

Isaiah 50: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 50. Thus says the Lord, Where is your mother's certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you?

Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away. Why, when I came, was there no man? Why, when I called, was there no one to answer?

Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold, by my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a desert, their fish stink for lack of water, and die of thirst.

I clothe the heavens with blackness, and make sackcloth their covering. The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary.

Morning by morning he awakens, he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious. I turned not backward. I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard.

[1 : 0 5] I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. But the Lord God helps me, therefore I have not been disgraced. Therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.

He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord God helps me. Who will declare me guilty?

Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment. The moth will eat them up. Who among you fears the Lord, and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light, trust in the name of the Lord, and rely on his God.

Behold all you who kindle a fire, who equip yourselves with burning torches. Walk by the light of your fire, and by the torches that you have kindled. This you have from my hand.

You shall lie down in torment. In Isaiah chapter 49, Zion was spoken of as a widowed woman who had lost her children. Yet in the Lord's grace her children were restored to her, and her land, once vacant and barren, so filled with her restored offspring, that there was barely space to contain them.

[2 : 1 6] Chapter 50 addresses, Not a mother, but the children of a mother, who wonder whether she has been rejected and cut off. In Deuteronomy chapter 24, verses 1-4, provision is made for cases of divorce, by which a man could send away a wife deemed unfaithful, by writing her a certificate of divorce.

Jeremiah chapter 3, verse 8, also compares the Lord's rejection of the northern kingdom of Israel, to such a decree of divorce. However, the question of the Lord to his people here is where, if he has indeed utterly cast them off, their mother's certificate of divorce is.

Where is the evidence that he has so rejected her? Another possible situation where a woman was cut off from her husband, was where the family was in such terrible debt, that members had to be sold into slavery until the debt was repaid.

Yet the Lord clearly does not have creditors to be repaid. The Lord is not anyone's debtor, nor has he committed any wrong for which he must make restitution. The explanation for the sending away of Zion is solely to be found in the people's own sin.

The Lord is disciplining his people for their iniquity and rebellion, but the fundamental relationship between the Lord and his people has not ended. The people's belief might be that this communication breakdown was on the Lord's side.

[3 : 32] However, the Lord's follow-up questions explode this perception. The Lord asks why, when he came, no one was to be found, and why, when he addressed them, no one responded.

It's not as if the Lord was silent in his relationship with Israel. He persistently addressed his wayward people through the prophets, for instance, yet without response. Perhaps they simply don't believe that the Lord is able to redeem or deliver them.

This would be a strange belief indeed. Their God is the one who can dry up the seas and the rivers, much as he did in the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. He is the master of the very stars in the heavens, of both the chaotic forces of the deep and the great powers of the celestial heavens.

Both the deep and the heavens often provide symbols of earthly powers. In declaring his sovereignty over these realms, the Lord is also declaring his sovereignty over analogous human powers.

He is the sovereign, both in the abyss of exile and in the throne room of kings. Zion has been unresponsive and resistant to the word of the Lord, her divine husband. However, in verses 4-9, the voice of the servant, the one who is faithful where Israel was not, the one who would be the means of bringing back Jacob, is heard once more in the third of the so-called servant songs.

[4 : 48] His is the voice of one who is faithful and responsive to the word of the Lord, one who hears and obeys. He is the exemplar of faithfulness to an unfaithful nation.

If Israel, in going after idols, became progressively more like them, unresponsive, insensible, immobile and hardened, hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving, the servant, in his responsiveness to the Lord, is quickened in his senses and enlivened in his capacities.

His tongue is equipped for action, perhaps recalling the way that his tongue was compared to a sharp sword in the preceding chapter. We might also think of the way that Isaiah's lips were prepared for bearing the word of the Lord back in chapter 6, with one of the seraphim touching his lips with a burning coal.

Having been taught, the servant is able to speak with wisdom and skill in a manner that sustains and revives others. Each morning, the Lord opens the ear of the servant as that of an attentive disciple.

In contrast to the nation, the servant is neither rebellious nor turns back from the Lord's instruction. In the preceding chapter, in verse 7, the servant was described as one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers, and as lamenting that he had laboured in vain, and spent his strength for nothing and vanity.

[6 : 08] In verse 4, the suffering of the rejected and mistreated servant comes into clearer view in verse 6 here. The servant submits to cruel and shameful treatment, treatment that was intended, not merely to cause pain, but deeply to dishonour.

We are not told more about what occasioned this mistreatment, nor those who showed it. However, the servant faithfully endures it, confident in the Lord's vindication. The description of the suffering yet resolute servant, with his face set like flint before his persecutors, is similar to that of suffering, rejected, and cruelly treated prophets such as Jeremiah.

As part of his call in Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 17 to 19, the Lord tells Jeremiah what he is to expect. But you, dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you.

Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.

They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. In this, as in other respects, the suffering servant should be seen as being in continuity with the prophets, and not merely as a royal sufferer.

[7 : 29] While I do not believe that John Goldingay and others who identify the servant with the anonymous prophet, who supposedly wrote what is called Deutero-Isaiah, are correct in that identification, they are not mistaken in recognizing the prophetic character of the figure.

The confidence of the servant in the teeth of such opposition is found in his assurance of the Lord's vindication. If the Lord is with him, what adversary or accuser could ultimately be successful against him?

No matter how many or how powerful his opponents, they cannot withstand the sovereign power and justification of the Lord himself. The legal overtones of the conflict here should not be missed.

The Apostle Paul almost certainly alludes to this passage in Romans chapter 8, verses 31 to 34, where he writes, What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?

[8 : 30] It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, who was raised. Who is at the right hand of God. Who indeed is interceding for us.

Paul proceeds to compare Christians to those regarded as sheep to be slaughtered in the verses that follow this, probably referencing the next servant's song of chapter 52 verse 13 to chapter 53 verse 12.

This suggests that Paul sees the fulfilment of the prophecies of Isaiah here, not merely in Christ himself, but also in his people. In the concluding verses of the chapter, the servant's speech ends and another voice enters, perhaps that of the prophet.

The people are addressed, asking which of them fears the Lord, the fundamental posture of reverence that is at the beginning of wisdom, who obeys the voice of his servant, much as the servant himself heeds and observes the word of the Lord.

Those who do should follow the servant's example, trusting the Lord in the darkness, awaiting the vindication of the Lord's promised dawn. Their justification and deliverance would come in its due time.

[9 : 36] In stark contrast, all of those who kindle their own fires, seeking alternatives to the Lord's vindication, in idolatry, sorcery, trust in worldly powers and other such things, are sarcastically told that they should walk by their light.

However, they are warned that they will thereby end up in torment. A question to consider. Where, prior to the day of Isaiah, might hearers of this prophecy have looked to for examples of suffering servants of the Lord?

