

Exegetical Study of Isaiah 9:1-4

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Isaiah, it has often been said, is a book of contrasts. It contains thundering passages of law and judgment followed by some of the most beautiful promises of mercy and hope in all of Scripture. There are extended Messianic prophecies in the second part of Isaiah (chapters 40- 66) which August Pieper calls the "Book of Comfort." While the latter section of Isaiah also contains significant passages of the law, the numerous gospel passages appear to dominate. So much so, that commentators and bible scholars have been moved to describe Isaiah as the Evangelist of the Old Testament.

In the first part of the prophet's book, however, (chapters 1-39) the part which Pieper designates the "Book of Denunciation," the prevailing message is that of God's wrath against a wayward and rebellious nation. It is against this dark background of the Almighty's pronouncements of judgment that the gospel gems in the first part of the book stand out as exceptionally brilliant, brilliant in both Messianic content and in contrast to God's righteous anger. Chapter four proclaims the Branch of the Lord, beautiful and glorious; in a single verse (14) chapter seven foretells a virgin bearing a son and calling his name "Immanuel" (God with us), both clear references to the Savior who was to come. In like manner chapter nine of Isaiah stands out as a bright beam of hope in a dreary and seemingly God-forsaken landscape.

The prophet is speaking mainly to rebellious people. Chapter six summarizes the mission to which the prophet has been called. *"Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people callused; make their ears dull and close their eyes'"* 9-10. Chapter one is the summary of the Book of Isaiah, especially chapters 1-39: *"Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: 'I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.' Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption. They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him"* verses 2-4.

Israel and Judah had both turned from the Lord. The wicked kings of these two nations frequently fought against each other in their greed and lust for power. So the kings of Judah rejoiced when the Assyrians punished Israel in the north and plundered Damascus and Samaria, but didn't reckon that the same Assyrians would soon be at their own doorstep. A judgment was due to both nations; it was already being accomplished in the north and would soon enough become a reality for Judah in the south. God's people had repeatedly ignored the warnings of his heralds. The cup of

his wrath had now become full. The nations of his people would be cast aside. The house of David would soon be rejected from power and prominence. The land would be ravaged, the cities destroyed, the people left desolate. The proclamation of this message of doom and gloom was the unhappy task of God's prophet.

However, dispersed among the repeated words of warning and destruction are brief messages of hope for those remaining hearts that had not turned away from the Lord. Thus the Lord would accomplish two results through Isaiah's preaching. One would be that the message of judgment would harden more and more the hearts of those who had forsaken him. The message of the gospel was meant for them too, but in despising it they would become more confirmed in their unbelief. The other result would be that the message of hope and deliverance from God through Immanuel, the very message that was despised by the hardened, would strengthen a remnant of the faithful. The law and the gospel --- both messages are needed by all people but received with different outcomes by the unbelievers and the faithful. It was so in Isaiah's day and remains so today.

כִּי לֹא מוֹעֵף לְאַשֶׁר מוֹצֵק לָהּ כְּעֵת הָרֵאשׁוֹן הַלֵּל אֶרְצָה וְכִלּוֹן וְאַרְצָה נִפְתָּלִי

וְהֶאֱחָרֹן הַכְּבִיד דְּרַף הַיָּם יַעֲבֹר הַיַּרְדֵּן גְּלִיל הַגּוֹיִם:
(9:1)

But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

כִּי — conj. *but* or in strong contrastive *nevertheless*

לֹא מוֹעָף - neg. w. noun, *no gloom, there is not gloom*, in context “*no more gloom*”

לְאַשֶׁר - relational prep. – *for*

מוֹצָק - n. *that was in anguish*

לָהּ - preposition third per. fem. sing. - *her*

בְּעַת הַרְשׁוֹן - prep. w. def. article and adj. literally “*in the time former*”, *at first*

הִקְלָה - verb Hiphel perfect, third person, mas., sing., *he brought into contempt, he humbled, he made light of*

