

Isaiah 52: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 52. Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion. Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city. For there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean. Shake yourself from the dust and arise. Be seated, O Jerusalem. Loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter of Zion. For thus says the Lord, you were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money. For thus says the Lord God, my people went down at the first into Egypt to sojourn there, and the Assyrian oppressed them for nothing. Now therefore, what have I here, declares the Lord, seeing that my people are taken away for nothing? Their rulers wail, declares the Lord, and continually all the day my name is despised. Therefore my people shall know my name.

Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak. Here I am. 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 voice of your watchmen, they lift up their voice. Together they sing for joy. For eye to eye they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem. For the Lord has comforted his people. He has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. Depart, depart, go out from there. Touch no unclean thing. Go out from the midst of her. Purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord. For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight. For the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rearguard. Behold, my servant shall act wisely. He shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you, his appearance was so marred beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind, so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him. For that which has not been told them, they see, and that which they have not heard, they understand. In Isaiah chapter 52, the section that began in verse 9 of the preceding chapter continues until verse 12. In verse 9 of that chapter, the people had called upon the Lord to awake, recalling his mighty deeds of old in the Exodus, and also repeating the words of the Lord's promise that crowned chapter 35 at the climax of that earlier body of prophecies. In his response to them in verse 17, the Lord had reassured them of his coming deliverance, responding to their petition that he awake, by charging them to awake, to awake from their stupor of judgment, and to brace themselves for his coming redemption. Chapter 52 also opens with another summons to awake, addressed again to Zion by the Lord. It perfectly echoes and answers the people's summons to him in the preceding chapter. Awake, awake, put on strength. It is the people who are really the ones that need to prepare themselves. Zion, drunk with the cup of the Lord's judgment, lying in the filth of her exile for her sins, is instructed not merely to get up, but to prepare herself for exaltation and the Lord's glorious visitation, clothing herself with strength and beauty

The splendor and majesty of Jerusalem as the royal city, and of Zion as the Lord's bride, will be restored. Released from the defilement of the uncircumcised and the unclean, she would appear in her true God-given radiance, appearing as the Lord himself sees her. John Goldingay observes the contrast between the city of Babylon, which in chapter 47 verse 1 was instructed to vacate its throne, and come down and sit in the dust, and Zion, which is to stand up and shake off the dust, and be seated on its throne. These two cities, as at the end of Revelation, are juxtaposed, the elevation of the one corresponding to the humiliation of the other. The liberation of Zion is something that she is called to enter fully into. As she is released, she must arise and loose her bonds. She is going to be elevated to rule in the Lord's grace. She must dress and comport herself accordingly. In chapter 50 verse 1, the Lord had asked his people, 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. The Lord had neither utterly cast off his people in divorce, nor had he sold them to some third party to pay his debts. In verse 3 of this chapter, the Lord returns to this point.

There was no third party involved to whom the Lord had to pay her redemption. He would deliver them without having to pay a debt or ransom to any other party. At the dawn of their history as a nation, Israel had been delivered from the oppression of Egypt, where they had freely gone to sojourn in the time of Joseph. How much more would the Lord deliver his people when they were forcibly taken by foreign powers like Assyria and Babylon against their will, and not in payment of any debt that the Lord owed those nations? To the watching peoples and rulers, it might appear that the Lord had been outmatched by rival gods. They had destroyed his temple and stripped him of his people, leading them all to blaspheme his name. The Lord, however, will vindicate his name against all such adversaries, proving his name to his people in the watching world. Monotheism isn't an abstract theological proposition, but a truth that will be demonstrated on the stage of history. This section is concluded in verses 7 to 12 with a moving poetic portrayal of Zion's redemption. The watchmen in the hard-pressed city desperately scan the horizon, hoping for signs of relief. Suddenly one of them raises his voice to the others, pointing out a figure faintly visible on one of the hillsides facing the city, running towards them. As this figure approaches, they recognise that the man is one of their heralds. He is bringing tidings of their deliverance, of the victory of their god over their adversaries. As he nears the gate of the city, perhaps he waves his arms and calls out to the eager watchmen, telling them the joyful news, your god reigns. The watchmen erupt in joyful shouts and songs, spreading the glad news to the entire city. The city, once devastated but now released, is invited to join in the song. The Lord's sovereignty has been publicly demonstrated in his deliverance of them and the overthrowing of all of their oppressors. He has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, as verse 10 puts it. All this recalls chapter 40 verses 9 to 11, where a similar scene is described.

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. Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him. Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. The scene is portrayed from the vantage point of Zion, but the exiles of the people are also addressed in verses 11 and 12. These verses recall chapter 48 verses 20 and 21.

[7 : 33] Go out from Babylon. Flee from Chaldea. Declare this with a shout of joy. Proclaim it. Send it out to the end of the earth. Say, The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob. They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts. He made water flow for them from the rock. He split the rock, and the water gushed out.

The exiles are exhorted to leave the land of their exile and to return, in a new exodus-like event. Their return would not be a desperate flight, however, from a pursuing adversary, as in the departure from Egypt. While there would be similarities to the exodus, in their enjoyment of the protection and presence of the Lord, they would be a peaceful and joyful procession, returning to the land with no enemies threatening to harm them. In the concluding three verses of this chapter, the fourth, and by most reckonings, the final of the servant songs begins. It is here that the figure of the servant comes in to clearest view. The introduction, Behold my servant, is the same as that of chapter 42 verse 1.

The servant is one in whom the Lord's hand will be revealed. Through him the Lord will demonstrate his sovereignty. The servant is also the true messenger of the Lord, the one who attends to the Lord and speaks his words wisely and faithfully. This passage concerning the servant begins by speaking of his exaltation. Although the path to exaltation will pass through the deepest suffering and mistreatment, he would be lifted up at the last. The servant would astonish everyone. While one might expect the anointed servant of the Lord to have the charm and beauty of David, the servant is disfigured and disgraced, not someone who seems in the depths of his humiliation to be marked out for his exaltation.

The term that the ESV translates as sprinkle in verse 15 has been rendered as startles by many commentators, underlining the surprise and astonishment that the figure of the servant provokes in these verses. Goldingay, however, argues that we should understand it as spattering.

The spattering of the nations might be related to the expiation that the servant will accomplish. The servant would be an epiphany for the rulers of the nations, an unveiling of the Lord's purpose and arm, leading them to stand in an awestruck silence at the majesty of the Lord and the greatness of his deliverance wrought through this servant. A question to consider, how is the image of the herald of good tidings in this chapter and in chapter 40 taken up in the New Testament?