

## Rel A 304 Reading Questions for Tuesday, October 17

### Isaiah 28–35

These chapters of Isaiah consist largely of pronouncements of woe leading up to the Assyrian invasion of Judah. The word “woe” (Hebrew *hōy*) appears at 28:1, 29:1, 29:15, 30:1, 31:1, and 33:1, creating a motif that unifies the different prophecies placed in this section. As always, you should also keep your eye on how these prophecies can have additional applications beyond Isaiah’s day.



### The Northern Kingdom of Israel Reduced to a Remnant (28:1–6)

As we have seen before, Isaiah usually speaks about his own country, Judah, but sometimes he also addresses the northern kingdom, Israel. If the destruction of Israel referred to in this prophecy is the one that occurred in Isaiah’s lifetime, then the “mighty and strong one” would most likely be Tiglath-pileser III.

1. Although the northern kingdom of Israel will fall and its inhabitants will be scattered, Isaiah holds out some hope for a remnant. (The KJV usually translates *she'ār* as “remnant” but here it renders it as “residue”). The wicked majority of Israel had worn a “crown of pride” and their “glorious beauty” (literally, “the glory of their beauty”) was about to fade. The remnant, by contrast, will wear a “crown of glory” and a “diadem of beauty” that will endure, because who/what will be their crown? What do you think this poetic metaphor would mean in practical terms?

### Judah’s Leadership Is Committing Similar Crimes (28:7–22)

Isaiah switches to addressing the southern kingdom of Judah at least by v. 14, but it's hard to know exactly when he makes the switch. I'm following the interpretation that the "they" in v. 7 refers to the leaders of Judah, who are committing similar crimes as those committed by their cousins to the north ("they *also* have erred through wine ..."). The theme of drunkenness that began in v. 1 ("the drunkards of Ephraim") is now developed further. Isaiah's accusations of excessive drinking may have a literal application to their overindulgence of worldly pleasures, but it's clear he's also using drunkenness as a metaphor for spiritual intoxication: "they err in vision, they stumble in judgment." Amidst this physical and/or spiritual drunkenness, Isaiah pictures a disgusting room covered in vomit and human waste. Everything that comes from these leaders is filthy.

Verses 9–13 are famously difficult to interpret, and several approaches are possible. One approach is to see Isaiah speaking throughout. In v. 9 Isaiah would be asking rhetorically whom he can teach since these leaders are so corrupt, finding that only the very young will be receptive and that they must be taught a little at a time. Another approach is to see vv. 9–10 as a quotation from the drunk leaders, who would be mocking Isaiah's teachings. Isaiah would then respond in vv. 11–13 by throwing their words back at them in condemnation.

The most difficult interpretive question is how to translate the part in v. 10 and v. 13 that the KJV renders as "precept ... upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line." The Hebrew sentence appears to be deliberately constructed as a series of monosyllabic sounds, which you can hear if you read it out loud: *ṣaw lāṣāw, ṣaw lāṣāw; qaw lāqāw, qaw lāqāw*, where *lā* means "to" or "upon." The problem is *ṣaw* and *qaw* aren't real Hebrew words as far as we know. There are two basic approaches to translating this line. One is to use the KJV's "precept upon precept, line upon line" or something similar, an approach that is based on finding Hebrew words related to the same verbal roots reflected in *ṣaw* and *qaw*. The second approach is to say that the line is simply intended to convey gibberish, representing either what the babies in v. 9 would say or what the drunkards represent Isaiah to be saying.

If the drunkards are indeed mocking Isaiah by presenting his teachings as gibberish, Isaiah responds by taking what they said and turning it back on them. You think I don't make sense? Well, God will teach you a lesson using a foreign people who speak a language you don't understand (v. 11). [Latter-day Saint scholar Terry Ball](#) sees v. 13 as an example of *entrapment rhetoric*, a rhetorical device where someone's own words end up being used against them. In this case, the drunkards in v. 10 represent Isaiah's warnings as gibberish, baby-talk, but then in v. 13 Isaiah repeats "*ṣaw lāṣāw, ṣaw lāṣāw; qaw lāqāw, qaw lāqāw*" but changes the tone and context so that the drunkards' words now condemn them. In this repetition, Isaiah uses word play to invoke the root meanings of the drunkards' nonsense sounds, creating the meaning of "precept" and "(measuring) line" as Isaiah declares how Jehovah will teach these wicked leaders a lesson.

