Isaiah 28-30

Being Confronted by the Holy One of Israel! Isaiah chapters 28, 29, and 30.

The book of Isaiah is a spectacular vision or book about God, His Ways, and His purposes for His people. Chapters 28-30 appear just about midway through Isaiah’s lengthy book. They are addressed primarily to the people of Jerusalem – the people of Zion – during the reign of Hezekiah and sometime during the time period of 721-701 B.C. The background for Isaiah’s message in these chapters is the contemporary invasion and destruction of Samaria by Assyria in 721 B.C. This invasion means the end of independence for both Ephraim and Samaria! The story is told, not so much for Ephraim’s benefit, but for the people of Jerusalem. It is primarily a call by God through Isaiah for his people in Zion to wake up, to become sober, and stop being so clueless of what is going on all around them. A closer look and careful reflection upon these three chapters reveals Isaiah’s critique on what His people have done, what God is doing, and, most importantly, what they need to know and take to heart concerning Yahweh – the Holy One – whose Presence is in their midst. The common and repeated theme in all three chapters is that Yahweh’s people are oblivious or senseless to what is going on, Isaiah repeatedly sounds this theme. The striking and controlling image throughout these three chapters is that the people of Jerusalem are behaving like drunks – people who are intoxicated by strong drink. The people of Jerusalem, because they are in such a stupor or daze, are senseless and clueless to not only to the severe calamity that threatens them, but, most importantly, to being God’s people who should be aware of the Holy One in their midst.

I. Oblivious to hearing Yahweh’s voice (Ch 28). Chapter 28 is the first chapter of Isaiah’s exposing Jerusalem’s plight. It is also the first chapter to introduce us to the theme of His people being in a state of stupor or drunkenness. Keep in mind that all three chapters explicitly or implicitly mention the devastating problem that Assyria represents to Jerusalem and Judah. Everyone knows that! Isaiah begins this chapter focusing upon Samaria, the capitol of Ephraim and the unnamed city in 28:1. Isaiah focuses his attention on Samaria first in order to provide an object lesson, warning the people in Jerusalem what not to do! Already in the first four verses, Isaiah wants us to see several things about this unnamed city. Isaiah recognizes that Samaria is a great and beautiful city. Isaiah describes it as at the top of a hill, overlooking a fertile valley. It is called Ephraim’s glorious beauty (twice). It is compared to a flowery wreath – the pride of the people of Ephraim.

Yet, Isaiah discloses that Samaria, the once famed beauty, is fading fast. Indeed, Isaiah declares that the pride of Ephraim is about to be crushed and destroyed, or consumed like a ripe fig! The careful reader cannot help but see that Assyria is being alluded to in these verses. In the second verse Isaiah discloses God’s hand in this. “See, the Lord has one who is powerful and strong like a hailstorm and destructive wind... he will throw it (Samaria) forcefully to the ground.” Point: Assyria is the rod of God carrying out the Lord’s purpose. But that is not all. Is there any indication here of why the Lord is crushing Samaria? Let us take a closer look? What is Samaria’s sin? Pride? Intoxication by strong drinking? Or perhaps something else?
While the multiple images of staggering, reeling and not being steady on ones feet is certainly a reference to intoxication by strong drink, I think the multiple images of staggering and reeling under the influence is also a figurative or metaphorical way of referring to the people of Jerusalem’s state of awareness of God, or more precisely their current lack of awareness of God and what God is doing. Just like a drunk stagers and is confused, and thereby makes senseless and stupid decisions because he is intoxicated, the Lord’s people likewise can be in a state of stupor or a daze and not see God as Isaiah, who in contrast clearly and soberly saw and responded to the Lord of hosts.¹

A. Samaria is in a state of stupor (7-8). In this time of impending calamity facing the city, the city of Samaria is doomed. She is paralyzed! She is both helpless to save herself, and oblivious to turning to God to help save her. Reasons? In this time of threat, the city, especially the leaders, are guilty of being intoxicated by strong drink (beer and wine). Isaiah deftly paints a vivid picture of their state of stupor, carrying over from his earlier description of Samaria being characterized as being a city of drunks.

