Isaiah and Jesus Weeping Over Jerusalem by Kevin Beck

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Real men cry. Jesus was no exception. As he made his way toward Jerusalem a week prior to his crucifixion, he looked over his beloved city and bewailed its future. After the model of the prophets, Jesus had warned Israel about running headlong into disaster. As an occupied nation, ordinary Second Temple Jews felt the weight of the empire in oppressive taxation, Greek cultural influence, and Roman military might.



Israel's power elites, the Sadducees and Herodians, embodied the status quo.

They worked to reinforce the *Pax Romana* and their positions of authority. Others moved in a countercultural direction. The Qumran community fled to the desert, standing at a distance critiquing the broader society as they immersed themselves in their rituals and sacred writings. The Pharisees remained within society, yet they opposed the official leadership. They sought covenantal renewal through strict allegiance to the Torah, and some of their factions advocated violent revolution.

Jesus took a different path. Instead of leaving society or fighting culture, he called Israel to abandon the hope of overthrowing the Gentiles and instead practice the heart of the Law and prophets—love God and love neighbor.[1] He fully expected that Israel would not heed his warning, and he believed the results would be catastrophic. This opinion did not take any special skill. N.T. Wright points out that "it hardly took a prophet to foresee a major disaster if Israel kept her present attitude toward Rome."[2]

Jesus took no pleasure in being right in this matter. He understood the tragic consequences of death and devastation. Josephus described the famine, crucifixions, disease, and plundering that that took place forty years later. He observed that the Romans "set all on fire as far as Siloam. These soldiers were indeed glad to see the city destroyed."[3] The legions may have enjoyed razing the city, but Jesus mourned the prospect.

We read his grief expressed in Luke 19:41-44. "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

Ever cognizant of the Hebrew prophetic tradition, Jesus' cry echoed the prophet Isaiah. When we read of the weeping Jesus, we might readily remember Isaiah 53:3. "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of sorrows and acquainted with infirmity." While this incident in the life of Jesus may be reminiscent of Isaiah 53, it echoes even more clearly another passage in Isaiah, chapter 29. Jesus, as an astute Jewish prophet (and Luke as sophisticated theological writer), purposefully relied on this ancient text in this situation because of the dual theme of woe and blessing presented by Isaiah.

Isaiah's Lament

Isaiah's oracle begins with a repetitious lament over Jerusalem. "Ah, Ariel, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped! Add year to year; let the festivals run their round" (29:1). Immediately, Isaiah identifies the object of his oracle as Ariel, the city where David dwelt. David made Jerusalem the capital of all Israel in 2Sameul 5:1-12. When David took the city, the text says that he "dwelt in the stronghold, and named it the city of David." (2Sam. 5:9). The word "dwelt" is the same Hebrew word employed by Isaiah. These historical and linguistic connections link Samuel and Isaiah.

Additionally, Isaiah commented on the feasts occurring in the city. As the center of Jewish cultic practices, Jerusalem hosted the national festivals. Ridderbos suggests that "the prophet is speaking on the occasion of one of the great festivals, sacred or civil."[4] This implies that Isaiah likely offered this critique during Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles. We will note the significance of this below.

Then, we find Isaiah's cryptic reference to the city as Ariel. Literally, "Ariel" is "lion of God." Also, "Ariel" can mean "altar hearth" as in a place for burning sacrifice. Ezekiel uses it in both ways. "And the altar hearth, four cubits; and from the altar hearth projecting upward, four horns" (Ezekiel 43:15). We can see a relationship here when we consider that the altar was the place where the offering was consumed, like a lion devouring its prey. For Isaiah, Jerusalem was the lion of God because it was the place for burnt offerings.

