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The oracle against Moab. The Triumphal Entry.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 15, an oracle concerning Moab. Because Ah of Moab is laid waste in the night, Moab is undone. Because Kur of Moab is laid waste in the night, Moab is undone.

He has gone up to the temple, and to Dibon, to the high places, to weep. Over Nebo and over Medeba, Moab wails. On every head is baldness, every beard is shorn.

In the streets they wear sackcloth, on the housetops and in the squares, everyone wails and melts in tears. Heshbon and Eliella cry out, their voices heard as far as Jehaz. Therefore the armed men of Moab cry aloud, his soul trembles.

My heart cries out for Moab. Her fugitives flee to Zoar, to Eglash, Shalishia. For at the ascent of Luhith, they go up weeping.

On the road to Harunayim, they raise a cry of destruction. The waters of Nimrim are a desolation, the grass is withered, the vegetation fails, the greenery is no more. Therefore the abundance they have gained, and what they have laid up, they carry away over the brook of the willows.

For a cry has gone around the land of Moab. Her wailing reaches to Eglayim, her wailing reaches to Be'er Elim. For the waters of Dibon are full of blood.

For I will bring upon Dibon even more, a lion for those of Moab who escape, for the remnant of the land. Isaiah chapters 13 and 14 contained oracles or prophecies against Babylon, Assyria and Philistia. The historical context for the prophecy against Philistia was given as the time of the death of King Ahaz, likely sometime toward the end of the 710s BC.

However the context of the prophecy against Babylon is debated, as it seems to relate to a situation where Babylon was a, or the, primary centre of power in the wider world. This does not neatly seem to fit a late 8th century context, a period of Assyrian hegemony. Babylon was a centre of commerce, culture and power, and the kings of Assyria after Tigilath-Pileser III were kings of Babylon too, Babylon continuing to enjoy a high status for much of the period, not merely being annexed into Assyria.

While there have been some strong arguments made in favour of a late 8th century setting for the prophecy against Babylon in the preceding chapters, neither these arguments, nor the arguments for a 6th century context seem to resolve all of the questions that the content of the prophecy raises. One possibility is that it is a telescoped prophecy, relating both to the sacking of Babylon by the Assyrians in 689 BC, and the much more distant horizon of the defeat of Babylon in 539 BC by Cyrus and the Medo-Persian Empire. Babylon might be foregrounded on account of the temptation faced by Judah to look to Babylon and its anti-Assyrian alliance.

In chapters 15-16 we have an oracle against Moab. Once again the precise historical context of the oracle is unclear, although chapters 16 verses 13-14 speak of the fulfilment of a previously delivered word of judgement concerning Moab within three years. Considering this, some commentators claim that the Moab material might be traditional material relating to a time that has passed.

Christopher Seitz suggests that traditional material may have been re-contextualised, now related to the disaster about to befall Moab at the hands of the Babylonian Empire. This however would be about 100 years after the time of Isaac. Other commentators such as Alec Mottier contextualise the material within the broader Assyrian crisis which came through Sargon II in 715 and 711 BC, and then later through Sennacherib in 701 BC.

We need not assume that the prophecies and oracles against the nations in this section of Isaiah are arranged chronologically. It is entirely possible that they are ordered by a different principle. A further complicating factor here is the similarity between some of the material concerning Moab in these chapters, especially chapter 16, and material concerning Moab in Jeremiah chapter 48.

When reading such scriptural prophecies, where the specificity of dates, contexts and other particulars are difficult to ascertain, even the enemy of Moab in view here is vague, we ought to bear in mind that scriptural prophecy very commonly abstracts from the specifics of situations to help us to recognise deeper and recurring principles that are in operation, principles that are of perennial or frequent importance. In such a manner, rather than losing ourselves in reconstructions of the original historical context, we can recognise the primary canonical purpose of such prophecies in acquainting us with deeper principles that pervade history, helping us to draw relevant insights for our own times from words of the Lord to 8th century kingdoms. Moab was a Transjordanian nation, situated largely on a plateau to the east of the Dead Sea.

Most of its territory was between the Zered Brook and the Arnon River. Its capital was likely Ker, although there is not unanimity among scholars on that matter. Moab was descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew.

Their ancestor was born of the incestuous relations between Lot and his oldest daughter after the destruction of Sodom. As a near neighbour, Judah had many interactions with Moab over the years. Israel had passed through Moab's territory on their journey to the Promised Land.

And Reuben and Gad had taken possession of land to the north of Moab in the Transjordan from the defeated Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, who had dispossessed Moab of that territory. Moses had died in the land of Moab and saw the Promised Land from the top of Mount Nebo. Most notably, Ruth, the ancestress of David, was a Moabiteess.

