

OpenTheo

October 26th: Isaiah 8 & Mark 7:24—8:10

October 25, 2021



Alastair Roberts

Maher-shalal-hash-baz. The Syrophenician woman and the feeding of the four thousand.

My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here:

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you are interested in supporting this project, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Isaiah chapter 8. Then the Lord said to me, Take a large tablet, and write on it, in common characters, belonging to Meher Shalal Hashbaz. And I will get reliable witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah, to attest for me. And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son.

Then the Lord said to me, Call his name Meher Shalal Hashbaz. For before the boy knows how to cry, My father or my mother, the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria. The Lord spoke to me again, Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoice over Reza and the son of Ramaliah.

Therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the river, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels, and go over all its banks, and it will sweep on into Judah. It will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Emmanuel.

Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered. Give ear, all you far countries. Strap on your armour and be shattered.

Strap on your armour and be shattered. Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing. Speak a word, but it will not stand.

For God is with us. For the Lord spoke thus to me, with His strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, Do not call conspiracy all that this people call conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, Him you shall honour as holy.

Let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread. 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. Bind up the testimony.

Seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in Him. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

And when they say to you, Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? To the teaching and to the testimony, if they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn. They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged, and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God, and turn their faces upward.

And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish, and they will be thrust into thick darkness. Isaiah chapter 8 comes in the context of the Syro-Ephraimite war and the threat of the alliance of Rezan the king of Syria and Pekah the king of Israel. These kings have come up against Judah and against Jerusalem to attack King Ahaz, to replace him with a puppet king that will fight on their side in their anti-Assyrian alliance.

Already in the preceding chapter we had two sons with significant names. She-ar-Jeshub, a remnant will return, and Emmanuel, God with us. Within chapter 8 we have another child that will serve as a prophetic sign.

Isaiah is instructed to perform a prophetic sign act as other prophets such as Jeremiah or Ezekiel. He is charged to write, belonging to Meher Shalal Hashbaz on a large tablet, likely a piece of wood or metal. Joseph Blenkinsop notes that this was probably a placard designed for public display.

The name Meher Shalal Hashbaz means speed the plunder, hasten the spoil. Although once Isaiah's son was born the writing would have the sense of belonging to Meher Shalal Hashbaz, at this point in the prophetic sign it isn't clear that the writing is of a name and rather than belonging to it might have been understood as concerning. Isaiah was accompanied by two respectable witnesses who could testify to his action.

This seems to be one of several examples of prophetic signs that were multi-stage with the actions that they involved and the meaning of them being revealed over a period of time. Having performed this act Isaiah had relations with the prophetess although we are not told that this was done in response to a divine instruction. The prophetess, presumably his wife, although commentators differ on that question, may have been a prophetess in her own right, along with several other women in the old and new testaments.

Or perhaps she is just referred to as the prophetess on account of her union with Isaiah the prophet. Considering that the sign is primarily being performed through and by her in bearing the child we could at the least understand her being called the prophetess in that sense. However if she was also known as a prophetess in her own right the sign might have had more force.

There are pronounced similarities between this account and that of Emmanuel in Isaiah chapter 7 verses 14-17. Blenkinsop notes the parallels. In both cases there are significant names given.

The young woman parallels with the prophetess. The virgin shall conceive and bear a son parallels with the prophetess conceived and bore a son. She shall call his name Emmanuel parallels with call his name may her shall al-hashbaz.

Before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good parallels with before the boy knows how to cry my father or my mother. Both prophecies also end with a reference to the king of Assyria. Considering these parallels the problem of fitting two supposedly successive children and the processes of their development in a short period of time and the references to Emmanuel in chapter 8. Many commentators Blenkinsop and John Oswald being two examples argue that what we have here are two accounts of a single sign.

