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November 15th: Isaiah 28 & Luke 2:1-21

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The danger of heeding Judah's drunken prophets and priests. The birth of Jesus Christ.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 28. The Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty to the remnant of his people, and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate. These also reel with wine and stagger with strong drink.

The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink. They are swallowed by wine. They stagger with strong drink.

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They are swallowed by wine. To whom he has said, This is rest, give rest to the weary, and this is repose. Yet they would not hear.

And the word of the Lord will be to them, precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little, that they may go and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken. Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers, who rule this people in Jerusalem. Because you have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement.

When the overwhelming whip passeth through, it will not come to us. For we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter. Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone of a sure foundation.

Whoever believes will not be in haste. And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb-line, and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter. Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand.

When the overwhelming scourge passes through, you will be beaten down by it. As often as it passes through, it will take you. For morning by morning it will pass through, by day and by night, and it will be sheer terror to understand the message.

For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on, and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in. For the Lord will rise up as on Mount Perizim, as in the valley of Gibeon, he will be roused to do his deed, strange as his deed, and to work his work, alien as his work. Now therefore do not scoff, lest your bonds be made strong, for I have heard a decree of destruction from the Lord God of hosts against the whole land.

Give ear, and hear my voice, give attention, and hear my speech. Does he who ploughs for sowing plough continually? Does he continually open and harrow his ground? When he has levelled its surface, does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put in wheat, in rose, and barley in its proper place, and emmer as the border? For he is rightly instructed, his God teaches him. Dill is not threshed with a threshing-sledge, nor is a cart-wheel rolled over cumin, but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod.

Does one crush grain for bread? No, he does not thresh it forever. When he drives his cart-wheel over it with his horses, he does not crush it. This also comes from the Lord of hosts.

He is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom. As our chapter 28 begins what is generally seen as a new collection within the book, taking us through to chapter 39, there are a few subdivisions within this section, most notably the narrative section of chapters 36-39. Chapters 34 and 35 are also often treated as a distinct subsection, although chapter 33 is sometimes joined with them.

Chapters 28-33 might relate to those chapters in a similar way as chapters 13-23 in the Oracles Against the Nations related to chapters 24-27, which move from the specificity of judgments upon particular cities and nations to a more general eschatological vision. These chapters are structured by five Woe Oracles, all introduced with the same word, variously translated as Woe, Ha, Ah or Hey, a word that we have already encountered several times in the Book of Isaiah, especially in chapter 5. While the earlier Oracles Against the Nations addressed the earth with a wide-angle lens, addressing nations and cities throughout the world, from Babylon in the east to Tyre in the west, in this section the frame of the prophetic vision once again narrows to focus on Ephraim and Judah more particularly. Whereas chapters 7-12 dealt with the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war in the 730s BC, as Judah and Jerusalem under Ahaz were threatened by the anti-Assyrian alliance of the Arameans or Syria and Israel, these chapters speak to a situation after the removal of the Syro-Ephraimite threat through Assyrian intervention, leading up to the crisis of the Assyrian invasion in 701 BC, which is recounted in the narrative section of chapters 36-39.

Whereas Assyria had seemed to be King Ahaz's saviour in the 730s, now it is becoming clearer that Assyria would likely be Judah's doom and the foreign policy of Ahaz no longer seemed so brilliant. Now Judah's hopes turned to Egypt. Isaiah addresses this developing crisis in these chapters, once again warning Judah against putting its hope in such an alliance rather than in the Lord.

The section begins with Isaiah speaking to the rulers of the northern kingdom of Israel, the imminence of whose demise is probably generally apparent at this point. Samaria and Israel would fall to Shalmaneser V and Sargon II in 722 BC, leaving Judah next in line. At this point the fall of Samaria was likely inevitable.

The point of Isaiah is not to foretell that near inevitability, but to present Samaria and Israel as a cautionary lesson to Judah. The woe oracle of this chapter opens with an image of reeling drunkards of Ephraim wearing a fading garland of flowers upon their heads. This comparison to drunkards illustrates the insensibility, instability and folly of the leaders of Israel.