In the Class Translation, I have tried to make an English rendering that follows Dr. Ball's argument. Thus the drunkards' "*yada-yada*" turns into "*preceptada*" (so that we can get English "precept" in a rhyme with "yada") and the drunkards' "*blah-blah*" turns into "*bline*" (so that we

can get English “line” in a rhyme with “blah”). My rendering is admittedly inelegant, but it at least tries to replicate the Hebrew wordplay, which I have not seen any other translation attempt.

2. Isaiah 28 includes a line that is famously difficult: “*ṣaw lāṣāw, ṣaw lāṣāw; qaw lāqāw, qaw lāqāw.*” There are two basic approaches to translating this line. The KJV takes the first approach, which is to translate “precept upon precept, line upon line.” What is the second approach?

### **A Parable Defending God’s Measured Use of Violence (28:23–29)**

This interesting section compares Jehovah’s actions to those of a plowman or farmer. His actions may sometimes seem harsh, but they are necessary. Unless you break open the soil, you will never be able to sow seed. Unless you are willing to thresh, pound, and mash grain, you will never be able to make bread. But even when He must use a firm hand, God does it in a very careful, calculated way, never too long and never with inappropriate force.

### **The Foreigners Sieging Jerusalem Will Suddenly Fail (29:1–8)**

Isaiah 29 opens by addressing “Ariel,” a poetic term for Jerusalem. Jehovah says He will “camp against thee” and “lay siege against thee” and “raise forts against thee,” implying that Jehovah will somehow be behind a siege of the city. Given all the references to the Assyrian invasion of Judah that surround this chapter, the Assyrians are probably intended here, even if they are not named. (Of course, Jerusalem has been sieged many times, so this prophecy surely could have other fulfillments as well.)

3. Isaiah 29 opens with Jehovah addressing “Ariel.” What/whom does “Ariel” refer to?

The KJV of Isaiah 29:4 refers to “one that hath a familiar spirit.” This entire phrase translates one small Hebrew word, *’ôb*, which the Israelites used to refer both to a ghost and to a necromancer/medium who, it was thought, could summon a ghost. This cultural understanding can be seen in a story from 1 Samuel 28:7–20. King Saul was getting invaded by the Philistines and was desperate for divine guidance, which he used to get from the prophet Samuel before Samuel had died.

Then said Saul unto his servants, “Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit [ *’ôb* ], that I may go to her, and inquire of her.” And his servants said to him, “Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit [ *’ôb* ] at En-dor.”

And Saul disguised himself, and put on other raiment, and he went, and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night: and he said, “I pray thee, divine unto me by the familiar spirit [’*ôb*], and bring me him up, whom I shall name unto thee.”

And the woman said unto him, “Behold, thou knowest what Saul hath done, how he hath cut off those that have familiar spirits [’*ôbôt*], and the wizards, out of the land: wherefore then layest thou a snare for my life, to cause me to die?”

And Saul sware to her by the LORD, saying, “As the LORD liveth, there shall no punishment happen to thee for this thing.”

Then said the woman, “Whom shall I bring up unto thee?”

And he said, “Bring me up Samuel.”

And when the woman saw Samuel, she cried with a loud voice: and the woman spake to Saul, saying, “Why hast thou deceived me? for thou art Saul.”

And the king said unto her, “Be not afraid: for what sawest thou?”

And the woman said unto Saul, “I saw gods ascending out of the earth.”

And he said unto her, “What form is he of?”

And she said, “An old man cometh up; and he is covered with a mantle.” And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground, and bowed himself.

And Samuel said to Saul, “Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up?”