Here Isaiah makes it plain that the leadership – priests and prophets – are guilty of reeling and staggering under the influence of being drunk. Verse 7 explicitly states that the priests and prophets are “befuddled with wine.” The term can mean both swallowed up (overcome) by wine or the state of being confused. Both meanings are true here. This stupor effects how they carry out their responsibilities. “They stagger when seeing visions.” Implication: The priests have failed to in their responsibility to guide and instruct God’s people. (Is.5:12-13) The priests who have this great responsibility for teaching and guiding the people in the ways of God cannot even see clearly enough to guide even themselves properly. For they are in such a state of confusion and befuddlement that not only do they stumble in doing the right thing, but the people themselves under their defective leadership stumbling doing the right thing as well. And they scoff and ridicule those like Isaiah who desperately try to sober them up to reality.

B. The leaders of Samaria scoff and ridicule Isaiah and his message. (9-13) I would suggest that in this state of stupor they cannot see or hear God’s instructions to them. In fact, they misinterpret and even ridicule Isaiah for his messages to them. They see Isaiah talking down to them and treating them as children. “Who is he (Isaiah) trying to teach? Does he think that we are children? Does Isaiah think that we are very young children who have been just weaned from their [mother’s] milk.” Point: Isaiah’s message is too simple! This may be the thrust of verse 12. The leaders are quoting a sample of Isaiah’s message to trust God and he will give you rest. Verse 10, which may again be a quote from Isaiah, is hard to translate, as seen by multiple and different translations. The NIV translation “Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, a little here, a little there,” may indicate either their perception of God imposing a bunch of rules upon them, or something that just didn’t make sense to them. The main point is that the people of Samaria would not listen

¹ John D Watts, Isaiah 1-33, Word Biblical Commentary p 362. So also Oswalt p 530.
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to Isaiah speaking the word of the Lord to them (v. 12). Therefore, Isaiah declares that God would speak to this people and they will understand. "Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people." What will he say? The last verse alludes to the judgment God will bring against them for their refusal to listen to his words.

C. The application of the lesson of Samaria to the people of Judah. (14-23) This section begins with an admonition by Isaiah for the people to pay attention and to listen to the instructions that he is giving them. Indeed, this is the major unifying theme to this third section of chapter 28. “Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers...” (28:14) “Listen and hear my voice; pay attention to what I have to say.” Beginning with verse 14, Isaiah proceeds to address the leaders in Jerusalem primarily with his instructions and admonitions. Indeed, the leadership of Jerusalem may have been Isaiah’s primary audience throughout this chapter, and not Samaria. The example of Samaria was used by Isaiah only as a living illustration and an example to avoid. In verse 14, Isaiah explicitly addresses them as scoffers. Not only are they scoffers, but they are declared by Isaiah of being in a state of spiritual stupor. (Is. 29:9) Isaiah condemns the leadership in Jerusalem of being just like the leaders of Samaria. They are not only guilty of being oblivious to the threat of Assyria, but they are also in a daze about what to do in response. Isaiah’s First Point: Their supposedly wise strategy of turning to Egypt for help will not protect them from the overwhelming flood of disaster coming from Assyria. Second Point: Only God is a reliable source of help. Only he can protect his people from the overwhelming scourge that is coming. Isaiah message to them: Stop being fools! Egypt is false protection. The blanket of protection that she offers is too small. Your covenant with Egypt can only end in your death and destruction. Wake up before it is too late. Isaiah will comment more on this alliance/covenant with Egypt in chapter 30.

II. Oblivious to seeing and being aware of the living God in their midst (Ch 29). Whereas chapter 28 condemned Judah for their failure to refuse to listen to Yahweh instructions and condemned her for failing to trust and to rely upon God for their protection, this chapter condemns the people of Jerusalem for their blindness and being in a drunken stupor in not being able to see God working in their midst. They are blind to seeing Him in their midst and blind to the nature of their God as being the Holy One of Israel. Simply stated: Both leaders and the people are oblivious and unaware of their God and the destructive threat coming by Yahweh’s will. While this theme of the needing to be aware of God is not present in the forefront of each and every section of this chapter, it is the key and core idea that unifies the entire chapter. With this in mind let us see how Isaiah develops this theme.

