

# Isaiah 63: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Isaiah chapter 63. Who is this who comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he who is splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength? It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save. Why is your apparel red, and your garments like his who treads in the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me. I trod them in my anger, and trampled them in my wrath. Their lifeblood spattered on my garments, and stained all my apparel. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and my year of redemption had come. I looked, but there was no one to help. I was appalled, but there was no one to uphold. So my own arm brought me salvation, and my wrath upheld me. I trampled down the peoples in my anger. I made them drunk in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth. I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely. And he became their saviour. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and in his pity he redeemed them.

He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. Therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them. Then he remembered the days of old, of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up out of the sea, with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put in the midst of them his Holy Spirit, who caused his glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, who led them through the depths? Like a horse in the desert, they did not stumble. Like livestock that go down into the valley, the Spirit of the Lord gave them rest. So you led your people to make for yourself a glorious name. Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful habitation, where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me. For you are our father. Though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us, you, O Lord, are our father. Our redeemer from of old is your name. O Lord, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. Your holy people held possession for a little while. Our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. We have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name. The final section of the book of Isaiah, running from chapter 56 to 66, can itself be subdivided into three major subsections, chapters 56 to 59, 60 to 62, and beginning here in chapter 63, the final subsection which runs until the end of chapter 66.

Several commentators have argued for a chiastic structure to this concluding section of the book, centring upon chapter 61. Within this section, these final chapters retrace dominant thematic steps back to the beginning of the section. John Goldingay, for instance, sees a return to visions of the Lord acting in judgment, previously seen at the end of chapter 59, at the beginning of chapter 63, and a return to prayers for forgiveness and restoration like those at the middle of chapter 59, in the second half of chapter 63, and into chapter 64. Some of the parallels between these sections should be quite apparent in the text itself. For instance, the parallel between the account of the Lord's judgment at the end of chapter 59, and that at the beginning of this chapter, can be illustrated in the connections between verses like chapter 59 verse 16, and verse 5 of this chapter. Chapter 59 verse 16 reads, He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede. Then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. Verse 5 of chapter 63 reads,

I looked, but there was no one to help. I was appalled, but there was no one to uphold. So my own arm brought me salvation, and my wrath upheld me. In both instances, the Lord, the divine warrior, looks and is appalled that there is no righteous man to assist him, and acts by his own arm and strength, being upheld by his own righteousness and wrath, respectively. Both sections describe the clothing of the Lord as the divine warrior, and his coming and vengeance. John Oswalt suggests that, given the chiastic structure, the order of the former section of chapters 56 to 59 is largely reversed in the later, which has the effect of shifting the accent of the material, whereas the former material had foregrounded the problem of the people's unfaithfulness and their inability, with the Lord's saving work being cast as the response to that, here the Lord's saving power is given greater prominence from the outset. While we should beware of overstating these shifts in accent, they are nevertheless noteworthy. While recognising such divisions and structuring to the material, we also need to appreciate the ways in which these sections continue from and connect to each other. While the text can be divided, it should not be fragmented or separated. Chapters 60 to 62 spoke of the restoration and salvation of Zion. Here we see the judgment upon the wicked that is the obverse of that salvation.

At several points, we can see points of connection in the themes and language between this chapter and that of the section that precedes it. For instance, in chapter 61 verse 2, the servant declared his mission to Proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God. Similar language, which isn't that common elsewhere, is taken up in verse 4.

[ 5 : 56 ] For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and my year of redemption had come. The description of the divine warrior in these verses is clearly alluded to in the New Testament in Revelation chapter 19 verses 13 to 15, where the imagery is applied to Christ.

