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November 9th: Isaiah 22 & Mark 14:53-72

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An oracle concerning Judah. Jesus before the Sanhedrin.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 22. The oracle concerning the valley of vision. What do you mean that you have gone up, all of you, to the housetops? You who are full of shoutings, tumultuous city, exultant town.

Your slain are not slain with the sword or dead in battle. All your leaders have fled together. Without the bow they were captured.

All of you who were found were captured, though they had fled far away. Therefore I said, look away from me, let me weep bitter tears. Do not labor to comfort me concerning the destruction of the daughter of my people.

For the Lord God of hosts has a day of tumult and trampling and confusion in the valley of vision, a battering down of walls and a shouting to the mountains. And Elam bore the quiver with chariots and horsemen, and Kerr uncovered the shield. Your choicest valleys were full of chariots, and the horsemen took their stand at the gates.

He has taken away the covering of Judah. In that day you looked to the weapons of the

house of the forest, and you saw that the breaches of the city of David were many. You collected the waters of the lower pool, and you counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall.

You made a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the old pool, but you did not look to him who did it, or see him who planned it long ago. In that day the Lord God of hosts called for weeping and mourning, for boldness and wearing sackcloth. And behold, joy and gladness, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine.

Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. The Lord of hosts has revealed himself in my ears. Surely this iniquity will not be atoned for you until you die, says the Lord God of hosts.

Thus says the Lord God of hosts, Come, go to this steward, to Shebna who is over the household, and say to him, What have you to do here? and whom have you here, that you have cut out here a tomb for yourself, you who cut out a tomb on the height, and carve a dwelling for yourself in the rock? Behold, the Lord will hurl you away violently, O you strong man. He will seize firm hold on you, and whirl you around and around, and throw you like a ball into a wide land. There you shall die, and there shall be your glorious chariots, you shame of your master's house.

I will thrust you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your station. In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your sash on him, and will commit your authority to his hand. And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah.

And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut, and he shall shut, and none shall open. And I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his father's house.

And they will hang on him the whole honor of his father's house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel from the cups to all the flagons. In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, the peg that was fastened in a secure place will give way, and it will be cut down and fall, and the load that was on it will be cut off, for the Lord has spoken. The oracle with which Isaiah chapter 22 opens most likely relates to the invasion and siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC by Sennacherib and the Assyrians during the reign of King Hezekiah.

Judah had rebelled against Assyria, turning to Egypt for support. The Assyrians came up against Judah, inflicting heavy losses. Sennacherib's prism on which his campaign against Judah is described boasts that he destroyed 46 of Judah's cities.

However, although it was besieged, Jerusalem was not one of these. The Lord's routing of the Assyrian invaders at Jerusalem is described in chapter 37 verses 36-37. And the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians.

And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh. Some have argued that, besides the reference to the events of 701 BC, the oracle also speaks to events of a later time, after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

They see this in such details as the reference to the destruction of the daughter of my people in verse 4 and to the battering down of walls in verse 5, which they argue fit far better with the events of 586 than those of 701 BC. Some have even seen an extensive reworking of an earlier prophecy, one chiefly seen in verses 1-3 and 12-14, to relate to a later situation. For others, the prophecy has become dislodged from any specific historical events altogether.

Brevicharles, quite dissatisfied with such dehistoricisation of the prophecy, argues that the supposed tension between 701 and 586 references are greatly overstated. He contends that the passage, in its canonical positioning, while historically grounded in the events of 701 BC, is clearly presented as foreshadowing the later events of 586. It is not some later editorial reworking and misappropriating of an earlier text, but rather, in Charles' words, the narrative structure of a canonical corpus that comprises a holistic, unified story of God's purpose in history for his chosen people.