In this introduction, Isaiah wove a multifaceted picture of Jerusalem as the city of David, a lion, and the home for ritual offerings. Quickly, though, Isaiah turned these images *of* Jerusalem *against* Jerusalem and launched a fierce salvo at the city. "Yet I will distress Ariel, and there shall be moaning and lamentation, and Jerusalem shall be to me like an Ariel. And like David I will encamp against you; I will besiege you with towers and raise siege-works against you. Then deep from the earth you shall speak, from low in the dust your words shall come; your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and your speech shall whisper out of the dust" (Isa. 29:2-4).

Isaiah pictured God standing opposed to Jerusalem. Isaiah predicted that God would bring suffering to Ariel and bring the lion to the ground, just as David slew the lion with his sling. As David encamped in Jerusalem, YHWH promised to encamp against Jerusalem. Whereas David occupied the stronghold and "built the city all around from the Millo inward" (2Sam. 5:9), God would encircle Jerusalem and bring it to the dust.[5] While Jerusalem had been a place of feasting, it would become a place of weeping. Jerusalem had been the lion of God and the center of brunt offerings, but God would turn it into an "Ariel," a place of burning.

This is not the only text in which Isaiah made such pronouncements. For instance, the first five chapters are filled with oracles of doom directed against Jerusalem. The city representing all Israel would be besieged and burned with fire (1:7-8). YHWH announced displeasure with the burnt offerings and ritual festivals (1:11-15). God would turn against the adversaries (1:24-25). All high things would be brought to the ground (2:12-19). Jerusalem would be taken away (3:1-9). The gates of Jerusalem would lament as the city wallowed in the dust (3:26). YHWH saw oppression within the city and decided to lay it to waste (5:1-7). Woe is announced upon the workers of iniquity, and fire would devour the stubble (5:18-25). The Book of Isaiah is filled with statements of God's intention of striking Jerusalem because she was filled with idolatry, subjugation of the poor, and feigned devotion to YHWH.

Jesus' Lament

Jesus was familiar with the entire context of Isaiah 29.[6] He quoted 29:13, "The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing" (compare Matt. 15:8-9 and Mark 7:6-7). So, it is not surprising to find Jesus alluding to Isaiah elsewhere in his announcements. Jesus' grief for Jerusalem reverberates with four themes from Isaiah 29.

First, the timing of the event occurred about a week prior to the Passover—which was probably the same time as Isaiah's oracle. Jerusalem in Jesus' day was teeming with pilgrims offering burnt sacrifices just as it was in Isaiah's time. After the fashion of Isaiah, Jesus regularly critiqued Jerusalem's affinity for ceremony and sacrifice in place of service toward the underclass of society. The Book of Luke especially develops this theme. Luke 19 contains no less than three incidents in which the rich are brought low and the poor are elevated. One, in 19:1-10 the wealthy tax collector, Zacchaeus, redistributed the wealth he had taken by coercion, and Jesus pronounced salvation had come to his house. Two, in 19:28-40 the crowds praised God as Jesus neared the Mount of Olives. Meanwhile the elites criticize the multitudes, but they received a rebuke from Jesus. Three, immediately following his weeping over Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple and drove out the money changers who had been exploiting the poor. The temple leaders conspired against him, but the ordinary people attended to what he said. Because Jesus uttered these words at the great festival, we should be clued that he wanted us to hear Isaiah.

Second, Jesus, like Isaiah, repeated his address to Jerusalem. "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" Jesus, following the Hebrew prophetic tradition, often reiterated his statements to emphasize his point. Regularly, he said, "Verily, verily." His particular opening in Luke 19 brings Isaiah 29:1 to mind. Here, the prophet begins with a twin reference to Jerusalem. "Ah, Ariel, Ariel," Instead of dismissing this as a fluke coincidence, hearing Isaiah's echo in Jesus' lament allows us to see that Jesus (and the author of this gospel) actually intended to convey the *entire message* of Isaiah 29, which, as we will see in a moment, contains a message of hope, restoration, and new creation.