He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. Many over church history, often squeamish of the imagery of Christ as the one shedding the blood of his foes, have sought to refer the fulfilment of Isaiah 63's image of the divine warrior to the shedding of Christ's own blood at the cross. Ben Witherington is surely correct, however, in arguing that the New Testament relates the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy to Christ's sanguinary judgement upon his foes, and the blood on his robes cannot be identified as the wearer's own. The prophecy seems to be told from the perspective of a watchman, espying a figure approaching from the south, from Edom and its capital, Bosra, dressed in splendid garments, and with the confident gait of a mighty warrior. Edom, of course, was the land of Esau, Jacob's twin. Situated to the south of Judah, within the book of Isaiah we have already seen it standing for the enemy nations more generally. The description of the judgment of Edom in Isaiah chapter 34 verses 5-9 plays such a role, Edom representing the opposing nations more broadly. That passage, in the conclusion of the earlier section of the book, prior to the narrative section, is surely recalled here. For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens.

Behold, it ascends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction. The Lord has a sword. It is sated with blood. It is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the Lord has a sacrifice in Bosra, a great slaughter in the land of Edom. Wild oxen shall fall with them, and young steers with the mighty bulls. Their land shall drink its fill of blood, and their soil shall be gorged with fat. For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion. And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulphur. Her land shall become burning pitch. The same imagery of the divine warrior, the language of the day of vengeance and the shedding of much blood, tie that earlier passage to our present one. The prominence of blood imagery and prophecies concerning Edom is likely in part a result of purposeful wordplay, as Edom, red and blood are words that sound alike in the Hebrew.

Another example of such a peculiar emphasis upon blood in a prophecy against Edom can be seen in Ezekiel 35. As Witherington observes, the symbolism of the scene is further filled out by the recognition of the importance of viticulture in Edom, and the similarity between the verbal route for grape gathering and the place named Basra. The watchman wonders at the identity of the figure that he sees, as by his appearance he is clearly a remarkable person. The Lord himself, who is the warrior, answers that he is the one, speaking in his righteousness and powerful to save his people. From a distance, the redness of the approaching warrior's garments is apparent, but the watcher might initially have thought that the warrior's clothing itself was red. When he gets closer, however, he sees that the garments are stained and spattered. Perhaps his garments have become reddened through treading the grapes on the winepress. The watchman inquires as to the cause of the redness of the warrior's glorious garments.

That the divine warrior should have allowed such splendid garments to become stained is surprising. The Lord answers this inquiry in verses 3 to 6. The cause of the garment's redness is the Lord's solitary act of judgment upon the peoples, trampling them and shedding their blood in his wrath and displeasure against them. In his anger, the Lord has taken matters in his hand, and without any to assist him, had in his might wrought vengeance upon the wicked and salvation for his servants. Developing further wine-related imagery, the Lord speaks of making the peoples drunk in his wrath. The common prophetic image, most fully developed in Jeremiah, of the poisoned cup of the Lord's wrath that causes the drinker to reel, stagger, and topple over. The final clause of verse 6 could be taken as referring either to bringing down the eminence of the people to the ground, or of pouring out their blood upon the earth.

[10:33] It would not surprise me if the double entendre were the intention, especially given the prominence of wine and blood imagery in the context. In verse 7, we turn from the presentation of the divine warrior to what seems to be a lament. In the rest of this chapter and the chapter that follows, the history of the nation will be recalled. A complaint or lament concerning the nation's current situation will be expressed. Confession will be made, followed by an appeal for divine action in forgiveness and deliverance. In the history of his dealings with his people, we see the power, the purposes, and the character of the Lord displayed. This is where we begin in verse 7. The speaker declares the praiseworthy love of the Lord, his goodness to his people.

All of these things displayed over the course of the people's history and in concrete events of deliverance. It is the election of the people that is first mentioned in verse 8. The Lord took Israel for himself. Surely they are my people. The Lord committed himself to be their guard. And as their reciprocating obligation, the people were to be faithful to him, to be his people, children who will not deal falsely. Throughout their history and all of their trials, the Lord acting as the father of his people was their saviour and redeemer. In claiming them for himself, he took on the responsibility of delivering them when they were in trouble.