Recognition of the biblical text as scripture prepares the reader for the rich resonance that a holistic interpretation invokes and functions without sacrificing the text's original historical mourning for a literary construct. Indeed, this is not unrelated to the reasons why people over two and a half millennia after the time of Isaiah and the events to which he immediately referred can continue to read his prophecies and those of other prophets with great benefit. Although they have more immediate and specific reference and fulfilments, they also disclose deeper patterns and realities of the Lord's dealing with his people in the world.

In chapter 21 there was a prophecy concerning Babylon, introduced as the oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea. Chapter 22, a prophecy concerning Jerusalem, is introduced in a somewhat similar manner, as the oracle concerning the valley of vision. John Oswalt observes further similarities between these visions, including, in his words, the partying and lack of vision, the prophet's grief, the references to Elam, and the mention of a chariot of a man and horsemen.

To these he adds the fact that both of these prophecies seem to be operating on two different levels, referring to Babylon and Jerusalem in Isaiah's own time, but also to their later destinies in the 6th century. The association of the two visions is possibly an indication of the intertwining of their destinies. In chapter 39, Isaiah would directly warn Hezekiah that, in throwing in his lot with Babylon, he was unwittingly allying himself with the very power that would one day destroy Jerusalem.

Linking an oracle concerning Judah with oracles against the nations is also an ominous sign that Judah is bringing similar judgments upon itself. The description, concerning the valley of vision, should probably be related to verse 5, with its reference to a valley of that name. The opening verses of the oracle describe a chaotic and almost surreal scene of revelry, people on the housetops of Jerusalem celebrating, completely out of keeping with the severity of the city's situation.

Verse 13 implies that they were aware of the fact that death was likely very imminent for them, so it may not be the case that they believed that they were delivered. The cause of their celebrations may not have been the lifting or weakening of the siege, as many have presumed. Alternatively, if that were the case, they are not confident that it will hold.

Gary Smith wonders whether, given the descriptions of the preparations for the siege in the context, the people were celebrating because the siege preparations were complete, and though they considered their hopes of survival low, they wanted to have a party before dying. The prophet cannot share in these hollow celebrations. He is weeping and in mourning at the terrible state of his nation.

Many of their leaders have fled, and according to Sennacherib, over 200,000 captives and 46 cities were taken from Judah at this time. In the section beginning in verse 5, Azar describes a sort of day of the Lord that is coming upon the people of Judah and Jerusalem. A great reckoning as enemy forces surround them in the valleys around their city.

The cities that formerly shielded Jerusalem have been overcome, and now Zion itself is surrounded. The references to Elam and Qurhiyah might refer to mercenary forces within the army of the Assyrians. Faced with these surrounding forces, Jerusalem's response, even in its weakness, is to trust in its own strength.

It looks to the weapons of the House of the Forest, one of the great buildings built by Solomon within the palace and temple complex. They collect waters from the reservoir and dig a tunnel to bring further waters into the city. They demolish some of the houses of the city in order to strengthen the walls.

However, in all of their efforts, they fail to look to the Lord, the one whose providence and purposes stand over all things. When they should have been weeping and calling out to the Lord, confessing their sins and repenting of their iniquities, they are rather found in engaging in feasting, trying to dull their awareness of the severity of their situation on the very eve of their potential deaths. In a terrible statement with which this part of the oracle closes, the Lord declares that they will not be forgiven for this iniquity.

In turning to wine and song, rather than turning to the Lord in the time of their distress, they had disclosed something of the true measure of their lack of spiritual concern. The

more general attitude of the people was more specifically manifested in some of the key figures within the realm. The prophet Isaiah is sent to see the steward Shebna.

Shebna, a man over the administration of the household of the king, and presumably in charge of much of the preparation for the siege, is found in the process of cutting a fine tomb from the rock for himself. Rather than turning to his maker, he seems to be more concerned to prepare for his death by ensuring that he will get a grand burial. Shebna will not enjoy the burial that he hopes for.