But the proud crown is not merely one worn by drunkards in their revelries, but Samaria

itself, the proud crown of the rich valley on which its hill was situated. Samaria in its intoxication is dulled to the terror that is descending upon it in the form of the invading Assyrians. Compared in verse 2 to a natural disaster, an extreme hailstorm or tempest, a deluge that the Lord is bringing upon the nation that will submerge it.

In its wake, the proud crown, the symbol both of Israel's decadent intoxication and of its capital Samaria, would be trodden underfoot by the enemy, or plucked off and eaten like a first ripe fig, an ominous image perhaps making the hero wonder which other figs would ripen next. In contrast to the proud crown of Ephraim that would be trampled underfoot is the Lord himself as the crown of glory of his faithful remnant, the Lord the true king of his people. Instead of the inebriation and moral insensibility of the judges and rulers of Samaria, the Lord would bring a spirit of justice and would empower the defenders of the nation.

The whole ethos could not be more opposed. Commentators are divided on the question of the persons who are in view in verse 7 and onwards. Does this continue the description of Samaria and its leaders or has the focus now shifted to Judah and its leaders? I am inclined to see the verses referring to Judah and its leaders.

The priests and prophets of Judah are no different from the rulers of Israel. They are no less intoxicated, staggering in their drunkenness, their vision blurred and their judgement impaired. The prophet is the one who is supposed to give his vision to the people.

The priest judgements in accordance with the law. Both parties however here are utterly incapacitated by drink. This presumably refers to the iniquity of the people but likely also to their excessive indulgence.

Elsewhere drunkenness is presented as a sign of divine judgement so we should probably regard their intoxication as a sign that they are marked out for destruction. Just as a drunkard might spew up vomit upon the drinking tables so the drunk prophets and priests of Judah are vomiting everywhere, covering everything with their filth. Perhaps there is a suggestion here that the tables in question include the table of the altar and the tables in the holy place at which the priests had to serve.

The speaker in verses 9 and 10 is not clear. It might still be the prophet or it might be that just as revelers might engage in drunken mocking, the prophets and priests of Judah are ridiculing the faithful prophet. Some commentators have argued that these are the Lord's own words from the past.

Gary Smith argues, I believe persuasively, that as there is no explicit reference to a different speaker introducing these verses and as the teaching of verse 10 is presented in a derogatory fashion, the most likely option is that these are the direct words of Isaiah to the prophets and the priests of Judah, exposing the emptiness of their teaching. Their

teaching is like the slurred and stumbling speech of drunken men, perhaps suited only for infants and young toddlers, who with their unsteady gait, lack of self-control and dignity, and clumsy speech would be the natural counterparts of such drunkards. Verse 10 likely mocks their teachings then, presenting them as like the stuttering speech of a drunk or the gibberish of a toddler, a cluster of repeating yet nonsensical monosyllables which is apparent in the original Hebrew.

On account of their failure in speech, the failure to bring light and knowledge through their teaching, the Lord would communicate with them in a language more appropriate in the strange lips and foreign tongues of Assyrian invaders. The word of the Lord to them would sound much like their own drunken speech, but now in the mouths of an enemy nation that he had brought upon them, whose language they could not understand. Paul, of course, refers to this passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 in his discussion of tongues as a sign to unbelievers.

If it didn't already occur in verse 7, by verse 14 the focus has clearly shifted to Jerusalem and its rulers, who are now explicitly addressed. The scoffers of Jerusalem need to learn the lessons from the fate of their brethren to the north. They seem to fancy themselves immune to the disaster that is coming, because they have made a covenant with death and an agreement with Sheol.

It is likely given the focus of subsequent chapters that this refers to their turn to Egypt in their foreign policy, trusting Egypt to rescue them from the Assyrians. In the characterization of alliance with Egypt as a covenant with death and an agreement with Sheol, the suicidal character of Judah's foreign policy is exposed. It is also contrasted most sharply with the true covenant that the people were supposed to have with the Lord their God.

Their covenant with Egypt was taking refuge in lies and falsehood and would ultimately not provide them with the security for which they hoped. Rather they would find that, in looking to death and Sheol, they would descend to the grave. Perhaps in death and Sheol we might be expected to hear a reference to the false gods of Egypt, who lay behind its power.

