

Exegesis of Isaiah 61 & 62

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Thesis: We are the tools God will use to reshape the world in which we live.

The reason God interacts with the world is to draw all of mankind toward a relationship with him. One of the primary ways God builds relationships with people is through those who already have a relationship with God. God calls each of us in relationship with him, regardless of our earthly past, to reach out to the lost of this world. God promises that all who seek a relationship with him will find it and God is a faithful God who will never go back on his promise.

Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else on earth is righteous; rather righteousness is something that God develops within each person once we are in a relationship with God. As God grows this righteousness it will affect how the world sees us. As God shapes and changes us we must bathe all of our activities in prayer. The work we are called to do, as children of God, is to reveal God to the world around us. We can be confident in this work that God will save all those who turn to him.

Contextual Analysis

The nation of Israel had divided into a northern and southern kingdom following Solomon's rule in approximately 930 BCE[1]. The first ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel was Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12:1-20). The first ruler of the southern kingdom of Judah was Rehoboam who was Jeroboam's brother. Judah would continue a succession of kings in the line of David until approximately 586 BCE when the Babylonian occupation was complete.

The eighth century BCE was a time of turmoil for the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Assyria, a nation northeast of Israel, began to rise to power in the twelfth century and was a constant threat to Israel until the middle of the ninth century. In 853 BCE Assyria lost a significant battle at Qarqar that sent them into a state of decline for the next century[2]. During this decline of Assyria the kingdoms of Israel and Judah experienced one of their greatest periods of political and economic stability.

However, the stability of the two kingdoms was not to last. From 743-738 BCE the Assyrian monarch Tiglath-Pileser began a campaign of westward expansion[3]. King Menahem of Israel attempts to thwart this expansion by paying a tribute to Assyria (2 Kings 15:19-20). Eventually, Assyria took over the kingdom of Israel, as well as most of the eastern Mediterranean. Assyria may have encouraged Hoshea to assassinate Peka to become Israel's last king; Hoshea would die in approximately 732 BCE[4].

The Assyrian conquest of Israel was a concern for Judah and Jerusalem herself was held under siege for a time around 700 BCE, but Judah never fell to Assyria. As a result of Hezekiah's revolt in 705 BCE much of Judah's land and human capital was taken over and Judah would never fully overcome this deficit. It seems that by the reforms of Josiah in 621 BCE Judah was

once again a fully independent state and would remain so until she was conquered by the Babylonians in 587 BCE[5].

Isaiah's ministry fell against this violent background. According to Isaiah 1:1, Isaiah ministered during the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Using these kings we can thereby date the visions and ministry of Isaiah to the years between 740 and 700 BCE[6]. It is important to note that these are the years during which the kingdom of Israel is coming to an end and the kingdom of Judah is under threat from the surrounding armies.

Regardless if one considers the whole of the text of Isaiah to be written by a single person or multiple authors it is important to note that Isaiah 1-39 is written with a different audience in mind than is Isaiah 40-66. The first half of the book of Isaiah is written for the people of Isaiah's day; that is an eighth century BCE Israelite living in Jerusalem under the constant threat of an Assyrian invasion. This was the situation in which Isaiah found himself. The second half of the book is written for an audience living in exile; that is an audience of post-587 BCE Jews who are not living in the traditional lands of Israel or Judah, but in the land of Babylon.

The first verse of the book of Isaiah attributes that which follows to "Isaiah son of Amoz." Until recently there was little criticism of this view. Beginning in the eighteenth century scholars began to divide Isaiah into two sections; the first section being chapters 1-39 and the second section being 40-66. This division was made using three different arguments. First, it is argued that the chapters 1-39 presume a setting of Jerusalem while the second half presumes a post-exilic audience. Second, it is argued that there are different theological motifs in the two sections; most notably the messianic king of the first section and the suffering servant of the second. Third, it is argued that there are linguistic and stylistic differences with the second half being more poetic and lyrical than the first[7][8].

Ultimately, the idea that there is some kind of division or seam that occurs between chapters 39 and 40 is not as hotly a contested issue as are the implications of the existence of that seam. Some would argue that this seam represents the start of a second author's work. This argument enables the scholar to explain the prophetic nature of the second half of Isaiah without the necessity of Isaiah actually predicting future events. If there is a second author in Isaiah, then the text would be explained in a purely rationalistic manner.

For many biblical scholars, and nearly all conservative scholars, there is no need to insinuate a second author into the text of Isaiah[9]. However, there are many biblical scholars who have no conflict with a second, third or fourth author or editor who added on to the original text of Isaiah continuing the themes and motifs originated by the prophet Isaiah.

While this is an important discussion, there is, at present, no truly definitive answer. There seems to be reason enough to detect a seam in the text at the end of chapter 39. But to claim that this seam requires a new author is a questionable assertion. It is more likely that this second half was written at a different period in the life of Isaiah and with a different audience in mind; a future audience.

Isaiah 61:1-3

The introduction of Isaiah 61-62 announces that the Spirit of God has come upon Isaiah in order that God may be glorified. The Lord has anointed and sent Isaiah with a special message to a broken people. These people are described as being afflicted, brokenhearted, captive, prisoners, in mourning. But the message Isaiah has will point them toward the year of the Lord and toward Zion, where their suffering will turn toward joy. God has sent and anointed Isaiah so that those who look forward to the day of the Lord will be called “oaks of righteousness” planted by the Lord himself.

