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November 26th: Isaiah 39 & Luke 7:11-35

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The visit of the Babylonian envoys. Messengers from John the Baptist.

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Transcript

Isaiah 39. At that time Merodach-Baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present for Hezekiah. For he heard that he had been sick and had recovered.

And Hezekiah welcomed them gladly. And he showed them his treasure-house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.

Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah and said to him, What did these men say, and from where did they come to you? Hezekiah said, They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon. He said, What have they seen in your house? Hezekiah answered, They have seen all that is in my house. There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them.

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord of hosts. Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this

day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord, and some of your own sons who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.

Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good, for he thought, There will be peace and security in my days. Isaiah chapter 39 concludes the narrative section that began in chapter 36. It is also the final chapter of what most scholars regard as Proto or First Isaiah.

While most of the chapters up to chapter 39 are generally attributed to the prophet Isaiah, scholars differ concerning the chapters that follow. Theologically conservative commentators typically attribute the entire book to the authorship of Isaiah, although this is very much a minority position in the field. Whatever our position on the composition and authorship of the book of Isaiah however, this chapter is very clearly part of an important seam in the book.

Chapters 7-12 were centred on the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war in the 730s BC. Chapters 13-39, with oracles against the nations, against Judah, and the narrative of chapters 36 and following, focused on the Assyrian crisis faced by the wider region in the years leading up to 701 BC. However from chapter 40 to the end of the book, the prophecy addresses a situation 150 years later with the return from exile in Babylon, even though at the time of the events in chapter 39, the Babylonian exile is well over 100 years away.

We could perhaps compare this to speaking about the end of World War I in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s. While many of the principal actors would be the same, the world and its power relations had changed considerably in the intervening century. This underscores first, the challenge of reading the book of Isaiah as a unified text, and second, the added challenge for any who want to maintain the traditional position that Isaiah is the author of the entire book.

In addressing these questions, we should recall the telescopic character of much of the prophecy to this point, where earlier prophesied events function as reality-filled promises of later ones. For instance, the events of the 730s anticipate the deliverance of 701 BC, and in these deliverances, the later deliverance from Babylon is foreshadowed. Similarly, we have seen nations and cities stand for more than merely themselves.

Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Tyre, Moab, and Edom have all functioned as figures of realities that exceed themselves in Isaiah to this point, or as representatives of larger groups of nations. When reading Isaiah, we should be careful not to miss such connections between events and figures. Such connections invite the hearer to consider various situations and characters in relation to each other, to recognise deeper patterns and the unity in history.

Isaiah can often feel like a book that introduces its great themes in more fragmentary and abbreviated forms in connection with near events, while constantly building up expectation and longing in its hearers for fuller and stronger expressions of them. In the latter part of the book, the great themes themselves come to the fore, and the particularities of the history recedes into the background. At several points already, we have seen how prophecies could do double service, speaking not only to events in the later years of the 8th century and early years of the 7th, but also to a situation of Babylonian dominance in the 6th century, and even beyond that to a more final eschatological horizon.

The people of God have long read scripture in this way, recognising that prophetic words can send forth sparks that cross the vast gulfs of the centuries and speak with a living urgency to times many years distant from those into which they were first spoken. Considering the fact that Assyria was the dominant power in the region at the time, we have observed the strangeness of the prominence that was given to Babylon in the Oracles against the Nations, which began with Babylon in chapters 13 and 14, and also focused on Babylon in chapter 21, while saying relatively little directly concerning Assyria. Some scholars have made the case that the king of Babylon in chapters 13 and 14 really is the king of Assyria, who also claim that title.

If this were the case, it presses the question of why the prophecy presents Assyria under the guise of Babylon upon us. However, if the prophecy is addressing two distinct yet related horizons, most likely the sacking of Babylon in 689 BC at the hands of the Assyrians, and the capture of Babylon by Cyrus and the Medo-Persians in 539 BC, then the attention given to Babylon makes a lot more sense, even though it is allowing us to see the action within its frame, the camera may not be focusing upon the player currently with the ball, because it wants the watcher to follow the player that will later take possession of it, against whom the critical tackles will occur further down the field. The Oracles against the Nations begin with Babylon in chapters 13 and 14, and in chapter 39 at the end of this greater section of the book, we return to Babylon once more.