While fleeing from King Saul, David had sent his parents to Moab for refuge. At several points in their history, Moab was at war with Israel or Judah. In 2 Samuel 8 verses 1-2, we learn that they were defeated during the reign of David and made to pay tribute to Israel.

However, King Mesha later secured Moab's independence from Israel and dispossessed Reuben after the death of Ahab. Our knowledge of Moab and its history is limited, much of it coming from non-Moabite sources, although there are some important archaeological confirmations of certain aspects of the biblical record concerning it. The chapter presents us with a litany of Moabite places, from major cities and regions to smaller towns, with the disasters about to befall them.

Jeremiah chapter 48 has some similar passages concerning Moab, especially in verses 1-5. We know where some of these places were. Some such as Dibon, Heshbon, Eliela, Jehaz and Neba were former territories of Reuben and Gad, most of them mentioned in Numbers chapter 32, where Reuben and Gad requested to be given their possessions in the Transjordan.

Reuben and Gad has subsequently lost these territories to Moab. The prophecy describes

a devastation descending upon the land of Moab, extinguishing city after city, with the people of Moab going into mourning as a result of their distress and the great loss of life. They go up to their temple and their high places to call for divine intervention in their crisis.

Everyone, even Moab's warriors, are crying out in grief and despair, powerless to arrest the disaster that is ravaging their land. In verse 5, the Lord himself joins in the mourning, recognizing the horrific suffering of the nation. Even as he is striking them, his heart mourns for them.

Their flight to Zoar is, of course, ominously reminiscent of the flight of their forefather Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, when he too fled to Zoar, although he did not find secure enough refuge there. As Gary Smith observes, however, the refugees' flight to Zoar might suggest that they are aiming to flee southwards to Judah or Edom, from an enemy coming upon them from the north. The disaster striking the people of Moab afflicts their land too.

Waters are dried up or spoiled, grass withers, vegetation is destroyed. The whole nation wails in their collective distress, their cry being heard from all of their borders. Even as the waters of Dabon are full of blood, the disaster will not be stayed.

Matthias suggests that this might be intended as an allusion back to the mirage of waters of blood that Moab saw in 2 Kings 3, verses 22-23. Even after all of this suffering, there is still more to come. A lion, presumably a fierce predatory nation, will be brought upon them by the Lord.

A question to consider. Where in the book of Numbers do we find prophecies of destruction upon Moab? Mark chapter 11, verses 1-26 And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. And some of those standing there said to them, What are you doing untying the colt? And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go.

And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest! And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple.

And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it.

When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, May no one ever eat fruit from you again. And his disciples heard it.

And they came to Jerusalem, and he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple. And he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

And he was teaching them and saying to them, Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a den of robbers. And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him. For they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.

And when evening came, they went out of the city. As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree that you cursed has withered.

And Jesus answered them, Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, Be taken up and thrown into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. In Mark chapter 11, Jesus finally arrives in Jerusalem. We've been moving to this point for a number of chapters now.

And now the events of the final week of his life are about to take place. In Genesis chapter 49 verses 10 to 11, Jacob prophesies concerning the tribe of Judah. The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and the obedience of the peoples is his, binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine.

He washes his garments in wine, and his robe in the blood of grapes. Later on as we read in the story of 1 Samuel, Saul's rise to the throne of Israel is set in motion by the wandering donkeys of his father Kish, and his quest to locate the lost donkeys leads him to the prophet Samuel, who anoints him with oil and lists a series of signs that will confirm his message to Saul as he travels back. One of these signs is that he will be met by two men declaring that the donkeys have been found.

The association of donkeys and mules with rule and kingship in Israel, which we first see in Genesis chapter 49, is seen throughout its history, from Judges in chapter 5 verses 10 and 10 verse 4, 12 verse 14, and then later on in passages such as 2 Samuel chapter 16 verses 1 and 2, where as David escapes from Jerusalem after his son Absalom's coup,

Zeba brings two donkeys for the king's household to ride on. In an ironic twist, Absalom the pretender ends up hung from a terebinth tree by his long hair when his mule goes beneath it. Later on we see again in 1 Kings chapter 1 verses 28 to 40, the fraught situation surrounding royal succession as David's death draws near is resolved as Solomon is decisively distinguished as the true heir as he goes in a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on King David's own mule.

The donkey or the mule is the king's steed. It's associated with peaceful rule, while the horse with an animal of war. A different sort of triumphal entry occurs in the story of Jehu, who is secretly anointed by Elisha and rides on a carpet of people's garments.

He's not a meek ruler riding on a donkey, but he's a furious charioteer and someone who causes a lot of bloodshed. He kills Joram of Israel, Ahaziah of Judah, he tramples Jezebel under his horse's feet, and he cleanses the Temple of Baal in a very bloody manner. When the prophet Zechariah foretells the coming of a new king to restore the people's fortunes, he's identified as riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey, and his mode of rule is distinguished from that of the rulers on their great horses and their royal chargers.

