

## Isaiah 28, Beginning of the Woes

### Overview

#### **Overall Structure of the Book of Woes**

This chapter begins a new section of the book (28-35), punctuated by six instances of the phrase, “Woe to xxx” (28:1; 29:1; 29:15; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1). These woes primarily concern Israel (both north and south). Ch. 33 is apparently addressed to Assyria, but it emphasizes the effect on Israel.

As proclamations of judgment, they balance the Burdens (ch. 13-23), which concerned all nations (including Ephraim, ch. 17, and Jerusalem, ch. 22). They immediately follow the vineyard song of ch. 27, just as the vineyard song of ch. 5 is followed by a series of six woes (5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22).<sup>1</sup> Thus we should not discern a sharp break, but the end of an extended section beginning in ch. 13.

Delitzsch has excellent insight here:

- The book of woes extends through 33; 34-35 are an apocalyptic summary, just as 24-27 summarized the book of burdens (13-23).
- The last woe is against Assyria; the first five against Israel
- The theme here is the futility of trusting in Egypt for help against Assyria, compare 7-12, which warned against trusting in Assyria for help against Syria and Ephraim
- ch. 36-39 give the historical context that vindicates the emphasis of these messages, that people must trust in the Lord.

#### **Historical Background**

##### **The Assyrian Threat**

Throughout the second half of the eighth century BC, the territory of Israel was subjected to repeated waves of Assyrian attack. The public concern was comparable to the tension over the USSR during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

- About 743, Tiglath-Pileser III extracted tribute from Menahem king of Israel, 2 Kings 15:17-20.
- Pekah overthrew Menahem's line and established an anti-Assyrian policy, but TPIII defeated him, 2 Kings 15:29 (ca. 733), in association with the fall of Damascus (732). (Read vv. 23-30)
- Then in 722, Samaria under Hoshea fell to Sargon II after being besieged by his father Shalmaneser V. 2 Kings 17:1-6. Note Hoshea's attempt to find help in Egypt.
- In 701, Sargon's son Sennacherib reached as far as Judah and Jerusalem. 2 Kings 18:13.

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<sup>1</sup> My wife Anita pointed out the interesting similarity.

## The Egyptian Embassy

Just as Ahaz had sought Assyria's help against Syria and Israel, and as Hoshea had sought help from Egypt against Assyria, so there was a movement in Judah to seek Egypt's help against Assyria. The clearest evidence for this movement is Isaiah's argument against it throughout this section, notably 30:1-7; 31:1-3. 18:1 records the embassy sent by the Ethiopian dynasty of Egypt; see 2 Kings 19:9-10 for Assyria's view.

In fact, the main historical background of ch. 28-35 is Isaiah's rejection of this strategy, urging Jerusalem instead to trust in the Lord. In this way, the section is parallel to ch. 7-12, where he rejected the appeal to Assyria against Syria and Israel. But we saw throughout that section a prophetic foreshortening that merged the near future with the Messianic promise, and we will see the same phenomenon here. The same attitude of trust in the Lord that is reflected in our faith in the Messiah is the basis for enduring in the face of immediate dangers.

Here, in fact, is the central application of this entire section. A godless world continuously tempts us to look for human solutions to our problems. Through Isaiah, the Lord is calling those who claim to trust in him spiritually, to trust him with our physical problems as well. 1 John 5:9-15 (KJV) states this principle succinctly:

1Jo 5:13 These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.

## Structure of Ch. 28

The first woe describes the coming fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria (vv. 1-13), and then warns Jerusalem that she cannot escape by her worldly wisdom (14-22), closing with a parable about the Lord's skill in chastisement (23-29). Each of the first two sections has paragraphs describing (though in different orders)

- the peoples' offense;
- the coming judgment;
- the Lord as the only source of deliverance.

In the first half, the order is chiasmic: Offense, Judgment, Deliverance, Offense, Judgment. In the second, it is linear: Offense, Deliverance, Judgment.

The chapter recalls the prophecies of ch. 7-11 about the coming Assyrian destruction of the Northern Kingdom, and warn Judah that she is not immune to the same kind of disaster. Ahaz thought that he was in control when he invited Assyria to move against his adversaries, but his son Hezekiah had to face Assyria as an enemy, and the southern kingdom later fell to Babylon.