Instead, the Lord will hurl him away, casting him into exile in a foreign land. Stripped of his office, his role will be given to Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah. In chapter 36 verse 3, we read of both of these figures again and here Eliakim is described as being over the household and Shebna as being the secretary, which might suggest that the removal of Shebna from his office happened very soon after the prophecy was delivered.

Eliakim's investiture is described in verses 20 to 24. Although the fate of the royal house of David has not been as prominent in this section concerning the prophecies and oracles against the nations, it was very prominent in earlier sections of the book of Isaiah. As the newly appointed steward, much of the managing of the royal house would now fall into the hands of Eliakim.

Possessing the key of the house of David, he would enjoy immense scope of authorization to act in the name of the king, much as we see in the figure of Joseph in Genesis chapter 41 and following. He would be established by the Lord and the whole of his household would be increased in its status and dignity on account of his office. However, those given great status and blessings by the Lord should not presume upon their past gifts.

There is good reason to suppose that Eliakim fell into this trap. In the final verse we learn that the Lord would remove the peg that was once secure and with it, all that once hung upon it, Eliakim's house and its dignity, would fall to the ground. A question to consider, in Matthew chapter 16 verse 19 and Revelation chapter 3 verse 7, the New Testament alludes back to this prophecy concerning Eliakim.

How does it use this prophecy and how can our understanding of this prophecy help us to understand these New Testament passages better? Mark chapter 14 verses 53 to 72. And they led Jesus to the high priest and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest.

And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.

And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands. Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you? But he remained silent and made no answer.

Again the high priest asked him, Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus said, I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven. And the high priest tore his garments and said, What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision? And they all condemned him as deserving death.

And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to strike him, saying to him, Prophecy. And the guards received him with blows. And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, You also were with the Nazarene Jesus.

But he denied it, saying, I neither know nor understand what you mean. And he went out into the gateway, and the rooster crowed. And the servant girl saw him, and began again to say to the bystanders, This man is one of them.

But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean. But he began to invoke a curse on himself, and to swear, I do not know this man of whom you speak.

And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times. And he broke down and wept.

Earlier in Mark chapter 14 Jesus was seized by the mob with Judas at night, and taken now to Caiaphas the high priest. The setting of night highlights the urgency and the underhandedness of what is taking place. The authorities are concerned to deal with Christ as urgently as possible, before the feast proper starts.

And so rather than following a more deliberate and slower procedure of justice, they are trying to deal with things as rapidly as possible. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, brings together false witnesses against Christ. They are seeking to get the conviction that they so desperately desire.

And they repeatedly try and fail, until some come forward accusing him of statements challenging the temple. Jesus had challenged the temple on a few occasions, particularly during the final week in Jerusalem. He claimed it had been made into a den of robbers, a place of traders, a den for brigands to take refuge from God's justice.

Acts chapter 6 verses 11-14 is one testimony to the way that the early Christians were

seen to speak against the temple and what it stood for. Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council.

And they set up false witnesses and said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us. In the story of Stephen's trial, we see many of the beats of the story of Christ's trial being played out again. And once again, there's that threat to the temple that's at the centre of the charges being made.

Jesus is a prophet like Jeremiah or Ezekiel, one of the prophets who speaks against the temple and the way that it's being used in the people's life. It's being perverted, it's being made into something they're putting their hope in while they're disobeying the will of the Lord. In Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 1 to 14, we have an example of such a charge.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there this word and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, amend your ways and your deeds and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words.

This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless or the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place in the land that I gave of old to your father's forever. Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal and go after other gods that you have not known and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name and say, We are delivered only to go on doing all these abominations. Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.

And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you you did not answer. Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name and which you trust and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers as I did to Shiloh. Jesus makes a statement about the temple in John chapter 2 verses 18 to 22, which seems to be alluded here in the statements that are made by the false witnesses against him.

