

Isaiah 49: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 49 Yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God.

And now the Lord says, He who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him. For I am honoured in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has become my strength.

He says, It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to bring back the preserved of Israel. I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers. Kings shall see and arise, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.

Thus says the Lord, In a time of favour I have answered you, in a day of salvation I have helped you, I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, Come out, to those who are in darkness, appear.

[1 : 37] They shall feed along the ways, on all bare heights shall be their pasture. They shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.

And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up. Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth. Break forth, O mountains, into singing, for the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted.

But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me. Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?

Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are continually before me. Your builders make haste, your destroyers and those who laid you waste go out from you.

[2 : 42] Lift up your eyes around and see. They all gather, they come to you. As I live, declares the Lord, you shall put them all on as an ornament. You shall bind them on as a bride does.

Surely your waste and your desolate places and your devastated land, surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away. The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears, The place is too narrow for me.

Make room for me to dwell in. Then you will say in your heart, Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away. But who has brought up these?

Behold, I was left alone. From where have these come? Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples.

And they shall bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders. Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet.

[3 : 47] Then you will know that I am the Lord. Those who wait for me shall not be put to shame. Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?

For thus says the Lord, Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued. For I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children.

I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the Lord your Saviour, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

A new section of the book of Isaiah begins in chapter 49, albeit not without connections to that which preceded it. Chapters 40 to 48 focused upon the way that the Lord's stirring up of Cyrus from the east would demonstrate his sovereignty in history against all of the false gods.

While the figure of the servant appeared back in chapter 42, in the course of the Lord's public demonstration of the impotence of the false gods, from chapter 49 he moves to the centre of the stage, and the figure of Cyrus disappears, as does Babylon.

[4 : 53] As we move through the prophecy of Isaiah, the details in many respects become vaguer and less specific, as the Lord reveals the more distant and hazier features that are visible on the prophetic horizon.

Isaiah chapter 49 begins with the second of what many scholars have termed the servant songs. The first servant song was in chapter 42, verses 1 to 4. Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights.

I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.

He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged, till he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlands wait for his law. In chapter 49 the servant himself speaks. The character of the figure of the servant is not immediately apparent. It requires closer attention to discern. At points the servant seems to be identified as Israel, perhaps as a personification of the nation.

[5 : 58] Verse 3 of this chapter, for instance, might suggest such an identification. You are my servant Israel, in whom I will be glorified. However, in verse 6, the servant stands over against Israel as a distinct figure from it.

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel. Earlier in the book, in chapter 41 verses 8 and 9, for example, Israel was referred to as the Lord's servant.

As the servant emerges into clearer view, his royal characteristics become more apparent. Yet these royal characteristics should not blind us to the fact that he also has prophetic characteristics. He is a bearer of the word of the Lord, and the fact that some have identified him with the prophet himself is not a position entirely without supporting argument. John Oswald remarks upon similarities between the language the servant uses of himself here and language elsewhere associated with prophetic initiation, mentioning Jeremiah chapter 1 verse 5 as one such example. Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Some commentators argue that the reference to the body of the mother of the servant here rules out the possibility that this might be a collective figure.

[7 : 14] While it might weigh in favour of the position that this is an individual, I do not believe that it is at all conclusive. Similar language is used of the nation in chapter 44 verses 1 and 2.

But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen. Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you. Fear not, O Jacob my servant, jeshurin whom I have chosen.

Doing justice to both collective and individual dimensions of the figure of the servant, it seems to me that the royal character of the figure is important. The king can represent and sum up the nation. When he acts, he acts as the nation. While he can be positioned over against the collective, he is no mere individual. In 2 Samuel, for instance, people can talk about having shares in David the king.

Chapter 41 began with the summons to the nations to draw near, to assemble for judgment.

Chapter 49 begins similarly. In chapter 41, the Lord declared to them the work of Cyrus, the man that he would stir up from the east, before later disclosing the figure of the servant at the beginning of chapter 42.

[8 : 18] Now they are assembled by the servant himself, who is going to declare his mission. The servant was set apart for a special purpose of the Lord from his very womb. Much like Jeremiah in chapter 1 verse 5 of his prophecy, or the apostle Paul in Galatians chapter 1 verse 15, This underlines just how purposeful the Lord is in the fulfilment of his plan.

In speaking of his mouth as a sharp sword, the servant underlines the connection between his mission and the communication of the word of the Lord. We might here distinguish between the role

of the servant and the role of Cyrus, who, though anointed by the Lord, was not a bearer of the word of the Lord in the way that the servant seems to be here.

The servant was hid until the appropriate time, hid in the shadow of the Lord's hand, perhaps a figure of intimacy, and also like a polished arrow in a quiver. That image both connects predetermined purpose and preparation, the way that the Lord prepares this arrow, and might also suggest the way that the arrow, in its appointed time, would be fired suddenly and speedily, and would be aimed towards a precise target.

Commentators give different suggestions for the way that the servant relates to Israel in verse 3. Gary Smith, for instance, argues that we need to see a break in the sentence between my servant and Israel.

This would yield two distinct statements. First, you are my servant, and then the second statement, Israel, in you I will glorify myself. The servant, then, in this reading, would not be identified with Israel.

[9 : 45] John Goldingay, who identifies the figure here as the prophet himself, argues that the prophet is being referred to as Israel. In chapter 48, it was revealed that Jacob, the nation, was insufficient to act as Israel, and now the prophet is being so designated.

He will act as Israel. He will spearhead the mission for which the Lord set his people apart. Brother Charles argues that there is likely a shift from chapter 42 here. In chapter 42, the Israel in view was the nation.

