

Isaiah and the nations

Christians commonly view the prophecy of Isaiah as the high point of missionary theology in the Old Testament. Certainly, Isaiah is the Old Testament book with the most references to ‘the nations’—that is, the Gentiles, those who are not members of the chosen people of God known as Israel. In our studies during the next fortnight we will explore the place of those nations within God’s plan.

Isaiah is a complicated book. The eighth-century prophet whom God called (ch. 6) is the first named ‘missionary’ (*missio* means ‘sending’). Isaiah was sent to his own people, a calling that not many would envy. During a prosperous period in the southern kingdom, he was to warn Judah and Jerusalem of their fate—spelling out the sin of the people, the desecration of the land and the prognosis of punishment. Though it doesn’t yet look like it, exile is coming.

At first glance, this would hardly seem a promising start for an exploration of the place of ‘the nations’. Yet Isaiah’s oracles within the first main section of the book (Isaiah 1—39) relate to the nations over and over again. Many of them appear to address some of the nations surrounding Israel quite directly, and it turns out that Israel’s own calling relates to the nations—not least in that Israel’s current spiritual crisis will result in a political crisis, whereby the people of God will be carried off into ‘the nations’ as exiles in Babylon.

By chapter 40, Israel finds itself situated among the nations, where new questions arise as to the calling of God’s people. Are they still God’s people, even without their land, their king and their temple? What, then, is their calling?

Whereas chapters 1—39 are predominantly a message of judgment, chapters 40—66 present a message of comfort and hope. The first half of Isaiah addresses a people heading for exile; the second half meets the people in their exile, comforting them in their grief, yet challenging their self-pity. So the message is very different, as are the tone and style of writing. We move from prose to poetry. It is carefully composed and beautifully worded, as if to encourage the Israelites to memorise these words and allow them to ring in the heart over and over.

In reality, God’s people need to learn afresh about their God. They need to relearn that he is the Creator of the universe, at a time when they doubt his

power. They need reminding that he is not a creator who keeps a distance from his creation but a God who is deeply involved, grieving with those who mourn and getting his hands dirty for the sake of those he loves. They also need to rediscover who they are in God's purposes and receive his calling anew. Israel may have messed up and forgotten God, but God has not forgotten his people and they have not dropped out of his plan.

Quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

31 May–6 June

1 Guns to glory

Isaiah 2:1–4

The book of Isaiah opens with two visions, both 'concerning Judah and Jerusalem'. The first (ch. 1) concerns the present: the people's current state is one of sinfulness and hopelessness. The second concerns their future role in God's plan of salvation. This is a vision that could have been familiar, if the parallel text in Micah 4:1–3 was already known. It is possible, then, that God's people are being reminded of a role in God's plan that they have heard before. In any case, their present circumstances do not seem to dampen or disqualify their future prospects.

In fact, both Micah and Isaiah are reminding Israel of the big picture. The account of creation in Genesis 1 makes plain God's good intentions for the whole earth, not just for some people, and the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 brings into sharper focus God's plan of blessing for all people. The promised land and the chosen nation are established with a purpose—to convey God's blessing to every nation. Election is not for privilege but for service.

Isaiah 2 spells out how Israel should expect this to happen. Jerusalem is depicted at the centre of the world map, the focus of centrifugal forces that draw all nations in. Going 'up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob' (v. 3) suggests that these nations encounter YHWH in the way that God's chosen people Israel did at Sinai—by entering into covenant, observing the law and engaging in worship.

If so, this vision is radical. It is not clear whether Israel's role in the

gathering of the nations is passive or active—whether the vision will be fulfilled reluctantly as the outcome of God’s intentions alone or through the enthusiasm of God’s people acting with evangelistic zeal. Certainly there are circumstances where the word of the Lord can and does ‘go out’ by itself, but it is usually enhanced by instruction and instructors.

Verse 4 spells out the extraordinary impact of this word: they shall not ‘learn war any more’. The logical outcome of embracing God’s covenant law is world peace. This peace is not the absence of difference: verse 4 assumes that it is still necessary for God to judge between nations. But it represents the constructive transformation of weaponry so as to disable the people for war and re-enable the land for fruitfulness.

