

Isaiah – Chapters 31-32

The Lion, the Birds, and the King Who Reigns in Righteousness

Isaiah 31:1, 3, 32:1-2 – Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, and trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but they do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the LORD! ... Now the Egyptians are men and not God, and their horses are flesh and not spirit; so the LORD will stretch out His hand, and he who helps will stumble and he who is helped will fall, and all of them will come to an end together. ... Behold, a king will reign righteously and princes will rule justly. Each will be like a refuge from the wind and a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry country, like the shade of a huge rock in a parched land.

Context

Chapter 31 is the fourth woe in the block that runs from Chapter 28 through chapter 33, and chapter 32 is its answer. The pairing has the same shape as Chapter 30—the woe names the false refuge, the answer names the true one. This is still Hezekiah’s Judah in the years before 701 BC, the embassy of Chapter 30 has already gone south, and the chariots and horsemen it went to buy are the whole substance of Judah’s defense policy.

What Chapter 31 adds to the charge is its legal ground. The Law in Deuteronomy 17:16 reads, “Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, ‘You shall never again return that way.’” Hezekiah’s counselors were not merely making a poor bet; they were doing the one thing the throne of David was forbidden to do. The covenant lawsuit (*riv*) that has run since 1:2 adds a specific citation to the complaint.

The historical record after these chapters should be kept in view. In 36:6, the Rabshakeh mocks Judah for leaning on Egypt, “the staff of this crushed reed,” and in 37:9, Sennacherib hears that Tirhakah of Cush has marched out against him and answers with a second letter of blasphemy rather than a retreat. Scripture never records how the Egyptian army fared. Assyria’s own annals claim a victory over it, but Scripture gives Egypt no part in Jerusalem’s survival at all, and that silence is the commentary on 31:3. Egypt marched, Egypt was checked, and the outcome was decided by a sword not of man (31:8, 37:36).

Structure of the Chapters

Chapter 31 runs in four greater sections, and Chapter 32 in three:

- 31:1-3: **The woe and its reason.** Horses and chariots against the Holy One of Israel; Egypt is flesh and not spirit.
- 31:4-5: **The lion and the birds.** The LORD of hosts comes down to fight on Mount Zion and hovers over Jerusalem to pass over it.
- 31:6-7: **The call to return.** In that day the idols of silver and gold are thrown away.

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- 31:8-9: **Assyria's fall.** A sword not of man, a king in panic, and the fire of the LORD in Zion.
- 32:1-8: **The King and the transformed society.** A king reigns righteously; eyes are opened, and the fool is no longer called noble.
- 32:9-14: **The complacent women.** Within a year the vintage fails, and the city is forsaken until...
- 32:15-20: **The Spirit poured out and the kingdom settled.** Justice in the wilderness, peace as the work of righteousness, the city of man laid low, and sowing beside all waters.

Chapter 31 sits at 701 BC with one prophetic utterance set inside it. Chapter 32 opens in the kingdom, drops back to 701 BC, and then climbs through Pentecost to the kingdom again.

Exposition

The Woe and Its Reason (31:1-3)

31:1 – The verse is built on a contrast of verbs: rely, trust, and then look and seek. Judah has done the first two toward Egypt and neglected the second two toward the LORD. This is the only place in the two chapters where the title Holy One of Israel appears, and it appears as the One not looked to. The charge is the same as 30:1-2, the shadow of Egypt in place of the shadow of the LORD, but here it is put in the terms of Deuteronomy 17:16: the horses of Egypt, multiplied, by the house of David.

31:2 – The word “also” carries the irony. Egypt was consulted for her wisdom (19:11-12, 30:2); the LORD “also” is wise, and His wisdom has already been spoken and will not be taken back. He rises against two parties at once, the house that did evil and the help it hired, and verse 3 finishes both.

31:3 – Two pairs settle the matter: man and not God, flesh and not spirit. Judah had weighed Egypt by numbers and strength (31:1, “because they are many... because they are very strong”); the LORD weighs Egypt by category. A great many horses are still horses. The stretched-out hand is the hand of 5:25 and 9:12, the hand of the lawsuit, and under it, helper and helped go down together. This is where the silence of Chapters 36-37 belongs: Egypt is never mentioned again as a factor, because the text has already declared her flesh.