Third, Jesus bemoaned that the ingredients for peace lay before Jerusalem, but the city was blind to them. Certainly, Jesus had his own ministry and message in mind here. He taught peace through nonresistance. Surrender the sword. Turn the other cheek. Give and do not expect return. Forgive. His kingdom was not of the world; that's why his servants did not fight. However, as a whole, Jesus' contemporaries rejected his nonviolent approach. Some attempted to take him by force and make him a king. Others took him by force and crucified him. Within a generation, the military option carried the day. The blind led the blind, and both fell into the ditch.

Eight centuries earlier, Isaiah spoke of a similar blindness. "Stupefy yourselves and be in a stupor, blind yourselves and be blind! Be drunk, but not from wine; stagger, but not from strong drink! For the LORD has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep; he has closed your eyes, you prophets, and covered your heads, you seers. The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed document. If it is given to those who can read, with the command, 'Read this,' they say, 'We cannot, for it is sealed'" (Isa. 29:9-11). Isaiah looked at Jerusalem and saw a people whose eyes were closed, who slept, and who were unable to read the signs of the times.

Isaiah's Jerusalem ran headlong into a confrontation with the predominant superpower, Assyria, just as Jesus' Jerusalem was provoking a confrontation with Rome. As a result, Jesus wept.

Fourth, in anticipating the approaching war, Jesus cried, "Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another" (Lk. 19:43-44).

Being two millennia removed from the event, it is easy to read over this passage with a sort of theological coolness, a detachment that misses the human cost. To get a hint of Jesus' pathos, think back to the horror of September 11, 2001. People in the planes and buildings were hemmed in. They were crushed to the ground. Children died too. Not one stone was left upon another. Is it any wonder that Jesus wept over the ensuing tragedy that would engulf his beloved city and its inhabitants whom he knew so well?

Jesus envisioned the Roman blockade and war machines. Josephus chronicled the cordon around the city. "Titus began the wall from the camp of the Assyrians...and drew it down to the lower parts of Cenopolis; thence it went along the valley of Cedron to the Mount of Olives; it then bent towards the south...whence it bended again to the west and went down to the valley of the Fountain...it returned back to the north side of the city...Now the length of this wall was forty furlongs...So all hope of escaping was cut off."[7]

Once again, Jesus drew from Isaiah 29 for inspiration. "And like David I will encamp against you; I will besiege you with towers and raise siegeworks against you. Then deep from the earth you shall speak, from low in the dust your words shall come; your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and your speech shall whisper out of the dust" (Isa. 29:3-4). Jesus not only alluded from Isaiah, he essentially quoted him directly.

These four citations by Jesus of Isaiah 29 in Luke 19 prompt us to revisit the entire text of Isaiah 29 which will help us to see a broader and even hopeful meaning to Jesus' lamentation.

Isaiah's Vision of Renewal

Although Isaiah's vision commences with a catastrophic message of doom, it culminates with Jerusalem renewed. Isaiah sees Jerusalem surrounded by enemies, but eventually the enemies come to naught and Zion is transformed. Isaiah presents this new creation setting in five ways.

First, In 29:7-9, the prophet envisioned "the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel, all that fight against her and her stronghold, and who distress her, shall be like a dream, a vision of the night. Just as when a hungry person dreams of eating and wakes up still hungry, or a thirsty person dreams of drinking and wakes up faint, still thirsty, so shall the multitude of all the nations be that fight against Mount Zion. Stupefy yourselves and be in a stupor, blind yourselves and be blind! Be drunk, but not from wine; stagger, but not from strong drink!"[8] Although Israel's enemies torment her, they will awake from their drunken stupor to find that they have been living in a dream world. This language is found in the broader context of Isaiah, 28:11-15 and 28:7, where the prophet used the language of resurrection to describe Israel's reversal of fortunes.