2 Walking in the light

Isaiah 2:5–10

The glorious future vision of Isaiah 2:1–4 is not mere ‘pie in the sky’. At least, the pie has implications at ground level and consequences for present realities. God’s people—variously termed ‘Israel’ or the ‘house of Jacob’—are urged to ‘walk in the light of the Lord’ (v. 5).

The principle is very simple. For God’s people to lead others into God’s paths, they themselves need to be walking in those paths. Unfortunately, they are not doing so: they have forsaken God’s ways. Chapter 1 explained their sinfulness in terms of rebellion, corruption, estrangement, sickness, hypocrisy, futility, injustice and disobedience. Here the description of unfaithfulness is especially concrete: it relates to the adoption of alien religious practices, to the accumulation of wealth and weapons, and to the worship of idols.

What is the result? Verses 9–10 describe how the people will be humbled and humiliated—such that they will hide from God. The awesome glory of God is unwelcome and unwanted among a people who have chosen to worship their own gods. Indeed, God’s glory is to be feared.

Who would resist the vision of global cooperation, harmony and peace described in the preceding vision? Those who fear that they stand to lose something. The vision describes the nations joining Israel on God’s holy mountain. It does not discuss how this might affect Israel’s special status

as elect and chosen. It simply demands a willingness to set aside anything that is more precious—specifically the idols of wealth and weaponry, the usual means to material security—in order to focus entirely on the ways of God and to be transformed as they walk in his paths. Who is willing?

3 ‘The whole earth is full of his glory’... except Israel?

Isaiah 6:1–8

The prophet Isaiah is willing. We may imagine him in the temple, seeking God, at a time of national grief. The good king Uzziah has died, and his successor does not hold the same promise. Isaiah’s prayer request, then, probably focused on his own nation’s well-being.

His prayer is answered by a striking vision of none other than God himself. Even Moses, who communed with God ‘face-to-face, as one speaks to a friend’ (Exodus 33:11), was not allowed to see God (v. 20). Yet, just at the point when Isaiah is longing for a new human king in Judah, he glimpses God as the divine King, whose horizons stretch way beyond those of Judah.

Clearly Jerusalem is important to this King, for the hem of his robe touches down at this point on the planet. In the light of Jerusalem’s importance, though, it’s striking that God is presented as King of the universe, high above every nation, filling the whole earth with his glory. Is this a surprise? Not if we have taken on board God’s original plan of universal blessing and his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. But to any with a more parochial outlook—especially those who suppose themselves to be the unique locus of God’s presence on earth—it may be surprising

To those who had embraced the message of judgment in the earlier chapters of Isaiah, there may be a further surprise. ‘You mean, despite our sin, the hem of God’s royal robe still touches us?’ God’s glory neither focuses purely on the chosen people nor resists the unfaithful people. In its transcendence it fills the whole earth without distinction; and in its immanence it reaches in to fill the temple—the particular place where sacrifice is made and forgiveness is sought.

This vision surely stretches Isaiah’s horizons—to embrace God’s awesome power and majesty over the universe, and yet to recognise God’s

forgiving grace to me, to us, here and now. The two are far from incompatible, according to God's ways.

The experience of this vision brings such profound enthusiasm for God that Isaiah volunteers to serve, like a school child with hand up, itching for the teacher to notice, yet not knowing to what or where. Isaiah models the response that is appropriate for all God's people.

It turns out that Isaiah's calling is less about the future promise of God (2:1–4) than the present predicament of God's people (vv. 5–10). I suspect that Isaiah would rather have been sent to a faraway nation as herald or teacher, yet he is called to disturb the comfortable close to home. Serving the God whose glory fills the whole earth may involve starting very locally and in just the place where that glory seems most scarce.