An important theological truth comes out in this first paragraph. The truth that those who listen to God’s messengers, allow those messengers to work, and turn toward the message God brings will be pillars of righteousness built up and cared for by God himself. God comes into the world to draw the world toward him.

Isaiah 61:4-7

The next paragraph of the Isaiah pericope reflects upon the work those who have returned to the Lord will undertake. This section opens with the word “Then” suggesting that the following action will occur only after those who have been broken have been drawn back to and repaired by the Lord. Once the Lord has repaired and built them up to be “oaks of righteousness”, then the people will begin to repair the city. It seems likely that this ruined city being restored is the city of Jerusalem, the city of the Lord. There seems to be something of an attitude of reciprocal restoration; God restores the people, the people restore the city.

Starting in verse 6 a new and unexplained pronoun enters the picture: the pronoun “you.” The pronoun “they” of verses 3-4 seems to represent those who will be returning to the city of Jerusalem from foreign lands. Therefore, by contrast, it would make sense for “you” to be directed to those who will have been left in and around Jerusalem and sent into exile. This would also make sense if we consider this to be Isaiah writing about a future people (they) but reading the text to a present people (you).

This paragraph concludes in verse 7 by assuring both groups of people (both you and they) that each will receive blessing. Instead of shame or humiliation all of those who turn toward and follow the will of God will receive a generous portion and everlasting joy. God blesses those who follow his leading regardless of where they start from.

Isaiah 61:8-9

God is a faithful God who will return those who have been scattered to himself. The Lord is just. Those who look to the Lord and return to his ways will receive recompense and an everlasting covenant with the Lord. God promises that he will not separate his people from him forever, but will give them the opportunity to return to him and receive the blessing of the Lord. It is interesting to note that these offspring whom the Lord has blessed are those that have returned (they), rather than those who never left (you).

The Lord is just and faithful and will go back on neither his promises nor his covenants.

Isaiah 61:10-11

Those who follow the will of the Lord will receive salvation and live in righteousness. This righteousness is not the work of the individuals, but rather the work of the Lord who plants it in the person and allows it to grow. Because of this gift God is worthy of praise.

A man is not righteous; rather, God grows the righteousness in a man.

Isaiah 62:1-5

In the first paragraph of chapter 62 Isaiah sees the future Jerusalem serving as a visible sign of God's righteousness and salvation to the entire world. It is for this reason that the rebuilding of Jerusalem in 61:4-5 is so important. The importance of Jerusalem as the beacon of God's promises, righteousness, and salvation will be the predominant theme for the next two paragraphs (vv 6-10).

It is important at this time to ask if Isaiah is truly speaking of the rebuilding of Jerusalem by Nehemiah or if he is speaking more metaphorically about an even future time. Could it be that Isaiah is speaking of a post-messianic period? Could it be that the new name "you" will be called is referring to the faith that would come after the Jews? It may be too much to suggest that this is a reference to Christianity or that the allusion to marriage (v 5) is an allusion to Christ, but it is worth considering.

It is comforting to note that God not only enables the salvation and grows the righteousness of his people, but he also changes how they are perceived by the outside world. Changing a person's name, what they are called, is a tremendous change. There is great power in a name. Our trust in God will affect how we are seen.

Isaiah 62:6-7

Verses 6-7 are a call to continuously praise the Lord until he reestablishes the city of Jerusalem. Some of God's people are called to watch over the reconstruction of the city and stay in communication with God throughout the process. In this way it may truly be God's city on the earth; a light that will point all peoples to the Lord.

Bathe all the work you do for God in prayer.

Isaiah 62:8-10

In the last section that exclusively focuses on the rebuilding of Jerusalem Isaiah assures God's people that the Lord will follow through on what he has promised. The Lord has promised those who have returned to faith in God will be honored and God will never overlook them in favor of one who is not faithful.

Isaiah then reaffirms that the ultimate job of those who are faithful to God is to point toward the Lord. The reason Jerusalem is being rebuilt is to reveal God to the world. The standards are lifted over the people to reveal God the world. The highways are being rebuilt to reveal God to the world. The work we are called to as children of God is to reveal God to the world.

Isaiah 62:11-12

Finally, the Lord proclaims to the entire world that salvation is coming. Those who return to Jerusalem (they) will be holy and redeemed to the Lord. Those that never left Jerusalem (you) will never be forsaken. God is faithful and will save those who turn to him.

Endnotes

[1] Howard Jr., David M. Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books, An. Moody Press. Chicago:1993. p187.

[2] Howard Jr. p212.

[3] Howard Jr. p213.

[4] Howard Jr. p214.

[5] Marshall (et al)(eds.). New Bible Dictionary (3rd ed.). InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 1996. p620.

[6] VanGemen, Willem A. Interpreting The Prophetic Word. Zondervan, Grand Rapids: 1990. p248.

[7] Dillard and Longman III. An Introduction to the Old Testament. Zondervan, Grand Rapids: 1994. p268-71.

[8] Marshall. P514-6.

[9] VanGemen. P252.