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November 3rd: Isaiah 16 & Mark 11:27–12:12

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The conclusion of the oracle against Moab. The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 16. and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples underfoot has vanished from the land. Then a throne will be established in steadfast love, and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David, one who judges and seeks justice, and is swift to do righteousness.

We have heard of the pride of Moab, how proud he is, of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence. In his idle boasting he is not right. Therefore let Moab wail for Moab, let everyone wail, mourn utterly stricken for the raising-cakes of Kir Harasath, for the fields of Heshbon languish, and the vine of Sivmah.

The lords of the nations have struck down its branches, which reach to Jezer and strayed to the desert, its shoots spread abroad and passed over the sea. Therefore I weep with the weeping of Jezer for the vine of Sivmah. I drench you with my tears, O Heshbon and Eliella, for over your summer fruit and your harvest the shout has ceased, and joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field, and in the vineyards no songs are sung, no cheers are raised, no treader treads out wine in the presses.

I have put an end to the shouting. Therefore my inner parts moan like a liar for Moab, and my inmost self for Kir Harasath. And when Moab presents himself, when he wears himself on the high place, when he comes to his sanctuary to pray, he will not prevail.

This is the word that the Lord spoke concerning Moab in the past. But now the Lord has spoken, saying, In three years, like the years of a hired worker, the glory of Moab will be brought into contempt, in spite of all his great multitude, and those who remain will be very few and feeble. As our chapter 15 contained a lament for Moab, Judah's neighbour, a nation situated largely to the east of the Dead Sea.

Moab was the son of Lot's eldest daughter through her incestuous relations with her father. Her sister bore Ammon, the forefather of the Ammonites, through relations with Lot too. Toward the end of the lament of the preceding chapter, Moabites were fleeing to Zoar, much as Lot and his family had done at the time of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

It is likely that some of the Moabites were intending to take refuge in Judah. The opening five verses of this chapter are challenging to understand, and various lines of interpretation have been followed by different commentators. They seem to relate back to the description of refugees from Moab in the preceding chapter, whether or not there is a strong literary connection between the two sections or not.

However, it is unclear whether these are the words of Moabite refugees appealing for asylum, or whether they are the words of Zion, exhorting Judah to make room for the refugees from Moab. An important associated question is whether we should read the section that follows as the response to the opening five verses, or as a more independent section or oracle. If the opening section is the message of Moabite refugees, and the verses that follow are Judah's response, it might seem as though the Moabites' appeal for shelter is denied.

Beyond this, there is the question of whether seemingly sincere messianic sentiments such as those of verse 5 are conceivable in the mouth of Moabites. My inclination is to take the opening section as the words of the Moabites, and the section that follows as a more general reflection upon the situation facing Moab. This would give the opening five verses a more hopeful flavour.

Read this way, Moab is sending messengers to Zion, describing their desperate plight and begging for asylum. They are a scattered and vulnerable remnant at the river crossing on the borders of their land, and also sending a message from a foreign land if Selah is in Edom. Alternatively, Selah might refer to one of Moab's own strongholds, a place to which they had retreated.

Comparing themselves to birds whose nest had been destroyed, they beg Judah to take them in and to show compassion for them in their time of crisis. The Moabites are

presented as expressing confidence in the Lord's promise to establish the throne of David and peace through the reign of the Messiah, something that has already been referred to at several junctures in the book to this point. These could be read as words that the Lord or the Prophet is putting in the mouths of the Moabites, presenting their appeal for sanctuary in an idealised way, suggesting that this is a way in which the Lord's promise of bringing the nations to Zion might be fulfilled in part.

Zion and its Davidic king can be a site of sanctuary for the nations in their distress, a beacon of hope and righteousness to the needy and the oppressed of the nations. In such a manner the Lord would fulfil some of the promise of chapter 2 verses 1-4. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it.

And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Verses 6-12 should, I believe, be read as a broader reflection upon Moab's pride in its downfall, although some, such as Christopher Seitz, argue that this should be understood as a rejection of the earlier request of Moab for asylum. If this is the case, then we would probably need to read the earlier statements of the Moabites concerning the Davidic Messiah as insincere flattery.

