.

⁹ I. W. Slotki, revised by A.J. Rosenberg, *Isaiah*, p. 159.



host of heaven shall rot away. Some have seen this as a reference to the stars, the moon and the sun while others have seen this as reference to the celestial powers of the nations.¹⁰ Either way it is a powerful image that nothing will stand in the face of the wrath of Yahweh as he comes to bring judgment. Whether this is referring to the celestial forces of darkness that stood as the power behind the nations, or the heavenly bodies themselves nothing will withstand the wrath of God. All will fall like ripened fruit, or dead leaves before Yahweh. At verse 5 there is perhaps an indication that the celestial powers are in mind in the previous verse, but it is difficult to be certain. It is hard to see though why Yahweh would be so consumed with anger at the stars, the moon, and the sun otherwise. We must recognize their world view that saw these things not the way we do, but as actual celestial beings.


The sword of Yahweh is drawn and it will do its work of slaughter. The idea here is related in terms of the ancient war ideology of Deuteronomy 20:10-18, where the nations that resist Yahweh and threaten Israel are to become under the ban; in other

¹⁰ I. W. Slotki, revised by A.J. Rosenberg, *Isaiah*, p. 160.

words they are to be completely destroyed. A case in point of this is Amalek; he is totally destroyed (1 Samuel 15:4-33). This enemy is totally destroyed as Yahweh's adversary, and as the unforgiven enemy of God and his people (cf. Exodus 17:8-16).¹¹ Standing as the enemy of Yahweh was an attack on his sovereignty and it is met with overwhelming force and condemnation. To stand in judgment of Yahweh is not tolerated, especially when to stand in judgment of him entails attempting to subvert his decreed order and commands. This is, in part, why certain crimes among the people of God were punished so severely in Israel and why idolatry is seen as so terrible. These things act as a direct challenge to the power and authority of Yahweh.

The sword of Yahweh is gorged with fat: fat was often a prominent feature of animal sacrifices and here it appears that those who defy Yahweh are offered up as sacrifices for purification. This same theme seems to carry over in the mentioning of the blood of the goats and lambs, and in the fat of the kidneys. It appears that we are to hold in view the idea of the sacrifice here. This same theme

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 269-270.



carries forward into verse 7 and it has to be asked if there is not some equation of imagery here between all the animal sacrifices and the mighty armies of men who in their pride and arrogance are nothing before Yahweh except sacrifices to soak the land with their blood and fat. The wrath of God is devastating, and a thing to be avoided at all costs, but once it is unleashed there is no refuge from it and the defiant pride of those who continually ignore Yahweh and his precepts are doomed to be a part of the plan of Yahweh in a different fashion as their blood is poured out as a sacrifice to nourish the earth. They are fertilizer.

Verse 8 continues the theme of the vengeance of Yahweh; still the wrath of God runs hot and there is the indication that this is not a short lived event as if there is simply a flash of anger and then it is over. The wrath is shown as being furious from the beginning by the reference to a day and as lasting a long time by the reference to year. We then turn to the object of this fierce wrath of Yahweh, Edom. Edom, the brother of Israel is now the object of wrath due to their continual animosity toward the people of God, and God will deal a devastating blow turning their land into a wasteland. The hostile

attitude toward Edom is prevalent in prophecy. Of all the people groups that are cited in prophecy the oracles of the prophets with reference to Edom are the most remarkable. Such prophecies can be found at Isaiah 21:11-12; 34; 43:1-6; Jeremiah 44:7-22; Ezekiel 25:12-14; 35; Joel 4:19-21; Amos 1:11-12; 9:13-15; Obadiah; Malachi 1:1-5. There is also harsh treatment of Edom in biblical poetry such as in Psalm 60; 137; and Lamentations 4:21-22.¹²

The question we are still left with as we come to this harsh prophecy regarding Edom is why? There are many explanations proposed by scholars, but each seems quite unsatisfactory for different reasons, but particularly because they do not account for the antiquity of this ill feeling. Most cite either the fact that the Edomites participated in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., or that they occupied the land of Judah after this time and up through the time of the Romans. None of these explanations seem satisfactory in the face of the antiquity of a text like this, or the depth of the animosity. Assis has offered a different perspective and equates the animosity to the struggle of the two fathers, Jacob and

¹² Elie Assis, "Why Edom? On the Hostility Towards Jacob's Brother in Prophetic Sources," *Vetus Testamentum* 56 (2006), pp. 1-20.