אֶרְצָהּ - noun, fem., sing. – *the land*

זְבֻלוֹן - *Zebulun*, one of the 12 sons of Jacob whose tribe was apportioned land in the northeast part of Israel

נַפְתָּלִי - *Naphtali*, one of the 12 sons of Jacob whose tribe was apportioned land in the northeast part of Israel

וְהֶאֱחָרֹן - conj., def. art, adj. *but in the later (latter) time; afterwards*

בְּהַכְבִּיד b, Hiphel, perfect, third pers., mas., lit. “*he will make heavy*”, *he will honor, make glorious*

דְּרַף - noun, *the way of, the pathway*

הַיָּם - *the sea*

עַרְבֵי - *beyond, the other side of*

הַיַּרְדֵּן - def. article, proper name, *Jordan*, referring to the northern part of the Jordan river

גְּלִיל - *Galilee*, referring to the lake and the region around it.

הַגּוֹיִם - *of the nations*, goyim includes also non-Jewish nations

Verse one is both a transition verse as well as a summary of what follows in the next six verses. Because it is such a transitional verse, in some manuscripts 9:1 is 8:23; or the final transitional statement to some very distressing preceding verses. They read, “*Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.*” (8:21,22) The judgment here described relates to both the circumstances of being a conquered nation and hopelessness that comes from losing their relationship with God.

The picture of total gloom which closed the preceding chapter gives way in verse one to a picture of hope. Since this passage looks to the future in contrast to the past, many commentators have ventured to insert at the opening the words "no more" before "gloom." The extreme devastation that the Assyrians visited upon

^a Is 8:22

^b 2 Kin 15:29; 2 Chr 16:4

^c Matt 4:15, 16

² Or *nations*

north Galilee and the spiritual darkness that hung over the land is to give way in the course of time -the prophet himself does not seem to know how soon or how late-to a bright glory -- but he testifies it will surely come.

Zebulun and Naphtali are the two northern-most tribes of Israel. The way of the sea most likely refers to the area west of the Sea of Galilee. Along the Jordan, or as some translate, the other side of the Jordan, but would also include some of the region east of the Jordan River. Galilee of the Gentiles, Galilee of the nations, would then be the northern regions of Galilee, a region that often served as an invasion corridor for armies that fought against Israel throughout its history. Syria and Israel fought over the territory in ancient times and still fight over it today. It's the area that contains the Golan Heights. Invading armies from the north, including the armies of Assyria and Babylon, trampled the area. It was a region often humbled by cruel and conquering foreign nations. It was also a place where Israel interacted with other nations in trade and commerce of various kinds.

Here again we see a contrast. The same territory where the feet of invading soldiers trampled every hope and left nothing but gloom and distress would be the scene of a bright future. The same area where people had forsaken God and drifted into paganism, superstition and despair; God had chosen this area for a special honor. Another set of feet would walk through this region, feet that would bring not dishonor, but rather great honor and glory. We know without a doubt that these feet were the feet of the Savior who walked there and brought the hope, joy, peace and greatness that had been promised, establishing a new kingdom one that flourished beyond the wildest expectations of the ancients. When Jesus returned from his temptations in the wilderness, he began his ministry in Galilee. After Matthew identifies the place "by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali" (Matt. 14:3) he cites this passage of Isaiah leaving us with no doubt as to whom the following verses referred.

הָעָם הַהֹלְכִים בְּחֹשֶׁךְ רָאוּ אֹר גָּדוֹל יֹשְׁבֵי בְּאֶרֶץ צְלֻמוֹת אֹר נִגְהָ עֲלֵיהֶם:
(9:2)

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On them who live in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

הָעָם - collective noun, *the people*,

הַהֹלְכִים - qal active participle, prophetic seeing future as current,
walking

בְּחֹשֶׁךְ - *in darkness*

רָאוּ - verb, Qal perfect, third pers. pl., *have seen*

אֹר - noun, *light*

גָּדוֹל - adj., *great*

יֹשְׁבֵי - Qal act. participle, *those who dwell, those dwelling*

בְּאֶרֶץ - *in a land of*

צְלֻמוֹת - composite noun, *shadow of death* coming from צַל meaning dark, shadow, and מוֹת meaning very thick darkness, death.