## 1-13, Coming Judgment on Ephraim

### 1, *Their Offense*

**1 Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower,**--The tribe Ephraim was the leading member of the northern kingdom, and its name often stands, as here, for the entire nation.

We have here four descriptions of those upon whom the doom is pronounced, in chiasmic order:

- The crown of pride
- The drunkards of Ephraim<sup>2</sup>
- The fading flower
- The glorious beauty.

The second description is the literal one. The objects of the doom are people. We need to emphasize this because if you're not reading the KJV, you are likely to think the woe is pronounced on a city, which is called "the proud crown OF the drunkards of Ephraim." But the Hebrew punctuation separates "crown of pride" from "drunkards," and we'll see that this reading makes excellent sense.

Why would one call people a "crown of pride"? Compare two expressions in Proverbs, a book that Isaiah has already quoted extensively:

Pro 17:6 Children's children *are* the crown of old men; and the glory of children *are* their fathers.

Pro 12:4 A virtuous woman *is* a crown to her husband:

People are called a "crown" when others treasure them, think highly of them, and are proud of them. The "crown" here is the leading citizens of Samaria. Compare the fate predicted in ch. 3 on the proud men and pampered ladies of Jerusalem. The rest of the citizens look up to them, lionize them, boast of them as a king boasts of his crown. But in reality they are drunken sots, like yesterday's flower withered and faded.

Ecc 10:16-17 Woe to thee, O land, when thy king *is* a child, and thy princes eat in the morning!  
17 Blessed *art* thou, O land, when thy king *is* the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!

**which *are* on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine!**--Their capital, Samaria, is a beautiful hill overlooking a fertile valley (see photograph). Isaiah condemns those who enjoy this blessed site with a sense of entitlement and self-gratification. Compare the judgment of Amos, Isaiah's contemporary,

Amo 4:1 Hear this word, ye kine of Bashan, that *are* in the mountain of Samaria, which oppress the poor, which crush the needy, which say to their masters, Bring, and let us drink.

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<sup>2</sup> See the notes in support of reading these two phrases with the AV as appositional, not a single construct chain as in most modern translations

## 2-4, The Judgment

**2 Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and strong one,**--Isaiah does not name either Egypt or Assyria in this section until ch. 30, but they are clearly in his mind. The reference is to Assyria, but because it belongs to the Lord and is completely under his control, it need not be named. Recall 10:5, 15,

5 O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. 15 Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? *or* shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake *itself* against them that lift it up, *or* as if the staff should lift up *itself*, *as if it were* no wood.

Isaiah gives three images of the impending destruction.

**which as a tempest of hail and a destroying storm, as a flood of mighty waters overflowing, shall cast down to the earth with the hand.**--First, the Assyrian invasion is depicted under the simile of a meteorological disaster. Recall 8:7-8, with its image of Assyria as an overflowing river:

Isa 8:7-8 Now therefore, behold, the Lord bringeth up upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, *even* the king of Assyria, and all his glory: and he shall come up over all his channels, and go over all his banks: 8 And he shall pass through Judah; he shall overflow and go over, he shall reach *even* to the neck; and the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel.

Interestingly, in his annals describing one of his campaigns in Syria, Tiglath-Pileser III writes,<sup>3</sup>

592 towns ... of the 16 districts of the country of Damascus I destroyed, making them look like hills of ruined cities over which the flood had swept.

The lush valley will be buried in mud and debris.

**3 The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under feet:**--Second, he compares the invader to a rioting mob trampling the overrated leaders. There may be a reminiscence here of Samaria's earlier history, when a member of the court who doubted the prophet's word about the raising of the Syrian siege was trampled as the people rushed to get food from the enemy camp (2 Ki 7:17).

**4 And the glorious beauty, which is on the head of the fat valley, shall be a fading flower, and as the hasty fruit before the summer; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in his hand he eateth it up.**--The third image is of a ripe piece of fruit, a first-ripe fig that appears as soon as the flower has fallen, before the main harvest is ready. The hungry farmer snatches it for a snack as he labors for the full harvest. (By describing the fall of Samaria as "the hasty fruit before the summer," he anticipates the subsequent disaster threatening Jerusalem.)