I don't believe that this is persuasive as a reading. A consistent theme in Isaiah to this point has been the Lord's humbling of the pride of the peoples, and Moab's pride is well known. The nation of Moab is compared to a spreading vine.

The vine of Moab spread throughout its land and beyond its borders, but now its branches are being cut off. With the cutting off of the nation's vine, its fruitfulness is being denied and the joy of harvest is being removed. Instead of the joyful cries of the harvesters and those treading out the wine in the presses, the nation is filled with mourning.

Once again the Lord himself mourns for Moab, even as Moab, in its idolatrous worship, finds that its prayers and its sacrifices are offered in vain. We should recognise the extensive similarities between this passage and the prophecy concerning Moab in Jeremiah chapter 48, which also uses material from the book of Numbers. These similarities are especially noticeable in verses 29 to 36.

We have heard of the pride of Moab. He is very proud of his loftiness, his pride and his

arrogance, and the haughtiness of his heart. I know his insolence, declares the Lord.

His boasts are false, his deeds are false. Therefore I wail for Moab. I cry out for all Moab.

For the men of Kir Haraseth I mourn. More than for Jazar I weep for you, O vine of Sidmar. Your branches passed over the sea, reached the sea of Jazar.

On your summer fruits and your grapes the destroyer has fallen. Gladness and joy have been taken away from the fruitful land of Moab. I have made the wine cease from the winepresses.

No one treads them with shouts of joy. The shouting is not the shout of joy. From the outcry at Heshbon, even to Eliella, as far as Jehaz, they utter their voice.

From Zoar to Horonayim and Eglash, Shalishia. For the waters of Nimrim also have become desolate. And I will bring to an end in Moab, declares the Lord, him who offers sacrifice in the high place and makes offerings to his God.

Therefore my heart moans for Moab like a flute, and my heart moans like a flute for the men of Kir Haraseth. Therefore the riches they gained have perished. In the commonalities between Jeremiah's material and the material from this chapter in Isaiah, perhaps we have evidence of a common tradition that lies behind both of them.

This evidence is the way in which words of prophecy could be moved from one context to another. Words addressed to Moab at the end of the 8th century for instance, could also be applied to Moab in the early 6th century. At the end of this chapter however, words of more general judgement concerning Moab are applied to a very specific time scale.

Whether or not he did so through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord had previously spoken these words concerning Moab. Now however, within a period of three years, the Lord would bring a signal of destruction upon the nation of Moab. A question to consider, why might a Davidic kingdom receiving refugees from Moab be particularly appropriate? Mark 11.27-12.12 And they came again to Jerusalem.

And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him. And they said to him, By what authority are you doing these things? Or who gave you this authority to do them? Jesus said to them, I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.

Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me. And they discussed it with one another, saying, If we say from heaven, he will say, Why then did you not believe him? But shall we say from man? They were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, We do not know.

And Jesus said to them, Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. And he began to speak to them in parables. A man planted a vineyard, and put a fence around it, and dug a pit for the winepress, and built a tower, and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.

When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants, to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head, and treated him shamefully.

And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others, some they beat, and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son.

Finally he sent him to them, saying, They will respect my son. But those tenants said to one another, This is the heir, come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours. And they took him, and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture? The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.

And they were seeking to arrest him, but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him, and went away. The end of Mark chapter 11 sees Jesus back in the temple again.

And there is a movement back and forth between the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount in this chapter that is worth paying attention to. And we see it continuing throughout the Gospel. Jesus has entered the city like a king.

He declared judgment upon the temple. He had healed within it. And there are people gathering around and behind him.

He is the head of a movement. And now the leaders, the chief priests, the scribes, and other elders try to trap him. If his authority is from man, it can be dismissed.

If his claim is that it is from God, they have grounds to move against him. So Jesus answers their question with a question. Once again he is challenging the authority on which they are asking the question, and putting them in a position where they are trapped.

The answer to the question that Jesus asks is the answer to the question that the chief priests and the elders ask. Because John the Baptist was sent by God, and his prophetic ministry was one through which God authorised and bore witness to his son. So Jesus traps those seeking to trap him, as he does on many other occasions.

