

The Sacrifice

An Interpretation of Isaiah 34

by Lynn Andrew

If more than half of the verses in a chapter seem to be paradoxical, odd, or superfluous, and if one's interpretation does not accommodate apparent hyperbole, it is time to seek another interpretation. Common interpretations of chapter 34 do not address all of the paradoxes in verses 1, 7, 11, or the oddities in verses 11, 15, 16, 17, or the seemingly superfluous verses 14-17, or the wild hyperbole of verses 3, 4, 9, 10. That totals about ten verses containing unsolved mysteries out of seventeen verses. One can skip over an enigmatic verse or two here and there, but if a major part of a chapter seems to make little sense to commentators, either by tacit admission in their omission or by overt speculation or by diverging interpretations, something is wrong.

A Condensed, Interpretive Paraphrase of Isaiah 34:

The Universal Judgment of Sin

1 Let it be known by everyone and everything everywhere: the Lord is enraged against sin; he has devoted it to destruction.

Rebels in Heaven and Earth Meet the Sacrifice

4 The host of heaven have fallen as leaves fall from a tree, and their former dwelling place, now empty, shall be rolled up like a scroll. For my sword has drunk its fill in heaven and now descends to earth. Yes, the Lord has a sword; it is sated with the blood of the sacrifice in heaven, and now the land shall drink its fill too.

The Day of Recompense

8 For the Lord has a day of vengeance to recompense hostility toward

Zion. The home of Zion's enemies shall be a land of burning pitch and sulfur—night and day its fire is not quenched, and its smoke goes up forever.

A Picture of Hell

None shall pass through it forever and ever, for the Lord will stretch over it a demarcation line. On the far side of the line will be confusion and emptiness. Former rank, nobility, and power mean nothing there. Like wild animals they settle among screech owls, demons, and dragons fallen from above. The wild goat cries to his fellow demon. Denizens of the dark are confined there without end.

The Lord Decides

16 Check your Scriptures: the Lord's purposes are sure, and his appointments come to pass in every generation. He has decreed this: the Spirit gathers every indestructible vestige of evil and throws it into the fire. Their lot is cast, and it is permanent.

The essence of true prophecy, in my view, is revelation of God himself. That is, God revealing his character, his thoughts, and his plans *through* the prophet—not only *to* the prophet or perhaps not to the prophet at all. There is no reason why the prophet needs to understand the communication before he writes it down, and there is no reason why an average reader in a foreign culture looking at a translation (made from a copy after repeated copying) might understand it better than the prophet—in my view. In other words, I give God credit not only for being able to perform such a miracle but for actually doing it. He wanted ordinary people like me to get to know him accurately through the Scriptures. Few commentators take such an idealistic view of God's purpose, and one reason for that, quite naturally, is the delight one finds in tinkering with God's word. The well-kept secret is that ultimately most of that is unnecessary because the nature of the message and the mode in which it is carried makes it quite resilient to corruption and the key to

understanding is not a stack of commentaries but the Holy Spirit. So when a commentator excludes an interpretation for the reason that Isaiah's day would have been unfamiliar with the concept, I thank him for that bit of historical orientation, but otherwise his statement has not been helpful.¹

A most interesting aspect of chapters like this is the obvious presence of major metaphor. Those who volunteer to make a career of writing books on commentary tend to be poetically challenged and shy away from serious metaphors. I suppose it goes with the scholarly environment that keeps them indoors most of the time, working at the microscopic level far below the metaphors that anyone who steps outdoors into the light of day can see at once. Well, not literally everyone; that was my rhetorical hyperbole, you understand.

At face value Isaiah 34 is about the judgment of the peoples or nations because of their hostility toward Zion. Everyone recognizes Edom as an apt type of all such nations. (Symbolically at least, Edom is the archenemy of Jacob, starting back when Esau and Jacob fought in their mother's womb). That is a step in the right direction; the poetic particular is pointing to a general. But another step in the same direction needs to be taken before the entire poem comes to life. Those concrete poetic images are pointing at sin, not sinful nations or even sinners. And at that point the most vivid image of *temple sacrifice* is met. The theme of the poem is not simply retribution for sin. It is the principle of *sacrifice* for sin. The difference is crucial because sacrifice opens the door to substitution and substitution makes possible the continuation of the human race, for without a substitutionary sacrifice the guilt of sin rests on each and every human being, and simple retribution would leave no one standing. It is "sin" that the Lord has devoted to complete destruction through Sacrifice, not literally "the nations."

