

Isaiah 61: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 61. The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, to grant to those who mourn in Zion, to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit, that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations, they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks, foreigners shall be your ploughmen and vinedressers, but you shall be called the priests of the Lord. They shall speak of you as the ministers of our God. You shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory you shall boast. Instead of your shame, there shall be a double portion. Instead of dishonour, they shall rejoice in their lot. Therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion, they shall have everlasting joy. For I the Lord love justice. I hate robbery and wrong. I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their offspring shall be known among the nations, and their descendants in the midst of the peoples. All who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord.

My soul shall exult in my God. For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness. As a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations. In Luke chapter 4, Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, applying the reading to himself. The passage that Jesus reads from Isaiah is fundamental for Luke's portrayal of Jesus and his mission, and as Ben Witherington observes, it also seems to inform Luke's structuring of some of the episodes that he records. In its original context in Isaiah chapter 61, the passage is at the centre of a series of messages concerning salvation, running from chapter 60 to chapter 62. Some commentators, recognising similarities between it and the earlier passages termed the servant songs, have argued that it should be regarded as the fifth such song.

Considering the way that Old Testament prophecy can have multiple reference, we should be cautious of the position that Jesus' application of this passage to himself straightforwardly settles such questions.

Nevertheless, within the book of Isaiah itself, it seems natural to connect the speaker in the first three verses of this chapter with the figure of the servant that we have already encountered. As in these verses, in Isaiah chapter 42 verses 1 to 4, the servant is described as chosen and anointed by the Lord's Spirit for a mission of liberation and justice. Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlands wait for his law. Further parallels could be observed between the figure with which chapter 61 opens, and the portrayal of the servant in chapter 49. The one anointed by the Spirit in this chapter is seemingly the one through whom the Lord is going to accomplish his saving purpose described in the surrounding material, much as the servant in the preceding section of the book.

[4 : 05] Many commentators, both past and contemporary, have identified the speaker here as the prophet himself, not unnaturally considering the first person singular forms that are used. John Goldingay, for instance, in keeping with his understanding of the servant material more generally, understands the speaker in such a manner. The prophet is describing his commission as a herald of God's salvation, whose delivering of the message of the advent of the Lord's righteousness is part of the means by which it is put into effect. Yet, even though we might reasonably see some resemblance to the prophet here, identifying the figure as the prophet leaves us with some challenging questions too.

As Gary Smith argues, for instance, the figure here seems to be operating within the eschatological era that is being described in these chapters, unless, like Goldingay, we more generally associate the figure of the servant with the prophet. The parallels between the account here and those of the servant in previous chapters will also weigh against an identification with the prophet. On the other hand, even as we recognise the similarities, we ought also to recognise the differences between the description of the figure here and earlier descriptions of the servant. The servant's work and suffering was earlier emphasised, but the figure here is principally the bearer of glad and liberating tidings. His character as a prophetic messenger is more central. The message of the figure here and its effects do, however, resemble some of the effects that the work of the servant is elsewhere presented as having. There are several examples in scripture of figures anointed by the Spirit of God. This is similar to the way that the Lord's empowering of kings, judges and rulers for their extraordinary missions is spoken of in certain places in scripture. The equipping of prophets for their vocations is also presented in terms of the anointing of the Spirit at various junctures. And in terms of content, the mission of the figure described here, whom I believe we should identify with the servant, seems to find its closest comparisons in the missions of the prophets on account of its emphasis upon proclamation. The task of the servant is to declare the good news, or gospel, to the poor, liberty to the captives, the cancellation of debts to those labouring under them, the Lord's vengeance to the cruelly oppressed, comfort to the mourners, and restoration and divine favour to those longing for the nation's healing. While some commentators are dubious of any allusion to the jubilee here, as they maintain there is limited evidence that the year of jubilee was ever practised in Israel's civic life, the prominence of the motif of jubilee and sabbath year in pre-exilic and exilic prophetic material undermines claims of its unimportance. These themes were important in the understanding of the original deliverance from Egypt, an entrance into the promised land, so even if we might not see them as dominant themes, it should not surprise us to see some allusions to them, as people consider the possibility of a new exodus. The servant heralds a dramatic reversal of the people's fortunes, from bondage to glorious liberty, from mourning to joy, and from weakness to strength. The visitation of God to his people, the day of the Lord as it is termed elsewhere, involves the two-sided reality of blessing, salvation and vindication for the righteous, and vengeance and destruction upon the adversaries and the wicked. As the anointed servant heralds the time of the Lord's redemption, the mourners in Zion will be transformed. Festal garments will replace mourning clothes and ashes.