Esau. The perception that Edom was the brother of Jacob was prevalent in Judah. The view of Assis is that this dispute over birthright became a part of Israelite heritage and Edom became a sobriquet (a nickname for one opposed to Israel) for opposition to Israel. Edom's aspirations to occupy areas of Israel and to participate with their enemies may have been interpreted by the inhabitants of Judah as the desire on Edom's part to reverse the situation, and to restore the birthright of Edom. This was a direct challenge to the sovereignty of Yahweh who as sovereign has the right to elect whoever he wishes, and this without giving any explanation, or reason.¹³

It might be assumed that when Edom grew stronger and threatened Judah such feelings would grow more intense. Each new incident between Edom and Judah built on this foundation of animosity and became a way of referring to the enemies of Yahweh that refuse to accept his sovereign decree. A further aspect of this phenomenon of anti-Edomite prophecies is that a number of them are in close proximity to prophecies regarding the redemption of

¹³ Elie Assis, "Why Edom? On the Hostility Towards Jacob's Brother in Prophetic Sources," *Vetus Testamentum* 56 (2006), pp. 1-20.

Israel (Joel 4:15-20; Amos 9:11-15; Isaiah 34-35; Isaiah 52:11-53:6; Obadiah 19-21; Ezekiel 35-36; Lamentations 4:21-22). The prophecies concerning the destruction of Edom and this salvation of Israel seem striking in comparison with oracles regarding other nations. There then becomes a connection between Yahweh's forgiveness of Israel and his destruction of Edom. Judah's redemption is only possible after the destruction of Edom. The people of Judah feel that they are insecure as long as there is a rival for the birthright.¹⁴ Whatever the reasons for the animosity there seems to be a clear connection between the salvation of Israel on the one hand, and the destruction of Edom, who stands for those who oppose the sovereign rule of Yahweh on the other.

The land of Edom will become an uninhabited place. It is likely that the initial devastation concerning Edom is a reference to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24-25). When the land is desolate and empty it will remain in this state for a long time, perpetually.¹⁵ Low-life creatures will come to inhabit the land along

¹⁴ Elie Assis, "Why Edom? On the Hostility Towards Jacob's Brother in Prophetic Sources," *Vetus Testamentum* 56 (2006), pp. 1-20.

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 271-272.


with horrid and despicable demons such as Lilith, who is noted in antiquity for seducing men, threatening pregnant women, and killing newborn babies. The Jewish account of Lilith as the first wife of Adam is perhaps the most widely known account of Lilith, but this character has appeared throughout recorded history in the Ancient Near East in a variety of ways. She is very often associated with the “night” because her name shares consonants with the Hebrew word for night, but it is much more likely that the name is derived from Akkadian.¹⁶ Lilith is put into a class of Mesopotamian demons belonging to the incubi-succubae class of demons, more popularly known as vampires.¹⁷ Lilith also appears among a list of demonic creatures in the *Song of the Sage* (4Q510-511). This text is most often classed as an exorcism text. The legends regarding Lilith have been greatly expanded through the centuries and the variety of legends is quite expansive. For our purposes the main thing is that this is an unclean demon that haunts lonely, desolate places.

¹⁶ H. Wayne Ballard, Jr., “Is Lilith Fair? An Observation from Isaiah 34:14,” *Review and Expositor* 95 (1998), pp.583-588.

¹⁷ Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, third enlarged edition (Detroit MI: Wayne State University, 1990), p. 207.

The land would be a cursed land inhabited by only the foulest of things. The desertion of this place will be made more assured by its occupation by these foul creatures and this is seen as an indication of the depth and breadth of the curse of Yahweh that will fall upon nations that fail to recognize his sovereignty and indeed upon those who flaunt their lack of recognition of this fact. This prophecy should be a stark warning even today for those would place themselves in a position that fails to recognize the sovereignty of God. This passage was intended to strike terror into the hearts of those who read it, because they will have understood the consequences of the wrath of God.

