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November 7th: Isaiah 20 & Mark 14:1-25

November 6, 2021



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Caution against resting on Cush and Egypt. The Last Supper.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 20. In the year that the commander-in-chief, who was sent by Sargon the king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and fought against it and captured it, at that time the Lord spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, Go and loose the sackcloth from your waist, and take off your sandals from your feet. And he did so, walking naked and barefoot.

Then the Lord said, As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt. Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope, and of Egypt their boast. And the inhabitants of this coastland will say in that day, Behold, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped, and to whom we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria.

And we, how shall we escape? Isaiah chapters 18-20 concern the great powers to Judah's south, Cush and Egypt. In the preceding chapters the two nations were treated separately, Cush in chapter 18 and Egypt in chapter 19. In chapter 20 they are treated

together.

Judah was tempted, especially with the rising power of Assyria, which had overthrown the northern kingdom of Israel by this point, to look towards Egypt and Cush as potential sources of aid. Hoshea, the last king of Israel, had looked to Egyptian forces for aid earlier in the rebellion against Assyria. During much of this period Egypt was divided under various rulers.

However, after the rise of the Nubian rule 25th dynasty of Egypt, under Kashta, Pianchi and their successors, the Cushites would go on to secure rule over the entirety of Egypt. Forces from some ruler within Egypt had supported Gaza and Hamath in their rebellion against the Assyrians around 720 BC. However, Sargon II of Assyria had crushed the rebellion and defeated the Egyptian forces supporting them.

Perhaps he didn't retaliate against Egypt at that point because the forces were from a more limited regional power in a much divided Egypt. Ashdod was a key port on the coastal plain of Palestine belonging to Philistia. The Assyrians wanted to control the sea ports and the regions around them as the ports were critical for trade.

When an anti-Assyrian faction under Yamani gained power there, ousting an Assyrian appointed ruler in 713 BC, Ashdod looked to Egypt for support. They do not seem to have received the support that they hoped for. When the Assyrians came to crush the rebellion and Yamani fled, like many others before him, people like Hadad the Edomite and Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he fled for refuge to Egypt.

However, on this occasion the Egyptians extradited him to the Assyrians in 711 BC when they were threatened by them. The Nubian 25th dynasty seemed to have a more conciliatory foreign policy towards Assyria during this period. Nevertheless, a decade later they would support Judah in their rebellion against the Assyrians.

The Assyrians under Esau Haddan invaded Egypt in 674 BC but were defeated by the Egyptians under Taharqa. The Egyptians weren't so successful in repelling the invasion of 671 BC and the Assyrians ended up taking lower Egypt, the northern part of the country, and imposing tribute. After some Egyptian gains, Ashurbanipal extended Assyrian power down as far as Thebes by 656 BC.

The whole country was united under a vassal of the Assyrian Ashurbanipal and the 25th dynasty was at an end. This is all background for the short 20th chapter of Isaiah, presumably set in 711 BC, the year of the recapture of Ashdod by the Assyrians. The prophet Isaiah was instructed to perform a prophetic sign act.

There are several instances of such sign acts in the books of the prophets. Jeremiah performs a number, so does Ezekiel and Hosea in one of the most famous sign acts of all takes the unfaithful Goma as his wife. Isaiah is instructed to dress, or rather undress, as

if he were a captive taken in war.

Isaiah this time was wearing sackcloth, presumably in mourning for some reason, but he was instructed to remove the sackcloth and the sandals from his feet and walk around naked and barefoot. It is not clear whether he was entirely naked or whether he was merely removing all of his outer garments. Either way it would have been a humiliating sight.

Egypt had not been directly involved in the rebellion of Ashdod and they had extradited the rebel Yemeni to the Assyrians. Perhaps part of the lesson of Ashdod in this context is that Ashdod was greatly unwise in expecting any aid from the Egyptians. This lesson would be particularly important in the years that followed, in the final years of the 8th century, as the Egyptians played a part in fomenting rebellion in the region.

The Assyrian Sennacherib would crush the Egyptian expedition at that time. In the years to come, as we have already seen, the Assyrians would drive back the Egyptians. They would subdue them and reduce Egypt to the status of a vassal kingdom.

The people of the coastland, people who had looked to Egypt from Philistia for many years as their greatest source of support, would be dismayed. There was no help to be found in Egypt and Kursh. Once again the message of the prophet is that there is no security to be found in such human alliances.

Even supposedly great powers would prove utterly insufficient. Judah would have to learn to depend upon the Lord God of hosts for their support or else it would not survive at all. A question to consider, what might be the symbolic import of the nakedness of the prophet Isaiah in this prophetic sign act? Mark 14 verses 1-25 It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him.

For they said, Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people. And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.

And they scolded her. But Jesus said, Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.

For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want you can do good for them, but you will not always have me. She has done what she could. She has anointed my body beforehand for burial.