## 5-6, The Lord our Refuge

**5 In that day shall the LORD of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of his people,**--As so often in God's judgments, he preserves a remnant: Noah from the flood, Lot from Sodom, Rahab from Jericho, the sons of Korah after the rebellion in the wilderness. So,

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<sup>3</sup> ANET p. 283.

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after the fall of Samaria, there remained not only some citizens of the northern kingdom, but the kingdom of Judah.

This remnant can no longer focus on the prominent citizens of Samaria as their beautiful crown. When that substitute is removed, they should recognize the Lord himself. We are not speaking here of a crown that the Lord wears, but of him as a crown to his people. The use of the expression here confirms our decision that in v. 1 it referred to people, not to the city. Jeremiah may have this verse in mind a hundred years later, when he writes,

Jer 9:23-24 Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty *man* glory in his might, let not the rich *man* glory in his riches: 24 But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I *am* the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these *things* I delight, saith the LORD.

**6 And for a spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment, and for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate.**--Indeed, there will be prominent citizens, providing judgment for internal stability and strength for external security. But their capability comes from the Lord. He is the one whom the people should treasure—not the vessels of clay through whom he works.

### 7-8, Their Offense

The Lord is the source of judgment and strength for those who direct the state—but they have rendered themselves incapable of discharging that duty.

**7 But they also**—Tragically, the remnant falls into the same errors as the Northern Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

**have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way;**--“The drunkards of Ephraim” are joined by the drunkards of Judah.

**the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment.**--People disagree over whether the Bible prohibits alcohol absolutely, or whether it only prohibits drunkenness. These discussions often overlook the question of *who* is partaking. For example, God forbade the priests to partake of intoxicants at all, when they were serving him:

Lev 10:8-11 And the LORD spake unto Aaron, saying, 9 Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: *it shall be* a statute for ever throughout your generations: 10 And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean; 11 And that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses.

This regulation requires, not temperate use, but complete abstinence. It also sets forth a purpose: priests had to be able to distinguish clean from unclean, and to teach the Lord's statutes. They must not indulge in anything that would compromise their ability to render objective judgment.

Similarly, Prov 31:4 tells kings to avoid intoxicants, for the same reason:

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<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel records the fulfillment of this prophecy in his parable of the two sisters, Ezek 23. Judah did not learn from Israel's tragic example.

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Pro 31:4-5 *It is* not for kings, O Lemuel, *it is* not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: 5 Lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted.

I don't know of a parallel passage for prophets, but the principle established for two of the three anointed offices would seem applicable there as well.

Now Isaiah shows that the priesthood has abandoned this “statute . . . throughout your generations,” and as a result, is unable to give clear judgment. He associates “the prophet” with them. Those who ought to be clear-minded in guiding the people have fallen into carnal pleasures that destroy their understanding.

Those who entertain the casual use of intoxicants should consider these texts very seriously. If our responsibility, at work or in the family, requires us to make judgments, to distinguish holy from unholy and clean from unclean, to remember, apply, and teach God's law, these texts offer an excellent biblical reason to abstain, and a strong caution against partaking, even in “moderation.” Alcohol may not be sinful. It certainly is unwise.

**8 For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean.**--He paints a graphic picture of their debauchery.

### 9-13, *The Judgment*

NIV and ESV put vv. 9-10 in quotes, as though they were spoken by the drunken rulers in mockery of Isaiah. There is no such indication in Hebrew. The simplest reading is to understand “he” as the Lord, not Isaiah.<sup>5</sup> The argument follows naturally from the previous verses.

- In v. 6 we learned that the Lord seeks to provide judgment and strength to civic leaders.
- But vv. 7-8 show that they have rendered themselves incompetent through drunkenness.
- Now Isaiah asks, “Who is left to receive this teaching?”

**9 Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts.**--It may be clearer to understand the second half of the verse as continuing the question: “Whom shall he teach? Shall he teach the toddlers?” The argument continues to echo ch. 3, first in the judgment on prominent people, and now in the warning,

Isa 3:4 I will give children *to be* their princes, and babes shall rule over them.

**10 For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little:**--The words appear to be chosen as much for their sound as for their meaning:

כִּי צוֹ לְצוֹ צוֹ לְצוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ זְעִיר שָׁם זְעִיר שָׁם

The words in this verse, though short, are of uncertain meaning.