4 Judgment on Cush

Isaiah 18

You need a strong constitution to read the whole of Isaiah, not just the 'purple passages'. Chapter 18 is part of a long section (chs. 13–23) that is often skipped. The early chapters (1–12) focused on God's judgment of Judah and Jerusalem. Now we discover that the same arm of judgment is outstretched against the nations. One by one, each is named and addressed, forming an arc of those that are near and far in a full circle around Jerusalem. Because many of them, at various points during the eighth to sixth centuries BC, were enemies of Judah, this section of the prophecy would surely have been gratifying to its original audience. Imagine it: 'Phew, God doesn't like those Babylonians either!'

In chapter 18 the focus of God's fearful attention lands on Cush. This most probably relates to present-day Sudan, where the Dinka tribe in particular (among whom I have the privilege to visit and teach regularly) are indeed very tall and smooth-skinned. These people receive emissaries warning of a devastating attack, God's harsh reckoning at the time of judgment (vv. 5–6). The people of Cush, of Sudan, of Ethiopia, are to be laid waste, to become fodder for wild animals—just as was described in chapter 1, speaking of Judah and Jerusalem.

I chose this particular oracle of judgment from among the many because

I have read this text with some Sudanese Christians and listened with interest and surprise to their response. Where I expected fear or cynicism, I heard expressions of expectancy and grace. These people know first-hand about devastation and attack: their land has witnessed war for most of the past 50 years. They know that if the coming judgment is from God, then it will be just and fair—not racially and religiously motivated, as in recent experience. If judgment is the precursor to salvation, surely this act of God is to be welcomed: the pruning will be for good. Finally, the fact that these people are described and named in scripture, singled out among the nations, brings them honour ('You English are never mentioned,' one person said to me), even if they are singled out in the context of judgment.

This perspective is salutary. The time of reckoning is a time to be welcomed for those who have been on the underside of earthly injustice. Even oracles of judgment may be read as good news to the nations, for they confirm that God cares about them and includes them in his plan for justice and peace and salvation.

At that time, the 'Cushites' will bring gifts to Mount Zion (v. 7). Here is an echo of the vision of Isaiah 2. I suggest that we are invited to imagine the gifts as their tools of war, handed over so that they may become ploughshares and pruning hooks.

5 Judgment and salvation for Egypt

Isaiah 19:18–25

It is well worth reading the whole of chapter 19 if you have time. The Lord is riding on a 'swift cloud' that now alights in Egypt, where another oracle of judgment is delivered. The cloud has already travelled through Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus and Cush. Now it falls on Israel's arch-enemy of old, rehearsing and reversing some of the problems Israel experienced during its slavery—idols, a fierce taskmaster as ruler, and drought. Imagine the relish with which the Israelites must have rubbed their hands at verse 17: 'And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians...'

Yet the tide turns suddenly in this chapter. 'On that day' denotes not just the day of harsh judgment but also a day of transformation when 'five cities in the land of Egypt' will 'swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts'

(v. 18). Do you feel the shock waves? Here is a statement about Israel's enemies, their former slave-drivers, turning to Israel's God! Moreover, this allegiance is not reluctant: the people will worship him and cry to him in their oppression, and 'he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them' (v. 20). Does this sound familiar? Here is the language used to describe the Israelite slaves in Egypt and their exodus, the defining event of salvation according to the Hebrew Bible—now applied to *the Egyptians* in their oppression. At this point we may imagine shock turning to horror among Isaiah's audience. How could God be so merciful? Doesn't God shun those who shun his people? The answer is that God strikes Egypt and heals Egypt. Judgment and salvation are opposite sides of the same coin.

The text continues to surprise and horrify Israelite ears. Verse 23 describes a highway between Egypt and Assyria, the two powers that represented the greatest threat to Israel in the eighth century. Whereas previously the highway enabled the exodus of Israel out of Egypt, and even out of Assyria (11:16), here is a reverse exodus—we may presume, for the salvation of Egyptians and Assyrians. Finally, when Israel is named and affirmed as a blessing in the midst of the earth, it is as 'the *third*' people. The gold and silver medals will go to Egypt and Assyria. The people of God are being prepared to share the podium of honour, salvation and blessing, for the God of Israel is also, clearly, the God of Egypt and of Assyria. Everything that God has invested in Israel as 'my people' is also destined for others.