In contrast to the false refuge to which Judah and its leaders have turned, the Lord is establishing a true sanctuary in Jerusalem, which he describes in terms of the laying of a foundational cornerstone. We should probably see this cornerstone as a representation of the Lord's manifest covenant commitment to his people, seen in such things as the Davidic king, the strength of a faithful Zion, the Lord's keeping of his promises and the restored community of the remnant. The statement, whoever believes will not be in haste, has been understood by some to be an inscription upon the cornerstone, by others to be a statement about its import.

Either way the point is that the person who trusts in the Lord will be established and will

enjoy the confidence and calm that comes from that. The refuge of Egypt, to which Judah's leaders were turning, would be swept away. However the Lord's sure refuge would stand firm against all storms, established firmly upon the choice cornerstone and built up with the true standards of justice and righteousness, in contrast to the structure of lies upon which the people were actually trusting.

As their false refuge was destroyed in the time of crisis, their covenant with death and Sheol, the terrible powers to which they had turned, rather than to the Lord in the time of their distress, would prove ineffectual and would be swept away. Egypt would prove to be like a short bed with small blankets and no amount of shifting around would keep Judah comfortable and warm in the bitter winter that was coming. Not only would the refuge fail them once, the failure of the refuge would be bitter as time and again they would be battered by their foes without any relief.

Verse 21 seems to refer back to great victories that the Lord gave his people against their foes. At Mount Perizim in 2 Samuel 5, verse 20, the Lord had given David a great victory against the Philistines. His words on that occasion were, The Lord has broken through my enemies before me like a breaking flood.

In the valley of Gibeon, in events recorded in Joshua 10, the Lord had struck down many Canaanites who fought with Annibezak against the children of Israel, striking them down with large hail stones. These two great victories might remind us of verse 2, Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong, like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty overflowing waters, he cast down to the earth with his hand. The Lord's might had been manifested in such deliverances in the past, however the might of the Lord would now be against Jerusalem and Israel.

The scoffing leaders of the people should cease immediately, lest matters become even worse for them, because the Lord had decreed the destruction of the land. They needed to come to terms with him as swiftly as possible. The concluding verses of this chapter have a very different tone.

They present the illustration of a wise small farmer, who knows how and when to plough, sow, thresh, beat and prepare grain for bread, having been taught the ways of agriculture by God's teaching through the natural order. In learning and heeding these lessons, the farmer is able to conduct his work successfully and has the results to show for it at harvest time and in the final results of flour for bread and other produce. The Lord is often compared to a farmer, dealing with his people as with a field of grain, a vineyard or as an olive orchard.

The wise learn from the Lord and act accordingly. The message of these verses is found in verses 26 and 29. Just as the wise farmer learns from the Lord, so ought the leaders of Judah to learn from him, heeding his counsel rather than following the example of doomed Israel, the teaching of their drunken priests and prophets, or turning to Egypt

and the powers of death for security against Assyria.

A question to consider. 1 Peter chapter 2 alludes to this passage in speaking of the building of the church upon Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone. How might Peter's use of this passage illumine the words of Isaiah and vice versa? Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 21 In these days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. Luke chapter 2 begins with a census of the whole world by Caesar Augustus. This sets Luke's story within the context of the wider empire of Rome, much as the later story of Israel in the Old Testament is placed within the context of larger empires such as Assyria, Babylon, the Medo-Persians,

as the influence of Israel and the Lord is felt throughout the wider world that Israel inhabits.

Luke's narrative in Luke and Acts will conclude with Paul in Rome. By mentioning Rome at this point, this wider world provides a backdrop for the Gospel, even though most of the action within it will be contained within Israel's borders and population. It also makes clear that Israel is under foreign control.

Under the shadow of Roman rule, an heir of David is returning to the city of David. Much ink has been spilled on the subject of Luke's census, as there immediately seems to be a number of problems. First of all, Quirinius was not the governor of Syria at the time of Jesus' birth.

Second, there's no evidence that people would have to return to their ancestral town to be registered, or that Mary would need to accompany Joseph. And third, Judea wouldn't be included in such a census, because it was a client kingdom of the Romans, under the rule of Herod the Great. While I won't get into all of these issues here, here are a few observations in response.

First of all, it's likely that Bethlehem was not just Joseph's ancestral home, that it was his family home. Mary's home was in Nazareth, where Joseph had gotten betrothed to her. They then moved down to Bethlehem together, as their initial home as a couple, as Joseph presumably owned property and had family there.