So the Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things? Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days? But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

So the false witnesses make a true statement, but with the attempt to destroy him, false witness can have a broader sense than simply a false message. Jesus is convicted by true testimony, but true testimony that is perverted. Jesus is silent before his accusers, and once again this seems to be in fulfilment of the scriptures in Isaiah chapter 53 verse 7. He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

The high priest asks him if he is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed. What does this have to do with the earlier claims about his statements concerning the temple? Well, the Messiah was the one to cleanse and restore and reform the temple. Jesus, we should remember, has been performing messianic style actions for the last few days, his triumphal entry, his action in the temple.

Calling the Messiah the Son of the Blessed would not have the same strong metaphysical meaning that later Christian theology would give it. The Son of God, in that sense, is the one who is the Davidic son, the one who is going to inherit the throne of his father David. Now as we play that out and work out all the things that are associated with that, we'll see that it's not just a human figure, but the initial and immediate sense of Son of God or Son of the Blessed is not the Divine Son in the way that we would think about that in terms of the Son as the second person of the Trinity.

Jesus affirms the statement that the high priest gives to him in the loaded words, I am, and he identifies himself once more with the Son of Man in Daniel's vision in Daniel chapter 7 verses 13 to 14. I saw in the night visions and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man and he came to the ancient of days and was presented before him and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

There also seems to be an allusion here to Psalm 110 verse 1. The Lord says to my Lord sit at my right hand until I make your enemy to your footstool. The hearers of Jesus' statement, he declares, will see Jesus at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven. What on earth could this mean? Jesus seems to be saying that he's coming to the throne of God in the middle of history to receive power.

The point is not that he's coming to earth, but the leaders of the Jews will see proof of his

ascension to power when he is vindicated in the destruction of their temple and city. The coming of Christ then, the coming of the Son of Man, is not primarily a downward movement to earth, rather it's the movement to the throne of God, the movement to the right hand of the power of God. And the high priest's response to this is to tear his clothes.

We should recall from Leviticus chapter 21 verse 10 that the high priest was specifically commanded not to tear his clothes. The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor tear his clothes. The high priest and the court charge Jesus with blasphemy and declare him to be worthy of death.

They do not, however, have the jurisdiction to carry out that sentence, so they must deliver him to Pilate later on. This trial was probably not a trial in the fullest sense of the term, more a hearing that is an attempt to establish charges to be presented to Pilate later on, the one with the actual authority to cast the death sentence. So why was Jesus declared to be guilty of blasphemy? First of all, he committed a sort of cultural blasphemy.

He opposed the temple and the religious leaders, and he claimed messianic status. But also he seemed to go beyond that. In claiming to be the son of man, who would sit at the right hand of the power of God, he was claiming something for himself that went beyond the status of any man.

This was a blasphemy in a stronger sense of the term. The response is to spit in his face, to cover his face, to strike him and to mock him. The way that he is being treated here is probably intended to remind the reader of the Isaianic servant in Isaiah chapter 50 verse 6, Peter's denial is paralleled with and contrasts with Jesus' trial.

Mark brings that contrast to the attention of the hearers of his gospel by moving the narrative to and fro between them. Both are questioned. One is faithful, but the other is unfaithful.

And there's a gradual escalation. First he is approached directly by the servant girl and he denies it. He then tries to move location.

And then he's accused to the bystanders by the servant girl and he denies it strongly again. Then the bystanders accuse him together of association with the followers of Jesus. His accent gives him away.

He seems to be a man of Galilee, associated with this teacher that's come down from Nazareth. In responding to this charge, Peter seems to call a curse upon himself, an anathema upon himself, which is something of the utmost seriousness. In denying Christ, he's calling a curse upon himself.

Hearing the cock crow that second time brings sudden and horrified self-recognition. He recognizes his earlier pride. He recognizes his lack of wakefulness.

He's not been alert. He's not recognized what he's been doing. And he's sleepwalked into this great sin.

He comes to his senses. He completely removes himself from the situation and he weeps bitterly. A question to consider.

What can we learn from the way that the testing of Peter is contrasted with the testing of Jesus, both in Gethsemane and in the house of Caiaphas, the high priest?