- The word “precept” צוֹ appears only here and in Hos 5:11, where its meaning is uncertain. It might be a shortened form of the word “commandment” מצוה, but it might also be homophonous with שוא *shaw* “worthlessness,” perhaps in the sense of “filth.”

<sup>5</sup> Methodologically, as a correlate to Occam's razor, we should prefer the simplest interpretation of a passage that makes sense in the context.

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- “Line” קו refers to a builder's plumbline, not a line of teaching. If we take צו to mean commandment, then the line might be metaphorical for a guiding principle.

On the whole, it's preferable to understand the line as gibberish, in imitation of a toddler's immature and often incomprehensible language. The Lord is working out the consequences of the question in v. 9. “Who is left to be taught? The toddlers? Then I will have to communicate with them in baby talk.”

**11 For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people.**--He will do this by means of foreign languages. Cf. 33:19, where a similar term (“stammering tongue”) describes the language of the “fierce people” that they will no longer hear during the Messianic kingdom. The nation would not heed his clear instruction in their own language through Moses and the prophets. Therefore he will speak to them in foreign languages, that will sound to them like gibberish. They will be like little children, learning to talk all over again.

The immediate reference is to the Mesopotamian invaders (first the Assyrians, then the Babylonians). But the NT assigns it a more remote meaning as well, as we shall see.

vv. 12-13 set forth the historical *cause* of this demeaning instruction, and its *purpose*, respectively. (The cause is what happened in the past that led to this course of action; the purpose is the future result that the Lord intends.)

**12 To whom he said, This is the rest מנוחה wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing:**--First, consider the *cause* of this judgment. We have already heard the Lord's offers of rest to his people through Isaiah.

- 11:10 promised of the coming Messiah, “his rest מנוחתו shall be glorious”
- 14:1-7 use the verb נוח three times (1 “**set them** in their own land,” 3 “**give thee rest**,” 7 “the whole earth **is at rest**”) to describe the nation's future blessing.

The Messianic rest is the culmination of a line of promise that goes back to the exodus.<sup>6</sup> Its main elements are summarized in Moses' farewell to Israel at the plains of Moab (Deut 12:10),

10 But *when* ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and *when* he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety

The elements of this rest were to be Israel, in the land, at peace from their enemies.

Israel did enjoy this rest, intermittently: under Joshua and his elders, four of the twelve judges, and four of the twenty-three kings of Israel. But the very fact that it had to be mentioned when it occurred, indicated that it was not continuous. Under the most generous assumptions, of the 700 years between the conquest and Isaiah, they had about 450 years of rest, and probably much less.

**yet they would not hear.**--“Would” here is not the future tense helping verb, but a statement of volition: “they were not willing to hear.” Why was Israel's rest intermittent? The reason is summed up in Ps 95:7-11: they hardened their hearts against the Lord, thus drawing his chastisement.

- The Psalm recalls their rebellion at the report of the spies in Num 14.

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<sup>6</sup> See notes for more detail.

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- It itself is written much later, bearing witness to their ongoing rebellion during the monarchy.
- The Lord Jesus, after presenting his credentials as the Messiah in Matt 5-11, invites the nation to come to him and receive rest (11:28). He offers himself as the fulfillment of the prophetic offer of rest. Their response was to crucify him, a final rejection of God's offered rest.

**13 But [and] the word of the LORD was [will be] unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little;**--The copula is simply “and,” and is probably not adversative. If anything, it has the sense, “and so.” In addition, the verb is better understood as future. Isaiah is turning from the past *cause* of the gibberish to its future *purpose*. Because the people have rejected the Lord's offer of rest, he will treat them as little children, speaking to them in languages that they cannot understand. He returns here to the gibberish of v. 10,

צוּ לְצֹ צוּ לְצֹ קוּ לְקוּ קוּ לְקוּ זְעִיר שָׁם זְעִיר שָׁם

**that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.**--Now we hear the fearful *purpose* of this treatment. It is not designed to bring them to repentance, but to confirm them in their condemned condition. Recall Isaiah's charter in ch. 6,

Isa 6:9-10 And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. 10 Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.