A. Doom and Destruction is coming to Jerusalem (vs. 1-4). Isaiah signals to his hearers that Doom (Gloom & Darkness) are coming soon against Jerusalem. This repeats and reinforces Isaiah’s message to the people of Jerusalem in chapter 28 that an overwhelming flood or scourge was about to sweep through and destroy them (28:22). This section adds three details to the

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picture of the devastating destruction coming. 1). Yahweh – the LORD of hosts – is behind the devastation and destruction. It may seem that Assyria, or eventually Babylon, is behind the attack and destruction of the city, but not so! It is the LORD. “Yet, I will besiege Ariel: she will mourn and lament, she will be to me like an altar hearth.” “I will encamp against you...I will encircle you with towers... and siege works” (vv 2-3). Who is saying this? The LORD is! As a result, Jerusalem, or Ariel, will fall to her enemy; her walls will be broken down, the city captured, and then she will be devastated. She will, in Isaiah’s words, become an (Ariel) or an altar hearth. Ariel, the term used only here, means Lion of God. Or it can mean altar hearth – the place where sacrifices are made and consumed. This is the fate predicted for Jerusalem. Whoa! It will be so bad that those who survive will lift their heads from the dust and their cries will be sound ghost like-mere whispers. This first section confronts the people especially the leaders with this terrible tragedy that faces their city just as it happened to Samaria.

2) There is a conundrum facing the people of Jerusalem. In verse one, Isaiah hints at the bafflement the people have with Isaiah’s message of doom. They are the people of Jerusalem. They are special. This is the city that David dwelt in and made his home and the capitol of all of Israel. Implication: God had promised that his house and his kingdom would endure forever. Surely, this would seem to imply special protection by God for the capitol of David’s kingdom. Besides, God had appointed a special place there, the only place where sacrifice and worship could take place, year after year. Did not this ensure Jerusalem’s safety from destruction? But, Isaiah declares that Jerusalem will herself become an altar hearth. How can this be? Is God not remaining true to his promises?

B. Jerusalem’s time mourning and grief will end (5-8). Abruptly, Isaiah changes his subject. Isaiah moves from announcing the threat of the complete destruction which is about to come upon Jerusalem by God, to talking about a sudden change and reversal of what he just pictured. Three times in four verses, Isaiah informs us that Jerusalem’s enemies will vanish (5, 7, 8). The hordes of all the nations that fight against Ariel will vanish like chaff blowing in the wind. What happens to bring about this change? The LORD comes to fight for and not against Jerusalem. “Suddenly, in an instant, the LORD Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake... with windstorm and flames of devouring fire,” and do what? Isaiah doesn’t tell us. He does not need to tell us. But it is very clear what God does for Jerusalem. He will once again fight for his people and for his city. So that the hordes of enemies will completely vanish. Isaiah compares the turnaround to waking up from a terrible nightmare.

C. Jerusalem’s stupidity to remain in a state of stupor. (9-12). This is a critical section. It is not obvious what Isaiah is telling us in this section. Isaiah is trying to hammer home two ideas to the people of Jerusalem. They must grasp these two ideas if they hope to survive the coming

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3 2 Samuel 7:16
4 The Song of Moses depicts God as a warrior fighting for his people during their Exodus. (Ex.15)
destruction at Yahweh’s hand from Assyria. **First Point:** Disaster and destruction is coming to them, just as it did to Israel and especially Samaria. God brought Assyria and her armies against his people for their rebellion against him. It did happen to Samaria. It will happen to them. But they think they are different than Samaria. They think it won’t happen to them. Why? Isaiah, in verses 10-12, condemns Jerusalem, particularly the leaders of Jerusalem, **for being in a daze or stupor:** Just like the leaders of Samaria, they had been guilty of staggering like a drunk during this critical time. They are blind and insensible to what was going on. Jerusalem and her people especially the leaders are blind particularly to what God was saying to them through Isaiah and other prophets. Even this blindness ultimately stems from God himself. “The LORD has brought over you a deep sleep.” He has sealed the eyes of their prophets so that they cannot see. So while Isaiah is saying to us that God has indeed prevented his people from seeing the seriousness of their plight, verse 9 tells us that at the same time, Isaiah holds the people, especially the leadership, **responsible for their own rebellion against the LORD.** Not only does Isaiah hold them responsible for their own stupor and accompanying rebellion, but, I see that verse 9 is Isaiah’s attempt to **shock the people into waking up from their stupor.** It is as if Isaiah was throwing a cup of freezing cold freezing water into their faces in order to get them to sober them up and turn around thus avoiding the fate that they face.