The parable of the tenants that follows is important to read in the light of Israel's identity as the vineyard. Jesus introduces the parable in a way that highlights the background of Isaiah 5 and Psalm 80. Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 to 7 reads, When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste, it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry.

The prophecies of Isaiah have often been in the background of the book of Mark, and here is no exception. We also see references in Psalm 80 verses 8 to 16. You brought a vine out of Egypt.

You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it. It took deep root and filled the land.

The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the river. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.

Turn again, O God of hosts. Look down from heaven and sea. Have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself.

They have burned it with fire. They have cut it down. May they perish at the rebuke of your face.

Isaiah's parable focused upon the failure of the vineyard to produce good fruit. Jesus, however, focuses upon the wickedness of those working within it. The fruit seems to be there, but the workers are rebellious.

The master is sending his servants, the prophets, and finally his own son, and all are being rejected. In speaking of the killing of the son within the parable, Jesus is presenting to the people who will orchestrate his death their part in the fulfilment of this parable. Listening to the parable to this point, you can imagine that the chief priests and the scribes and the elders would have thought in terms of the background of Psalm 80, the vineyard of God has been exposed to the enemies of the Lord, to the enemies of the people who are ravaging it, and they're going to pray for God to deliver them.

The real problem are the Romans or some other force that's oppressing the land from

outside. But even though a passage like Psalm 80 is playing in the background, the enemies of the land are not actually the Romans in this parable. It's the elders and the chief priests and the scribes themselves.

And a further biblical allusion can help us to see what's taking place here. In Genesis chapter 37, 18 to 20, we read of Joseph approaching his brothers. They saw him from afar and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him.

They said to one another, here comes this dreamer, come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. The wicked tenants in this parable speak in a manner similar to the brothers of Joseph. They are members of the people, they are the tribes of the land, and they are rejecting the one that has been set apart by the father to receive the firstborn portion.

By using this particular parallel, maybe we can see Jesus inviting us to read his story in the light of the story of Joseph. He's the one who's going to be placed into the pit. He's the one who's going to go down into the far country.

He's the one who's going to deliver his people and he's going to be raised up, seated at the right hand of power. He's going to have criminals on either side of him. He's going to provide bread and wine and the raising up of his body from the far country is going to be at the heart of God's great act of deliverance of his people.

The wicked tenants will be deprived of their position. This isn't a claim about Israel itself being dispossessed, but about the wicked tenants of the chief priests and the scribes. Their places will be taken by the Twelve and others who are the true tenants of the vineyard of Israel.

It also looks forward to fruit from Israel. The vineyard isn't abandoned, it's given into different hands. And Jesus quotes Psalm 118 verses 22 to 23 here, a verse that is used in reference to resurrection in Acts 4 verse 11 and 1 Peter 2 verses 4 and 7. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

The quotation interprets the parable. The chief priests and the leaders of the people might have identified the wicked tenants with the Romans or some other party. Although it's not found in Mark's Greek, there seems to be a wordplay behind the use of this verse with son, Ben, and stone, Eben, being played off against each other.

The rejected son is the rejected stone. And this brings temple themes to the foreground. Jesus is the rejected stone and he becomes the cornerstone of a new temple.

In Isaiah chapter 8 verses 14 to 15, and he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offence and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it, they shall fall and be broken, they shall be snared and taken. And Daniel chapter 2 verses 44 to 45, and in the days of

those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people.

It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. Later in the story Jesus will be buried in a tomb cut out of the rock. He is the stone quarried from the rock, prepared as the cornerstone of a new temple of the Lord.

The wicked tenants get their comeuppance, but the focus of the parable ultimately rests upon the vindication of the rejected son. Once again, the response of the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders is determined by their fear of the people. They could not respond to Jesus' question about authority concerning John the Baptist because they feared the people, and once again they cannot respond properly because they fear the people.

A question to consider, how might Jesus' quotation from the Psalms that opens up his parable remind us of the setting and also connect with Jesus' actions in the previous chapter?