

Isaiah 48: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 05 December 2021

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 48. Hear this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, and who came from the waters of Judah, who swear by the name of the Lord, and confess the God of Israel, but not in truth or right. For they call themselves after the holy city, and stay themselves on the God of Israel. The Lord of hosts is his name.

The former things I declared of old. They went out from my mouth, and I announced them. Then suddenly I did them, and they came to pass. Because I know that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass, I declared them to you from of old. Before they came to pass I announced them to you, lest you should say, My idol did them. My carved image and my metal image commanded them. You have heard. Now see all this, and will you not declare it?

From this time forth I announced to you new things, hidden things that you have not known. They are created now, not long ago. Before today you have never heard of them, lest you should say, Behold, I knew them. You have never heard. You have never known. From of old your ear has not been opened. For I knew that you would surely deal treacherously, and that from before birth you were called a rebel.

For my name's sake I defer my anger. For the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver. I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.

For my own sake, for my own sake I do it. For how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel whom I called. I am he, I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens. When I call to them, they stand forth together.

[1 : 51] Assemble, all of you, and listen. Who among them has declared these things? The Lord loves him. He shall perform his purpose on Babylon, and his arm shall be against the Chaldeans.

I, even I, have spoken and called him. I have brought him, and he will prosper in his way. Draw near to me. Hear this. From the beginning I have not spoken in secret. From the time it came to be, I have been there.

And now the Lord God has sent me, and his spirit. Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go.

O that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. Your offspring would have been like the sand, and your descendants like its grains.

Their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me. Go out from Babylon. Flee from Chaldea. Declare this with a shout of joy. Proclaim it. Send it out to the end of the earth. Say, The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob. They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts.

[3 : 02] He made water flow for them from the rock. He split the rock, and the water gushed out. There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked. Isaiah chapter 48 concludes the section of the book introduced by chapter 40, which runs from chapter 41.

The Lord assembled the nations for a great trial, exposing the emptiness and powerlessness of the false gods, idols, and the proud idolaters. The Lord alone, the creator of all, is the sovereign of history.

The Lord's sovereignty in history would be publicly demonstrated over all pretenders to his throne, and all would ultimately bow the knee in submission before him. The primary way that this sovereignty of the Lord would be made known would be in his words taking effect, as Cyrus, the man that the Lord stirred up in the east, would overthrow Babylon.

In the downfall of Babylon, the Lord would judge the proud oppressor, delivering his people, and establishing Zion. Gary Smith discusses the ways that many commentators have questioned the unity of this chapter, on the grounds of its seeming contradictions, tensions, and incongruities.

There are statements that seem, at first glance, to be at odds with each other. In verse 6, for instance, we are told, From this time forth I announce to you new things, hidden things that you have not known.

[4 : 19] In verse 16, however, we read, Then, as Smith notes, people see apparent tensions between verses giving assurance of deliverance, and others proclaiming strong judgment, and other points where there are statements that seem to be out of context, such as at the end of verse 16.

However, these objections, he argues, can be answered. He draws attention to research suggesting the literary unity of the chapter, a unity manifested in repeated words and keywords distributed throughout, in continuing themes, a tone of rebuke, and a balanced structure between the first 11 verses of the chapter, and the second 11 verses.

John Oswald also highlights the fact that the force of some of the supposed tensions arises in part from the assumption that the chapter belongs to the period just prior to the return from Babylon, and addresses only the exiles there, in anticipation of their soon return.

Brother Charles, while giving much more weight to the arguments of those who believe that there has been significant reworking of the original text over time than most conservative commentators, argues that the change in form and function of the text from chapters 41 to 47 preceding it is best accounted for by its role in its context, as the conclusion of those chapters.

This chapter, he argues, turns to address Israel's unfaithful response to the promises, and also marks another transition as the figure of the servant starts to come to the fore as Cyrus recedes, in his understanding.

[5 : 54] It is worth bearing in mind that, when considering such issues, questions of form and genre criticism can raise their heads. Form criticism typically seeks to identify the original form that parts of the scriptural texts had in their supposed oral pre-existence.

In their quest for these original forms, scholars often hypothesised a corresponding *sitz in Laban*, or situation in life for them. A song of ascents, for instance, would be sung as worshippers ascended towards Zion during one of the pilgrimage festivals, and, once one considers this original context, the actual texts of such psalms make more sense.