If there were ominous forebodings of the later Babylonian exile, in this chapter the future threat that Babylon will present becomes more explicit. The material in this chapter, like the material of the preceding three chapters, is largely identical to material found in 2 Kings chapter 18-20, in this case in chapter 20 verses 12-19. As we have already noted in our study of the preceding chapter, the material of this chapter is put out of chronological sequence.

The events of this chapter most likely occurred in 703 BC, a few years prior to the invasion of the Assyrians. Meredak Baladan would soon be removed from the throne of Babylon, the rebellion in Babylon ended by the Assyrians. When we consider the larger structure of the Book of Isaiah, the placing of this and the preceding chapter out of

chronological sequence makes a lot more sense.

Babylon's prominence in this chapter presents a very neat segue into the second part of the book. It also, with chapter 13, provides bookends for the larger oracles concerning the nations and Judah. Besides a sign of friendship from one nation to another, the visit of the Babylonian envoys is probably for the purpose of forming an alliance against the power of Assyria in the region.

Hezekiah could have benefited from a northern ally and would be much more confident fighting against the Assyrians with Egypt to the south and Babylon to the north. Nevertheless, as we've seen from the prophecies in the book to this point, Judah's trust in the nations is a dangerous thing. Rather, they should look to the Lord and trust in him as he is the one who will be their deliverer.

The Lord sends the prophet Isaiah to Hezekiah to give him a dismaying message about the Babylonians. Hezekiah has shown the Babylonians all around his house and all that he has shown them will one day be carried out into Babylon. Nothing will be left.

The whole city will be plundered. Indeed, some of Hezekiah's own descendants, whether his immediate sons or some of his later descendants, would also be carried into Babylon. Hezekiah's response seems rather selfish.

He acknowledges the word of the Lord is good and just, but he takes more concern for the peace and security of his own days, with seemingly little concern for the well-being of the nation and his dynasty after his death. Nevertheless, the portrayal of Hezekiah in this chapter may not be as negative as some suppose. Peter Lighthouse writes, Isaiah chapter 56 verses 6 to 8 The final vision of Isaiah is that the Gentiles will bring Judah's brothers like a minkah or tribute to the holy mountain of Jerusalem.

Chapter 66 verses 19 to 20 Hezekiah receives the visitors from Babylon the way Solomon received the Queen of Sheba. He showed her all their treasures, as Hezekiah shows the silver, gold, spices, oil and armour that are in his treasuries. As Lighthouse notes, the message of Isaiah implies the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple that is to come.

However, in the larger frame of Isaiah, this is not all that is in view. He continues, Lighthouse continues to make the point that the lesson of the preceding chapter is that just as the king could be brought to the point of death and then restored, so Judah could be brought to the point of death and restored, not just in the Assyrian crisis but also in the coming Babylonian crisis. As they are brought down to the very grave of Sheol in exile, they will be raised up again.

And this time, as the rest of the book of Isaiah makes clear, rather than plundering Zion, the empires of the nations will bring their riches into the city of Jerusalem. A question to

consider, how might Babylon, in its relationship to King Hezekiah, be compared to Assyria in its relationship to King Ahaz earlier in the book? The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? And when the men had come to him, they said, John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight.

And he answered them, Go and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.

To what then shall I compare the people of this generation? And what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, We played the flute for you and you did not dance, we sang a dirge and you did not weep. For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, He has a demon. The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, Look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

Yet wisdom is justified by all her children. In Luke 7 following the healing of the centurion's servant, Jesus raises the son of the widow of Nain. Jesus in his sermon in Nazareth in chapter 4 verses 25-27 compares his ministry to that of Elijah and Elisha.

But in truth I tell you there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath in the land of Sidon to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed but only Naam and the Syrian. We have already seen parallels between Naam and the Syrian and the healing of the centurion's servant.

We might notice a further parallel between the widow of Zarephath and the widow of Nain. In both cases their sons are raised by a prophet. In 1 Kings chapter 17 verses 8-24 we read of the widow of Zarephath.