Isaiah's original milieu falls within the timeframe of Sennacherib's invasion of Israel and Judah and the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem.[9] Following the capture of Samaria, the Assyrian attack

force encircled Jerusalem and called for its unconditional surrender. "Thus says King Sennacherib of Assyria: On what are you relying, that you undergo the siege of Jerusalem?" (2Chron. 32:10). Prospects looked bleak for Jerusalem. Hezekiah did the only thing he knew to do—he went into the temple and prayed as the nation's intercessor. YHWH heard the prayer and pronounced that the Assyrian monarch "shall not come into this city, says the LORD. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David" (2Kings 18:33-34).

At the time of Jerusalem's salvation, the king reigning in Jerusalem received tribute. God saved Jerusalem, and "many brought gifts to the LORD in Jerusalem and precious things to King Hezekiah of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations from that time onward" (2Chron. 32:23). Later, we discover the king in Jerusalem "had very great riches and honor...for God had given him very great possessions" (2Chron. 32:27-29). Israel was saved and prospered.

Second, Isaiah 29 includes poetic language describing the rebirth of the nation by evoking images of Eden. In 29:17, Isaiah wrote, "Shall not Lebanon in a very little while become a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be regarded as a forest?" This is nothing less than a picture of the renewal of creation. Isaiah (and the other prophets) consistently employed Edenic imagery to convey the hope of Israel restored.[10]

Third, Isaiah 29 evokes the imagery of healing. The prophet envisioned a time when, "the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see" (29:18). In their condition leading to the Assyrian battle, Jerusalem had been blind. But following YHWH's deliverance, Jerusalem regained their sight. As a result, they were walking in the light. Moreover in many prophetic texts, light and being able to see equate to life. Isaiah uses this metaphor throughout his oracle.[11]

Fourth, Isaiah 29 forecasts the turning of the tables for the oppressed in Jerusalem. "The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. For the tyrant shall be no more, and the scoffer shall cease to be; all those alert to do evil shall be cut off—those who cause a person to lose a lawsuit, who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate, and without grounds deny justice to the one in the right" (29:19-21). The meek would inherit the earth, and the oppressor would be cut off. Subsequently, justice would win out.

Fifth, Isaiah 29 winds up with an affirmation of the Abrahamic covenant. "Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob: No longer shall Jacob be ashamed, no longer shall his face grow pale. For when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name; they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel. And those who err in spirit will come to understanding, and those who grumble will accept instruction" (Isa. 29:22-24). Israel's children would live, and the nation would praise YHWH. At the end, the entire nation would know YHWH, from the least of them to the greatest.

To summarize, Isaiah looked to the specific historical event of the Assyrian offensive against Jerusalem, and he also anticipated God's deliverance of Jerusalem. The resulting liberation would mark the beginning of a new day when Jerusalem's enemies would be leveled to the dust, Eden would be renewed, Jerusalem would see the light, justice would abound, and the Abrahamic covenant would be confirmed.

Jesus' Vision of Renewal

While citing the destructive sections of Isaiah 29, Jesus did not limit his echo to these parts only. Jesus intended to call the entire passage to mind. Jesus (and Luke) used the trope of metalepsis by borrowing the phraseology from Isaiah, placing it in a new context, and thereby transforming Isaiah's meaning for a new situation.

Metalepsis is a figure of speech in which one thing is referenced by something else which is only remotely associated with it. Jesus and Isaiah were separated by more than 700 years—that qualifies for remote. Nevertheless, Jesus and Isaiah both spoke of Jerusalem's troubles. Jesus referred to the embattlement of Jerusalem in Isaiah's time, bringing it forward into his own, transforming it where appropriate and necessary. Richard Hays makes this observation concerning metalepsis when he comments that an "echo can often serve as a dischronic trope."[12] In other words, metalepsis takes an older literary work and places it in a new timeframe, thereby filling it with new meaning.

