

Isaiah 35: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 35. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, Be strong, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water. In the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes, and a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the way of holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way. Even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it. They shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Isaiah chapters 34 and 35 conclude the body of prophecies that ran from chapter 28 to 33, and also the larger section beginning with the oracles against the nations in chapter 13.

These two chapters are more general, global, and cosmic in their scope. They're also important in the larger structure of the book. Chapter 34 especially recalls chapter 13, but chapter 35 anticipates the later material of the book, in chapters 40 to 66, a fact that has led a majority of less conservative scholars to attribute it to a later hand. There are certainly close comparisons to be drawn between the language and themes of this chapter, and those of later chapters. Much in this chapter anticipates passages like chapter 40 verses 1 to 11, and then verse 10 is almost identically repeated in chapter 51 verse 11.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Of course, such commonalities do not demand the theory that this passage comes from a later date, while any who believe in Isaiah's authorship of the entire book, for instance, certainly have some difficult challenges to that position to address. Explaining commonalities of language between some material in chapters 1 to 39 and chapters 40 to 66 definitely isn't one of them. Likewise, lines of supposed dependence can generally just as readily be reversed. For those scholars who hold that other hands were involved in the writing of Isaiah, later material could have been informed by earlier material such as this chapter. While the unity of these two chapters is also questioned by some scholars, they are in fact tightly connected. Chapter 34 spoke of the devastating judgment that would come upon the earth and those doomed to destruction, which the nation of Edom, Judah's near neighbour, particularly represented. In contrast to the devastation of the land of Edom, at the end of the preceding chapter, chapter 35 speaks of the healing and the fruitfulness of a once barren land.

[3 : 3 6] Joseph Blenkinsop writes of these chapters, Together they form a diptych, in which the final annihilation of Edom is contrasted with the ultimate well-being of Zion. The contrast embodies the theme of eschatological reversal, stated more incisively in the last section of the book, for instance chapter 65 verses 13 and 14.

Whereas Edom will be turned into an uninhabited wasteland, the Judean wilderness and arid land will bloom like Lebanon and Carmel. The contrast is worked out in some detail. The wadis of Edom will be turned into pitch. Wadis of the Israelite land, now barren, will have a plentiful water supply.

Chapter 34 verse 9 and 35 verse 6. Nettles and thistles are contrasted with reeds and rushes, plants that grow near water.

Chapter 34 verse 13 and 35 verse 7b. Jackals and other unpleasant animals will take over in Edom. They will lose their habitat in the transformed Israelite wilderness. Chapter 34 verse 13, chapter 35 verse 7b and 9. There will be no way of travelling through Edom. There will be a highway for all except the richly unclean in the transformed land of Zion. Chapter 34 verse 10b and chapter 35 verse 8. Blenkinsop concludes, a close reading will confirm the detailed correspondence between the contrasting images. Chapters 34 and 35 therefore form a coherent unit that juxtaposes the fate of hostile powers with the ultimate salvation of Zion, a juxtaposition found elsewhere in the book, especially in the last 11 chapters. The vision of the future here seems to look towards a greater, more eschatological horizon, a more general restoration of the creation, of which there are anticipations and time in such events as the return from exile in Babylon. The desert here, as John Oswald argues, should probably not be identified with any desert in particular. It is rather a symbol of that which is barren and fruitless, lacking the means to sustain life. The Lord's coming and grace can transform the driest and least hospitable place into a verdant and beautiful garden that is filled with bounty. He can transform the lamenting of his people into joyful song. When the Lord arrives on the scene, the whole earth will take on a renewed and transfigured aspect. Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon, typically especially fruitful parts of the land, were described in chapter 33 verse 9. The land mourns and languishes. Lebanon is confounded and withers away. Sharon is like a desert, and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves. Now, however, for their drought and mourning will come the rain of divine blessing and the joy of new life. The glory of Lebanon and the majesty of Carmel and Sharon that they will receive are here directly related to the glory and majesty of the Lord. The glory of these lands are reflections of the Lord's smile upon them. As they see the Lord's splendor, they start to bear some small measure of his likeness. The people were earlier described as hopeless, despairing and fearful, having lost all energy and confidence. Verses 3 and 4 encouraged them to lift up their downcast hearts, to strengthen their weakened limbs, and to await with confidence the Lord's action in their situation. His vengeance and recompense, described in verse 8 of the preceding chapter, is at hand. There is no need to be dismayed or to languish and fear any longer. Their deliverance is nigh. When the Lord comes, disabilities will be miraculously healed. Those who are once incapacitated or disabled will arise with a surge of strength. The blind will see the death here.

Back in chapter 6 verses 9 and 10, the Lord had declared a judgment upon his people where they would lose their senses. Go and say to this people, keep on hearing but do not understand. Keep on seeing but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy. And blind their eyes lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. In the opening of eyes and ears, this judgment, among other things, is being reversed. Lame men will leap. Mute men will sing, like babbling brooks bursting forth in a parched desert. Imagery of waters in the wilderness extends the theme of healing to include the land, in addition to the people. Just as the people are filled with new life, so will their land be. [8 : 01] Once uninhabitable places will be made welcoming for dwelling, lush and well-watered. Places that were once the haunt of scavenging beasts would become places of verdant foliage. Edom, the people devoted to destruction by the Lord, would have their land given over to wild animals, and rendered impassable. The reverse would happen to the people of the Lord. A highway would be created through the once desert lands, an image to which Isaiah returns in chapter 40 verses 3 to 5.

A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Whereas the path down to Egypt for aid, described in the oracle of the beasts of the Negev in chapter 30 verse 6, was dangerous and treacherous, this path is safe and certain. It is a way that belongs to the righteous. The unclean cannot walk on it, nor can the fools stumble upon it. Upon that path people will enjoy safety from all predators.

Isaiah previously spoke of highways in chapter 11 verse 16, where he spoke of a highway for a remnant of exiles returning from Assyria, and in chapter 19 verse 23, where a highway between Egypt and Assyria was established for worshippers. Once again, this is a highway that leads to

Zion, to the worship of the Lord. We might also hear, as in those other places, reminders of the story of the Exodus and the journey through the wilderness to the promised land. The highway that the Lord is establishing is a highway for the redeemed of his people to return to Zion. Fittingly, this section of Isaiah ends with an eschatological image of the fullness of joy, of exiles returning and reuniting, of sorrow and sighing fleeing away, and of a glorious and glad assembly of song in the holy city.

A question to consider, where do we see the New Testament referring to and using the imagery of this chapter?