

Isaiah 41: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 41. Listen to me in silence, O coastlands. Let the peoples renew their strength. Let them approach, then let them speak. Let us together draw near for judgment.

Who stirred up one from the east, whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot. He makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. He pursues them and passes on safely, by paths his feet have not trod. Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, the first and with the last, I am he. The coastlands have seen and are afraid. The ends of the earth tremble. They have drawn near and come. Everyone helps his neighbor and says to his brother, Be strong. The craftsman strengthens the goldsmith, and he who smooths with the hammer, him who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering, it is good, and they strengthen it with nails so that it cannot be moved.

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend, you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, you are my servant. I have chosen you and not cast you off. Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Behold, all who are incensed against you shall be put to shame and confounded.

Those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish. You shall seek those who contend with you, but you shall not find them. Those who war against you shall be as nothing at all. For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand. It is I who say to you, Fear not, I am the one who helps you.

Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel. I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord. Your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. Behold, I make of you a threshing sledge, new, sharp, and having teeth. You shall thresh the mountains and crush them, and you shall make the hills like chaff. You shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the tempest shall scatter them, and you shall rejoice in the Lord. In the Holy One of Israel you shall glory. When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I, the Lord, will answer them. I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.

[2 : 4 4] I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plain, and the pine together, that they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the Lord has done this. The Holy One of Israel has created it.

Set forth your case, says the Lord. Bring your proofs, says the king of Jacob. Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome, or declare to us the things to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods. Do good or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified.

Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing. An abomination is he who chooses you. I stirred up one from the north, and he has come, from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name. He shall trample on rulers as on water, as the potter treads clay. Who declared it from the beginning, that we might know, and beforehand that we might say, He is right? There was none who declared it, none who proclaimed, none who heard your words. I was the first to say to Zion. Behold, here they are, and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news. But when I look, there is no one.

Among these there is no counsellor who, when I ask, gives an answer. Behold, they are all a delusion. Their works are nothing. Their metal images are empty wind.

After the chapter introducing this new section of the book of Isaiah, chapters 41 to 48 develop the theological themes that we saw in chapter 40, underlining the lordship of God over history, creation, and the nations, and his utterly surpassing greatness over all of the false gods and idols.

[4 : 36] The theological message of these chapters, their message about God, is one of the most pronounced in the entirety of the Old Testament. But this is no mere abstract theology. It is truth about God, powerfully and urgently addressed to people caught up in the turmoil of the storms of history.

When the vessel of the nation will be stricken on the rocks of hostile imperial powers, its capsized sailors and passengers left flailing in the abyssal deep, their strength gradually being sapped away by the bitter cold of the waters, it would help them to know that their God is the master of the chaotic waters, and he has assured them that, whether in the ship or out of it, he will get his people to his promised shore. Likewise, when helplessly battered by opposing powers, knowing that they served a God who is greater than all of those powers could not be more essential. Within these chapters, there are recurring legal motifs at play. There is, as it were, a great cosmic trial scene, to which the Lord summons the nations and their gods. The trial will establish who is the true God and who are false. The entire earth is called to attend the judgment, the coastlands or islands representing the farthest reaches of the nations. Called to summon up all of their strength, they are commanded to approach and present their case for assessment of the divine court.

The Lord presents evidence in support of his claim to be the one true master of history, the one who has demonstrated his rule within the arena of great human events on the centre stage of the affairs of the nations. The identity of the figure stirred up from the east is likely Cyrus, although John Goldengay notes the possibility that the figure in view might be Abraham, an interpretation historically followed by John Calvin and several others, and which would be strengthened by parallels with verses 8 and 9. Cyrus, likely presented in the more general terms here, will come into greater focus in later chapters. The same language of stirring up will be used of Cyrus in chapter 45 verse 13.

I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level. He shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts.

Ezra chapter 1 verse 1 also speaks of the Lord stirring up the spirit of Cyrus, as to 2nd Chronicles chapter 36 verse 22. Gary Smith, disagreeing with readings that identify this character either as Cyrus or as Abraham, argues that it is Assyria that is in view here.

[7 : 08] The empire that turned many other nations into chaff to be driven away by the wind would face that same fate itself. As such prophecies are very general and figurative, we probably should not be too preoccupied with identifying specific historical reference. Their words can speak powerfully into various contexts. However, the case for Cyrus as the primary referent does seem to be the strongest to me, especially when we consider how strongly and commonly the notion of the Lord stirring up is associated with him. The expression used of this figure in verse 2 is variously understood.

John Oswald argues that it should be rendered, whom righteousness calls to its foot, presenting the figure not merely as a victorious conqueror, but as one who is an agent and servant of effective righteousness, setting things to rights as he subdues the nations and reduces oppressors to dust.

Many other commentators and translators interpret the expression differently though, as relating to the victory that meets the one stirred up from the east at every step. This figure is successful in pursuing his foes. In verse 4, the Lord interrogates the assembled participants in the trial. Who was the one who initiated all of this? In what we might see as an allusion back to the revelation of the divine name at the burning bush in Exodus, the Lord declares that he is the one who did so. He is the I am. He is the first and the last, a theological expansion of some of the meaning inherent in the divine name. In the last, the Lord brings to effect what he has determined from the first. His purposes stand certain and sure, beyond the power of men to undermine.