The Lion and the Birds (31:4-5)

31:4 – The picture must be read as one piece. A lion has taken his prey and stands over it; the shepherds come out shouting to drive him off, and he does not move. The prey is Zion, the LORD's own possession, and the shepherds are the nations shouting at Him to give it up. Some read the lion as the LORD against Zion, taking “on Mount Zion” as “against Mount Zion,” but the figure will not bear it: the lion is not fighting his prey, he is keeping it, and

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verse 5 continues the same thought in plainer words. The LORD comes down to fight on Zion's ground, for Zion, unmoved by the noise of Assyria. This is the same scene as 29:7-8, where the multitude of the nations that fight against Ariel vanish like a dream.

31:5 – The lion stands his ground; the birds hover over it. Four verbs pile up—protect, deliver, pass over, rescue—and the third is the one to stop on. “Pass over” is *pasach*, the verb of Exodus 12: “when I see the blood I will pass over you” (Exodus 12:13), “the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to come in” (Exodus 12:23). Outside the Exodus material, this is the one place where the verb carries that sense, and it was chosen deliberately. Jerusalem in 701 BC is Israel in Egypt on the night of the first Passover: the destroyer abroad, the city under the LORD's wing, and the deliverance carried out in a single night (37:36). Chapter 30 had already promised songs “as in the night when you keep the festival” (30:29); Chapter 31 names the festival by its own verb.

The Call to Return (31:6-7)

31:6-7 – The call is to the sons of Israel, the same sons of 1:2 who were reared and rebelled, and the defection is called deep. Then the marker: “in that day.” The marker governs. It fixes verse 7 in the Day of the LORD and the kingdom, not in Hezekiah's reform. Hezekiah did break the pillars and cut down the Asherah (2 Kings 18:4), and the near event resembles the prophecy, but the prophecy says, “every man,” and no reform in Judah's history reached every man. Verse 7 is the national turning of Israel at the Return, the same day as 2:20, when men throw their idols to the moles and the bats, and 30:22, when the overlaid images are scattered like an impure thing. The far passage sits inside the near ones; the marker, not the neighborhood, decides where it belongs.

Assyria's Fall (31:8-9)

31:8 – The text returns to the near enemy by name. The sword is twice said to be not of man, and 37:36 records the stroke: the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the Assyrian camp overnight. Judah did not draw a blade, Egypt did not arrive, and the Assyrian fell. The verse was fulfilled once, in Hezekiah's day, and that fulfillment is held firmly.

31:9 – The rock here is the Assyrian king, the one his army leaned on, and 37:37-38 records his flight to Nineveh and his death in the house of his god. The standard (*nes*) that terrifies his princes is the banner of 11:10 and 30:17, the LORD's own signal raised on the hill. The closing line reaches back to Ariel. The LORD's fire is in Zion and His furnace in Jerusalem: the altar hearth of 29:1-2 is a furnace for the enemy who camps against it. The surrogate note from 30:27-33 may be sounded once here and left: the enemy who falls before Zion by a sword not of man has the shape of the last enemy, but this verse belongs to 701 BC.

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The King and the Transformed Society (32:1-8)

32:1 – The woe of Chapter 31 gives way to a throne. This is the King of the Messianic Hope, the Branch of 11:1-5 who judges the poor with righteousness, and the setting is the kingdom. The princes who rule under Him are the kingdom's administration and are left unnamed.

32:2 – The Hebrew is singular, “a man,” and the four figures are the refuge language of the book gathered in one verse: the refuge and shade of 25:4, the shelter from storm and rain of 4:6, the water in the desert of 35:6. Chapter 30 offered “the shadow of Egypt” (30:2); chapter 32 offers the shade of a huge rock, and the Rock is a man. Judah went looking for a refuge and chose the wrong one; the right one is a Person.

32:3-4 – Every line reverses a sentence passed earlier in the book. The eyes and ears are the shut eyes and heavy ears of 6:9-10 and the stupor of 29:9-12; the stammering tongue is the stammering lips of 28:11 that were the LORD's word of judgment on a mocking people. Under the King, the judicial blindness is lifted. This is the kingdom, not the Church age; the eyes opened here are Israel's on the other side of the lawsuit.