When the nation's leaders are no longer the channels for God's wisdom and strength, when the nation has rejected the rest that God offers it, he will speak to it in the strange tongues of foreigners. This treatment is not designed to make it easier for them to learn, but is a form of judgment that confirms them in their rebellious condition.

The four verbs at the end of this verse are echoed from 8:15, which described the effect of the Lord as a stumbling stone:

Isa 8:13-15 Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and *let him be* your fear, and *let him be* your dread. 14 And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 15 And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken.

Here, as there, they have a choice: turn to him as sanctuary, or stumble over him. Receive his offer of rest, or be destroyed. We must not miss the underlying principle here. Married men know that their wives need to be listened to. Nothing offends a wife more than thinking that her husband isn't paying attention to her. God is the same way. He speaks to us through his word, and he is very angry if we do not pay attention to him.

In 1 Cor 14:20-25, Paul cites this passage to explain the Pentecostal gift of languages. In a separate study we review that phenomenon, his explanation, and the implications for modern claims about tongues. There is a profound parallel between the historical settings of Isa 28 and the NT.

- In Isa 28, the Gentile kingdoms were about to supplant Israel as a political power. Under David and Solomon, Israel had become the dominant power in the known world. Now Gentile languages would replace Hebrew as the language of civil authority.

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- In the NT, Gentile believers supplant Israel as God's spiritual people. Israel had been the people of God, through whom God made himself known to the world. Now the church, made up of all nations without distinction, becomes the people of God, and Gentile languages replace Hebrew as the language of revelation.

### 14-22, Coming Judgment on Jerusalem

In vv. 1-13, Isaiah focused on “the residue of his people” (v. 5), those who remained after the Assyrian invasion, which would include not only Judah but also remnants of the northern kingdom. Now he focuses specifically on Jerusalem. We see the same three themes that appeared in 1-13:

- the people's offense (misplaced confidence)
- the judgment that he is about to bring
- the Lord as the correct object of confidence

This time, the reference to the Lord comes between the other two.

### 14-15, *Their Offense*

**14 Wherefore hear the word of the LORD, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem.**--Vv. 1-13 focused on the prominent citizens of Ephraim, who were the crown of the society (v. 1), but dissipated their judgment in alcohol (7-8). With Jerusalem, the prominent men again come into focus. This time the distinguishing sin is their scorn.

Scorn is a popular tactic in debate. Instead of engaging the issue rationally, the scorner laughs at it, and effectively removes it from consideration.

Think of Lloyd Bentsen's put-down of Dan Quayle in the 1988 vice-presidential debate. Quayle was responding to a question of his experience by comparing the length of his Senate service to that of Jack Kennedy. Bentsen did not engage this substantive claim. Instead, he replied, “Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy, I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy.” The audience erupted in laughter, and the substantive point was forgotten.

How often do we hear unbelievers reject the claims of God, not because of a rational analysis, but by making them a joke. They refuse even to consider the things of God seriously. Mockery, like alcohol, blunts the mind's ability to weigh issues clearly. Thus the Scriptures warn against a flippant attitude:

Pro 26:18-19 As a mad *man* who casteth firebrands, arrows, and death, 19 So *is* the man *that* deceiveth his neighbour, and saith, Am not I in sport?

Ecc 10:1 Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: *so doth* a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom *and* honour.

Paul condemns “foolish talking” and “jesting” (Eph 5:4)

As often, Isaiah appears to be drawing on Proverbs, which anticipates use of the phrase “scornful men”:

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Pro 29:8 Scornful men bring a city into a snare: but wise *men* turn away wrath.

**15 Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell [Sheol, the place of the dead] are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves:--**

They recognize the approach of “the overflowing scourge.” This language echoes v. 2, and the earlier description of Assyria (8:7-8) as an overflowing river.

They believe they have made preparation for this impending disaster. They have made a “covenant,” an “agreement,” that will provide them with a “refuge” and a place to “hide ourselves.” But what is this refuge?

It's highly unlikely that they would actually boast of making a covenant with death and an agreement with Sheol. Such a boast would be an admission of despair. Probably, Isaiah is mocking their boast. They're saying, “We have everything taken care of. We've made a covenant and an agreement that will protect us.” What is this agreement?