Seeing the purpose of the Lord taking effect in history, in this figure from the east, the nations are dismayed and terrified. Verses 5 to 7 look back to verse 1, where the Lord summoned the coastlands to attend, renew their strength, and draw near for judgment. In verse 5, we see that the coastlands have indeed drawn near and come. Seeing what the Lord is accomplishing in the earth, they are deeply afraid.

However, they look to their neighbours and idols for strength, rather than to the Lord. Yet far from receiving strength from their idols, the adulterers must strengthen the idols, seeking to secure their idols from toppling. The futility of the adulterers is contrasted with the situation of Israel, the chosen people of the Lord, called in their forefather Abraham from the farthest corners of the world.

[9 : 33] Smith notes a progression in the description of Israel here, from my servant, to the people whom I have chosen, to the offspring of Abraham, to my friend or beloved. As the servant, they are commissioned to act in the name of the Lord, their master. They were graciously chosen by the Lord to be his people, set apart in their forefathers Jacob and Abraham, as a people of the Lord's own and beloved of the Lord.

Israel's standing as beloved of the Lord is a continuation of the Lord's relationship with their forefather Abraham. They are beloved as his seed. While I don't believe that we should see the one stirred up in the east in verse 2 as Abraham, I do think that the parallels are important to recognize. Cyrus's actions in delivering the people of God from the land of the Chaldeans will be akin to a renewal of the first call of Abraham. The Lord assures his people of his continued love for them, his personal presence with them, his empowering and upholding of them, and his dismaying and confounding of all of their foes. Punctuating his statements with the charge, fear not, the hearer might recall the pivotal moments in which this expression is used in the Old Testament narrative. For instance, when the Lord cuts a covenant with Abraham in Genesis chapter 15, a covenant confirmed using the same expression with Isaac in chapter 26, or when Moses exhorted the terrified children of Israel at the Red Sea, the Lord's power, his presence with them, his promises to and good purposes for them, are what they need to stand against the nations that would terrify them. All of those adversaries would be put to shame. Smith observes that the description here seems out of keeping with the ways that the Babylonians and Medo-Persians are described relative to Israel during the exilic period, where they are not fighting against Israel. He suggests that we see this as referring to the

Assyrians in 701 BC, or the Babylonians in 587 BC. Perhaps this would be better read as a more general statement, including such events, but also others besides them. While Israel might regard itself as little more than a puny worm before the dragons of the nations, it is the Lord himself who is on their side. Imagery of harvesting and threshing has been used on several occasions earlier in this book.

Here Judah will become the Lord's thrashing sledge, a heavy wooden frame with stones and teeth of metal beneath it, used to separate the grain from the stalks. All obstacles before them would be broken beneath them as the Lord used them as his instrument. Their foes would be driven away by the wind, and the Lord, described as the Holy One of Israel, a title that pervades the entire book of Isaiah, but is rarely found outside of it, would be glorified through it all. The promise of verses 17 to 20 is of the transformation of the barren and dry wilderness into fruitful, verdant, and well-watered land.

We've already encountered similar promises in chapter 35 verses 1 to 2. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus.

[12 : 38] 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.

And also in verses 6 and 7 of that chapter. 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. Even though there is no reference here to the Lord bringing people through the wilderness, many commentators see allusions to a second or new exodus in these verses. Perhaps especially in the reference to the opening up of rivers and fountains, much as the Lord provided water for the children of Israel in the desert of Sinai.

As Peter Lightheart notes, there are four locations mentioned here. The high places, the valleys, the wilderness, and the dry land. And each has a corresponding form of water provided for it.

Rivers on the heights, springs in the valleys, pools in the wilderness, fountains in the dry land. The trees that the Lord will plant in the wilderness are trees that afford shade more than food. They enable travellers to find relief from the heat of the burning sun.

The power of the Lord to render the parched, burning, and deserted places green, well-watered, and shaded would be a demonstration of his power to those that contemplated it.

[14 : 02] In verse 21, we return to the scene with which the chapter began, with the nations assembled as participants in the trial of the gods. The adulterers were condemned earlier in the chapter, but now the false gods whom they worship are the ones being challenged. What account can they provide for themselves? The Lord, as we have seen, declares the future in advance, as the one whose purposes from the very beginning will be realised by his providential power and authority. Yet the false gods have neither true foresight of the future, nor, more importantly, are their purposes effective in history. If they could really tell what was going to happen afterwards, as those who had power over the course of history, then they would really be terrified. They would really be gods. But yet they cannot. They are not true gods. In contrast, the Lord's word did stand. Seeing Cyrus come down from the north upon Babylon to take it over, they should see the Lord's word coming into effect.

Cyrus, indeed, would invoke the name of the Lord, as we see in Ezra chapter 1 verses 2 to 4. Cyrus would trample down many great rulers, and through him the Lord would demonstrate his sovereignty.

The Lord declared his good news of deliverance of Jerusalem long before it took effect. Can any of the idols of the nations do the same? No, they cannot. They are empty. They are worthless. They are utterly powerless to deliver those that worship them. The Lord alone is the true God and master of history.

Before his work, all the idols and false gods of the nations are struck dumb. A question to consider. What are some of the ways, in the description of the decree of Cyrus and its aftermath, that the scripture underlines the fact that the Lord was behind it all?