32:5-8 – This describe what the kingdom corrects, and what it corrects is the court of 701 BC. The fool who “speaks nonsense” and whose “heart inclines toward wickedness,” who keeps the hungry unsatisfied (32:6), and the rogue whose “weapons are evil” and who destroys the afflicted with slander (32:7), are the counselors who hid their plans from the LORD (29:15) and the Shebna of chapter 22, honored with the titles of nobility while acting the part of the scoundrel. Under the King, names and natures match. The fool is called a fool, and the noble stands by what he devises.

The Complacent Women (32:9-14)

32:9 – The text drops from the kingdom back to Hezekiah's Judah, and it addresses the women, as 3:16-4:1 addressed the daughters of Zion. The charge is complacency, ease in the face of a judgment already announced. “Within a year and a few days you will be troubled, O complacent daughters; for the vintage is ended, and the fruit gathering will not come” (32:10). This is a short countdown, the same near marker as “add year to year” in 29:1, and it dates the passage. Sennacherib's campaign of 701 BC stripped the Judean countryside; his own record claims forty-six walled cities taken, and 2 Kings 18:13 agrees that he came against all the fortified cities of Judah. The vineyards of Judah did not yield that year.

Verses 11-13 call the women to mourning: sackcloth on the waist, beating the breast “for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vine, for the land of my people in which thorns and briars shall come up; yea, for all the joyful houses and for the jubilant city” (32:12-13). Thorns and briars are the vineyard curse of 5:6 and 7:23-25, and here they take the land of the people.

32:14 – This verse reaches beyond what 701 BC delivered, since Jerusalem was spared and the palace still stood, and its setting must be located with care. **Three readings are possible.** The first keeps the whole passage at 701 and takes the forsaken city as the ruined towns of

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the countryside. The second reads the verse as foreshortened to 586 BC, when the palace was in fact burned and the city emptied. The third takes the word “forever” (*'ad olam*) at its weight and reads the desolation as beginning at 701 and running forward without a fixed endpoint, held open by the word that opens verse 15: “until.” The third reading is what I think is the best. The desolation is real at 701, it deepens at 586, and the text does not close it; it simply says that it lasts until something happens and then names the thing.

The Spirit Poured Out and the Kingdom Settled (32:15-20)

“Until the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field is considered as a forest” (32:15). The hinge of the whole chapter is this word “until,” and the verse it opens has two halves that must be kept apart.

The first half is the outpouring: “until the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high.” This is Pentecost. The ground for saying so is Acts 2. Peter stood up and said of the tongues and the power on display, “this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘that I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind’” (Acts 2:16-17), and at the end of the sermon he named the source: “having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear” (Acts 2:33). The Greek of Acts 2:16 is too strong for an allusion; it is a statement of fulfillment. Joel 2:28-29 was fulfilled in the Apostolic era, and Isaiah 32:15a is the same promise in the same words. The Lord Himself had pointed to it: “you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49), and “from on high” is the phrase of Isaiah 32:15. What was poured out at Pentecost was the Spirit in power, the Spirit coming upon men as He had come upon the prophets, now upon all flesh as the Spirit willed. It is not the indwelling of the believer, which the Epistles teach on other ground; it is the Spirit of prophecy and power falling on Israel in Jerusalem, exactly as promised.

The second half is the land: “and the wilderness becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field is considered as a forest.” This is not a figure for the Apostolic harvest. It is the same literal transformation of the land as 29:17, where Lebanon is turned into a fertile field, and it belongs to the kingdom. The seam falls inside the verse. The outpouring of 15a has happened; the fertile field of 15b has not. Between them lies the Church age, and it is invisible here for the same reason it was invisible to Peter, who read straight on from Joel 2:29 to Joel 2:30 and saw the Tribulation as the next thing on the calendar. In Isaiah the prophet reads straight on from the outpouring to the fruitful land; in Acts the apostle reads straight on from the outpouring to the Day of the LORD. Both are true, both are in sequence, and neither could see the length of the valley.