After this, the prophet takes us back to the discipline of these verses. He is aware that he is making text and he acknowledges here the expectation that he expects his words to be written down and to endure. After all he is writing the words of the sovereign ruler of the universe. These things will occur because they are the decree of Yahweh and there is no way of avoiding what is to come for Edom and the decree of Yahweh will be everlasting throughout time. God has decreed that each agent shall occupy its proper place in the plan



of God and that is exactly what will happen. There is irony here in that the God who guarantees land to Israel also guarantees that the land of Edom will belong to the forces of death forever and ever. God will not be mocked; he will not have his authority challenged. There are consequences to such actions and those that do such things must answer to their creator.

Some may wonder why we studied such a depressing passage of Scripture. One of the reasons is that it is indeed Scripture. The themes recounted in this passage will be seen in other places in Scripture throughout history. The clearing away of that which is evil is indeed a prominent aspect of Revelation as the great battle that is fought is recounted, blood running horse-bridle deep and the slaughter of the enemies of God are recounted. The forces of evil cannot be left in place if things are to become what God desires them to be. They are rebellious, defiant and arrogant and the only way to deal with such forces are to totally overwhelm them. This is what we have in Isaiah 34. This is a part of the great salvation and restoration of world. Seen from the proper perspective this should be a passage that brings great encouragement to the faithful followers of God.

Synopsis

This passage of Scripture begins with a summons to all the nations of the earth and everything in it. Once the attention is called for, the verdict is given from the mouth of Yahweh. He is angry with the nations and in his fury he is going to exterminate the armies of the nations. This fury will be seen in the extreme prejudice with which he slaughters these armies, which are vast. Their bodies will be left unburied and the stench of their corpses will rise up and their blood will be so boundless that it will dissolve the mountains. The attack will not simply be against these armies, but also against the celestial forces behind them. These forces too will be destroyed with extreme prejudice and they will wither before Yahweh like leaves on a vine and like figs rotting on a tree. The poet then turns toward Edom, who appears to stand for the enemies of Yahweh that would challenge in any way his sovereignty and they too are slaughtered and their land is saturated with their blood and fat as if they are a sacrificial offering only useful as fertilizer. The vengeance of Yahweh will be terrible, intense, and long-lasting.

The desolation that it will bring will be so complete that the land will be sparsely populated and it will become the haunt not only of a variety of creatures that inhabit lonely, desolate places it will be cursed. Thorns, weeds, and briers are an indication of this curse as it was in Genesis. The kingdom of Edom will become nothing and their royalty will have nothing over which to rule. A hairy demon will call other demons to come and dwell in this accursed place and even the evil and despicable Lilith will come and dwell there. All of this will happen because Yahweh has decreed that it will happen and even these unclean creatures obey the summons of Yahweh. They obey even when men do not.

What happens here is a powerful prelude to the salvific activity of God. He will destroy the evil and bring everything under his dominion, or it will be destroyed. Edom, who by birthright might pose a threat to the elect of God is utterly destroyed from the face of the earth. The way is then open for the salvation of Yahweh to come to his people. God will not allow the status quo to continue and the actions of God will be marked out by the fact that he moves against the forces of evil and darkness with extreme prejudice.

Questions

1. How would you define evil?
2. What right do you think God has to rule over his creation and do with it as he pleases?
3. Why do you think Yahweh exterminates the armies of the nations?
4. Do you think the people of God received comfort from his harsh treatment of his enemies? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think Yahweh punishes the host of heaven? What part do they play in all of this?
6. Why do you think Jacob was chosen over Esau? Why do you think we are not really given the answer to this question?
7. What right does God have to bless one brother over another?
8. What does it mean for us as human beings to attempt to pass judgment on God?
9. What does such an attempt say about our attitude and our respect for God?
10. What does it mean to defy God?
11. Why do you think Yahweh gives this prophesy to his people?
12. What are some lessons that you think we should learn from this passage of Scripture?
13. What do you think it means that even the demons come when they are summoned by Yahweh?
14. How are we today different than the people who originally received this prophesy? How are we the same?
15. What do you find the most challenging about this passage of Scripture?
16. Do you find any comfort in this passage? Why or why not?