

Isaiah 25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 25. O Lord, you are my God. I will exalt you. I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin. The foreigner's palace is a city no more. It will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will glorify you. Cities of ruthless nations will fear you. For you have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall, like heat in a dry place. You subdue the noise of the foreigners as heat by the shade of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is put down. On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth. For the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Behold, this is our God.

We have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord. We have waited for him. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain, and Moab shall be trampled down in his place, as straw is trampled down in a dunghill. And he will spread out his hands in the midst of it, as a swimmer spreads his hands out to swim. But the Lord will lay low his pompous pride together with the skill of his hands, and the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down, lay low, and cast to the ground, to the dust. Isaiah chapters 24 to 27 are an extended proclamation of the Lord's judgment upon the whole earth, punctuated by praise that responds to it. While we can imagine some of these chapters being occasioned by the judgments upon the whole earth, brought about through the Assyrians at the end of the 8th and beginning of the 7th centuries BC, it is general and non-specific in character, and one might just as well relate it to the later judgment upon the earth that came about through the Babylonians a century later. The figures in this section seem to stand for broader realities. The two opposed cities of the section are perhaps best understood as relating to the city of man and the city of God, rather than simply to particular cities like Babylon or Jerusalem.

Even when specific places are referenced, like Moab in this chapter, we should probably see them as more exemplary or representative of the nations more generally. Most importantly, within the more immediate horizons of the Lord's acts of judgment and redemption in history, the reader is invited to see a far greater final horizon prefigured, the time when the judgment and salvation of the Lord will be complete, death itself will be defeated, all enemies will be pacified, and the reign of the Lord spread throughout the world, his people triumphant and free, and worshippers from all nations gathered to the holy mountain. Chapter 25 is a chapter that speaks of cosmic restoration and renewal after the devastation and decreation described in chapter 24. Punctuating the pronouncements of the Lord's judgment and salvation in these chapters are responsive declarations of praise, verses 1 to 5 of chapter 25 being an example of this. Chapter 12 provided a similar song of praise, responding to the material relating to the earlier crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war. The language here is steeped in that of the Psalms and the scriptures more generally. The opening lines of the song might recall the words of Moses' song after the deliverance of the Red Sea in Exodus chapter 15 verse 2. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. This is my God, and I will praise him, my Father's God, and I will exalt him. Just as that song responded to the great deliverance and judgment of the Red Sea, so this song declares the Lord's greatness in the light of the judgment of the earth that he will bring about, much as the feast on the mountain that follows it might recall the covenant meal at Sinai in Exodus chapter 24. The singer expresses his devotion to the Lord and his commitment to exalt the Lord's name, the God who has acted powerfully for his deliverance. He gives reasons for his praise, the mighty deeds of the Lord, in accordance with his sure purposes of old. The Lord has declared his purposes and his judgments in advance, and he has brought them to pass. The Lord rules over the affairs of men and all of the events of history. He is never taken by surprise, he is never wrong-footed. His plans are not only certain, but also plans in which his faithfulness to his covenant and his people are displayed. A further reason for exalting the Lord is the fact that his judgments against his foes are decisive, and as the Lord displays his hand among the Gentiles, people of foreign nations fear and glorify his name, a common theme in the book of Isaiah. As the Lord's judgments go out to the nations, the Lord's salvation is also extended to them. The Lord is a God who is near to the poor, the needy, and all those in distress. He is a refuge for those who are oppressed. He is like a fortress and a stronghold for them, one to whom they can flee for safety, but also a shade and a shelter against hostile elements. The furious blast of the cruel violence and oppression of the wicked against the weak and the vulnerable is quelled by the protection of the Lord, who is like the relief of the shade of a cloud on a burning hot day, or like a wall that shields people from the anger of a storm. The previous chapter had described the failure of the vine harvest, the stilling of feasts, the cutting off of the wine, and the banishing of gladness from the people. Now, however, a bountiful banquet of wine is prepared for all of the nations. The mountain here, like the cities, isn't identified, although it is presumably the cosmic mountain to which all of the nations is assembled, to be identified with the mountain of Zion that is lifted up over all of the other mountains, described in places like chapter 2 verses 1 to 4. It is a celebration of the Lord's kingship, albeit not a coronation as some have claimed. The feast is not exclusive to Israel, but is one to which all of the peoples are invited.

After the dark storm clouds of cruel oppression, war and mourning have been removed, that mountain will be a place for the breaking forth of joy and gladness. Nothing less than the removal and swallowing up of death is in view. All hurts will be harmed, every tear wiped away, mourning, sorrow and pain will be removed, and the disgrace of the Lord's oppressed people will be taken away. Once again, the certainty of this is founded upon the certainty of the Lord's word. In the deliverance of Judah from the Assyrian crisis, and then later on in their return to the land after the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians, the mourning veil that would be associated with times of pestilence, famine and war is removed as the nation does not suffer from the same untimely deaths. In such deliverances from mourning, the people of the Lord would have an anticipation of a greater deliverance yet to come, not merely a deliverance from times of war and disaster, but a more complete deliverance from death in all of its forms. In such a deliverance, the confidence of faithful people in the Lord would be vindicated.

They had trusted and hoped in him, and he had delivered them, and now they will rejoice in his salvation. The final three verses of the chapter describe a contrast between the mountain of the Lord, upon which the hand of the Lord rests in blessing and protection, and the near-neighbor Moab, presumably symbolizing unfaithful nations, who will be brought low and humiliated.

[8 : 02] Moab will be akin to straw trampled down in dung. Verse 11 describes Moab as akin to someone swimming to try to escape a cesspool, yet his efforts to escape will fail. His pride will be utterly humiliated.

All of this is seen in the failure of Moab's cities and defences, their fortifications brought down and crumbled to dust. A question to consider, how can we relate the image of the defeat of death in this chapter, with images of resurrection within the New Testament?