This was where he came from. Joseph takes Mary with him, because Bethlehem is his family home, and he intends that having been betrothed in Nazareth, they marry and settle in Bethlehem. The census provides the occasion for this, but he goes back because that's where he owns property, that's where he belongs.

Later, as we read in Matthew chapter 2, they move back to her hometown of Nazareth, for the safety of the infant. And there we get the impression that Joseph and Mary belonged in Bethlehem, they weren't just visiting there for a short period of time. Perhaps the best explanation I've found for the census is that advanced by Stephen Carlson, who argues that Augustus' census was not a once-off general census, but that Luke is referring here to a larger census policy.

The reference to the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria is better translated he argues, as this became a very important registration when Quirinius was governing Syria. Now, why would he refer to this? Because the 6 AD census under Quirinius was the time and context of the rise of Judas the Galilean and his resistance to the Roman Empire. He started the movement of the Zealots, which eventually led to the Jewish war with Rome in the late 60s AD.

This was a hugely important event within people's memory, and it's referred to

elsewhere in scripture in Acts chapter 5 verse 37, further evidence that Luke had some idea of the relevant history. In Acts 5 verse 37 he writes, After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered.

Other options have been suggested, some have suggested two periods of office for Quirinius. Perhaps one of the most important things to bear in mind here is the limited character of much of the historical evidence that we are working with, and how often we are in danger of jumping to conclusions on the basis of silence or very limited evidence. There are a great many occasions where scepticism about the historical veracity of details in the Gospels has been challenged by later emergence of evidence that directly supports them.

The infant is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there is no room for them in the inn. We've all seen nativity plays in which the innkeeper turns away Mary and Joseph. Usually the assumption is that there were such crowds of people in the town for the census that they didn't have space in all lodgings.

This is almost certainly mistaken. Joseph is just a young man returning to his family home, not to his ancestral home. There wouldn't be that much movement around, nor should we expect that the registration was all occurring on a single day or a short succession of days.

These censuses could last many years, they weren't just over a period of days. Others have imagined that there was some sort of prejudice against Mary and Joseph and so the innkeeper didn't let them in. But there is a far simpler answer.

There was no inn and there was no innkeeper. It doesn't even need to mean that there was no room in the family guest room so that they had to camp out with the animals, although it could mean that. Rather, the more likely explanation is that they weren't short term visitors to Bethlehem but had moved back there on account of the registration and the marriage and lived there.

The simplest way to understand it is that they were living with Joseph's wider family. They would have a smaller marital room attached to the house but that room didn't have room for her to give birth and so they had to relocate to the main room of the house where the animals would also be present in order to give birth. When he's born, Jesus can then be placed into one of the feeding troughs of the animals.

While fishermen are prominent in the New Testament, in which the gospel goes out beyond the land to reach the Gentile peoples, shepherds dominate in the Old Testament. The patriarchs were shepherds, they were distinguished from the Egyptians by that fact. Moses was a shepherd, as was David.

In a familiar Old Testament image, both God and the leaders of Israel were regarded as shepherds of the people, with the nation as their flock. See that in Psalm 23 or in Jeremiah 3.15 or 23.1-4 and most strikingly perhaps in Ezekiel 34. Moses was a shepherd and he delivered Israel from Pharaoh as a shepherd, using a shepherd's rod to strike the enemy of his people and leading Israel through the wilderness like a flock.

This is the way it's described in Isaiah chapter 63 verses 11-13. Moses' first encounter with the Lord was while keeping watch over his father-in-law's flock. He saw an angelic appearance with glory phenomena, something that probably occurred at night, considering the appearance of fire, and he was given the further sign that he would later worship the Lord on Mount Horeb with the people after bringing them out of Egypt.

The shepherds in Luke are watching their flocks when they are given a glorious angelic appearance, accompanied with the glory of the Lord, and are also given a further sign. And I think we should notice the parallels between Exodus chapter 3 verse 12 and Luke chapter 2 verse 12. In Exodus, And this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you, when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.

In Luke chapter 2 verse 12, And this will be a sign for you, you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. The contrast within the parallel is striking however. The sign received by Luke's shepherds is that of a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths laid in a manger.