6 Judgment and restoration

Isaiah 34 and 35

After the oracles against the nations (chs. 13—23), the first major section of the book of Isaiah offers a mini 'apocalypse' (chs. 24—27) followed by some more historically focused passages warning Judah and Jerusalem of their condition and fate. Then comes this chapter-pair that functions as a summary for all of First Isaiah. Here we find a chapter describing God's terrible universal judgment, followed by a chapter anticipating a joyful homecoming in which all creation is restored.

I would guess that chapter 35 is familiar to readers, and that chapter 34

is not. Of course, we love to skip to passages that we find encouraging and hopeful, even at the expense of misappropriating that hope. Israel made the same mistake. But these two chapters form a little *inclusio* describing God's fearsome work of judgment followed by the joyful work of renewal. The two belong together.

Note how chapter 34 begins by addressing all nations, all peoples, the earth, the world. Even though, from verse 5, the particular nation of Edom comes into focus, it is understood that what God is doing in Edom will take place universally. It is all 'doomed' (v. 2): all that is in defiance of God is destined for destruction.

Yet destruction is not the end. God's work of judgment is the essential preparation for his promised work of renewal, recovery and redemption. Although chapter 35 has been classically understood to anticipate Israel's return to Jerusalem after the exile, the return is much more far-reaching: the description is of the re-creation of the whole created order. It is universal: the highway for God's people (v. 8) has relevance far beyond the historically defined Old Testament Israelite people of God, as does the reference to the redeemed and the ransomed (vv. 9–10). The historical experience of exile and return will offer a worked example—a small-scale means of appropriating God's promises—of the mind-boggling implications of God's planned new creation.

Guidelines

The first section of Isaiah emphasises God as 'the Holy One of Israel', who has a plan, an unshakeable plan, for Israel and for the nations. Sometimes it is hard to follow: certainly we may imagine the people of God alternating between confusion and complacency. But what is underlined here is the way in which the people of God are invited to participate within it, as those already invested with a covenant relationship, and so to help bring it about.

The plan encompasses judgment and salvation, for Israel and for all the nations. Neither triumphalism nor despair are appropriate, only an awareness of God as 'the Holy One of Israel'. That title spells out God's particular commitment to a particular people, yet it also emphasises the key quality of God's character—holiness—according to which he cannot be contained.

1 ‘Here is your God!’

Isaiah 40:1–11

These words—known and loved so well, thanks to Handel’s *Messiah*—represent the dulcet tones of a lover, wooing his beloved with a song from the heart. God’s people are fragile, bearing a sense of both political and personal abandonment owing to the experience of exile. But God has not abandoned them, at least not for long: here he comforts them, releases them and prepares them.

For what is he preparing them? A highway is promised (v. 3), reminiscent of that which led the Israelites out of slavery—but this highway is for God, the God who is coming. God gets the red carpet treatment, like visiting royalty. Is he coming back to Israel to reclaim his errant people? Much more than that: ‘Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and *all people* shall see it together’ (v. 5, emphasis mine).

Exactly what Isaiah was privileged to glimpse in chapter 6 is now promised, not just to Israel but to all people. Isaiah glimpsed the glory and holiness of God, high and lofty, sitting on a throne and filling the earth. Now, it is foretold, all flesh shall see what Isaiah saw.

As in chapter 6, this vision also constitutes a call. The people, though they are as frail as grass, are called to shout the good news from the mountain top. They are to be the heralds, the evangelists, those who prepare the way for God’s royal arrival. This announcement, then—though often received historically as a message of good news to Israel, promising the end of exile in Babylon—is actually the announcement of a universal arrival, impacting all people everywhere. For Israel, the good news is that they are receiving a renewed invitation to be involved in God’s plans, to offer themselves for faithful service in the manner of Isaiah. They are to prepare the way and announce the news so that all people will be ready for the glory of God—and, by the grace of God, in the process, they will find themselves included as recipients of salvation also.

The message of this text for the Church is little different from its message for Israel. The good news of salvation is not something that God

announces to the Church. It is something that God announces to the world, *through* the Church.