In the case of things like the Songs of Ascents, this is definitely a fruitful line of inquiry. However, far too often the result of such a quest has been the fragmentation of texts into a mishmash of different and contrasting forms, for each of which there is a highly speculative original context in the worship or life of Israel.

The result can be a text that is left with little unity. Scholars have rightly become much more suspicious of this approach over the last 50 years, recognising the violence that it does to the text as our proper object of inquiry.

Nowadays, many of the concerns of traditional form criticism are dampened within the field of biblical studies, scholars being more narrowly focused on the consideration of questions of genre, less prone to flights of fancy about what supposedly lay behind the text.

[7 : 19] This doesn't mean that such questions should simply be dismissed, nor for that matter that they necessarily fragment the text. For instance, someone like John Watts proposes that we read Isaiah as a sort of prophetic drama, with different speakers, a dialogic form, and a progression in the consequent conversation.

For those inclined to read such prophecies as a series of prophetic monologues, changes in mood and voice can be jarring. However, if it were originally a more dramatic form of text, with multiple voices in succession and progression in conversation, many of these shifts can be more readily accounted for.

While Watts' approach encourages an extensive speculative attribution of different texts to different speakers throughout the book, we would probably much better appreciate the unity of the prophecies if we gave different voices and speeches internal to the prophet's words a little more breathing room, so as to give more attention to the alternations between and progression through them.

Furthermore, recognising some of the ways in which certain prophecies can resemble drama can also be helpful. The Lord is often not directly addressing his people through the prophet, although often he is.

Sometimes the prophet is rather performing a divinely inspired dramatic conversation with the people more in the position of an audience to a drama than as its direct addressees.

[8 : 37] At points the prophet might be addressing a personified Babylon, the next he turns to look at his audience in Jerusalem directly in the eyes. Without going to the lengths that some such as Watts do, greater recognition of the likely more dramatic character of prophetic performance might potentially help to relieve some of the tensions and incongruities that we might otherwise feel when flatly reading such prophetic texts, and avoid some of the fragmentation that results from certain forms of form criticism.

This certainly doesn't answer all of the problems raised by some of the apparent jarring shifts in such texts, but it should be part of our conceptual repertoire in responding to them. The term here and related terms are prominent throughout this chapter, setting the tone for much of it.

Fittingly, the chapter begins with the Lord charging Israel to hear. Verses 1 and 2 contain a litany of descriptors of Israel, house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, who came from the waters of Judah, who swear by the name of the Lord and confess the God of Israel, who call themselves after the holy city, who stay themselves on the God of Israel.

By this extended address, piling up the sorts of affirmations of privileged covenantal standing that the people would make, the Lord is foregrounding the identity that they claim for themselves, and grounding his challenge to them upon it.

Doubtless Israel bore the name of the Lord, but in their gross hypocrisy, they were bearing it in vain. Israel were the witnesses of the Lord throughout their history, who could testify to the fact of his deity against the nations.

[10 : 11] In his past dealings with them, he had foretold his great deeds in advance. For instance, he had foretold slavery in Egypt and the Exodus to Abraham, way back in chapter 15 of Genesis, and also by Joseph.

And centuries later, he had brought it all to pass, even against all odds. Lest stubborn and rebellious Israel would attribute the Lord's great deeds to their idols and false gods, the Lord had announced what he would do in advance.

When what the Lord foretold came to pass, Israel had no excuse, but had to acknowledge the Lord's hand. Having heard the word of the Lord concerning future events, and having seen those words come to pass, Israel should bear testimony to the certainty of the Lord's word.

Prophecies had been fulfilled before their eyes, and they should now be able to declare that the Lord alone is God. Now, however, the Lord is going to show them new things, what he will accomplish through Cyrus and in bringing down Babylon.

The Lord didn't reveal all his purposes for the future at once, not wanting his people to become presumptuous, thinking that they know it all, and forgetting that it was the Lord who would reveal these things to them in his own appointed time.

[11 : 20] Many understand the things being revealed to refer to the fulfilment of the prophecies, seeing this as an argument against the dating of the prophecy to the lifetime of Isaiah, arguing that it must come from around 539 BC.

Oswald disputes this, claiming that it is far from straightforwardly apparent that the things being created and announced are the fulfilled events, rather than being new prophecies concerning an event in the future that the Lord would bring to pass, and that would demonstrate his sovereignty.

