

Weaned from the Breast

“Now therefore, do not be mockers, lest your bonds be made strong.” Isaiah 28:22

Introduction

At a recent workers meeting I was teaching a group of pastors about how to study the Bible properly. One of these raised his hand, and when called, raised an objection to my use of Isaiah 28:9-10.

I was teaching that in these verses God is offering to teach a class of men who look to him personally for guidance, and who compare scripture with scripture.

But the pastor opined that the “drunkards of Ephraim” are the incoherent teachers in this passage and that, as a consequence, it makes a poor launching place for a lecture on how to study the Bible correctly.

This short article will address that objection directly by showing from the Bible itself the purpose and intent of the Isaiah 28-29 prophetic revelation.

And along the way, scripture will teach us important things relevant to our life today.

I will begin by making an overview of the passage of Isaiah 28-29. Then I will progress to looking at the contextual data that has a bearing on how we should understand the passage. Then we will look at the historical fulfillment of this prophecy. Finally, I will end with a synopsis of the data and with a reasonable conclusion.

An Overview

God speaks to hell-bend leaders under the figure of drunken royalty of Ephraim. He promises to overthrow these (v. 2) with His mighty One. These rich persons will be like a fading flower at the same time that God is blessing his remnant (v. 5). But even the comparatively faithful persons have been overcome with wine so that the prophets and priests err in their “vision” and “stumble in judgment.”

God explains the conditions of these (and of others) receiving his helpful teaching. Persons must be saved from relying on other teachers or from neglecting connected Bible study.

Jesus used this method and harmonized with these conditions. He taught principles upon principles. He invited the Jews to come to him for rest. But they refused.

And so, after his ascension, Jesus used the gift of tongues to impress the Jews that He was their Messiah. And even the apostles that received that gift continued to teach by comparing scripture with scripture, here a little and there a little.

But the scornful leaders refused to hear the apostles also. They are pictured as having such confidence in their acceptance with God that it could be illustrated as a contract made with hell and the grave.

To this God responds that He will send an overflowing judgment that will not respect their confident assurances. But those that trust in Jesus as a mighty foundation stone will not be ashamed.

Though God cannot seem to reach these proud men, God does succeed in teaching farmers how to care for their crops.

As for the rebellious leaders of Jerusalem, they may have the appearance of being like a lion, but when many nations surround them (as happened under Titus in AD 70) then they will pay for their hardness of heart. They have been like drunk persons in the sense being spiritually asleep (29:9).

The last book given them was Revelation, but they couldn't make any sense out of it.

But the time is coming when God will teach the poor and humble, and when those classes will "rejoice in the Holy One" of Israel.

Still, there will be a class who try to hinder those who preach against sin. They will watch such persons to catch some mistake in their talk that is really not significant, and they will use this mistake to discount the message of the reprovers.

Finally, the faithful will be surprised to see the great work God will do with their own children. "Those who have erred in mind will come to understanding. And the complainers will learn doctrine."

The Context

The Immediate Context

Some observations of this passage itself is in order. It begins with erring persons (28:1) and ends with erring persons coming to a true understanding (29:24).

It speaks of metaphorical Ephraimites being drunk (28:1, 14) and of literal leaders of Jerusalem being metaphorically drunk. (29:1, 9). These two observations explain each other.

God (singular) opposes the erring persons (plural) in 28:1-8., 11-20, using singular pronouns for Himself and plural pronouns for others. In 28:9-10, the teacher is singular "He" (not "They").

Teaching happens in 28:6 (aiding in judging); 28:11-12; 28:14; 28:16 (whoever 'believes' implies that God has been teaching something that can be believed.) 28:23. In all of these passages it is God giving instruction. Then without good reason we should not make the drunkards the teacher in 28:9.

The Wider Context

The use of the word "drunk" and its cognates (drunken, drinking, etc.) is frequently, in scripture, used as a metaphor for irrational reactions. Such metaphorical drunkenness is used to describe fearful persons, suffering persons, and deceived persons. Famously, it is used twice this way in the Three Angels Messages where Babylon confuses people with her wine and where God's wine of wrath threatens the commandment breakers.

Also, these two chapters are quoted frequently in the New Testament. And especially does Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14, connect this prophecy to the rejection of Jesus and to the gift of tongues that God gave to the church to help the unbelieving Jews.

"In the law it is written, 'With men of other languages I will speak to this people; and yet for all that, they will not hear me,' says the Lord. Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to those who believe not." 1 Corinthians 14:21-22.

This naturally implies that the previous verses are about the messages that Jesus gave to the Jews

that were not received as tongues are for unbelievers.