And Saul answered, “I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams: therefore I have called thee, that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do.”

Then said Samuel, “Wherefore then dost thou ask of me, seeing the LORD is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy? And the LORD hath done to him, as he spake by me: for the LORD hath rent the kingdom out of thine hand, and given it to thy neighbour, even to David: because thou obeyedst not the voice of the LORD, nor executedst his fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore hath the LORD done this thing unto thee this day. Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with thee into the hand of the Philistines: and to morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me: the LORD also shall deliver the host of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.”

Then Saul fell straightway all along on the earth, and was sore afraid, because of the words of Samuel: and there was no strength in him; for he had eaten no bread all the day, nor all the night.

This kind of necromancy was illegal under the law of Moses and Saul the king was supposed to enforce the law, which is why he’s so secretive visiting the woman at night. She’s skeptical—imagine a drug dealer afraid a buyer might be an undercover cop—but Saul assures her he’s not there to get her caught. The woman says she can conjure up the ghost of anyone the client wants, and when Saul requests Samuel, she sees Samuel’s form, his clothes, and even enough to somehow figure out that it’s King Saul himself making the request. The back-and-forth between Samuel and Saul would not have happened directly: because the medium was the only one who

could see or hear the ghost, her job was to repeat out loud what she hears the dead person saying so that the message can be transmitted to the living person.

Did all this actually happen? People have different opinions on that. Some assume that there's no way God would actually allow a medium to really conjure a ghost, so she's either faking it or communicating with some demonic being. Others think maybe God allowed it in this case, given that everything Ghost Samuel says really does come to pass. Whatever the case, the point is that people in Israelite culture knew what an *'ôb* was and how this process was supposed to work.

Back to Isaiah. In Isaiah 29:4, when Jehovah says that the people of Jerusalem will have a voice "as" an *'ôb* in the ground, and that their "speech shall whisper out of the dust," He seems to be promising that they're going to die. In other words, the message is, "You guys are *dead*. Sooooo dead. In fact, if you wanted to say anything, you'd have to speak from the ground like an *'ôb*."

4. Isaiah 29:4 refers to "one that hath a familiar spirit." What did that mean in their culture? When Isaiah tells the inhabitants of Jerusalem, "Thy voice shall be, as of one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground, and thy speech shall whisper out of the dust," what message was he basically giving them?
5. Isaiah 29:5–8 explains that Jehovah will stop the foreign invaders ("the multitude of thy strangers") who are sieging Jerusalem. If you compare the invaders to dust or chaff, how quickly will they be blown away? Although the invaders are absolutely certain that they are about to conquer, how is their assumed victory similar to "a dream"?

### **The People Are Spiritually Insensitive (29:9–14)**

This section returns to the theme of Judah's present wickedness, picking up again the motif of being spiritually drunk from chapter 28 and adding to it an image of being spiritually asleep.

Verses 11–12 are very important, as Nephi will liken them to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. We'll look carefully at how Nephi does that later, but for now let's start by thinking about what these verses might have meant in Isaiah's context. One common approach is to see the sealed book as Isaiah's own prophecies. Earlier Isaiah said, "Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. And I will wait upon the Lord, that hideth his face from the house of Jacob, and I will look for him" (Isaiah 8:16–17). Based on these and some other passages, many scholars reconstruct a scenario in which Isaiah wrote his prophecies down, but as the people of Judah rejected him, he eventually sealed up his words and hid them, waiting for the day to come when a righteous remnant would be prepared to read, understand, and obey. In the meantime, no

one in society can get at Isaiah's written prophecies—some can't get access to them since they have been sealed (hidden), and some couldn't read them anyway.

6. Isaiah says that “the vision of all [everything]” will be in “a book that is sealed,” but that because of its seal, no one will be able to read it. How do scholars usually understand this description in Isaiah's context?

### **God Will Work to Restore Justice and Righteousness (29:15–24)**

This section continues from the previous one. Despite God's wondrous work among the people, many will continue believe He does not see their wickedness: they are like clay ignoring the sovereignty of the potter.