2 Is your God this big?

Isaiah 40:12–31

After the grand announcement and invitation comes a piece of creation theology in the form of a poem addressing the depth of God's wisdom and the extent of God's action. These words are intended (in the words of Hilaire Belloc) 'to make one gasp and stretch one's eyes' to the magnitude of God's creativity.

The poem proceeds by way of a series of rhetorical questions inviting speculation on God's greatness (and, by comparison, on human finitude). Who has measured the waters... weighed the mountains? Who was God's teacher? To whom will you liken God? Do you not know? Have you not understood? Who created these? Why do you speak? These questions are answered by assertions and images designed to boggle the mind concerning God, before whom 'the nations are like a drop from a bucket... the isles like fine dust... [the earth's] inhabitants are like grasshoppers' (vv. 15, 22).

If you have lost your home, a refugee living against your will in a foreign land, it is likely that you might feel like dust blown in a careless wind, or like a grasshopper trodden down by unfriendly feet. This chapter attempts to help us journey beyond our sense of our world to recognise God's sense of God's world. The perspective is very different.

It is hard not to think of ourselves at the centre of the world—if only because we learn our concepts of the world from the things around us. At a mission-minded church service recently, the pastor led the congregation to pray 'for strangers in remote parts of the world'—a statement that distracted me to wonder to whom such people were strange or remote. Certainly not to God, I suspect!

Moreover, when times are tough, our world is prone to get smaller: we instinctively curl up to resist further pain or pressure. This describes the condition of Israel in exile. To such situations, this poem comes not only as inspiration but as challenge. God has not forgotten them or abandoned them; moreover, the Creator of the universe is not anxious or flustered. He

who ‘also’ created the stars, who calls each one by name, can handle this little hiccup. Those who worry that they have fallen out of the plan need to be reminded that it is *God’s* plan, not theirs. It is not only about them, even though, by God’s gracious invitation again and again, it can and will and does include them. God’s plan is about God—the God who holds the whole universe in the gentle, steady palm of his hand.

3 Justice in the earth, light to the nations

Isaiah 42:1–9

The first of the so-called ‘servant songs’ resounds with the clearest message about the nations. God’s servant is tasked with establishing justice in the earth (v. 4), being given as a covenant to the people and a light to the nations (v. 6).

As anyone who has tried to establish justice between unhappy siblings (let alone warring nations) will know, this is a costly call. It is no simple listening process: the servant is implicated as a covenant, somehow embodying the reconciliation and light that he brings. Clearly the servant has reason to cry in weakness and even break down from pain (vv. 2–3), but he does not grow faint and is not crushed. The same power that was promised in 40:28–31, for the strengthening of the powerless and the renewal of the weary, is promised again here, explained by the assurance, ‘I have put my spirit upon him’ (v. 1).

The spirit that is promised is (as in chapter 40) closely related to the God of creation (v. 5). Thus the calling and the strength to fulfil the calling are given in the context of God’s creation of the earth. On reflection, the logic seems obvious: that which God creates, God redeems; and those whom God calls, God equips.

The biggest remaining question is one that has vexed readers and scholars for centuries, and over which Jews and Christians commonly divide: who is the servant? To whom does this calling refer? We have insufficient space to do justice to the complexity of the issues related to this question, given that almost every significant figure in the Old Testament (from Adam to Moses to David to Hezekiah to Cyrus), as well as (of course) Jesus, are regularly named. Here I simply want to point out the answer

that presents itself within the frame of the immediate context of Isaiah.

The most obvious answer to the question ‘Who is the servant?’ is ‘Israel’. The title of ‘servant’ is regularly used for the collective body of God’s people: it has been applied to Israel repeatedly in the previous chapter (see 41:8–9). If chapters 40—41 served a forlorn and downtrodden people with a reaffirmation of their identity and place in God’s plan, then this text from chapter 42 reminds them what it means, and what it costs. Their calling as God’s covenant people is to *be* a covenant to all peoples and nations. It may be costly but it will be rewarding (v. 7). In the end, it is the ultimate calling—and it may be the only calling (vv. 8–9).

4 There is no other

Isaiah 45:1–7

What, then, are we to make of God’s calling to Cyrus—a foreigner, the king of Persia?