Also, in Isaiah God elsewhere uses national names as metaphors for the condition of his people. So in Isaiah 1:9-10 the Jews are referred to as Sodom and Gamorrah. And in Revelation the words Egypt, Jerusalem, Babylon, are all metaphorical uses of those nations to refer to the character of various people. So to call unbelieving Judah by the name of the idolatrous northern kingdom, Ephraim, is not out of character for either sphere of context.

And the three other names in these chapters (Perazim, Gibeon, Ariel) are all references to past events that parallel situations in Christ's time. (When David was anointed king, he suffered an almost immediate surprise attack by the Philistines. He asked God for counsel and followed the directions. God broke forth against the Philistines like a flood, and hence the name Perazim for that area. Then, soon after, the same armies engaged a second time at Gibeon. David asked and received different instructions. He followed them and received a stunning victory. These illustrate how Jesus followed the Father's instructions, was attacked, and yet vanquished Satan. Ariel is a reference to Judah as a metaphorical lion.)

Finally, the union of the idea of "teaching" with the ideas of breast milk is a familiar theme in scripture and is the basis of the primary argument in the latter half of Hebrews 5 regarding those who need again to learn the first principles of doctrine.

But nowhere else in scripture is it (erroniously) implied that teaching toddlers and children is an easier art than teaching adults, one that well matches the benumbed skills of drunk persons. And so the larger context points the same direction as the local context, to God teaching those who have been weaned from dependence on human teachers.

The Fulfillment in History

Jesus began his ministry as a teacher. And He trained his twelve to be teachers.

And their message was poorly received by the leaders of Israel. When Jesus said to those inclined to believe him, “the truth shall make you free,” they immediately went backwards. They said, “We were never in bondage to any man, How say you that you shall be made free?” John 8:31-33.

In that same passage He taught that while genetically they were Abraham’s descendants, spiritually they were not. And this harmonizes well with Isaiah 28 calling these same persons the drunkards of Ephraim.

In three of the four gospels (Mt 21:42-44; Mr 12:10; Lu 20:17-18) Jesus quotes Psalm 118 regarding he being the foundation rejected by the workmen. This is, of course, directly parallel to Isaiah 28 with its “sure foundation” and its “they would not hear.”

Finally, Gabriel had revealed that Jesus would confirm the covenant with the Jews for seven years. And Mark 16 (and Hebrews 2) show that the gifts of the Spirit were tools used to confirm that covenant. Tongues, in particular, were to persuade the Jews (and did persuade 3,000 of them in Acts 2). That gift being especially given as a sign to the Jews (like exorcism and raising the dead) is consequently less common since AD 34.

And the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 was the consumation that came on the Jews that rejected the message sent by various languages.

But their loss is a beacon for us. It is to all ages that these chapters speak, and it is at the end that a different Jerusalem will be surrounded before consuming fire finishes what Titus started, the punishment of those who despised the teachings of Jesus.

Conclusion

The idea of searching scriptures for truth is as old as is scripture. The idea that different writers would write the same ideas in different ways is little more than common sense to those who reject verbal inspiration. And it is manifest to anyone who does a study of how New Testament writers use the Old Testament, that (A) they use many proof texts to support their ideas, and (B) that they not infrequently quote from a succession of authors, quoting only a small phrase or sentence from each.

And this was certainly the method of Martin Luther, and after him of William Miller (who codified his "Principles of Interpretation" in a way that specifically recommends word studies and comparative studies of the various prophets.

Miller, Luther, and with them our pioneers, all used this method of studying themes and phrases and ideas through the whole body.

And so it is not surprise that the pioneers and Ellen White all use Isaiah 28:9-10 as a useful verse for showing that God wants His children to search for themselves (not depending on others) and to search methodically and thoroughly.

But the idea of depending on God alone hinges not on this useful passage. It shows so much more plainly in Jeremiah 17 and in Matthew 15 and in 1 Corinthians 1.

And so I reasonably conclude that the translators who viewed the Hebrew interpretatively as mocking a drunken teacher, were mistaken. And, by way of contrast, that the translators of the KJV and ESV did much better with the passage, though their rendering of verse 9 was equally interpretative.

Even if this wonderful text on how Jesus studied with the Jews, were to be expunged from scripture, plenty of evidence remain that limiting your study of a passage to its immediate context is a sure way to introduce your own misconceptions into the reading wherever they might naturally fit. And since the book designed for comparative study, a refusal to avail oneself of the parallels leaves

you at the mercy of your helps and commentaries.

So be careful how you mock proof texting. You might succeed only In thickening your own bands.
Isaiah 28:22