As this section continues, we learn that Jerusalem was toying with the idea of an alliance with Egypt as a source of security:

Isa 30:1-3, 7 Woe to the rebellious children, saith the LORD, that take counsel, but not of me; and that cover with a covering, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin: 2 That walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt! 3 Therefore shall the strength of Pharaoh be your shame, and the trust in the shadow of Egypt *your* confusion. ... 7 For the Egyptians shall help in vain, and to no purpose: therefore have I cried concerning this, Their strength *is* to sit still.

Isa 31:1, 3 Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because *they are* many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the LORD! ... 3 Now the Egyptians *are* men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit. When the LORD shall stretch out his hand, both he that helpeth shall fall, and he that is holpen shall fall down, and they all shall fail together.

Their literal claim would be something like this:

We have made a covenant with Pharaoh, and with Egypt are we at agreement. Their promises are our refuge and our hiding place.

Isaiah replies, “Yes, you have made a covenant—with death and hell. All the diplomatic promises in which you are trusting are lies and falsehood.”

### **16-17a, The Lord our Refuge**

**16 Therefore**—As in the first half of the chapter, the Lord turns their attention from a false source of confidence to a true one. There, he warned Ephraim to trust in him, rather than their drunken leaders. Here, he warns Jerusalem not to trust in Egypt, but in a refuge constructed by the Lord himself.

**thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone,--**The first half of this

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chapter ended with an echo of 8:15. There, the stumbling, falling, breaking, snaring, and taking were described under the image of the Lord as a stumbling stone and rock of offense (8:14). But 8:14 also suggested an alternative outcome to those who received the Lord as their sanctuary. Here, Isaiah builds on that alternative, continuing to use the imagery of a stone. The stumbling stone of 8:14 is also the foundation upon which the sanctuary rests.

The NT (Rom 9:33; 1 Pet 2:7-8) makes it clear that this stone is the Messiah. See the notes on Isa 8:14 for a detailed discussion of how these passages integrate Isa 8:14; 28:16; and Ps 118:22. The Messiah is both a stumbling stone and a foundation stone, depending on how people receive him.

1Co 1:23-24 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; 24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

In 8:14 the Lord is himself the stone of stumbling, but here he appoints someone else as the foundation stone. In assigning both references to the Messiah, the NT asserts the essential unity of the sender and the one sent, of the Father and the Son. As true God, the Messiah is the stone of stumbling, bringing all who reject him under judgment. As our kinsman redeemer, he is the foundation stone, sent by the Father to give us rest.

Our text gives three characteristics of this stone, and then tells us how we should respond to such a foundation.

**a tried stone**,--The stone is tried, tested, proven. One does not use chalk or soft sandstone as the foundation of a building: it would crumble under the weight of the structure. Our Savior (Heb 4:15)

was in all points tempted like as *we are*, yet without sin.

He is tested and approved, and it is on this ground that the author to the Hebrews goes on to exhort us (4:16),

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

**a precious corner stone**,--Something is precious because it is rare, and the word often has that connotation. The Messiah is not only proven, but also unique. Most stones have only one finished face. They can go anywhere in the wall, but they cannot serve as the cornerstone. Only the cornerstone has two finished faces. By God's grace, many of his saints have been tested and proven. Job could say,

Job 23:10 he knoweth the way that I take: *when* he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.

Tested saints are the "lively stones" to which Peter refers (1 Pet 2:5), built into the temple of God. But they cannot serve as the foundation. The corner stone is rare and unique, the one who is both God and man.

**a sure foundation**:--Such a stone, proven and unique, is completely reliable. As a foundation for our faith, it will not let us down.

**he that believeth shall not make haste**.--When we understand the firm foundation that the Lord has provided for us in the Messiah, we will no longer feel a need to run hither and yon in anxiety and confusion. We will not run down to Egypt to seek human alliances. God has promised us rest, and we

will enjoy that rest.

**17 Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet:**--As in the first exhortation to trust in the Lord (vv. 5-6), judgment plays a role.