The familiar language used to describe this alien ruler is redolent with terms normally confined to Israel as God’s holy people, belonging to the context of commitment and covenant. God speaks ‘thus’ to Cyrus, in just the manner that he speaks to his own people and prophets. God promises to go before Cyrus in protection and preparation. He calls Cyrus by name as he called Israel by name—echoing and, arguably, fulfilling the promises delivered to Israel in chapter 41. Even more significant is the description of Cyrus as ‘his anointed’ (v. 1): the Hebrew has the same root as ‘messiah’, suggesting some surprising fulfilment of the messianic promises found earlier in Isaiah (chs. 9 and 11).

On the one hand, God appears to be functioning on intimate terms with a person who is not of God’s people. On the other, God is acting ‘for the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen’ (v. 4). God is doing something surprising, shocking, even scandalous—something that could be regarded as betrayal—yet he is doing it out of devotion towards his beloved people.

It seems that God can and does call anyone, but his choice and calling are meant to fulfil the purposes and plans that have been declared over and over again. These plans and purposes centre on Israel historically but

are not exclusive to Israel theologically. Thus a foreign king can not only come to know the Lord (v. 3) but can serve him also, even without realising it (v. 4).

Exploring the theme of 'Israel and the nations' in Isaiah throws us back to exploring more about the Lord, the God who created every nation and called Israel to be his holy nation. If there is no other God (v. 6), it follows logically that God is responsible for light and darkness, weal and woe, conquering enemies and unknown friends. Israel in exile appears to be charged with relearning this logic. If the God of Israel is the only God, then (at least) two conclusions follow. First, the Israelites are to serve him because there is nowhere else to go; and second, the God of Israel may have claims on (and plans for) people well beyond Israel. If so, then we might expect to find God calling 'aliens' into his service—surprising people fulfilling strategic roles in precisely those areas where the more predictable suspects have failed.

Here in the middle of Second Isaiah, God's dealings with some non-Israelites prove deeply challenging, while becoming a saving grace, for the Israelite people of God. Cyrus turns out to be God's instrument for rescuing the Israelites from exile and returning them to their own land. God's grace is conveyed through alien hands, even where such strangers do not recognise their role in mediating God's grace or God's plan.

5 God's holy mountain

Isaiah 56:1–8

What, then, is Israel to do with strangers who choose to serve the God of Israel? On what terms are they welcome? Chapter 56—commonly thought to introduce the third and final section of the book of Isaiah, addressing itself to the post-exilic situation after the people of Israel have returned to their homeland—describes a situation in which foreigners are 'joined to the Lord'.

Such foreigners are those who are not Israelites/Jews through biological descent, yet have become associated with the Israelites through religious observance. The text implies that the covenant between God and Israel is now extended to all who are faithful. All who maintain justice and do

righteousness (v. 1, in contrast to the Israelites before exile; see 5:16–23), who keep sabbath, resist evil and seek to please God, are given an everlasting name. No longer is race or circumcision the key—only faithfulness to the covenant.

It is not just that these ‘outsiders’ may become as ‘insiders’. Verse 6 describes them as ministering to the Lord as God’s *servants*. In the context of the book of Isaiah, where the term ‘servant’ has received such emphasis, here is another startling statement about Gentiles—as startling as describing a foreign king as ‘anointed’ (45:1). In 42:1–8, the role of servant was described in terms of reaching out to the coastlands and being a light to the Gentiles, reaffirming Israel’s original call. As the servant passages in Second Isaiah gather momentum (in particular at 49:1–7; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12), the servant figure is increasingly set over against Israel and, through his suffering, brings about vindication for all, not just for Israel. Thus may we Christians legitimately identify the servant as Jesus, even as we also recognise that, originally, Israel was called to be the servant.

So we may suggest that Cyrus is the forerunner for countless Gentile servants of the Lord, those who help to bring about God’s promises. Through church ministry I have learned the truth of the dictum ‘Use them or lose them’. In God’s kingdom, it is clear that God uses all comers.