The Lord's intent in revealing his purposes to them before they came to pass was to confirm them in their trust in him, not merely to satisfy their curiosity, or even to give them the sense of control that so often comes with knowledge.

We see this principle in Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 29, The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Due to the people's stubborn rebellion and unbelief, the Lord had not revealed things to them that he might otherwise have done. Such knowledge wouldn't have encouraged their faith, but would have fuelled the complacent presumption.

[12 : 28] At the beginning of this chapter, the Lord described Israel in a way that underlined the ways in which Israel appealed to the name of the Lord in their self-understanding. However, Israel bore the name of the Lord in a way that led to the Lord being blasphemed among the nations.

When the Lord restored his people, it would not be on account of their faithfulness, which as a rebellious nation they didn't have, but on account of the Lord's jealous commitment to his glory.

The Lord would not give his glory to any false god. This is a similar principle to that articulated in Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 21 to 23.

But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

[13 : 40] The chapter breaks down into two halves, the second half beginning in verse 12. Verse 12 recalls verse 1, the Lord summoning his people to attention. Yet now the focus is upon the Lord's identity, and the fact that he has called Israel, not upon Israel's presumptuous identification of itself by its relationship with the Lord, even as it was mired in hypocrisy.

The Lord's statements here recall the arguments of the preceding chapters. He is the creator, the one who has made all things in both heaven and earth. He is the first and the last, the eternal one, who is at the beginning as the creator, and at the last as the judge and the recognized lord of all, summoning them all to assemble.

The Lord asks again, who has declared the things that are going to come to pass? The Lord has appointed Cyrus, this man stirred up from the east, and the Lord is going to achieve his purpose through Cyrus upon Babylon and the Chaldeans.

Lest any be in doubt that it is he who will do this, verse 15 begins with two independent first person singular pronouns, and is followed by a first person singular verb.

It is the Lord's purpose and power that is going to be operative throughout. His success would be an expression of the Lord's will. From the beginning of the creation, which is the beginning which verse 16 most likely refers to, the Lord has been a God who speaks, who declares his purposes to his people, and brings to pass what he has made known.

[15 : 03] The conclusion of verse 16 has puzzled many commentators, and now the Lord God has sent me and his spirit. There are different ways of understanding the figure speaking here. Many commentators have understood the voice here to be that of the messianic servant, who appears again at the beginning of the next chapter.

The expression here is similar to that which we have of the servant, in chapter 61 verse 1 for instance. Charles, for instance, takes this line, Others such as Smith attribute these words to the prophet himself, yet others have argued that the statement here does not actually belong in this place.

Against the claim that these are the words of the prophet, we might consider that most of the first person's speech in chapters 40 to 55 is the speech not of the prophet, but of the messianic servant.

While this consideration does give me pause, I lean towards understanding these as the words of the prophet. They are also words that seem to introduce the section that follows. The second half of verse 16 then should be understood with verses 17 to 22.

In those verses the Lord speaks of himself as Israel's redeemer, and once again using the familiar title, the Holy One of Israel. He is the one who teaches them to profit, to pursue that which is good for the nation.

[16 : 14] Yet Israel has consistently rejected the Lord's commandments. Had they heeded him, they would have enjoyed peace, and a society that was well ordered in righteousness. They would have prospered and been numerous, never being cut off or destroyed.

The Lord is going to save Zion. He calls them forth from Babylon and Chaldea. However, it would have been so much better had such a salvation never been necessary. Israel is a witness to the nations, and when they are redeemed, they should spread the joyful news of the Lord's deliverance of his people far and wide, so that all the nations could hear.

The Lord has redeemed Jacob in fulfilment of all of his promises, fulfilling his word and his purpose given long ago. The redemption that he would accomplish would recall that of the Exodus.

When the Lord had first led them through the wilderness to the promised land, he had provided water from the rock for them along the way. Now in a new Exodus, he would provide for them once more. The final verse of the chapter draws a lesson from Israel's history that they should learn.

There is no peace for the wicked. They should have learned that lesson as they were sent into exile in Babylon. If they wanted to enjoy rest in the land upon their return, they would need to live accordingly.

[17 : 26] A question to consider. Drawing threads together from this chapter, how would you say that Israel's unfaithfulness factored into the Lord's greater purpose for them as a nation?