It seems to me that Luke wants us to remember this story, to connect this with the sermon at Nazareth, and to see that Jesus' ministry is proceeding after the pattern of these great prophets Elijah and Elisha. In the centurion and the widow of Nain we have a

male-female pairing, as we see on many other occasions in Luke, where Luke will often bring forward a man and a woman to express something of the scope and the comprehensive nature of the kingdom ministry of Christ. Just as the healing of the centurion's servant is particularly done on behalf of the centurion, so this raising of the widow's son is done for the widow.

The healing is performed not primarily for the dead man, but for his mother, upon whom Jesus takes compassion. The bereaved mother is restored in the gift of her son. John has heard accounts of Jesus' ministry, but he is himself now in prison.

He preached an imminent judgment. But Jesus is healing and restoring people. You might be uncertain whether Jesus is in fact the one that he awaited.

You might be wondering where the promised fire is. While John's messengers are with him, Jesus performs a number of miracles, which serve as signs. They confirm the nature of his identity and the character of his mission.

Are you the one who is to come? Jesus is judging by showing mercy. You can see allusions back to Isaiah chapter 61, verses 1-3 for instance. Then in Isaiah chapter 35, verses 3-8.

Then in Isaiah chapter 35, verses 3-9. These passages talk about the vengeance of God. They talk about the fire as it were.

But they speak much more about this restoration of the people, about healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, unstopping the ears of the deaf, and enabling the lame to leap. Blessed is he who does not stumble because of me. I don't believe Jesus is rebuking John the Baptist here.

John the Baptist may be confused and uncertain, but that doesn't seem to be the same thing as stumbling. Indeed, Jesus goes on to praise John the Baptist in some of the highest possible terms. He takes the occasion provided by the messengers from John to discuss the character of John's ministry with the crowd.

Who was John? A reed shaken by the wind? Someone who's weak, easily moved, or pressured? The Lord will strike Israel as a reed is shaken in the water and root up Israel out of this good land that he gave to their fathers. 1 Kings 14-15 may be an example of this imagery being used elsewhere in scripture. John the Baptist wasn't that sort of person.

He was a man of strong character, a man who stood firm as a prophetic witness. A man dressed in soft clothing, a dignitary such as you might find in king's houses. No, he's a prophet and more than a prophet.

As we know from elsewhere, he is the Elijah who is to come. John the Baptist and Elijah

are connected in a great many ways, not just in their clothing. He's prophesied in Malachi.

He's a man associated with the wilderness, a forerunner of a man who's a prophet in the land. He's a man clothed in camel skin with a leather belt. He fulfils the words of Malachi chapter 3 verse 1. Behold I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming says the Lord of hosts. Something that is connected to Exodus chapter 23 verse 20. Behold I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

The common people and the tax collectors recognise the justice of God. But the Pharisees and the lawyers reject God's saving justice. John the Baptist and Jesus as the son of man come in contrasting ways and the Pharisees and the scribes reject both for different and perhaps contradictory reasons.

They do not know the times. They're so out of sync with God's justice that they want to dance when they should be mourning and to mourn when they should be rejoicing. We've seen this already earlier in the context of Jesus' teaching concerning fasting.

Why fast when the bridegroom is with you? They describe Jesus, the faithful son, as a glutton and a drunkard. And to understand the meaning of this reference we should look back to Deuteronomy chapter 21 verses 18 to 20. If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother and though they discipline him will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives and they shall say to the elders of his city, this our son is stubborn and rebellious.

He will not obey our voice. He is a glutton and a drunkard. Of course, Israel is actually the rebellious son, the son that rejects the word of the father.

But Jesus will suffer the fate of the rebellious son, taking the judgment of the nation upon himself. Our passage ends with a peculiar statement that wisdom is justified by all of her children. The meaning of this statement most likely becomes plain as we look back to verse 29.

When all the people heard this and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John. Wisdom is justified by all her children is then paralleled with that statement that the tax collectors and the people declare God just. The children of wisdom recognize her ways.

They affirm her ways and align with her purposes. While the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus are misunderstood and subject to great slander by the Pharisees and

the scribes, the common people and the tax collectors recognize what's going on. They see the signs, they recognize the times, and they act accordingly.

Wisdom is justified by her children. A question to consider, how does this discussion of John's mission further underline the importance of John the Baptist within the theology of Luke?