

Isaiah 60: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 60 Then you shall see and be radiant.

Your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. The wealth of the nation shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you.

The young camels of Midian and Ephah, all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you.

The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you. They shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house. Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows?

For the coastlands shall hope for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them. For the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has made you beautiful.

[1 : 24] Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you. For in my wrath I struck you. But in my favour I have had mercy on you. Your gates shall be open continually.

Day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish.

Those nations shall be utterly laid waste. The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plain, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary. And I will make the place of my feet glorious.

The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet. They shall call you the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, with no one passing through, I will make you majestic forever, a joy from age to age. You shall suck the milk of nations.

[2 : 21] You shall nurse at the breast of kings. And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your saviour and your redeemer, the mighty one of Jacob. Instead of bronze I will bring gold, and instead of iron I will bring silver.

Instead of wood, bronze. Instead of stones, iron. I will make your overseers peace, and your taskmasters righteousness. Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders.

You shall call your walls salvation, and your gates praise. The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light.

But the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself. For the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.

Your people shall all be righteous, they shall possess the land forever. The branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified. The least one shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation.

[3 : 27] I am the Lord. In its time I will hasten it. As our chapters 56 to 66, the larger division with which the book concludes, began with chapters 56 to 59, containing two loosely parallel sections, in chapters 56 and 57, and chapters 58 and 59.

In chapter 60, we move into the heart of this division, with messages of the Lord's redemption that will run up until the end of chapter 62. The reader of Isaiah will not infrequently encounter passages that allude back to previous ones, inviting them to re-read older texts in the light of newer ones.

For instance, chapter 60 seems to offer several points of comparison with Isaiah chapter 2, verses 1 to 4. The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it.

And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

[4 : 51] Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. However, in recognizing the similarities between the texts, we can also recognize some differences, throwing certain aspects of the text into a greater relief.

John Goldingay observes the fact that, while chapter 2 focuses upon the significance of the elevation of Zion for the nations, in chapter 60, the accent is more upon the significance of the coming of the nations for the city itself.

He writes, In Isaiah chapter 2, the nations come for instruction and conflict resolution. In Isaiah 60, they come to contribute to the city's wealth and worship. In Isaiah chapter 2, they come freely, and with the head held high.

In Isaiah chapter 60, they come bending low, as in Isaiah chapter 49. The chapter begins with a charge to Zion to arise and shine, as the glorious dawn of the Lord's salvation rises over them.

As the rising radiance of the Lord's glory sends forth its beams, bathed in its dazzling splendor, they are to reflect its light to the whole world that is sunk in darkness.

[5 : 55] In the previous chapter, Jacob was described in the darkness of its sins, in verses 9 and 10. Now, however, they are to become light bearers in the world in dark days, with the glory of the Lord's light shining forth from them, attracting nations and kings like moth, to a lamp.

A city once robbed of its children is now instructed to look all around, as, from every direction, their children return to it. This should remind us of the earlier account of the children's return, in chapter 49, verses 18 to 23.

Lift up your eyes around and see. They all gather, they come to you. As I live, declares the Lord, you shall put them all on as an ornament, you shall bind them on as a bride does.

Surely your waste and your desolate places and your devastated land, surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away. The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears, The place is too narrow for me, make room for me to dwell in.

Then you will say in your heart, Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these? Behold, I was left alone. From where have these come?

[7 : 24] Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations and raise my signal to the peoples, and they shall bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.

Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground, they shall bow down to you and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

Those who wait for me shall not be put to shame. As the nations come to Zion, they are returning her lost children with them. They are also bringing tribute with them, kingly gifts for Jerusalem and her temple.

Great caravans of camels from eastern lands will crowd the Judean hillsides, laden with precious treasures and animals for sacrifice, all of which will be accepted by the Lord as a token of his acceptance of them.

At the height of the kingdom under Solomon, the Queen of Sheba had come from afar to see the glories of Israel and Jerusalem. 1 Kings chapter 10 verse 2 describes this as follows. She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices and very much gold and precious stones.

[8 : 30] Once again, visitors from afar would travel to the land with their riches, further to glorify the now glorious city. In Genesis chapter 2, the Garden of Eden was like the heart of the world, with rivers going out to other lands, many of which contained precious metals and stones.

The implied intent was that humanity would go out into the world from the garden, and then bring the riches of the world back into the garden sanctuary in order to beautify it. During the reign of Solomon, Jerusalem became such a place to which the nations assembled with their treasures.