Zechariah chapter 9 verses 9 to 10 reads, Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation as he, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations. His rule shall be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth.

Now this passage is not explicitly cited in Mark as it is in Matthew or John, but it is clearly in the background. The coming king is the true bearer of Judah's scepter. He is the one who will establish the kingdom.

He is the greater than Saul, the greater son of David. He will realize the unfulfilled promise of Solomon, who fell short of his name, and calling to be the prince of peace. He will not be like the warlike Jehu.

The chariot and the horse and the conflicts to which they belong will be cut off, and the nations will have peace declared to them. Jesus then is engaging in a symbolic action that displays kingship. Throughout Mark's gospel, themes of kingship have been prominent, and they really come to the foreground here.

Mark's account differs from Matthew's in the timing of events here, it seems, as the cleansing of the temple appears to happen on the following day. There are three visits to the temple, punctuated by two passages concerning the fig tree. The interspersing of these accounts strongly suggests a connection between the fig tree and the temple.

The fig tree is Jesus' one destructive miracle. The fig tree is seen in leaf, it seems to

promise some life, but it's not the season for figs. Jesus might be expecting undeveloped figs though.

When I would gather them, declares the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree. Even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them. Woe is me, for I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned.

There is no cluster to eat, no first ripe fig that my soul desires. The godly has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind. They all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts the other with a net.

Their hands are on what is evil, to do it well. The prince and the judge ask for a bribe, and the great man utters the evil desire of his soul. Thus they weave it together.

The best of them is like a briar, the most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day of your punishment has come. Now their confusion is at hand.

Put no trust in a neighbour, have no confidence in a friend. Guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your arms. For the son treats the father with contempt.

The daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's enemies are the men of his own house. The desire to find figs on this tree seems to be strange as it's out of season, and Mark underlines that fact.

The point however is not the fig tree itself, it's what the fig tree represents. The fig tree represents Israel and its temple and its leaders, and it's that that Christ has come to inspect. This is followed by Jesus' cleansing of the temple.

In Zechariah chapter 14 verse 21 we're told, Jesus' action is the action of the Messianic king. He's the one who's going to set right and restore and reform the worship of God. He's going to re-establish the temple in its proper manner, and his action with the fig tree interprets the action of the temple.

Jesus is inspecting the temple as he inspected the fig tree, and the temple will suffer the same judgment. It will wither and be destroyed in the same way as the fig tree. Jesus' statement concerning the temple is also working with the Old Testament.

Isaiah chapter 56 verses 6 to 7, And then in Jeremiah chapter 7 verse 11, So there are a number of overlapping judgments here. There's the judgment implied by the fig tree being inspected and no good fruit being found upon it. In the same way, the people of Israel, their leaders have been inspected, and they have not produced the fruit that is being sought.

Then there is also the background of Zechariah chapter 14, the final verse of that book,

which speaks of the removal of the traders from the house of the Lord. Beyond that, there's also Jeremiah. Jeremiah which speaks about the rebellion of the people, and the way that they treated the temple as a sort of talisman to protect them from God's wrath.

It was a shelter and a refuge, so they could sin and the temple would secure their impunity. Like robbers retreat to their den after they've committed their crimes, so the people of Israel would retreat to the temple, to the house of God itself, and treat that as a place that protected them from judgment, from being sought out by justice. This is an utter perversion of the true purpose of the temple.

It's not to be a place of merchandise. It's not to be a place to avoid the just judgment of God, and it's not to be a place that is fruitless. Rather, it's supposed to be the place where the spiritual life of Israel is most evident, where the leaves, as it were, of this house display the fruit within it.

And then it's also to be a place that brings in people from outside, that for all nations it should be seen as a house of prayer. The judgment on the fig tree then is a symbolic judgment upon the temple, and Jerusalem. In Mark's account then, it frames Jesus' action in the temple.

The fig tree represents Israel and its leaders and their failure to produce fruit. Jeremiah chapter 8 verse 13, chapter 24 verses 1 to 10, Hosea 9, 10 and 16 to 17 all use that sort of symbolism to refer to Israel. The temple and the fig tree are related then.

And then Jesus, after this, goes into a discussion of prayer, about efficacy in prayer, the importance of faith, but also forgiveness. If we want effective prayers, we have to come to God with faith and confidence, but also in a way that heals the relationships that we have with others, the breached relationships, the bitterness that might exist between us and others. And unless we come to God with the faith to grasp hold of him, and the forgiveness to release our neighbor from their debts, we cannot enjoy effectiveness in prayer.

A question to consider, why do you think Mark focuses Jesus' teaching on prayer here, rather than elsewhere in his gospel, as the other gospels do?