The Hebrew construction “to lay X to Y” means “to make X into Y” (HALOT 18e). The Lord, having described himself as the mason who lays the foundation stone, goes on to describe how he will construct the building. A mason uses a plumb line, a string with a weight on the end, to keep the wall vertical. The Lord will use judgment as his line, and righteousness as the weight that holds it straight. God's judgment is constructive as well as destructive. As he builds us into his temple, he works with us until our lives are aligned with his righteousness. The other side of this promise is that if we see an edifice that does not align with the line and plummet of God's word, we should recognize it as a false refuge, a hiding place that will collapse when the storm comes upon it.

### **17b-22, The Judgment**

The second section of the chapter began by describing the false refuge that the leaders of Jerusalem were constructing, then turned to the true refuge, the promised Messiah. Now he returns to consider the destiny of the false refuge.

**and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place. 18 And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand;**--The “hail” and “waters” recall the judgment on the prominent citizens of Ephraim in v. 2. The northern kingdom could not protect itself against God's rod, and neither can the south.

**when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.**--The first half of this sentence comes from their boast in v. 15, that the “overflowing scourge” would not come near them. In fact, it will come very near, so near that it will tread them down (recalling again the judgment on the prominent people of Ephraim, v. 3).

**19 From the time that [whenever] it goeth forth it shall take you: for morning by morning shall it pass over, by day and by night:**--The judgment will not be a single stroke, but a repeated chastisement.

**and it shall be a vexation only to understand the report.**--Just hearing a description of what will come to pass will bring terror.

**20 For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it.**--This verse is probably a proverb describing an inadequate solution to a problem. If Egypt were a bed, it would offer neither rest nor warmth.

**21 For the LORD shall rise up as in mount Perazim, he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon,**--The reference is probably to the twofold defeat of the Philistines recorded in 1 Chr 14:9-16 (cf. Baalperizim in v. 11, and Gibeon in v. 16).<sup>7</sup> Under David, a man after God's own heart, it was

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<sup>7</sup> The parallel in 2 Sam 5:25 mentions Geba instead of Gibeon. The two names are very close linguistically, and probably are alternate forms of the same name; the LXX has Γαβαων in both places. At the time Isaiah wrote, neither of these books would have existed in their present form, and there is no problem in assuming that he is reflecting the tradition preserved in 1 Chr.

## Isaiah 28, Beginning of the Woes

Israel's enemies who experienced repeated defeat. Now, under their proud and godless rulers, Israel falls under the repeated strokes (as would the Philistines, 14:29-31; 20:1).

**that he may do his work, his strange work; and bring to pass his act, his strange act.**--It is counter-intuitive that God would bring judgment upon his chosen people, that he would allow them to suffer the same fate as the Philistines before the Assyrian scourge.

**22 Now therefore be ye not mockers, lest your bands be made strong:**--This section has been addressed to the “scornful men” who rule Jerusalem. Isaiah urges them to turn from their mockery (the verb and adjective being derived from the same root). Otherwise, their refusal to take God's warnings seriously will lock them into their bondage.

**for I have heard from the Lord GOD of hosts a consumption, even determined upon the whole earth.**--The language is repeated from the warning of the Assyrian invasion in 10:23.

“a consumption, even determined” reminds them that the coming judgment is not an accident, but something that God has decreed and that is therefore inescapable.

“All the earth” extends the scope beyond the prominent men of Ephraim (vv. 1-13) or the scornful rulers of Jerusalem (14-22). Now, at the end, he discloses that this judgment will impact all the earth. As we have seen so many times, the ancient judgments of Assyria and Babylon are anticipations of the great Day of the Lord yet to come.

## 23-29, Parable of God's Discretion

To illustrate how the coming “consumption” is “determined” by providence, Isaiah presents a parable.

**23 Give ye ear, and hear my voice; hearken, and hear my speech.**--Isaiah calls his hearers' attention to an agricultural parable. The farmer needs discretion in two phases of the process, sowing (24-25) and threshing (27-28). In both cases this discretion comes from the Lord (26, 29).

### 24-26, *Plowing and Sowing*

Isaiah points out two kinds of distinction in preparing the crop.

**24 Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? doth he open and break the clods of his ground? 25 When he hath made plain the face thereof,**--Preparation of the earth requires plowing, opening the ground, breaking up the clods, and making the face plain, different processes that must be done in the proper order.

**doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place?**--Note the different verbs, reflecting a difference in the appropriate means for planting each kind of crop.