For take a look at verse 9 closely. See what and how Isaiah is telling them? “Stupefy yourselves and be in a stupor.”(NRSV) This translation is closest to the original Hebrew. But this version is not acceptable to many, since it sounds so confusing. The NIV translates this verse as “Be stunned and amazed” but this is only captures the first part of the verse or the stupefy part of his saying. Isaiah sarcastically calls on his listeners in the second half of this first clause of the first verse to remain in their state of blindness or stupor which he has accused the people of both Jerusalem and Samaria for being in. Isaiah’s point, according to Goldingay, is that Isaiah intent is just the opposite. Isaiah is trying to **wake them up from their stupor** in order that they might see with open eyes and clear thinking what is going on.

**D. Isaiah discloses the wrongdoing of Jerusalem that God finds so offensive. (13-16)** Isaiah confronts God’s people **with three major wrongs that they are guilty of** in terms of their dealings with Himself. All three offences specifically affect how they as the people of God approach Him in prayer and in worship. “The people come near...” and their worship is made up of... of what? Let us take a closer look at these three attitudes exhibited by the people of Jerusalem and question yourselves what gives rise to each of these “defective and offensive attitudes”? 1) The people’s hearts are not engaged in their approach to God. 2) The people hide their plans from God. 3) The people boss God around.

Let us take the last attitude first: They boss God around. How do I see that? This is my inference from the clay-potter relationship. Since the potter is the one who makes the pottery, the maker of the object has every right to make a decision of what the object should become and its function. The people of Jerusalem think they know better. They think they should be the ones
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making decisions and plans regarding their welfare. The second defective attitude, which goes along with the first, is that they make plans without even asking God for advice. They not only make plans, but do it secretly. Thirdly, they approach God in prayer/worship without their hearts being involved. “They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” The people say the right words, on the right days, in the right places, but their hearts are not in it. The heart in Hebrew thinking was the center of a person. The heart might include emotions, but it especially meant what we call the mind and will. When the people come before God, they are not engaged with their whole being in addressing God. But why? Isaiah provides a clue in verse 14. The people have forgotten God’s living Presence with them! The people have also forgotten the nature of the one that they call upon in prayer and worship. This gets to the root cause of their blindness. They stagger and reel like drunks. They are clueless and unaware of the nature of the one who is present in their midst to provide and to protect them. They have become like the other nations around them treating their God as someone they can manipulate, hide their plans from, and just say the right words to God. They mistakenly think God does not know what they are doing. God does see them! He knows their hearts. They think that they know more and are wiser than God. God says “Once again I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish.” When will they come to this awareness of seeing God rightly? When God begins to work his great deeds once again among his people they will be astonished and they will respond rightly to their maker and redeemer.

Before going on to the concluding section of this chapter, please keep in mind the overall defective mindset that the people of Jerusalem possess, along with how Isaiah concludes this important section by saying: “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, He did not make me? Can the pot say of the potter, he knows nothing” The careful reader who is following Isaiah argument would say: Of course not! And the careful reader then anticipates that Isaiah will conclude this chapter with a final woe in order to drive home his earlier initial threat that God was going to encamp and set up his siege works so as to destroy Jerusalem. For surely, we expect Isaiah end this chapter with this strong theme of judgment. But this does not happen! Instead, Isaiah concludes with a very strong section detailing how God is going to save, redeem, and restore his people of Jerusalem and all of Israel as well.

E. A concluding strong declaration that God is going to save His people. (17-24) Isaiah does not say explicitly that God is going save His people, but instead focuses upon the effects of God saving his people and what this looks like. Isaiah is using the language of poetry to provoke our imaginations into seeing the work that God will do on behalf of his people. Please note this is meant only to be a sample of how God will work in the lives of his people in order to restore them into a right relationship with Him. The Lord who Isaiah declares “redeemed Abraham” will in a very short time by implication redeem the children of Abraham-the house of Jacob. What will God do?
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1) He will make all of Israel, even going beyond the land of Israel to include Lebanon, to be fertile again (v. 17). Even Lebanon’s forests, which were cut down by the Assyrians, would grow into a forest again. The deaf ears will hear again. The eyes of the blind will be opened. This is primarily a reference to being able to hear God word with understanding (vs. 18). In that day God’s people will no longer be oblivious to what God is instructing them. Once more God’s people will trust him. Moreover, in the coming days, those who are humble in acknowledging their dependence upon God will rejoice with sincere hearts before God. All those who persist in doing evil, those who ruthlessly oppress others, will vanish. In that coming day Jacob, all of God’s people will no longer be disgraced or ashamed from being defeated, for the LORD will rescue and restore them. These few verses are meant to give us a poetic picture that a day is coming when God will make things right by saving his people once again.