Like the servant, they too would be anointed with oil, as if being prepared for joyous celebration. Those whose spirits once languished in gloom would now be dressed for praise. The weak and unstable nation, once cut down to the stump and later utterly uprooted, now planted by the Lord, it will become as secure as an oak. Such prophecies of salvation frequently conclude with an explanation of the fact that the driving purpose of the Lord's salvation is that he might be glorified, and this is no exception. There is comfort for the people to be found in the fact that, even if there are no grounds for salvation in themselves, the Lord's saving intent does not ultimately depend upon any faithfulness or merit on their part, but purely upon the Lord's gracious initiative in taking them as his own people. Andrew Abernathy makes the point that, where Isaiah elsewhere talks about good news, the encouraging news is that of the Lord's return to his people and his reign among them. Chapter 40, verse 9.

Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, behold your God. Chapter 52, verse 7 is another important instance of the deliverance of a message of good news. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, your God reigns. The previous chapter described the rebuilding of the ruins of Zion and the glorification of the now abject city. This motif reappears here in verse 4. The cities of Israel had been buffeted by many waves of invasion and oppression and, in the time of the Lord's visitation, generations of devastation are going to be overcome. People of foreign nations, under whose yoke Israel might once have suffered, would now join themselves to the Lord's people, tending their flocks and working in their vineyards, wanting to get closer to a people manifestly blessed by the Lord. The Israelites would be elevated to the status of priests of the

Lord, ministers of the Lord to the nations. We might think of the ways in which the status of the Levites and priests within Israel could be compared with the status and place of Jews among the nations.

[9 : 41] The riches of the nations, which they were bringing into Zion in chapter 60, would feed and glorify the righteous of Zion. Zion, which had received from the Lord's hand double for all of its sins, would now enjoy the blessed double portion of the firstborn son, enjoying honour where once it had suffered shame, and joy for its former sorrow. The Lord is a God who loves justice and righteousness and hates wickedness.

The righteous character of the Lord motivates his saving action. His love of justice means that he will set things to rights. He will vindicate and reward the righteous and judge the wicked. He will even establish a wayward people in righteousness when they fail to respond to him, all in order to fulfil his great purpose and to make an everlasting covenant with them. In all the promises of the Lord here, we might see the fulfilment of the Lord's promises first given to Abraham and his intent that, through Abraham, all of the nations would be blessed. In Abraham's seed, the Lord would reveal his hand and salvation in the sight of all the peoples. While the Lord was speaking in verses 8 and 9, in verse 10 a different voice enters. Isaiah's prophecies often have a distinctively dramatic character to them, with alternation between different voices, whose identities are not always clearly signalled within the text, leaving hearers to speculate on the matter. We could perhaps hear the voice here as that of Zion, clothed in the Lord's salvation, with such as John Oswalt. Making a case for such a reading, Goldengay warns the reader to beware of allowing the chapter division to dull them to the connection between this statement and that which follows it, with which he argues it ought to be read. The voice is either that of the personified community or of a person speaking as its representative.

John Watts, as he often is, is an outlier on this question, speculating that the solo voice with which the chapter opens might even be that of Ezra, while leaning towards identifying the voice in its final verses with Artaxerxes. Alternatively, with Brevard Charles, Gary Smith and Alec Mottier, we might see the figure here as the same as the prophetic figure with which the chapter begins, confirmed in the Lord's assurance of the success of his mission. The figure is, they argue, clothed much as the Lord clothed himself for his mission in chapter 59 verses 16 and 17.

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. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head. He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. Paul Hansen presents a reading that mediates between certain of the other proposals, seeing both the eye at the start of the chapter and the eye here as that of the prophet, but argues that the prophet is speaking on his own behalf concerning his mission in the former, and for and with Zion in the latter. Our identification of the speaker at the beginning of the following chapter will also weigh in the question of the identity of the speaker here.

On balance, I lean towards seeing the speaker as the same as the anointed one at the beginning of the chapter, the one bringing the Lord's righteousness to Zion, but also standing as a representative of Zion, receiving blessings that he hopes to share with the entire people.

[12 : 54] The figure compares himself to a bridegroom, priest, and bride in his glorious dress and adornment. The selection of images invites the hearers to recognise wedding themes, and perhaps also to recognise different aspects of the salvation that is being spoken of. For instance, Israel is like a priestly bridegroom who is dressed for redeeming ministry, and also like a bride being made beautiful by the Lord. The clothes of salvation are both garments beautifying the wearer, and glorious garments by which the wearer is invested into the high honour of appointed divine service. Like fertile earth brings forth its fruit, so the Lord himself will bring forth the fruit of righteousness and praise before all the nations. The Lord is the ground of his people's blessing, and all who are firmly planted in him will never be barren, but will be bountiful in bringing forth their fruit.

A question to consider. Imagery of clothing is prominent in this chapter, as in places like chapter 59. How might the clothing of the high priest help us to understand some of the symbolism of clothing more generally, and in this chapter in particular?