

Isaiah 56: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 56. Thus says the Lord, Keep justice and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness will be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil. Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, The Lord will surely separate me from his people, and let not the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree. For thus says the Lord, To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house, and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered. All you beasts of the field, come to devour. All you beasts in the forest, his watchmen are blind. They are all without knowledge. They are all silent dogs.

They cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. The dogs have a mighty appetite. They never have enough. But they are shepherds who have no understanding. They have all turned their own way, each to his own gain, one and all. Come, they say. Let me get wine. Let us fill ourselves with strong drink. And tomorrow will be like this day, great beyond measure. Isaiah chapter 55 concluded the section of the book running from chapter 40 to 55. From chapter 56 to the end of the book in chapter 66, we have the book's concluding unit. Those who question Isianic authorship of the entire book typically divide these chapters from chapters 40 to 55, referring to them as third or trito-Isaiah.

They are frequently dated to the period after the return to the land from Babylon, following the fall of Babylon in 539 BC, and are often regarded as contemporaneous with Haggai and Zechariah, with which biblical scholars often identify common themes, such as Sabbath, a temple that has been threatened by enemies of the Lord, but with sacrificial practice still in operation, injustice and fasting.

Advocates of an earlier dating for this material, attributing it to the authorship of Isaiah, can respond by pointing out that many of these issues were perennial ones within Israel's life, with plenty of references to them in the pre-exilic period. In addition to this, there are key differences, for instance, between the pagan foreigners among the people that we see in books like Nehemiah, and the proselytes who have joined themselves as faithful believers in the Lord, as we have here. The actual internal evidence that these chapters give us for dating the book is relatively thin. Like much other material in Isaiah, the dominant horizon in many passages of this unit is an eschatological one. Various structures have been suggested for this unit. Gary Smith and John Goldengay both present extended chiasms that have been proposed for the entire unit, chiasms that differ at several points, yet coincide at many others. Both of the chiasms that they mention centre upon chapter 61.

[3 : 38] Smith, however, questions whether the chiasm is really as strong as it initially appears to be. The unity of this section is not merely internal. As Breva Charles notes, this section of Isaiah repeatedly returns to and picks up themes from chapters 40 to 55, so-called second or deutero Isaiah, and that it also has several prominent themes in common with the opening 39 chapters of the book.

It opens with a call to covenant faithfulness. It also picks up on the general invitation that is offered in the preceding chapter, addressing the eunuch and the foreigner in particular. The work of the servant was as a witness to the nations. This chapter's discussion of foreigners joining themselves to the people of the Lord follows quite naturally on from that. Goldengay argues that the opening statement could be read, among other things, as a summary of the book to this point.

The keeping justice and doing righteousness to the first part, and then the salvation that is going to come and the righteousness to be revealed to chapters 40 to 55. The call here is to act in keeping with the Lord's act of salvation. And the beatitude that follows, blessed is the man who does this, might remind us of the beatitudes of Jesus' sermon on the mount. We might see the beatitude here as playing a similar role. In addition to keeping his hand from doing evil and keeping justice and righteousness, the observance of the Sabbath is especially singled out. Some have seen this as evidence that this text most likely belongs to a post-exilic period. Yet there are several such prophetic messages concerning the observance of the Sabbath in the pre-exilic period. For instance, in places like Ezekiel chapter 20, or in Jeremiah chapter 17 verses 21 to 27. Thus says the Lord, take care for the sake of your lives and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day, or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem.

And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath, or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers. Yet they did not listen or incline their ear, but stiffen their neck, that they might not hear and receive instruction. But if you listen to me, declares the Lord, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but keep the Sabbath day holy and do no work on it. Then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings and princes who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their officials, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And this city shall be inhabited forever. And people shall come from the cities of Judah and the places around Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin, from the Sheffala, from the hill country and from the Negev, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and frankincense, and bringing thank offerings to the house of the Lord. But if you do not listen to me, to keep the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden and enter by the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and shall not be quenched.

In Exodus chapter 31, the Sabbath is presented as the great sign of the covenant given at Sinai. It's a symbol of the people's liberation from slavery, but also a sign of their participation in the rest of the Lord from his creation. The Sabbath was the route from which all of the feasts of Israel were conjugated, the foundational feast. It was a day that was connected with solemn assemblies. It was a day in which servants and members of households should be given rest. It was a day for memorializing God's great deeds in the past. In these and other ways, the Sabbath was a condensed symbol of all that the covenant represented.

[7 : 14] Observing the Sabbath properly involved entering into the rest that the Lord had given to his people, spreading that rest to others, memorializing the great deeds of the Lord, assembling with the people of God to worship, and many other such things that exemplify the marriage of the justice and righteousness of the people, and the revelation of the Lord's salvation and righteousness that is spoken of in verse 1. In verse 3, we are introduced to two key figures, the foreigner and the eunuch.

Throughout scripture, we have examples of foreigners who join themselves to the people of God, perhaps most notably people like Rahab and Ruth. The eunuch is a figure that we do not encounter commonly. Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Jeremiah, is perhaps the most prominent, at least prior to Acts chapter 8. To any foreigner who might wonder whether they could ever be full members of the people of the Lord, and to any eunuch who might think that, on account of their being a eunuch, their name, memory, and legacy would be cut off, the Lord has words of encouragement and assurance. Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 1 restricts those who have their testicles crushed from entering into the assembly of the Lord. Yet here the Lord assures such persons that they will have a monument within his house, and that despite their inability to bring forth natural offspring, they would have a name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that would not be cut off. In this phraseology, we might see a call back to Isaiah chapter 55 verse 13, which spoke of an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. We might also think of ways in which the eunuch could be paralleled with the figure of the servant. The servant was cut off from the land of the living, and seemed to have no generation, yet he ended up seeing his seed. A similar assurance is given to the foreigner. He would be made a full participant within the worship of the people, and his worship and sacrifice would be accepted.

The Lord's house should be a house of prayer for all peoples. At the time of the temple's first dedication in 1 Kings chapter 8 verses 41 to 43, King Solomon had prayed, Likewise, when a foreigner who is not of your people Israel comes from a far country for your name's sake, for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm, when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name. Back in Isaiah chapter 49 verse 6, the Lord had declared his purpose to bring in the nations through the work of the servant. It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to bring back the preserved of Israel. I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. This expression of the Lord's purpose is reiterated in verse 8. In verse 9 to the end of the chapter, we have a surprising shift in the tone. There are also some challenging questions of interpretation.

Are the beasts of the field devouring the beasts in the forest, or are the beasts of the field and the beasts of the forest devouring something else? Perhaps the flock of Israel? Is the Lord explicitly summoning these, or is the Lord just describing their arrival? Are these foreign nations, or are they literal wild beasts that are devouring slain bodies? I am inclined to think of the beasts of the field as a broader reference to forces that would prey upon the flock of Israel. The watchmen of Israel are blind, and as a result cannot provide proper warning to the people. They are like sleepy guard dogs that cannot bark. In a cultural context, where dogs were seen as deeply unclean animals, this characterises them as, besides having no use, being defiling presences among the people. And what is worse, they are hungry creatures, constantly consuming, rather than feeding the flock. From dogs, we move to shepherds in the second half of verse 11. Shepherds with no understanding, who have rejected the true way, each turning after their own pleasure. They are described as decadent party-goers, rather than people that you would want to trust looking after the flock. There is no one awake, alert, and sober enough to raise an alarm for the people. A question to consider, how might this passage help us to read the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts chapter 8?