And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she

has done will be told in memory of her. Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money, and he sought an opportunity to betray him.

And on the first day of unleavened bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover? And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, The teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples? And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. There prepare for us.

And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover. And when it was evening he came with the twelve, and as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me. They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, Is it I? He said to them, It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me.

For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him. But woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.

And as they were eating he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, Take, this is my body. And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.

Truly I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. Mark 14 begins by telling us that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread was coming after two days. The timing was important.

The Passover was the 14th of the month of Nisan, followed by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, recalling the deliverance from Egypt. The Passover lamb, the death of the firstborn, all of these things were associated with that time. Passover was an event charged with significance in the memory of Israel, and so the events of the Passion and the Resurrection occurring at this time was of great significance.

It's important to consider that as this was one of the Pilgrim Feasts, Jerusalem would have been packed with people coming up for it, maybe over a couple of hundred thousand people. All of Israel's attention would be drawn towards Jerusalem over this week. So Jesus' death and resurrection were occurring at a crucial time, when people from all Israel gathered together in its capital.

The chief priests and the scribes were then seeking to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill

him. Jesus is a genuine threat to their power and influence, as has been seen in the previous chapter where his support from the crowd and his ability to outwit them really puts them in a difficult position. They don't want to capture and kill Jesus during the Feast, and certainly not to do so openly, precisely because that would draw so much attention, and the unmanageable crowd might cause all sorts of problems.

While Jesus is staying in Bethany, in the Mount of Olives, in the house of Simon the leper, he is reclining at a meal, and a woman comes with an alabaster flask of nard and pours it over his head. There are similar yet different anointing stories in each of the four Gospels, although Luke's story in Luke 7, verses 36-50 is set much earlier in the narrative and focuses upon themes of love and forgiveness. It suggests that this might be a different event that's being recorded.

Each of Matthew, Mark and John, however, connect their anointing story with the death and the burial of Christ. It anticipates the fate of his body and directly leads into the Passion narrative in some way or other. In John, it's connected with Jesus' own wiping of his disciples' feet.

In Matthew, as in Mark, it introduces the Passion narrative itself. Something very important is happening here. It's an extravagant and a costly action, and Jesus sees it as preparing him for his burial.

It's an act that values Jesus himself. Jesus is being treated like a king, but also in other ways, he's being treated like a lover. In Song of Songs, chapter 1, verse 12, I think we see part of the background for this.

While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance. Song of Songs, this song of the love between the king and a woman. And here I think we have that alluded to.

Jesus, throughout the Gospel of Mark, is the kingly figure. And here we have a woman treating him as the kingly figure, but also as the kingly bridegroom. The disciples are indignant over the cost of the ointment, but they fail to appreciate the value of the one to whom it is given.

Jesus declares that it is a beautiful thing that she has done, and that the poor they will always have with them. The timing of this action is critical. This isn't just an action performed upon Christ at any point in his ministry.

The importance of this action is seen in the fact that it occurs in the few days running up to his death. This is preparing Christ for his burial. This is an action that anticipates that Christ won't be with them for much longer.

They will have the poor with them after that week, but they will not have Christ with them to anoint in the same way. And indeed, after Christ has departed, it will be in the

service of the poor that the anointing of Christ occurs. We minister to the body of Christ and show our devotion and love for him by taking care of his people who are in need.

Jesus declares that the woman who performed this action would be remembered with honour wherever the gospel is proclaimed. As R.T. France observes, the gospel is not just told by Christ, as we see at the very beginning of the book of Mark, but it is also about Christ. And the fact that Jesus speaks in this way of the gospel, and the woman's part within this critical event that leads into the story of the Passion, is an indication that the gospel has a more developed sense.

That it's not just the story of the establishment of the kingdom as such, it's the story of the establishment of the kingdom through the action of Jesus Christ in his life, his death, and his resurrection. And that the woman is playing an important role within that story, that she has a noteworthy part to play. At this point, Judas goes to the chief priest and betrays Jesus.

This would have been a stroke of good fortune from the chief priest's perspective, because they would struggle to arrest Jesus secretly and do so before the start of the feast otherwise. But Judas's willing involvement and his knowledge of where Christ would be, and his involvement in different locations, would enable them to do so in a far more efficient manner. The presence of money in both these stories, the question of why the ointment wasn't sold for money rather than being expended upon Christ's body, and then the sale of Christ's body as it were for money by Judas, maybe helps us to see something of a common theme connecting these two stories.

The failure to perceive Christ's value and the value of Christ's body is beneath both of these accounts. Money is valued more than the person. At this point it's the first day of Unleavened Bread.