The occasion for his redemption was their difficulties and the afflictions that they suffered. He redeemed them through the angel of his presence and according to his love and compassion upon them. The figure of the angel is mentioned at various points in the Old Testament text, though often as a shadowy figure who never comes fully into the centre of the stage.

We can think, for instance, of Exodus chapter 23, verses 20 and 21. Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice. Do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. The figure of the angel of the Lord's presence, the angel of the covenant or the angel of the Lord, is one that is often associated with the Lord's personal presence. We might think, for instance, of the story of Genesis chapter 18, where the angel of the Lord, when he speaks concerning the promise of the child to Abraham and Sarah, speaks as God himself. Likewise, in the appearance of the burning bush or the story of Joshua when he meets the commander of the army of the Lord. Throughout church history, people have, I believe rightly, related this figure to the second person of the Trinity, to the son prior to his incarnation.

The angel of the covenant is in many ways the son acting incognito. In Jesus Christ, we finally come face to face with the one who had been with Israel on every step of their journey. However, the people rebelled against the Lord, the one who had taken them for himself. He had placed his Holy Spirit within their midst, so that they might know his glory and his personal presence. The warning that we have in Ephesians chapter 4 verse 30, not to grieve the Holy Spirit by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption, might be seen as alluding back to this long history of grieving the Holy Spirit by the unfaithful people of the Lord. At points like this in the Old Testament, it should be very clear that the doctrine of the Trinity did not come like a bolt from a clear blue sky within the new. Core elements of the doctrine can already be seen in the united work of the Lord, the Father of his people, the angel of his presence, and the spirit that he has placed in the midst of them.

[13:57] Back in chapter 51 verses 9 to 11, the people had recalled the great salvation work of the Lord in the past. Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord! Awake as in days of old, the generations of long ago! Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. As in that earlier passage, here the great deliverance of the Exodus is recalled, and particularly the deliverance at the Red Sea. The people, described as a flock led by shepherds under the leadership of Moses, was led safely through the depths and brought up from the sea. The Lord's purpose through all of this was to make himself a glorious name, and to give rest to his people. We might perhaps hear in some of this passage allusions back to the original creation. The purpose of the salvation in part, as we see in the book of Hebrews, is so that the people can enter into the Sabbath of the Lord. Great themes of the creation can also be seen in the emphasis upon the depths, the division of the waters, and bringing things up out of the sea. We might also think about the prominence of the Holy Spirit here, as the one who's upon the surface of the waters, as the one who breathes into the people the breath of life as a nation, and as the one who gives rest as the Sabbath spirit. This all serves to illustrate the Lord's character, power, and purpose. When these things are recalled, the people can take renewed confidence, knowing that the Lord has not changed, even though their circumstances might have done.

They are still his flock, they are still his creation, and his intent is still to make his name glorious through and in them. There is a subtle allusion back to verse 11, in Hebrews chapter 13 verse 20. Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant. Sadly, in their current beleaguered position, the people feel that the Lord is far off. He is up in heaven, in his beautiful habitation, and they are struggling on the earth. They feel distanced and alienated from him. Where is the zeal and the power of the Lord that he formerly demonstrated on their behalf? Where is his steadfast love and his pity for his people? They may be the descendants of Abraham, but Abraham does not know them. He is not around to recognize them. Their true father is the Lord who called Abraham, and he is the one that they are looking to for salvation. He must act as their kinsman-redeemer. Indeed, he is identified by name as their redeemer. And yet, though he is their father, he has allowed them to stray. Their land, his land, is overrun. His temple and sanctuary have been trampled underfoot by their enemies, by his enemies.

To anyone looking, it might seem that they have been completely disowned by him, as if the Lord recognized no relationship between him and them. In this lament, the people are recalling both God and themselves as a people to the relationship that they share. He is their God, and they must once more think of themselves as his people. A question to consider, where else in the Old Testament might we find hints of the triune character of God?