**26 For his God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him.**--Where does the farmer learn these vital distinctions? It is God who teaches him. The implication is that God is as discrete and wise in his own dealings.

## **27-29, Threshing**

**27 For the fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument, neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod.**

**28 Bread *corn* is bruised; because he will not ever be threshing it, nor break *it with* the wheel of his cart, nor bruise it *with* his horsemen.**--Different kinds of grain require different mechanisms to separate the edible kernel from the husk. One cannot use the same method with every crop.

**29 This also cometh forth from the LORD of hosts, *which* is wonderful in counsel, *and* excellent in working.**--Now the implication from v. 26 is made explicit. The Lord's own counsel is wonderful, his own work is excellent.

The implication of these examples appears to be that the Lord's judgment of his people, though harsh, is not unthinking or arbitrary, but based on deep discretion as to what is needed to accomplish his ends.

## **Notes**

### ***What is the Crown in vv. 1, 3?***

Most translations and commentators take the crown as something worn by the drunkards: “the crown of pride of the drunkards of Ephraim.” But there are strong arguments for preferring the AV's rendering, which places “crown of pride” in apposition with “drunkards of Ephraim”:

- In both v. 1 and v. 3, the phrase is divided by a disjunctive accent, making the interpretation as a continuous construct chain difficult.
- In v. 5, the Lord is presented as the true crown, suggesting that the crown is an idiom for a prominent person throughout.
- Elsewhere, a treasured person is called a “crown” עטרת:

Pro 17:6 Children's children *are* the crown of old men; and the glory of children *are* their fathers.

Pro 12:4 A virtuous woman *is* a crown to her husband:

### ***Rhetorical Structure of vv. 9-13***

Since Lowth, vv. 9-10 have been taken as the mocking of the drunken priests and prophets against Isaiah: “Whom does he think he's teaching, with his simplistic lessons?” Alexander tries mightily to defend this interpretation against the lack of any mark in the text for such a change in perspective, but at the end of the day I find his arguments unpersuasive. v. 9 makes just as good sense if we understand Isaiah to be saying, “With the official leaders of the people rendered incompetent through alcohol, who is left for the Lord to instruct?” v. 6 set forth his role as providing judgment and strength to civil rulers, but those rulers have rendered themselves incompetent. Now where will he turn? To the babies?

### ***The Offer of Rest (28:12)***

The Messianic rest is the culmination of a line of promise that goes back to the exodus.

When Moses interceded with the Lord for Israel after the episode of the golden calf, the Lord promised, “My presence shall go *with thee*, and I will give thee rest” (Ex 33:14).

In his farewell address at the plains of Moab, Moses promised the nation, “9 For ye are not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance, which the LORD your God giveth you. 10 But *when* ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and *when* he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety; 11 Then there shall be a place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there” (Deut 12:9-11). The elements of this rest were to be Israel, in the land, at peace from their enemies.

There are some periods in which Israel did enjoy this rest.

- It describes the results of the conquest achieved by Joshua (Jos 21:43-44 And the LORD gave unto Israel all the land which he sware to give unto their fathers; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein. 44 And the LORD gave them rest round about”; 22:4; 23:1 “the LORD had given rest unto Israel from all their enemies round about”).
- The term describes the periods of victory under the judges (“the land had rest xx years,” Judg 3:11 (Othniel), 30 (Ehud); 5:31 (Deborah); cf. 8:28 (Gideon)).
- It also describes periods of rest under some of the kings: David (2 Sam 7:1), Solomon (1 Kings 8:56), Asa (2 Chr 14:6-7; 15:15), and Jehoshaphat (2 Chr 20:30).

In all, if we assign 100 years to the period of rest achieved by Joshua and maintained by the elders that followed him (Jud 2) and assume that the entire reigns of these kings were peaceful (which is an exaggeration), we get 446 years of rest, surely an over-estimate. The invasion was about 1400 BC, so by the time of Isaiah (700), there were 450 years of non-rest. The people were far from consistent in enjoying what God intended for them. Thus Isaiah looks forward to the achievement of this rest in the coming Day of the Lord.

Notably, the Lord Jesus, after presenting his credentials as the Messiah in Matt 5-11, invites the nation to come to him and receive rest (11:28).