

Isaiah 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 4. And seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes. Only let us be called by your name.

Take away our reproach. In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. For over all the glory there will be a canopy, there will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain. The opening verse of Isaiah chapter 4 should probably be taken with the section at the end of chapter 3. There the prophet described the humiliation of the daughters of Zion, the haughty, wealthy, and fashionable women of the city, who epitomized its pride and its indifference to poverty and oppression. This continues the theme of the humbling of Judah's pride that has been running since chapter 2. After the Lord had cut down the lofty of the land, stripping the people of their rulers, judges, counsellors, prophets, and artisans, men would search in vain for some figure to act as their leader. Isaiah chapter 3 verses 6 to 7. For a man will take hold of his brother in the house of his father, saying, You have a cloak, you shall be our leader, and this heap of ruin shall be under your rule. In that day he will speak out, saying, I will not be a healer. In my house there is neither bread nor cloak. You shall not make me leader of the people. Chapter 4 verse 1 describes a similar situation for the humbled women of the land, who would engage in a comparably desperate quest for a husband or a man to take ownership of them. Widowed and impoverished, as Zion herself at the end of chapter 3, women who were formerly of high status would reduce themselves to extreme concubinage or near prostitution, simply to be under a man's protection and to be spared the social dishonour of destitute and childless widowhood. In the most sanguinary wars, the male population of a country can be radically diminished. After the Paraguayan War of the 1860s, for instance, there was likely only about one man for every four women in the country, and considerably less in many regions. Recording horrific events that occurred under a decade after Isaiah's prophecy here, 2 Chronicles chapter 28 describes a situation in which 120,000 men of Judah were slain by their Israelite brethren during the Syro-Ephraimite war, during the reign of King Ahaz. One could imagine that with so many young men dead on the battlefield, and so much property destroyed, plundered or captured, in a society where security depended heavily upon male protection and provision, any man of might and means that remained would have destitute women desperately trying to outbid each other for his support.

Isaiah describes women going to the extent of foregoing provision and surrendering themselves to such a man's ownership merely for the security and the minimal social status of belonging to his household. Chapters 2-4 of Isaiah largely present the awful humbling of the pride of Judah and Jerusalem.

However, this material is bookended by two prophecies that markedly contrast with the main body of the material that they frame. Chapter 2 verses 1-4 describes the raising up of the mountain of the Lord over all of the other mountains, and the flowing of the nations up to it in worship, and the flowing out of the law and the word of the Lord to the ends of the earth. Chapter 4 verses 2-6 present a restored and purged Jerusalem in terms of Exodus imagery. In the process it offers us an understanding of how the glorious vision of Jerusalem with which the section began would be achieved. It would be achieved as the people are purified through judgment. There have been several uses of the expression in that day in the last few chapters. In chapter 2 verse 11, verse 17 and 20, chapter 3 verse 4 and 18, and in chapter 4 verse 1.

At certain points in these previous uses, it was apparent that the day would not merely be one of humbling of the pride and judgment of the wicked, but also of exaltation of the Lord and abandonment of idolatry. Here that aspect of the awaited day becomes more prominent. There are also allusions back to other elements of preceding prophecies, such as to the daughters of Jerusalem in verse 4. The expression the branch of the Lord might make us think of the various references in later prophecies in scripture to a messianic figure referred to as the branch. We encountered this figure in places like Jeremiah chapter 23 verse 5 and chapter 33 verse 15, also in Zechariah chapter 3 verse 8 and 6 verse 12. Here, however, it's not entirely clear that this figure is primarily in view. Rather, most commentators argue that it ought to be read in parallel with the expression the fruit of the land later in the same verse. Yet, considering the ways that Isaiah employs arboreal imagery elsewhere, it does not seem inappropriate to see some sort of indirect reference at the very least to the messianic branch in whom the people would flourish.

[5 : 34] Just a few chapters later, in chapter 11 verse 1 for instance, he will write, There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his root shall bear fruit. Brevard Charles writes, Once the term branch had become a technical term for the Messiah in later prophetic literature, it is difficult to imagine this earlier non-technical usage not accumulating a richer connotation than perhaps originally intended. Particularly does this move seem likely when one recalls that the passage has been linked intertextually with its larger isianic context. Had not Isaiah chapter 11 verse 1 spoken of a shoot from the stump of Jesse, which initiated the prophetic theme of the return of paradisaical peace and harmony. Moreover, the use of the verb create raises the level of the imagery to that of a new divine creation, which starts over, as it were, after the cleansing of Jerusalem. In sum, in the present literary context within the book of Isaiah, the terms resonate with messianic reference, both in terms of the messianic bringer of salvation, the branch, and the return of paradise, the fruit of the land. Indeed, the very expansive, overlaid style of the unit is a further sign that this passage has acquired multi-layered connotations when construed in the light of the larger corpus of scripture.

Israel is the people of the Lord's planting, and after his pruning of her, she will flourish, and the remnant of her would be seen in their true splendor. After the Lord judged the wicked and the evildoers among his people, those who survived the purging of Jerusalem as its remnant would manifest a new holiness. Elsewhere in scripture we read of the Lord's book of life, and verse 3 seems to refer to such a document in speaking of those who were recorded for life in Jerusalem. This group would be revealed through the purgation of the Lord, as through judgment and burning he revealed the faithful among the people. Along with the imagery that we have already seen of paradise, in verses 5 and 6 imagery is taken from the exodus to refer to the intimate presence of the Lord among his people, protecting them, providing for them, and rendering them holy. The most powerful historical instance of this, of course, was the Lord's dwelling among his people and leading them by the pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness. That pillar of cloud and fire had become associated with the tabernacle, then later the temple, filled with the glory of the Lord. But now the glorious presence of the Lord among his people is no longer seen to be contained within the single building and the single room within the building of the Holy of Holies in the temple. Rather, it has expanded to overshadow the entire city of Zion. The Lord is dwelling among his people as the great bridegroom with his bride.

The canopy and the booth for shade are perhaps the imagery of a bridal chamber. This intimacy of the Lord's relationship with his people, taking imagery of paradise and also of exodus, is a concrete image of the fulfilment of the covenant formula, I will be their God and they will be my people.

A question to consider. How might we see in these final verses of chapter 4 connections with the feast of tabernacles? What insights might follow from those connections?