As John Watts recognises however there is a difference between the age at which an infant can cry my father or my mother and the age at which he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. Also as Alec Machia points out Emmanuel's name connected with the child of chapter 9 is one that means blessing whereas may her shall al-hashbaz's name signifies judgement. It seems more likely to me that we have two different children as two witnesses to the Lord's promise.

The first Emmanuel being Hezekiah who was born to the young queen of Ahaz and the

second being the son of Isaiah and his wife the prophetess. We could perhaps see this as similar to the paired births of John the Baptist and Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. In naming his own child as his prophecy and attaching the fulfilment of the prophecy to an early event in the child's development Isaiah was, apart from anything else, really committing himself to his message.

The prophecy would shortly be fulfilled even against appearances. The king of Assyria would come upon Syria and Israel and Reza and Pekah's invasion of Judah would be halted. In 734 BC Tiglath-Pileser cut off the support of Egypt to the anti-Assyrian alliance.

In the next two years he took extensive territory from Israel in Galilee and the Transjordan and he defeated Damascus in 732 BC. In verse 5 we seem to move forward in time. Tiglath-Pileser III has forced Pekah king of Israel and Rezan king of Syria to withdraw, abandoning their invasion of Judah.

Their lands were now being ravaged by the Assyrians. The people of Judah and Jerusalem were rejoicing over the downfall of their enemies, although the phrase is difficult to interpret. However they had rejected the gentle stream of Shiloah, the waters diverted from the Sihon spring, in the conduits that irrigated the city's pools.

This image of the gentle waters near the city is an image of the aid and the sustenance that the Lord provides to his people. Judah had turned to Assyria, against whom they would later rebel rather than trusting in the Lord. At this point in time they were presumably congratulating themselves on their canny foreign policy.

Ahaz's shrewdness in allying with Assyria seemed to have saved them in their hour of need. However as they rejected the Lord the mighty waters of the Euphrates, the great river, would be brought against them, representing the king of Assyria and all of his forces. The waters of the Euphrates, the power of Assyria, would overflow its banks and the region would be deluged.

Judah would be largely overwhelmed and the waters would come up to the very neck of Jerusalem. Meher-shal-al-hashbaz's name would be fulfilled against them. The land is described as Emmanuel's land, which perhaps adds weight to the idea that Emmanuel is a royal child.

Yet with the description of the land as Emmanuel's, the tone of the prophecy shifts. The Assyrians will come up against and overwhelm the land of Judah, but they will be shattered, failing in their design. Ultimately their purposes will not stand because of the promise of Emmanuel, God is with us.

The second half of the chapter sums up many of the themes of the section. The prophet is called to be a messenger, a sign and a model to the people in difficult days. In faithfully holding to the word of the Lord he sets a pattern for others.

He is warned against following the behaviour and adopting the attitudes of his compatriots. In chapter 6 Isaiah describes himself as a man of unclean lips dwelling among a people of unclean lips. Here he is given instructions in how to stand apart from his contemporaries.

The meaning of conspiracies in verse 12 is difficult to determine. Perhaps it is a reference to an alliance between Judah and Assyria, initially created out of fear of Israel and Syria and then later developed out of fear of Assyria's dominance within the region. Alternatively, maybe there are dark rumours of a fifth column in Judah, or speculations and intrigue about Ahaz's government and their dark purposes.

Oswald suggests, along with a number of other commentators, that rather than focus upon a particular conspiracy, this likely refers to a general approach to the explanation of events, especially unpleasant events. The danger in times of uncertainty and instability is to become paranoid and to turn to conspiracy theories, believing that the world is primarily controlled by shadowy human powers. Isaiah's message, however, is that man is but flesh, his life is as fleeting as the breath in his nostrils.

Conspiracy theories can be a sort of false doctrine of providence where fear of shadowy human agencies and the assumption that they wield vast powers and control can take the place of confidence in the Lord. Such a confidence in the Lord will greatly demystify and deflate our view of human powers. Late in Isaiah, idols, which hold people in their thrall, are deconstructed by the Prophet, broken down to their component elements and the processes of their construction.