Israel became a rich trading nation, with a fleet of ships of Tarshish going out to distant shores to bring back wealth. Once again, we read in 1 Kings chapter 10, verses 22 to 25.

For the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years, the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks.

Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of them brought his present, articles of silver and gold, garments, myrrh, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year.

[9 : 44] The restored Zion, as described in Isaiah chapter 60, would remind the people of the great heights reached by the United Kingdom prior to Solomon's fall and the kingdom's division. A glorious past that seemed lost and beyond recovery would be restored, but not just restored, brought to a height that would exceed anything seen even in Solomon's days, all through the gracious work of the Lord.

Many Christians have seen in the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus with their gifts, a fulfilment in miniature of this great and glorious promise, and in part as a result of this, have presented them as kings riding on camels.

Jerusalem had once been battered by the armies of foreign nations, its walls breached and broken down. Now foreigners would come to build up the broken walls. As the foreign nations had been the instrument of the Lord's wrath upon his people in the past, now they would be the means of his restoration of them.

The gates of the city, typically closed at night to protect it from attack, would now never be closed, as the city was so secure. Indeed, there would be such a constant and unceasing stream of pilgrims from the nations that the gates would be left open continually.

Any nation that might come against them as an enemy would be destroyed in the Lord's wrath and judgment. In the days of Solomon, great trees of Lebanon were sent to Jerusalem to build the temple and other great palaces and buildings of the king.

[11 : 05] Whereas the earlier prophecies of Isaiah frequently spoke of the felling of great forests and the devastation of Lebanon's mighty cedars, now the heart of Jerusalem would become a place of great trees once more, a glorious forest of the Lord's planting.

The children of their former adversaries would now come to pay tribute to them and to submit to their rule, recognizing that the Lord was in their midst as the mighty king of Zion. The desolate and despised city would now be the delight of the nations, a glorious jewel of the Lord set in the earth, attracting the wonder of people far and near.

Once again, themes of earlier chapters reappear here. Chapter 49, verses 22 and 23. Thus says the Lord God, The mighty kings of foreign nations would be like wet nurses for the restored nation, a sign of how the Lord had exalted his people.

Already in the Lord's use of the great Cyrus and later kings of Persia to provide for the restoration of the temple and the city, we see some fulfillment of these promises. After the splendor of Solomon's reign, a time when gold and silver were plentiful in the land, the sins of the nation and its kings led to its riches being plundered, especially by Shishak, king of Egypt, during the reign of King Rehoboam.

Shishak had taken off the treasures of the king's house and the shields of gold that Solomon had made. King Rehoboam had replaced these with shields of bronze, a sign of the much diminished glory of the nation.

[12 : 56] In verse 17, the Lord promises his people that this loss of glory would be most markedly reversed and all of its building materials would be substituted for more costlier and glorious ones.

Whereas many of their leaders in the past, even some of the greatest of them had been harsh and oppressive overlords, now peace and righteousness would be the ones ruling over them. The violence and destruction that had formerly ravaged their land would be banished from its borders and the city would be surrounded with walls called salvation and praise.

Perhaps we could draw some parallel between this and Zechariah's description of a Jerusalem inhabited without walls. The chapter opened with the promise of the advent, the light of the Lord's glory and salvation.

Now the people are assured that this brilliant light would never fail or set in the sky, but would continue day and night, holding back all threats of the darkness, the light being nothing less than the Lord's own glory.

Perhaps we ought to consider connections between this and the pillar of fire that lit up the nights for Israel in the wilderness, but in a much more glorious and enduring form. As the city is transformed, so will be its people.

[14 : 04] They would be righteous, vindicated by the Lord, in right relationship with him and walking in uprightness before him. The precarious purchase that the people had once had upon the promised land would now be replaced by a confident and secure possession of it, planted firmly within it by the Lord.

This would all serve to glorify the Lord himself, the great assurance for Israel that, even despite its sin and unworthiness, the Lord would accomplish their salvation. Israel would be fruitful and multiply, so much so that each of Abraham's children would enjoy the blessing given to their forefather, even the least of them being made into a great nation.

This glorious future is guaranteed to the people by the Lord's own commitment, grounded in his unique identity as God alone. A question to consider.

What points of resemblance can you see between this prophecy and John's vision of the new Jerusalem in the book of Revelation?