32:16-17 – The kingdom is described by its ethics before its geography. Righteousness is the King’s (32:1), and its work is peace; the quietness and confidence that Judah refused in 30:15 (“in quietness and trust is your strength, but you were not willing”) become the settled condition of the land forever. “Then my people will live in a peaceful habitation, and in

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secure dwellings and in undisturbed resting places” (32:18). The forsaken palace and the emptied city of verse 14 are answered by secure dwellings that no invader troubles.

“And it will hail when the forest comes down, and the city will be utterly laid low” (32:19). The kingdom is not entered without a judgment first. The forest is the Assyrian forest of 10:18-19 and 10:34, but the verse has moved past Assyria; this is the forest of the last enemy and the city of man, and the city is left unnamed. It is the city of chaos of 24:10, the fortified city made a ruin in 25:2, and the lofty city brought low in 26:5, under the Motif of the City, and its fall is the hail of the Day of the LORD (28:2, 17, 30:30).

32:20 – The chapter ends where chapter 30 ended: with the farmer. The rain on the seed and the well-fed oxen and donkeys of 30:23-24 are here the sowing beside every stream and the beasts turned loose to graze without fear. Chapter 31 opened with horses bought from Egypt for war; chapter 32 closes with the ox and the donkey set free for peace.

The foreshortening must be laid out plainly. Chapter 31 sits at 701 BC, with verses 6-7 set in the far day by their marker. Chapter 32 opens in the kingdom (1-8), falls back to 701 BC and runs forward from there without a stated end (9-14), reaches Pentecost (15a), and then stands in the kingdom (15b-20). Two peaks are in view, the deliverance of Hezekiah’s Jerusalem and the reign of the King, with the outpouring of the Spirit standing between them, and the valley after the outpouring, the whole Church age, is unseen from the eighth century and supplied by the New Testament. Sequence firm, timetable loose, every peak literal.

Synthesis with All of Scripture

The Prophets. Within Isaiah, the horses of 31:1 are the horses forbidden in Deuteronomy 17:16 and the chariots trusted in 2:7; the Holy One not looked to (31:1) is the Holy One dismissed in 30:11; the lion on Zion (31:4) is the visitation that scatters Ariel’s enemies (29:5-8); the passing over of 31:5 is the festival night of 30:29; the idols thrown away in that day (31:7) are the idols of 2:20 and 30:22; the sword not of man (31:8) is the stroke of 37:36; the fire in Zion (31:9) is Ariel’s hearth (29:1); the refuge and shade of 32:2 are the refuge and shade of 25:4 and 4:6; the opened eyes of 32:3 reverse 6:9-10 and 29:10; the clear tongue of 32:4 answers the stammering lips of 28:11; the complacent daughters of 32:9 are the daughters of Zion of 3:16; the thorns and briars of 32:13 are the vineyard’s curse (5:6); the fertile field of 32:15 is Lebanon transformed (29:17); the quietness and confidence of 32:17 are the quietness and trust refused in 30:15; the hail of 32:19 is the hail of 28:17 and 30:30; and the sowing of 32:20 is the rain on the seed of 30:23.

Among the other prophets, Hosea supplies the confession that answers both halves of chapter 31 in one breath: “Assyria will not save us, we will not ride on horses; nor will we say again, ‘Our god,’ to the work of our hands” (Hosea 14:3). The Psalms give the contrast in a line, “Some boast in chariots and some in horses, but we will boast in the name of the LORD, our God” (Psalm 20:7). Jeremiah records the warning outliving the prophet: a century later

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Pharaoh's army marched out, Babylon lifted the siege, and the word came, "Pharaoh's army which has come out for your assistance is going to return to its own land Egypt. The Chaldeans will also return and fight against this city" (Jeremiah 37:7-8). Joel 2:28-29 is the promise fulfilled with 32:15a at Pentecost. Ezekiel 39:29, "I will have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel," and Zechariah 12:10, the Spirit of grace and supplication poured on the house of David at the Return, are a later and distinct outpouring on national Israel, not a second fulfillment of Isaiah 32:15.