Now presumably this is not strictly speaking the first day of Unleavened Bread, it's the first day of the feast, it's the Passover, it's the 14th of the month, and the next day would be the first of the seven days of Unleavened Bread, but the larger festival could be spoken of as the Feast of Unleavened Bread connected with the Passover. It would be on that day, the 14th of the month, that they would kill the Passover lamb in preparation for the feast. The dating and the timing of these events, and particularly the way that we are to reconcile the events as they're told in John's Gospel with the events as they're narrated in the Synoptics, is a matter of considerable debate.

It might be possible for instance if we reckon the day from sunset to sunset, that this is all taking place on the night before the afternoon in which the Passover lamb will be sacrificed, and so it's the same day, but not as we would recognise it. As we would recognise it in our reckoning of a day, it's the day beforehand. So this is happening on the evening, and then Jesus ends up being taken that evening, he's brought to Pilate in the morning, and then he's crucified around the time that the Passover lamb would be

sacrificed.

This would explain for instance why certain actions that are performed by Joseph of Arimathea and others could be performed without a breaking of the laws of the Feast and the Sabbath. Various other suggestions have been made however. They prepare for Jesus to eat the Passover meal, and it's interesting that Jesus is spoken of as the one who's eating the Passover meal, as if it's Jesus' meal, not the meal of all of them together.

He sends his disciples into the city to prepare to celebrate the Passover together. They're sent and they're told that they will see a man carrying a jar of water. Jesus knows in advance who they will meet, and it's important in the context that it gives them assurance that he knows what's ahead, that he's not stepping into these events blind.

He knows exactly what's taking place, and from the triumphal entry, when they were given the instructions to go into the town and to get the occult, they have been assured that Jesus knows what's taking place, that things are under his control, even though he's facing a terrible fate. Again the request is made to the man, where is my guest room where I may eat? The suggestion once again being that the meal is particularly associated with Christ. It's Jesus' meal.

He will eat with his disciples, but he is the one who's the host. He's the one that the meal is about. Jesus eats the meal with the twelve, presumably the only ones present with him, and the shadow of the original Passover is starting to be felt.

This is a Passover meal, or at least a Passover-associated meal, and they have a sense that something is off. Jesus' tone may be somber in a way that they do not yet fully understand, and then Jesus tells them that one of them will betray him, and they become sorrowful. They're wondering who is it? Each question, is it I? They doubt their own hearts more readily than they doubt Judas, who's one of their number.

Jesus goes on to make clear that the Son of Man goes as it has been written of him. This is his destiny. This is not something that's happened accidentally, that's blown things off course.

This is what was always intended. It was what was written, and though there will be judgment upon the person who brought this betrayal about, the betrayal is what God intended and purposed. Jesus and his disciples are eating a Passover meal, or at least a meal associated with the Passover.

Now it's crucial to see that Jesus isn't just taking up any old food and drink. He's taking up elements that are charged with great historical and symbolic and ceremonial meaning. These are elements that are part of a larger meal, and when those elements are taken, they take with them the fabric of the symbolism of the meal itself.

So what Jesus is doing is taking something already freighted with meaning and symbolism, and taking that pre-existing symbolism and relating it to himself. In this case, the symbolism is that of the unleavened bread associated with the Messiah. It's broken and distributed and participated as his body.

It's a self-communication in symbol, a real communication of himself in the symbol of something that was already associated with the Messiah. Jesus speaks of the blood of the new covenant poured out for many, taking words I think from Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12, Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors. Yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors.

The pouring out of blood is also a sacrificial action, poured out as part of the blood rite around the base of the altar. For instance, Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Exodus chapter 24 verse 6, as the covenant of Sinai is being established.

The story of Exodus 24 is an important one for the background. This is where the covenant is established through sacrifice, and the blood of the covenant is spoken of in that particular context. Blood sprinkled on the people and cast against the altar.

This blood rite was for purification, for disinfecting as it were, the people and the temple of the pollution of their sins. It is also a means of establishing a new covenant. In Exodus chapter 24 verse 8, And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, Behold the blood of the covenant the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.

And then in Zechariah chapter 9 verse 11, As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. God is going to deliver his people through this blood of a new covenant. The wine also anticipates drinking in the kingdom.

The wine is associated both with the blood that Christ is about to shed, but also with the wine of the wedding feast of the kingdom that is anticipated. These two things meet together in Christ's gift of the wine. There's also a statement of abstinence that he will not drink of it again until this point.

It might make us think of the Nazarite vow, the Nazarite vow to abstain from wine and fruit of the grape, a vow of temporary dedication to a sort of priestly status for a period of time, often for a specific mission, maybe warfare. It seems appropriate in this context here that Christ would take such a vow, that Christ would be in preparation for his great act of deliverance, his great battle with the enemy, that he would take this vow of abstinence, that he would dedicate himself fully and then go out on the battlefield. A question to consider.

Many of the details that we've encountered within our passage might remind us of details that we meet in 1st Samuel chapter 9 and 10. Can you identify some of these details and what might we learn from the associations between these stories?