Yet here, the office and title of Israel has devolved upon a prophetic and kingly figure who will act in Israel's stead, as they cannot act for themselves. Yet the servant does not seem to meet with success, describing himself as having labored in vain.

Yet even in his sense of failure, he trusts himself to the Lord, looking to the Lord for his vindication. Very naturally, Christians have seen this as a reference to Christ, whose crucifixion, by all appearances, seemed to mark the utter failure of his mission.

Nevertheless, he committed himself to the justice of God, and the Lord vindicated him in the resurrection and raised him up to his right hand. The Lord does not directly answer the servant in his sense that his mission has not met with success.

[10 : 54] Once again, we are told that the Lord had formed the servant from the womb for his purpose, and that this purpose was the restoration of Jacob and Israel, the restoration of the failed servant of the preceding chapters.

The Lord is the glory and might of the servant, the one who equips him and honors him in his mission. And the Lord declares that he is going to, as it were, raise the stakes. He is not just going to send his servant to bring back Israel.

He is going to make him a light to the nations. Indeed, the servant is to be the Lord's salvation to the end of the earth, not merely bringing that salvation, but being that salvation.

The servant's mission is amplified, and the scope of the Lord's redemptive purpose is expanded. The Lord addresses the servant as one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers.

This is similar to language that we find later on in the servant songs. For instance, in chapter 52, verses 14 and 15, As many were astonished by you, his appearance was so marred beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind, so shall he sprinkle many nations.

[11 : 58] Kings shall shut their mouths because of him. For that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand. And then in chapter 53, verse 3, He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

And as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. There will be a dramatic reversal. The one who was despised will be honoured, and the ones who once disregarded, rejected and mistreated him would bow in submission to him.

This would all happen at the Lord's appointed time, in his day of salvation. Much as the servant was going to be the Lord's salvation to the ends of the earth, he is going to be a covenant to the people. This is language that we find earlier in chapter 42, verses 6 and 7. I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness. I will take you by the hand and keep you. I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

The servant would be a personal manifestation of the Lord's favour and goodwill towards his people, of his keeping of his promises. As in chapter 42, the servant is one who is going to release

captives, saying to the prisoners, come out, to those who are in darkness, appear.

[13:16] Those who the servant will liberate are described as if a flock. The Lord will provide a way out of captivity for them, and all along that way, the flock will find good pasture land. They will be protected from the inhospitality of the elements, and their ways will be made smooth.

They will be brought from all parts of the earth, from all points of the compass. The land of Syene here is almost certainly Aswan, the south of Egypt, representing the furthest extremity of the civilised world in that direction.

As in the case of various other deliverances and great deeds of the Lord mentioned in the book of Isaiah, this yields a response of praise, in which the entire creation joins. The heavens and the earth, and the highest heights of the earth, are all going to break forth in singing, joining together in collective praise of the Lord, who has shown his mercy, and his compassion upon his people. Yet in verse 14, Zion expresses its sense of desolation and abandonment. The Lord, Zion believes, has forsaken her. The Lord's response to Zion is one of the tenderest passages of the book. The Lord brings forward the example of a nursing infant with its mother. Can the mother forget such a child? Certainly not. Yet the Lord does not just compare himself to the mother.

[14:27] He argues that his compassion, concern, and attention to his people exceeds that of such a mother. She could indeed forget her child. He would never forget his people.

Indeed, it is as if Zion were engraved upon his hands. The walls of Zion ever before his eyes. Verse 17 refers to either the sons or builders of Zion making haste.

It's quite possible that the ambiguity is intentional. They are both sons and builders. The builders will raise up the walls of Jerusalem, but the sons are the returnees that are promised in the verses that follow.

As the building's sons make haste to return, the destroyers make haste to leave. Zion sees itself as bereaved and bereft, but the Lord tells her to lift up her eyes. From all corners, her sons and her daughters are returning to her.

Indeed, the problem is now not the desolation of her land, but the pressing question of how to fit all of her children within it. Will there be room for such a mighty company? Zion, who considered herself barren and forsaken, wonders where all of the children could have come from.

[15:31] The Lord, however, her husband, has not abandoned her. He has returned to her, and he will raise up seed for her. Using an image familiar from the earlier part of the book, the Lord will raise up a signal to the peoples, and they will return the children of Zion to her.

We might recall here, chapter 11, verses 10 to 12. In that day the root of Jesse, who we might here identify with the servant, who will stand as a signal for the peoples.

Of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious. In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathras, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.

He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. The great powers of the nations that had formerly terrorized Israel would now be her gentle guardians, as if she were an infant.

Those who had once lorded over Israel would now lick the dust of their feet, placing themselves completely at the service of the people of the Lord, their power no longer a terror. The question in Zion's mind is, how could such a thing be?

[16:44] How could the prey be snatched from such predators? How could captives and exiles be released from such tyrants? Yet the Lord's might is greater than that of the oppressive nations. He is the one who will release them.

He will fight against those who fight against Israel, and he will save Israel's children. He will bring the violence of Israel's adversaries back upon their own heads, something that the Lord expresses in imagery of cannibalism.

The predatory nations would consume their own flesh. In this, the Lord would demonstrate his sovereignty to all of the world. All of the world would see that the Lord, the God of Israel, the faithful redeemer of Jacob, is the only true God.

A question to consider, looking at the description of the servant of the Lord here, and what the Lord would accomplish through him, how can we see this as being fulfilled in Jesus Christ?