Where do they come to? Notice the reference to God’s holy mountain (v. 7), a deliberate echo of chapter 2. In the eighth-century context of Judah’s prosperity and blindness, this image came as a revisioning of Israel’s larger purpose and role in God’s overarching future plan. Here, after the lessons of the exile, it seems that the future is breaking in. At last there would seem to be a ‘normal’ expectation of foreigners in Jerusalem—even if they are still labelled ‘foreigners’!

6 The role of the servant

Isaiah 61:1–7

Our final passage in this series is sometimes called ‘the fifth servant song’, and comes as both summary and challenge. It brings together the royal imagery of anointing, associated with the messianic promises of a future Davidic ruler inaugurating a reign of peace (chs. 9; 11), with the role of

the servant to bring about justice on earth, accompanied by and achieved through vicarious suffering.

This text is often referred to as ‘the Nazareth manifesto’ because Jesus read from this chapter in the synagogue at Nazareth and then declared, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ (Luke 4:21). We are used to recognising the multiple ways in which Jesus represents and completes this picture—not least as both suffering servant and Messiah.

Yet the question remains: whom was the passage understood to address when it was first delivered? I suggest, once again, that all Israel, the people of God, are intended to take on the mantle of the servant. Here is Isaiah’s answer to the vision set out in chapter 2, where all nations stream to the holy mountain to learn God’s ways. Now, unlike the situation in Jerusalem described then, God’s people are displaying God’s glory (v. 3), building up the city (v. 4) and functioning as priests and ministers (v. 6). In the light of chapter 56, we might imagine that God’s people also include those who have been incorporated from other nations.

As well as offering a fitting conclusion, this passage presents a challenge. Despite the suggestion in Isaiah 56 that proselytes might become integrated within Israel, here we find ‘strangers’ and ‘foreigners’ described in subservient roles, with suggestions that Israel is luxuriating in the wealth of the nations. The overtones of ‘apartheid’—of some form of slavery or racism—are hard to miss. History would suggest that privilege is rarely given up or shared easily.

It seems clear that some tension exists concerning the place of the nations in God’s holy city. Is it that strangers were welcomed as friends before the complications of integration were fully acknowledged—and resisted? Is it that the earlier vision offers a rhetoric to aim for, and that this chapter more closely describes the reality? Either way, chapter 61, exuberant and exhilarating as it is in terms of the good news and its impact, challenges any naïve ‘missionary theology’ that we might seek in Isaiah. Jerusalem functions at the centre of the map. ‘Strangers’ are welcomed, but they may remain just that—strangers. This is hardly the picture found in Revelation, where all are equal around God’s throne—not singled out by race or nationality or tongue, despite a recognition of diversity. Nor is it the way in which Jesus took up the servant role during his earthly ministry.

Guidelines

The message of Isaiah delivers good news to the oppressed, liberty to captives and comfort for all who mourn. That good news is not simply a message to Israel but a message for Israel to bring to the world.

In the person of Jesus we see God (Isaiah 40). We also recognise in Jesus God's chosen servant, perfectly fulfilling Israel's call—not just in word but in deed; not just to Israel but to Gentiles; not just in life but in death. By taking on the role of the vicariously suffering servant, Jesus becomes the covenant to the people, the light to the nations and the means of bringing justice to the ends of the earth.

Just as the Israelites were called to mission as servants, so are we as Christians. We cannot rest content to say, 'Jesus did that.' Our calling is to walk in Jesus' footsteps. God's plans operate like a relay race, and we are those to whom the baton has now been passed.

God's holy mountain is now understood more spiritually than geographically (see John 4 for the way in which Jesus reinterprets the tradition for a Samaritan). Nevertheless, God's plan continues for the ingathering of all nations and for peace around the throne of grace. There, the God whom Isaiah was privileged to glimpse as king, high and lofty, will be enthroned above all people—the same God that we have come to know in the servant who suffered.

FURTHER READING

John Goldingay, *Isaiah* (New International Biblical Commentary), Hendrickson, 2001.

Jo Bailey Wells, *Isaiah* (The People's Bible Commentary), BRF, 2006.

Chris Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, IVP Academic, 2006.