One might see the Lord as engaging in something similar with human powers and authorities here. As we saw in the preceding chapter, for instance, when you consider Israel and Syria, they have two cities, Samaria and Damascus, at their hearts, and two weak men as their kings, Pekah and Rezan. What initially looks like an irresistible force is demystified and broken down to size.

When you fear the Lord and honour him above all, you are unlikely to have exaggerated views of the scope, scale and effectiveness of human power, knowledge and will, and conspiracy theories can become a lot less persuasive. By failing to trust the Lord and thinking in terms of human conspiracies, when the chips were down, Judah had turned to political machinations and intrigue, trusting in human power, which would ultimately bring ruin upon them. In verses 14 and 15 we see that the Lord would simultaneously be a sanctuary and a stone of offence.

Those who trusted in the Lord would find security and safety under his protection. But those who lost their nerve and turned to conspiracy theories and human powers and intrigue rather than to the Lord would stumble and be broken or snared. Those who did not base their lives and purposes upon the Lord would find that he was their great obstacle, the one frustrating their designs at every step.

In verses 16 to 18 it seems likely that Isaiah withdrew from his public participation in the discourse surrounding the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. He bound and sealed his testimony concerning the future and committed it to the charge of his disciples. The disciples of Isaiah need not be considered as a school around him, but this does suggest that he had some followers.

His words could have been produced by them in the future, at the time when they were vindicated. The time would come when the Lord would no longer hide his face from Judah and when Isaiah's words and the signs of his own actions and the names of his sons would be fulfilled. Brother Charles writes of this particular passage, against such occult practices Isaiah directs people to the teaching and the testimony of the Lord.

These are the touchstone of all truth. Any who reject such words will grope in the darkness, starved of knowledge and guidance, distressed in their fear, resentful and bitter in their suffering, stumbling further and further into the gloom. A question to consider.

In this chapter we see two contrasting fears, the fear of the Lord and the fear of human powers and agencies. Reflecting more closely upon this passage and elsewhere in scripture, how can the fear of the Lord release us from the fear of human powers? Mark chapter 7 verse 24 to chapter 8 verse 10 And from there he arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon, and he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet.

Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth, and she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. But she answered him, Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

And he said to her, For this statement you may go your way, the demon has left your daughter. And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

And they brought to him a man who was deaf, and had a speech impediment. And they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue.

And looking up to heaven he sighed and said to him, Ephetha, that is, be opened. And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one.

But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were

astonished beyond measure, saying, He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear, and the mute speak.

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way, and some of them have come from far away. And his disciples answered him, How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place? And he asked them, How many loaves do you have? They said, Seven.

And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish, and having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them.

And they ate, and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. And there were about four thousand people.

And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples, and went to the district of Dalmanutha. At the end of Mark chapter 7, Jesus goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

This might recall the story of Elijah, who stayed with the widow of Zarephath, and also raised her child from the dead, much as Jesus delivers the child of this Syrophenician woman living in that region. The woman begged Jesus to deliver her daughter, and Jesus seems to deny her request, telling her that the children should be fed first, that it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. Jesus doesn't send her away, but he gives her a seemingly very harsh response, possibly quoting a popular proverb, rebuffing her with an unflattering statement about Gentiles that seems to place them outside of the realm of God's blessings.

Jesus' mission is not to people in general, but to Israel especially, although the claim that the children should be fed first holds the door open a crack. The woman however responds to Jesus' presentation of an obstacle, by taking that obstacle and turning it around to her benefit. By this point we should have picked up on the fact that Jesus seldom goes out of his way to heal people, nor does he make things easy for the people who want to be healed by him.

People have to come to Jesus. Those wanting healing or deliverance often face obstacles or initial rejection, and have to beg and persist in order to get anything. But we must recognise that such dogged persistence is exactly what Jesus wants from them.

