

Isaiah 27: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 27. In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea. In that day a pleasant vineyard sing of it. I the Lord am its keeper.

Every moment I water it. Lest anyone punish it, I keep it night and day. I have no wrath. Would that I had thorns and briars to battle. I would march against them. I would burn them up together. Or let them lay hold of my protection. Let them make peace with me. Let them make peace with me. In days to come Jacob shall take root. Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit. Has he struck them as he struck those who struck them?

Or have they been slain as their slayers were slain? Measure by measure, by exile you contended with them. He removed them with his fierce breath in the day of the east wind. Therefore by this the guilt of Jacob will be atoned for, and this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin.

When he makes all the stones of the altars like chalk stones crushed to pieces, no asherim or incense altars will remain standing. For the fortified city is solitary, a habitation deserted and forsaken, like the wilderness. There the calf grazes, there it lies down and strips its branches. When its boughs are dry, they are broken. Women come and make a fire of them. For this is a people without discernment. Therefore he who made them will not have compassion on them. He who formed them will show them no favor. In that day from the river Euphrates to the brook of Egypt, the Lord will thresh out the grain, and you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria, and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt, will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem. In Isaiah chapter 27 we arrive at the end of the section that began in chapter 24, prophecies of the judgment upon and renewal of the earth, of the downfall of the wicked city, and the establishment of the city of the righteous, of the defeat of death and the enemies of the Lord, and of the raising up of his people. Within these chapters prophecy has been frequently punctuated with praise. While the oracles concerning the nations that preceded this section foretold judgments upon specific nations and cities, especially around 701 BC, this section has been more cosmic and general in its scope, presenting a more eschatological and archetypal vision of judgment and renewal for the cities of man and God respectively. The figure of the sea monster

Leviathan appears on several occasions in scripture, along with related figures such as Rahab. In places like Job chapter 3 verse 8, it is clearly more than merely a regular sea creature. It is a chaos monster of the deep, representing and personifying the forces of chaos and evil in the world. In the Baal cycle, Lotan is a serpent dragon of the abyss with seven heads, defeated by Baal-Hadad. The Babylonian cosmogonic myth described Marjuk slaying the sea monster Tiamat. Leviathan recalls the great serpent, the dragon who is identified with Satan himself. The sea monster is a figure that represents his terrifying might and destructive purpose, the powers of death, destruction, evil and disorder.

[3 : 31] His defeat is the end of the dominion of chaos and evil, and allows for the establishment and the securing of a new cosmic order. For instance, in Job chapter 26 verses 5 to 13, the dead tremble under the waters and their inhabitants. Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering. He stretches out the north over the void and hangs the earth on nothing. He binds up the waters in his thick clouds, and the cloud is not split open under them. He covers the face of the full moon, and spreads over it his cloud. He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness. The pillars of heaven tremble, and are astounded at his rebuke. By his power he stilled the sea. By his understanding he shattered Rahab. By his wind the heavens were made fair. His hand pierced the fleeing serpent. Later in Isaiah chapter 51 verses 9 and 10, Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord! Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago!

Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?

At various points in scripture, Leviathan and other chaos monsters are associated with tyrannical rulers, as the great dragon Satan is manifested in the evil human powers that he establishes and empowers.

The defeat of Pharaoh and the Egyptians at the Red Sea, for instance, is a symbol and manifestation of the Lord's greater dominion over the powers of evil represented by the sea monster Leviathan.

Psalms 74 verses 12 to 14, Yet God my king is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan.