7. As the sealed book comes forth again, what kind of person will “hear” its words? What kind of person shall “see”? Do you think this is literal, metaphorical, or both?

### **Judah Should Not Ally with Egypt against the Assyrians (30:1–7)**

This section condemns Judah for seeking a political alliance with Egypt as a solution to the threat of the Assyrians.

8. What does God promise Judah will be the result if they ally themselves with Egypt?

### **Rejecting the Prophetic Word Will Lead to Destruction (30:8–17)**

This section highlights that God is trying to warn His people through the voice of the prophets and seers, but the people do not like hearing how things really are.

9. Isaiah's “rebellious people” do not want to “hear the law of the LORD.” When prophets try to tell them what is right, their response is to say, “Prophesy not unto us right things.” What kind of things do they want instead? What do you think they mean by that?

### **Jehovah Will Heal the Survivors (30:18–26)**

This section follows up in the preceding one, promising hope and healing to those who survive the destruction.

### **Jehovah's Fiery Judgment on Assyria (30:27–33)**

Another description of how Jehovah will take down Assyria. You can imagine that for the people being killed and enslaved by them, these descriptions offered great comfort and hope.

### **God, Not Egypt, Will Save Judah from Assyria (31:1–9)**

This section returns to the subject of Judah's ill-advised treaty with Egypt. As with Judah's other physical preparations for the Assyrian invasion, the big problem is that they trust in *those* things to save them, "but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel."

10. Isaiah affirms that "the Assyrian [will] fall," but it won't be because of Egypt's help or any of the other physical preparations Judah is trusting in. In fact, the sword that fells the Assyrians won't be wielded by a "man" at all. Since you know the full story, explain what Isaiah means by this. (If you need help, go back and review 2 Kings 19:35–36.)

### **A Kingdom of Justice and Righteousness (32:1–8)**

This section describes a future kingdom that rules in "righteousness" and "judgment" (=justice). Because this description immediately follows the prediction of the Assyrians' defeat, the initial application of this prophecy probably deals with the righteous remnant that survives the Assyrian attack under Hezekiah's rule. We have already seen similar descriptions of "his government" ruling "with judgment and with justice" (=justice and righteousness, Isaiah 9:7).

### **Devastation to Precede Justice and Righteousness (32:9–20)**

As with many of Isaiah's descriptions that jump back and forth between different chronological points, this section jumps back in time to describe the bad conditions that precede the just and righteous kingdom described in the preceding section. Isaiah's address, specifically to the women in society, parallels what we saw in Isaiah 3:16–4:1.

### **Prayers for, Conditions of, and Promises of Deliverance (33:1–24)**

This chapter rounds out many of the messages in the preceding ones. The key idea is deliverance—why do you need it, how do you get it.

11. The prophet Joseph Smith [taught](#) that the righteous who have died "shall rise again to dwell in everlasting burnings in immortal glory, not to sorrow, suffer, or die any more,

but they shall be heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.” Joseph was drawing on Isaiah 33:14 to describe these “burnings” not as flames of punishment but as the radiant splendor of the divine presence. Isaiah 33:15 describes the kinds of people who will inherit that glory. Summarize Isaiah 33:15 in your own words (you don’t have to include every little detail) and explain what you think these attributes might look like in someone’s life today.

### **Edom’s Fate Typifies the Final Destruction of the Wicked (34:1–17)**

Isaiah 34 and 35 go together. They are loosely connected to chapters 28–33 but are not as integrated (for example, the repeated “woe!” motif does not continue here). Chapter 34 uses Edom (KJV “Idumea”) to represent the wicked world, and chapter 35 uses Zion to represent the righteous, so you should compare and contrast their respective fates as you read these chapters.

### **Edom’s Fate Contrasts with the Final Restoration of Zion (35:1–10)**

12. As Zion is redeemed, the ones Jehovah ransoms “shall return,” singing joyfully as they “obtain joy and gladness.” At that day, what shall “flee away” forever? (See Isaiah 35:10.)