In presenting these sorts of obstacles, Jesus is calling for strength of faith in the

petitioner, expecting them to wrestle with him until they get their answer. The obstacles aren't proof that Jesus doesn't want to heal and deliver people. Rather his healings and deliverances call for faith from their recipients.

Where such persistent faith is lacking, people are not healed. This is an example of the sort of prayer that we should practice. The deliverance of the daughter of the Syrophenician woman is also an anticipation of Christ's deliverance going to the Gentiles more generally, and the surrounding context is very much focused on Gentiles.

Jesus continues to travel in Gentile regions, in the region of Decapolis, and there is a deaf man with a speech impediment brought to him, and people beg him to lay his hands on this man. Once again, the begging suggests the importance of persistence. Jesus takes the man away from the crowd, puts his fingers in his ears, and using spittle, presumably on his finger, touches the man's tongue.

He looks up to heaven, sighs, and speaks a word of healing in Aramaic. Once again, the original Aramaic of a powerful healing utterance is preserved for us by Mark, just as he did in the case of Jairus' daughter. The man's ears are opened and his tongue is unshackled, suggesting the removal of bonds that Satan has placed upon him.

All of this recalls Isaiah 35, verses 5-6. We should read this story alongside the parallel story a few verses later, in chapter 8, verses 22-26. The parallels between these two stories are quite pronounced when we look closely, and it should be noted that it is also a fulfilment of Isaiah 35, verses 5-6, the eyes of the blind being opened.

We should remember how important Isaiah's prophecies are for Mark within his gospel. Having instructed the healed deaf mute not to tell anyone, the released tongue of the man cannot help but declare what Jesus has done for him, and the people's response is astonishment and praise. He has done all things well.

After this, Jesus is once again surrounded by a great crowd that lacks food, and we have another miraculous feeding account. In an event highly reminiscent of the earlier feeding of the 5,000, Jesus repeats the pattern of the Lord's Supper, in verse 6, once again making his disciples minister to a large flock. However, this time the flock seems to be largely Gentile.

The similarities with the earlier feeding of the 5,000 suggest that we are expected to recognise a connection between the two, and that is underlined later on in this chapter. These are two parts of a single story. Both of these events anticipate the future ministry of the disciples as they will minister Jesus to the multitudes, both Jews and Gentiles.

This seems to be in a largely Gentile region. It continues the Gentile focus of the last two stories. Jesus feeds not only Jews, but presumably many Gentiles too.

We should think back to the conversation with the Syrophenician woman. Gentiles, who

might be dismissed by dogs by some, are here feasting on the same food as the children had enjoyed. There is the feeding of the children first, and now the feeding of those who are the Gentiles.

The first feeding involves the feeding of 5,000 people. This may be connected with Israel's military ordering. And there are 12 baskets gathered up.

Here there are 4,000 people, maybe connected with the four corners of the earth. And there are 7 baskets gathered up. The 5,000 is the primary act, but the Gentiles are blessed with the Jews, and there are leftovers for others.

There is a super abundance, more than enough for others besides Israel. There are 5 loaves in the first feeding. There are 7 loaves in the second.

Altogether that makes 12 loaves. 12 loaves represented Israel in the showbread. We've already noted that the 5 loaves might be connected with the 5 loaves taken of the showbread by David in 1 Samuel chapter 21.

So together the loaves given to these two groups make a new 12. There are 12 baskets gathered up on the first occasion, and then 7 baskets gathered up on the second occasion. 12 for Israel, perhaps 7 for the fullness of the nations.

These are both significant numbers in scripture, numbers that suggest some type of fullness. 12 associated with Israel, 7 associated with the days of creation, the scope of creation more generally. Jesus is bringing together a new people, and all of these events connected with the Gentiles suggest that they are an important part of what Christ will perform, and his disciples will be ministering this.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which these stories give us an image of the Gentiles' spiritual participation in the awaited Kingdom of God?