It is hard to miss the language of sacrifice in the first section of chapter 34. As Oswalt notes: "... in a real sense, all sin must end in sacrifice, either of the sinner or of one in place of the sinner."

¹ See my essay entitled "Missing Keys" for a fuller exposition of this theory of inspiration.

The intent of the latter part of the chapter is more obscure. It can be taken literally (with allowance for poetic hyperbole), as a prediction that all or some portion of the earth will never again be inhabited by human beings, which would fit with amillennial eschatology. Or under a more liberal license the "forever" might be allowed to mean "until sometime later." Both interpretations attempt to smooth over rather than accept the apparent paradox.

There is another way of interpreting this that entirely solves the paradox of living creatures inhabiting Edom after it has become uninhabitable. The key is in the language used to describe the desolation. Who can miss the similarity between 34:8-10 and our Lord's words in passages such as Matthew 13:40-42 where he speaks of gathering "out of his kingdom all causes of sin" and throwing them into the fiery furnace?—the place of the damned, the "lake of fire" of Revelation, a concept foreign to Isaiah's day; but by the theory of inspiration mentioned above, this interpretation is permissible.

These interpretations of the two sections of Isaiah 34 taken together form a complete metaphor concerning the disposition of sin by sacrifice. The main points are 1) the origin of sin, though not on this earth, has been dealt with (v 4-5); 2) the sacrifice for sin utterly and completely satisfies the judgment (v 8, 16-17); and 3) there is a new, separate habitation for the indestructible vestiges of rebellion (v 9-17). Thus the earth itself is not irredeemably ruined, which is a nice outcome since it agrees with the next chapter.

This is a high vantage point from which we see a meaning that has nothing to do with any of the specific details that decorate the poetry. All of the concrete poetic details feed the metaphor, and that is all they are meant to do. The chapter makes one great, fervent statement that no one should miss: *the Sacrifice does away with all sin permanently*. Sin covered by the Lord's prescribed Sacrifice (the covenant typified by Zion) no longer rests on the sinner. All sin (typified by Edom) is hostile to Zion, and the Lord devotes it to destruction.

It is no accident that this chapter sits at the center of the writings of

Isaiah. Can there be any doubt that *Sacrifice* is central to our God who became himself our sacrifice? Do we dare complain that he maintains full discretion over it? Let us ponder the implications of the centrality of Sacrifice. We know that God is Love and he is Just. We know that he ordained sacrificial killing for sin atonement *on appointed days*. Love and Justice are foundational because you cannot derive one from the other. Neither can Sacrifice be derived from Love or Justice alone, but it is the link that enables Love and Justice to operate with sin. Justice plus Sacrifice speak of Love. Love plus Sacrifice speak of Justice. Given the background radiation of sin, Love and Justice cannot coexist in the universe without Sacrifice. Therefore Sacrifice had to be in the foundation: if Sacrifice is anywhere it is everywhere; it cannot apply to some and not to others. When sin came into the world, death came through sin by the law of sacrifice, and all would be sacrificed at the appointed hour, including the Creator himself. Those who would not be sacrificed in Christ must be sacrificed outside of Christ. God must sacrifice his entire creation. That is why it is fatal theology that denies Christ's divinity. Our Sacrifice, Jesus Christ, holds the universe together. And those of us who dwell in him are sheltered by the sacrifice through which he lives.

Yet it is a faulty moral calculation that would lead anyone to expect that in the sphere of human life there could be love and justice without sacrifice. The law applies everywhere. Only in Christ the sacrifice meets the Creator and results in redemption from sin, ending in life, not death. We are sacrificed in him and receive life instead of death in him.

Chapters 34 and 35 are a unit. If we have understood that the eternal smoke in 34:10 rises from the separate eternal abode of the spirits of those bodies whom the sword of the Lord found outside the covenant of Zion, then we should have no difficulty ascribing the picture in chapter 35 to the restoration of the lands that had been turned into wilderness during the sacrifice of the nations.