This is precisely what Jesus did by echoing Isaiah. Jesus was not appropriating the Isaiah passage wholesale on a one-to-one ratio. He was not expecting Jerusalem to be surrounded by the Roman legions, only to be miraculously saved by an angelic slaughter of the Gentile invaders. That was precisely the hopes and dreams of the zealous revolutionaries; they would provoke an incident with Rome expecting to force God's intervening hand. Jesus, in contrast, used Isaiah 29 and all of its resonances to create a *new* meaning, a novel significance. Moreover, Jesus was not suggesting that Isaiah was 'really' talking about the 70 A.D. event while only appearing to be speaking of Assyria and Sennacherib. Jesus drew from Isaiah's original meaning, echoed it, and creatively applied it to his own historical situation, thus raising Isaiah 29 to a new level. Jesus borrowed from Isaiah, and "when the source of the phrase [Isaiah 29] is read in counterpoint with the new setting in which it has been transposed [Luke 19], a range of harmonics becomes audible."[13]

John Hollander shows that "the interpretation of metalepsis entails the recovery of the transmuted material."[14] Said differently, reading a metalepsis in the newer passage requires us to consider the entirety of the older passage—even the unquoted parts. So, as we listen to Jesus we hear his variation on the themes of Isaiah—not just the destructive passages, but also the five creative sequences noted above.

First, by evoking Isaiah 29, Jesus expected the fall of Jerusalem to end in the arrival of a new day. Isaiah looked forward to Jerusalem's enemies sobering up and awaking to the 'real world.' Jesus was not suggesting that the Romans would wake up to recognize the folly of attacking Jerusalem. Instead, throughout his ministry Jesus sought to "redefine" Israel's enemies. Looking at the theological motivations driving the factions of his day, Jesus saw Israel's greatest enemy as Israel itself in its blind zeal for redemption from its covenantal sin and exile via the Torah.[15] With the fall of Jerusalem, Jesus expected every eye to see the recklessness of waging holy war with Rome as the basis of achieving national covenantal reconciliation.

Furthermore, the fall of Jerusalem would signal the collapse of the Old Covenant system and indicate the new world of the New Covenant.[16] Israel's fortunes would be reversed and Israel would awaken to the new day. By using metalepsis, Jesus developed the theme of (in the pattern of King Hezekiah) interceding on behalf of Jerusalem. By answering the intercession, God would deliver the city. In this fashion, Jesus anticipated the deliverance of Jerusalem (and hence all Israel) not from a military and political disaster, but from its condition under the Law through

his intercession on the cross—which reached its fullness at the Parousia.[17] At this time, (like Hezekiah) the king would receive the highest honors and God would be praised.[18]

Second, by echoing Isaiah, Jesus indicated that the fall of Jerusalem would be followed by a renewal of Eden. Recall that metalepsis is not a one-to-one ratio. Jesus was not insinuating that Eden would literally flourish again, just as Isaiah was not intimating that Lebanon would become a literal fruit grove. By utilizing descriptions of Paradise, Jesus conveyed the idea that the renewed presence of God would dwell with humanity following the fall of the old city in a way comparable, yet transcendent, to that of Genesis.

Third, Isaiah painted pictures of Jerusalem's healing; she would be given her hearing and sight which amounted to being given new life. That Jesus alluded to a healing passage should come as no surprise. Throughout his ministry, Jesus performed mighty works of healing which prefigured the covenantal healing of all Israel. N.T. Wright argues, "The acts of healing were understood by the evangelists, and most probably by Jesus himself, as the fulfillment of prophecy; but not just any miscellaneous prophecy. They fulfilled the prophecies of *return from exile*. The time when the blind would see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the poor hear the good news was the time when Israel would return at last from exile."[19] His weeping over Jerusalem's demise spoke ironically of his expectation of Jerusalem's healing.

It was not unusual for Jesus to cry at a tragedy while at the same time expressing hope for renewal. At the graveside of Lazarus, Jesus wept while anticipating raising his friend. The raising of Lazarus pointed to an even greater resurrection that would be accomplished in and through Jesus, Israel's covenant representative—just as his weeping over Jerusalem pointed to the ultimate healing of resurrection.

