

Isaiah 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 9 But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult, and every garment rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it, and to uphold it with justice, and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

[1 : 16] The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. The Lord has sent a word against Jacob, and it will fall on Israel. And all the people will know, Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria, who say in pride and in arrogance of heart, The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones.

The sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place. But the Lord raises the adversaries of reason against him, and stirs up his enemies. The Syrians on the east and the Philistines on the west devour Israel with open mouth.

For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. The people did not turn to him who struck them, nor inquire of the Lord of hosts. So the Lord cut off from Israel head and tail, palm branch and reed in one day.

The elder and honoured man is the head, and the prophet who teaches lies is the tail. For those who guide this people have been leading them astray, and those who are guided by them are swallowed up.

Therefore the Lord does not rejoice over their young men, and has no compassion on their fatherless and widows. For everyone is godless and an evildoer, and every mouth speaks folly.

[2 : 27] For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. For wickedness burns like a fire, it consumes briars and thorns, it kindles the thickets of the forest, and they roll upward in a column of smoke.

Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts the land is scorched, and the people are like fuel for the fire, no one spares another. They slice meat on the right, but are still hungry, and they devour on the left, but are not satisfied.

Each devours the flesh of his own arm. Manasseh devours Ephraim, and Ephraim devours Manasseh. Together they are against Judah. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.

The end of Isaiah chapter 8 spoke of the gloom of the people without the light of the word of the Lord, who had turned to the occult for revelation. Chapter 9 begins by speaking about a reversal. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali had been taken by Tiglath-Pileser III, as described in 2 Kings chapter 15 verse 29. In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-Beth-Meaca, Genua, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria.

[3 : 45] The Transjordan was the land that used to be owned by the two and a half tribes, Reuben-Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. The northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali had struggled to gain full possession of their land, and at many points in the nation's history, parts of this land or even the whole of the land had been lost.

Galilee of the Gentiles, not usually referred to in such a manner, was a more melting pot region to the north of the Jezreel Valley, around the lake that we would call the Sea of Galilee. There are a number of questions about this opening verse.

Many commentators separate it from the material that immediately follows it in verses 2-7, connecting it instead with the material of the preceding chapter. Others wonder whether the second half of it should be understood as, but in the latter time he has treated harshly the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

In Matthew chapter 4 verses 13-16, verses 1 and 2 of this chapter are connected together. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled, the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned. Unlike those in the nation who pursued false gods and mediums and soothsaying, a glorious new dawn would come for those who waited for the Lord.

[5 : 11] These are verses familiar from many nativity plays and from lessons and carols, most memorably presented in Handel's Messiah. The promised new dawn seems to be arising in the very regions of northern Israel, first annexed by Tiglath-Pileser III, Naphtali and Zebulun.

Expressed in a form akin to that of thanksgiving hymn, the prophet's announcement of the reversal of Judah's circumstances is compared not only to a great dawn, but also to the joy of harvest and the celebrations that follow a decisive victory over an oppressor, the bringing in of a new era of peace.

Deliverance from oppression is described using language recalling the Exodus, and also there is a reference made back to the victory over the Midianites through the work of Gideon.

In the story of Gideon, the Lord had used a very small force to defeat a much larger one. All of these things are spoken of as if they had already happened, although they are still awaited in the future.

The event that has led to this celebration is the birth of a child, a crown prince and an heir to the throne of David. A few significant children were mentioned in the preceding chapters, Shi'ar Jeshub the son of Isaiah in chapter 7, Emmanuel in chapter 7, and then in chapter 8, Meher Shalal Hashbaz.

[6 : 25] Some commentators have seen the description of verse 6 as relating to, anticipating, or taking on the form of a coronation ceremony. To support this position, they have pointed to some supposed parallels within the Psalms.

Psalms 2 verse 7, I will tell of the decree. The Lord said to me, You are my son. Today I have begotten you. In that verse, a coronation seems to be described as if it were the birth of a son.

In Psalm 45 verses 6 to 7, Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.

Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

Some have seen in this statement a king being referred to as a god, perhaps akin to the way that the Lord describes Moses as like God to Pharaoh.

Psalms 72 verse 17, May his name endure forever. His fame continue as long as the sun. May people be blessed in him. All nations call him blessed. Here they argue the Psalmist wishes that a particular Davidic king would have an everlasting dominion.

[7 : 31] This would fit with statements like, O king, live forever. For this reason, they believe that these titles can be referred to a human king. Other commentators, such as John Goldengay, have taken what most commentators take to be referring to titles for the king as being a long sentence referring to the Lord's activity.

An extraordinary planner is the warrior God. The everlasting father is an officer for well-being. This, he argues, is far more in keeping with the way that these names have worked elsewhere in the book.