Jesus. The birds hovering over Jerusalem (31:5) are the Lord's own figure for Himself: "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matthew 23:37). The man who is a refuge from the wind (32:2) is the One who said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). And the Spirit from on high (32:15) was promised by Him in the same words: "stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

Revelation. The lion who will not be driven from His prey (31:4) is "the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5). The sword not of man that devours the Assyrian (31:8) has its final form in the sword that comes from the mouth of the Rider, "so that with it He may strike down the nations" (Revelation 19:15). The city utterly laid low before the kingdom stands (32:19) is Babylon thrown down like a millstone into the sea (Revelation 18:21), and the secure dwellings of 32:18 are the tabernacle of God among men, where "there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (Revelation 21:3-4).

The Apostolic Letters. Peter's sermon is the apostolic reading of 32:15a: "this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). The national turning of 31:6-7 is the day of which Paul writes, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob" (Romans 11:26). James gives an echo of 32:17, not a fulfillment: "the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:18); the kingdom principle that righteousness produces peace is true now among believers, while the verse in Isaiah describes the land under the King.

Hermeneutic Checkpoints

Start literal. Real horses were bought from a real Egypt in a datable year, a real Assyrian army fell in a real night, and real vineyards failed the next season. A real King will reign over a real land where real oxen graze beside real streams. Nothing in the two chapters asks to be spiritualized, and the fertile field of 32:15b is a field.

Let the text interpret itself. The lion's meaning is stated by verse 5 in plain words, and the plain words settle the figure. The setting of 31:7 is stated by its own marker, "in that day." The referent of 32:15a is stated by Peter in Acts 2:16 and 2:33, and that stated referent is preferred over a guess. Where the text does not name the city of 32:19, it is left unnamed.

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Symbol still equals substance. The lion, the birds, the crushed reed, the refuge from the wind, the thorns in the fields, and the forest coming down are figures, and each stands for something concrete: a God who keeps His city, an ally that failed, a King who shelters, a land under curse, and an empire that falls.

Keep the method consistent. Whoever takes the desolation of 32:14 as literal ruin must take the secure dwellings of 32:18 as literal security in a literal land. The method cannot literalize the woe and spiritualize the kingdom.

A foreshortening checkpoint. Chapter 31 stands at 701 with one far peak inside it; chapter 32 runs kingdom, 701, Pentecost, kingdom. The seam falls inside 32:15, between the outpouring and the fertile field, and the Church age lies in that seam, unseen by the prophet and unseen by Peter, supplied by the New Testament. Sequence firm, timetable loose, every peak literal.

Tying the Threads Together

The Messianic Hope. The Hope in these chapters is a King who reigns righteously and a man who is a refuge (32:1-2). Chapter 31 shows Judah searching for a shelter and buying flesh; chapter 32 shows the shelter that was always on offer, a Person, the shade of a huge rock in a parched land. Under Him the eyes of Israel are opened (32:3), the fool is named a fool (32:5), and righteousness does its work, which is peace (32:17). The Branch of chapter 11, the Rock of 26:4, the tested Stone of 28:16, and the Teacher of 30:20 are here seated on a throne.

The Motif of the City. The Motif runs through both chapters. Zion is the prey the lion will not surrender and the nest the birds hover over (31:4-5); Jerusalem is the furnace where the LORD's fire waits for the invader (31:9); the jubilant city is forsaken and its palace abandoned until the Spirit comes (32:13-15); and the city of man is utterly laid low before the secure dwellings of the kingdom are built (32:18-19). The city under the lawsuit is the same city the LORD is keeping, and it is kept because it is to be the capital of the King.

The Holy One of Israel. The title appears once, in 31:1, and it appears as the One Judah did not look to. His holiness is seen in the woe He pronounces on a forbidden alliance, in the hand He stretches out over helper and helped alike, and in the fire, He keeps in Zion. His faithfulness is seen in the lion that stands his ground, in the birds that pass over the city on the night of the destroyer, in the call to return addressed to sons who had deeply defected, and in a Spirit poured out from on high on the very city that would not look to Him. The Holy One of Israel was not sought in 701 BC; He kept Jerusalem anyway, and He will yet give her a King.