But that is not all! The concluding point of the entire chapter is made by Isaiah in verse 23. Let us take a closer look! “When they see among them (the ones who have been redeemed) their children, the work of my hands (God’s hands), they will keep my name holy, they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.” Isaiah is making one fundamental final point. When his people see his saving work among them – God doing his wonders once again – they will worship and stand in awe of Him, recognizing, as Isaiah himself did in his vision of God, that God is truly the Holy One of Israel!

III. Oblivious to trusting the LORD and depending upon the LORD for their help (30:1-19).
This chapter focuses upon Isaiah’s condemnation of the plans by the people of Jerusalem to make an alliance with Egypt in order to gain protection from the threat of Assyria. This is once again a key aspect in Isaiah’s description of the stupor that the people find themselves in while facing the threat that Assyria poses against them. While Isaiah repeats and reinforces previous themes expressed in chapters 28 & 29, Isaiah’s main concern in this chapter is upon the people’s stubborn refusal to avail themselves of Yahweh’s help and protection. Isaiah sees their decision to seek Egypt’s help as both foolish and rebellious! He anticipates the disastrous outcome that will happen as result of their alliance with Egypt. Yet, Isaiah, in spite of his people’s foolishness and rebellion, concludes this part of his vision by declaring that God will nevertheless respond to their rebellion with compassion and grace.

A. Isaiah strongly condemns Jerusalem for seeking Egypt’s help (v. 1-7). Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God, declares this plan to be nuts! This is stupid. They are paying Egypt for help that she cannot give. While they are specifically looking for help from Egypt and Pharaoh to protect her from Assyria’s war machine, Isaiah declares that the help and resources from Egypt will prove out to be: no advantage, no help, utterly useless, even contributing to Jerusalem’s shame and disgrace. Not only will Egypt’s help be useless, this act of making an alliance with Egypt is declared an act of rebellion against the LORD. How so? The thrust of Isaiah’s words seems to be:

5 See Is. 14:8
They did not ask God for permission to make this alliance. “They formed an alliance but not by my Spirit, and without consulting me.” (vv 1-2). Isaiah condemns their wise and intelligent strategic plan as coming from a rebellious people who "are deceitful children, unwilling to listen to the LORD’s instruction. (v.9)

**B. Isaiah condemns Israel for their deceitful and unwilling hearts.** While an easy case can be made that the alliance with Egypt was a rebellious act, Isaiah maintains that the people in general were bent on going their own way and unwilling to listen to God. Note this emphasis. “Write as a witness to them: “These are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the LORD’s instruction.” This can be interpreted as their general disposition toward God, and not merely a specific reference to their plan to make an alliance, as seen by the following verses. They (the people of Jerusalem) say to the seers and prophets “See no more visions” and “Give us no more visions of what is right!” And don’t tell us “leave this way and get off this path…” Rather, tell us pleasant things… prophesy illusions… And most importantly: “Stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel and... his message.” Do you get the tone of how rebellious these people have become toward God? Specifically, Isaiah declared that the people rejected his message to trust God to protect and be a source of strength. They did not want to hear the Isaiah’s reassuring words: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.” These are very strong, comforting and challenging words to turn to the LORD and to quietly trust Him in their time of need. But Isaiah explicitly stated that they rejected this message. (v. 15) “But you would not listen.”

**C. God’s twofold response.** They will face the disastrous consequences of their foolish decision. “This sin will become for you like a high wall, cracked and bulging, that collapses suddenly” v. 14. Yet, even in their sin and rejection of his help, God offers to be gracious to them. “Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you, he rises to show compassion.” This is amazing grace. This is grace that they did not merit or deserve. This ties into Isaiah’s previous words promising that in a coming day, God would pour out his favor once again.

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