Mayher Shalal Hashbaz, for instance, is not a title for the son. The name, rather, is a prophecy about what the Assyrians will do to the northern kingdom of Israel and to the Arameans. Like many Jewish commentators, Goldengay argues that the child is probably King Hezekiah, the Davidic son who has just been born. He heralds the turn of the fortunes for the southern kingdom in the Syro-Ephraimite war.

The sign of David's heir is an auspicious indicator of the positive destiny for a formerly oppressed nation, a galvanisation of its sovereignty, and a promise of its enjoyment of peace in the years to come.

[8 : 34] It does seem appropriate that in the first instance this promise should settle upon the character of Hezekiah. However, it is hard not to see the words of this chapter straining forward to some fulfilment far in the future, a more eschatological messianic figure, upon whom the full weight of these words can be borne.

Naturally and appropriately, Christians have connected this with the character of Jesus. If we take the name as a series of titles, they seem to divide into four. Wonderful Counselor relates to extraordinary wisdom and guidance, or perhaps wisdom to perform extraordinary things. Mighty God need not necessarily be taken as referring to the child himself as God. As Gary Smith notes, many Hebrew names include the name of God within them. However, he suggests that the use of this same phrase in chapter 10 verse 21 suggests that the use of the title here should probably be given more weight.

This son is identified with God in some peculiar way. Everlasting Father perhaps relates to the king as the father of his people. The Everlasting Father would be the one whose throne endured. It is perhaps surprising to have the one who is given as a son referred to as an Everlasting Father. Prince of Peace is the final title. This king is going to bring a cessation of war.

[9 : 52] His people will know rest and security under his reign. Some have suggested reading verse 7 as an expression of a wish that his kingdom would endure forever and that the Lord in his zeal would accomplish it.

It seems better to me to read this as a prophecy of what the Lord would achieve. The Lord would, as he had promised within the Davidic covenant, ensure that the throne of David would endure. He would do this in his zeal.

His zeal as the God who kept his word and his promises. Themes of new birth are of course common within scriptural narratives. At key moments in biblical narratives and the story of the people of the Lord, a new dawn is seen to arrive with the birth of a child through divine favour and promise, shattering the gloom of a former darkness and serving as a propitious sign of a future that breaks with the oppression of the past.

This is most notably seen at the beginning of the book of Exodus, in 1 Samuel and later in the book of Luke. In each of these books we see an emphasis upon the labour of women and the manner in which they and the children that they bear are the means by which a new hope will arrive.

Such themes are scattered throughout the book of Isaiah, but perhaps most prominently within the two preceding chapters. In chapter 7 verses 14 to 18 and chapter 8 verses 1 to 4, newborn children serve as signs of divine favour and coming deliverance.

[11 : 11] Later on in chapter 11, infants and young children are integral to Isaiah's vision of a promised era of miraculous peace, of a time when the little child leads lines, where nursing children play by the cobra's hole and weaned children put their hands in viper's dens.

The future that the child represents is still far off and many challenges and difficulties lie between the present and that distant prospect. The child, however, is an embodiment of the nation's hopes and he must be protected and nurtured like those hopes for many years before the future that he stands for can ever be realised.

God's gift of a child is both a foretaste of the promised future and a commitment to provide in the interim. After the crashing blow that the northern kingdom of Israel had received from the Assyrians, they presumed that they could rebuild again.

Indeed, the calamity that had befallen them would provide them with the opportunity and occasion to build back on a greater scale and with better materials. Bricks would be replaced with dressed stones, sycamores with cedars.

However, the fundamental weakness of the people, the pride upon which they're trying to build, is still going to be their downfall. The Lord is going to raise up enemies against them and frustrate them in their endeavours.

[12 : 25] His anger has not yet been spent upon the northern kingdom. Destruction would come upon them all of a sudden and it would hit every single part of the nation, those at the head and those at the tail.

From the leading elders and nobles to the lying prophets, they would all be cut off. The corruption of the nation is comprehensive. Everyone is godless and an evildoer. Every mouth speaks folly. The Lord would not assist their young men in battle. He would not even have compassion upon the fatherless and the widows among them. There were no innocent parties. All would face destruction. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom would finally fall to Assyria.

And yet the Lord's anger would still not yet be spent. Verses 18 and 19 describe two fires. The fire of the people's wickedness that consumes the land and the fire of the Lord's wrath by which the land is also consumed.

These two fires are of course related. The first fire has brought the second fire upon them. And the northern kingdom is devouring itself. Pekith the son of Remaliah was assassinated by Hoshea.

[13 : 29] In this, Hoshea was continuing a long tradition of assassination and intrigue in the northern kingdom. For example, Pekith the son of Remaliah had also slain his predecessor. In addition to the northern kingdom devouring itself, it was also seeking to devour its brothers to the south, the kingdom of Judah.

Despite the judgment and the destruction that the Lord had already brought upon the northern kingdom, his wrath was still against his people, his hands still stretched out. A question to consider. How does the child whose birth is declared at the beginning of this chapter fulfil the promises of the Davidic covenant? A question to consider.