[5 : 26] You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. In such places we see mythological language being used to depict the Lord's dominion over evil and disorder in history, and the power by which he establishes a secure and habitable world under his rule. In Job chapters 40 and 41, the Lord describes Behemoth and Leviathan and his power over them to Job. These two chaos monsters represent the forces of death and evil that have been overwhelming Job. However, the Lord is the master over both of them, and neither can escape his control or thwart his good purposes. In the beginning of Isaiah chapter 27, the prophet describes the Lord's victory using such mythological imagery of the archetypal monster of chaos. In Revelation chapter 12 verse 9, John speaks of that same defeat. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. While there are human oppressors and evil powers, the great awaited victory of the Lord will involve the crushing of the power of death and the devil, and this victory is described in this section of Isaiah. The proper placing of verse 1 is a matter of debate among commentators. Many argue that the chapter break is poorly placed, with verse 1 belonging with the material that precedes it in chapter 26, or that the material from chapter 26 verse 20 to the end of chapter 27 should be treated as a unit. Others believe that it is an independent in that day saying.

The rest of the chapter describes the glory of the vineyard of the Lord, the destruction of the enemies of his people, and the return of the exiles of Israel. In Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 to 7, Israel was spoken of as a devastated vineyard.

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it. And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed. For righteousness, but behold, an outcry. In chapter 26, verses 2 to 6, we have a new song concerning the vineyard of the Lord. However, the contrast is stark. The vineyard that once bore only bad fruit, and was broken down, overrun, and abandoned to the wilderness, is now described as a pleasant, fruitful, and well-kept vineyard. Having passed through judgment and come out the other side, the once rejected vineyard has now been restored. We should probably connect this song of the vineyard with earlier parts of this section of Isaiah, which spoke of the Lord's banquet of rich wine on his holy mountain, and the victory songs of his people. The Lord himself is the one who guards and tends this vineyard. It is his own good planting, which he waters and watches over. The Lord's anger against the iniquity of his people has been assuaged. Indeed, the Lord so cares for his formerly abandoned vineyard, that in verse 4, he expresses a wish that there were thorns and briars within it that he could fight against, merely in order to demonstrate his loving care for it. In Joshua and elsewhere, the children of Israel were warned that if they were not faithful in driving out the idolatrous peoples from the land, those peoples would remain in the land like thorns in their sides.

However, in verse 5, the Lord describes an even better outcome, that the thorns and briars, the enemies of his people, would themselves turn to him, make peace with him, and find security under his protection. The restoration of the Lord's vineyard would involve the fruitfulness and expansion of the nation, but this expansion and fruitfulness would have ramifications for the whole world. The entire world would be filled with Israel's fruit.

[9 : 48] Verses 7 to 11 are difficult ones to interpret and understand at points. However, they seem to concern the fate of Israel relative to that of their enemies. While the Lord's judgment against the enemies of his people had been decisive and final, his judgments against Israel were not, and Israel would be purified through and restored after them. His judgments upon Israel had been carefully apportioned, so that they would not ultimately destroy them. Exile wasn't simply an abandonment, but a communicative act of judgment, by which Israel was supposed to learn the ways of the Lord and repent.

As the Lord punished his people, he was disciplining them as a father disciplines his wayward son. Through punishment, repentance, and on the basis of divine grace, Israel would know atonement for its sin. The restored people would utterly repudiate the idolatry that had led them to exile in the first place. The identity of the city in verses 10 and 11 is unclear. Is it a reference to Jerusalem, as some have argued? Does it represent the unfaithful among the people? Or is it about the cities of their foes? If we understand this city in terms of the city of man, there is no reason why it couldn't include all of these in its representation of the sinful enemies of the Lord and the unfaithful.

Their city would be ruined and left to the wilderness. It would be burned and never rebuilt. The largest section ends with a final declaration of the Lord's purpose to redeem and restore his people, judging their oppressors and bringing his people back to his land. The image is of a harvest, with the whole near east a threshing floor, whether of grain or olives. The Lord would beat the nations, from Assyria to Egypt, and even if his people were like scattered olives on their branches, he would carefully pluck them one by one and return them to his land. The trumpet would be blown, summoning the exiles to return, flowing up to the worship of the Lord on the holy mountain of Zion.

Perhaps we should see an image of the resurrection here, with the lost in Assyria referring to the dead. The Lord would once more make his gracious presence known among his people, and the people would be assembled as a company of worshippers.

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