The sign given to Moses, the pyrotechnics of Israel's encounter with and worship of the Lord at Sinai, is eclipsed by the sign of an infant in a feeding trough. In both cases, shepherds are led to an encounter with the Lord. In the first, the Lord is shrouded in the dread darkness of the thundering and fiery glory cloud, and in the second, he has come as a swaddled child in a manger.

The significance of the sign of the swaddled child in a Bethlehem manger being given to shepherds probably arises from Old Testament prophecy. The Old Testament foretold the coming of a Messianic shepherd from the line and the town of David. Ezekiel 34.23 And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them, he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

Micah 5.2-5 But you, O Bethlehem of Rathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has given birth. Then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel, and he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be their peace. An infant in a sheep's manger in Bethlehem, the town of David's

own birth, is a sign that she who is in labour has brought forth. We can hear the story of Rachel in the background of Micah's prophecy.

Just before the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel, Jacob is told that kings will come from his loins. And while journeying towards Bethlehem, Rachel gives birth to Benjamin and dies. That story lies in the background of Micah 4-5.

But now Bethlehem has been reached and the true king is to be born. The shepherds, symbolising the leaders of Israel, encounter the promised great shepherd. However there is a surprise.

The one who was to feed the people as his flock is himself in the feeding trough. The Messiah will feed his flock, but not in the way that people might have expected. He will be their food.

Moses had a significant and foreshadowing encounter with the shepherds at a well in Midian, prior to his encounter with the Lord at the burning bush. He delivered the seven daughters of Jethro from the abusive shepherds and watered their flocks. The one drawn from the water became the one who gave water in the wilderness.

And his later ministry involved resisting false shepherds and leading and watering the people as the Lord's flock in the wilderness. And there is also foreshadowing in Luke's account of the shepherds. Later in Luke's Gospel he describes Joseph of Arimathea requesting the body of Jesus from Pilate.

In Luke 23, verse 53 The comparison with the description of the birth of Jesus is a pronounced one. The comparisons don't end here. Shortly after the wrapping of the body of Jesus and laying it in the manger or the tomb, there is a dazzling appearance of angels.

Once again a sign is given, but the sign is no longer the wrapped body of Jesus in a stone container, but it's the unwrapped linen garments and the empty tomb. The women within Luke's resurrection account both receive the angelic message and serve as the angels to the apostolic shepherds. And in both cases the result is marvelling.

We see that in chapter 2, verse 18 and in chapter 24, verse 12. The conclusion of Luke's Gospel also tells the story of the shepherds. There the apostolic shepherds are charged as witnesses of the resurrection who will make widely known the fulfilled sign concerning the Son.

We could compare chapter 24, verses 45-49 with chapter 2, verse 17 here. The Gospel ends with words that echo the end of the account of the shepherds' visit. In Luke 24, 52-53 Luke's account of the shepherds is the story of a wondrous and remarkable sign.

It is reminiscent of the sign of the burning bush, it is anticipatory of the sign of the empty

tomb and it is revelatory of the promised arrival of the Davidic shepherd. The shepherd Moses' burning bush anticipated the greater sign of the burning mountain of Sinai as the Lord's presence descended upon it, appearing to the people that Moses shepherded out of Egypt. The wrapped child in the manger seen by the Bethlehem shepherds anticipated the greater sign of the unwrapped linen garments in the empty tomb to the apostolic shepherds.

The account of the shepherds as witnesses, the bursting forth in praise, the theme of rejoicing and people pondering things in their hearts, also connects this account with that which precedes it in the account of John the Baptist's birth and Zachariah's song of praise. Once again, the purpose of such an account is to help the reader to interpret the meaning of the events. The angels are bringing good news of the birth of the Davidic Messiah to shepherds.

Some have observed that the language of Lord, Good News and Saviour were all terms that were promptly used within the imperial cult concerning the emperor, with whose action in calling a census this chapter was opened. If Matthew frames Jesus as a challenger to Herod as the king of the Jews, Luke might be framing Jesus as one whose kingdom will eclipse that of Rome. A question to consider.

This chapter begins with the actions of the great Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. But rather than sending heavenly emissaries to give the news of the birth of this new king to Caesar, God sends them to some small town shepherds on the night shift. What are some of the things that we learn about the character of the kingdom of God from our passage?