Fourth, Isaiah looked to the vindication of the oppressed of Israel. This, too, made up an integral part of Jesus' mission and message. His Nazareth manifesto in Luke 4:18-19, a quotation from Isaiah 49 and 61, proclaimed healing, deliverance, recovery of sight and liberty for the underclass. In short, he would proclaim the Jubilee. Daily, Jesus embodied this statement of faith by associating with society's outcasts. In the ultimate form, Jesus *became* an outcast by taking on the curse of the Law, hanging on a tree, and being crucified outside the Jerusalem's gates.

Jesus understood the meaning of the oppressed in broad terms. He enlarged the boarders of who was an outcast by including all Israel. He told his opponents—Israel's elite—that *they* were in bondage. No one else could have imagined such a thing. But Jesus told them, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." They demurred, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free?"" Jesus responded, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:32-36). In this one discourse, Jesus indicted that the Jerusalem leaders were just as oppressed as the traditional underclass, and he foreshadowed their deliverance through his work.

He acted in a similar fashion in Luke 19. He predicted the entire city's downfall, yet by echoing Isaiah 29 he envisaged its justification.

Fifth, by referring to Isaiah 29, Jesus connected the destruction of Jerusalem with the

confirmation of the Abrahamic covenant that in Abraham's seed "all families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Jesus embodied the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise and enacted proleptically on multiple occasions such as when he healed the centurion's servant, cast a demon out of the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, and saved the Samaritans from his disciples.[20]

For Jesus, the demise of the temple signified the complete dismantling of the middle wall of division between Jew and Gentile. The apparatus separating these groups of people was disassembled, thereby opening a new and living way into the holiest of all. The dwel ling of God was no longer in Jerusalem, so the salvation that was of the Jews provided all people everywhere the means to worship the Father in spirit and truth.

As Isaiah looked to God's renewal of the covenant following salvation from the Assyrians, Jesus transmuted that expectation metaleptically to involve to full flowering of the Abrahamic covenant at the fall of Jerusalem. All families of the earth would be blessed and dwell in the presence of God.

Summary

The destruction of Jerusalem was a horrific historical event. Countless people died in unspeakable ways. Jesus understood that it would be so, and he mourned over the devastation and human cost. However, Jesus knew God well enough that he could envision YHWH working through such a tragedy to bring about his creative desire. Jesus drew solace, hope, and a prophetic inclination from Isaiah 29 to express his vision for Jerusalem renewed.

About the Author

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[1] Scot McKnight, The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others.

- [11] 2:5; 9:2; 30:29; 35:2-5.
- [12] Richard B. Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul, p. 20.
- [13] Hays, p. 23.
- [14] John Hollander, Figure of An Echo, p. 115.
- [15] Compare Romans 11:28-32.
- [16] Max King, The Cross and The Parousia of Christ, p. 401.
- [17] 1Timothy 2:5-6.
- [18] Jesus spoke of this in passages such as Luke 20:41-44.
- [19] Wright, p. 243.
- [20] Matt 8:5-13; Mk. 7:25-30; Lk. 10:51-56.

^[2] N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, page 185.

^[3] Flavius Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, 6.7.2 (363).

^[4] J. Ridderbos, The Bible Student's Commentary: Isaiah, p. 231.

^[5] The Millo was part of the fortifications of Jerusalem. See 1Kings 9:15; 11:27; 1Chronicles 11:8; 2Chronicles 32:5. Compare Luke 13:4-5/

^[6]Isaiah 29 was a popular passage for the New Testament authors. Paul references 29:5, 10, 14 and 16, and the Book of Revelation draws heavily from several its passages.

^[7] Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 5.12.2-3 (504-512).

^[8] Compare Isaiah 5:20-25.

^{[9] 1}Kings 18-19 and 2Chronicles 32.

^[10] Compare Isaiah 32:12-15.