נִגְהָ - Qal. perfect, third pers., mas., sing., *has shined*

עֲלֵיהֶם - prep. *on them*

Though the prophet speaks of events to come, he speaks of a completed action (perfect). With God a promise is as good as done. The thought of completion continues and prevails in the verses that follow. Verse one compares gloom and anguish to glory. Verse two follows the unmistakable comparison of darkness and light, the shadow of death and dawning light. Shadow of death is a composite noun, dark shadow, and very thick darkness, death. The people (collective noun) walk in darkness. Before light there was darkness. The darkness that covers the land, Jew and Gentile, is within as well as without. As a conquered nation the people may expect desolation. On account of

apostasy Israel faced only more misery and distress; finally she was swept away and reduced to ruins. The greater darkness, however, is that which is within -- ignorance, corruption, guilt, separation from God because of sin.

Into this state of things a light will shine, a light such as cannot be produced by the human heart, light that is from above, a gift of God. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16. This light is the whole work of Christ and all the blessings he brings. It is "the Sun of Righteousness (who) will arise with healing in his wings" Malachi 4:2. "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world" John 1:9. cf. also Luke 1:78-79; John 2:11; John 8:12; Ephesians 5:8,14; Isaiah 42:6; 60:1-3.

הַרְבִּיתָ הַגּוֹי לֹא הִגְדַּלְתָּ הַשְׂמֵחָה שְׂמְחוּ לְפָנָיִךְ כְּשִׂמְחַת בְּקִצִּיר כַּאֲשֶׁר יִגְּלוּ
בְּחִלְקֵם שָׁלָל:
(9:3)

You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy. They rejoice before you as one who rejoices in the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the spoil.

הַרְבִּיתָ - verb Hiphel, perf. second pers., **you have multiplied, you have enlarged**

הַגּוֹי - **the nation**

לוֹ - Masoretic text has לֹא a negative (not increase), context favors this as a variant **to her** (the nation's joy) or **its** joy

הִגְדַּלְתָּ - verb, hiphel, perfect, second pers., **you have increased**

הַשְׂמֵחָה - noun, fem. **joy**

שְׂמְחוּ - verb, Qal, perfect, third pers. pl., **they rejoice**

לְפָנָיִךְ - prepositional phrase, **before your face, before you**

כְּשִׂמְחַת - prepositional simile **as with the joy, like the joy**

בְּקִצִּיר - prep. w. def. art., **at the harvest**

כַּאֲשֶׁר - **as**

יִגְּלוּ - Qal, imperfect. Third pers., mas., pl., **men rejoice**

בְּחִלְקֵם - verb, piel, infinitive construct with third pers. pl. suffix – **when they divide**

שָׁלָל - n., mas., sing. **the spoil, the plunder** (fruits of victory)

When the great light who was Jesus finally dawned on the world scene, the remnant would be small, but God's plan would enlarge the nation, those who were truly his people by faith.

His people would include not only those of Jewish heritage and culture but believers from all nations. The golden time spoken of her started with the foundational work of Jesus ministry and work of salvation. It continued with the spreading of the gospel through Paul, the apostles and other faithful witnesses. And the expansion of God's people continues to this day to include nations and races of people that Isaiah could never have known about except through the miracle of inspiration.

Verse presents a textual problem for some. The Masoretic text has a negative in the first half of the verse. Accordingly the King James translates "Thou has multiplied the nation, and **not** increased the joy." If the negative is accepted the possible meaning might be: "You multiply the nation to which you had formerly not given joy." Luther also retains the negative with a somewhat different meaning. "Many nations are received into the kingdom of God; this makes the Jews sick, by this they are provoked to anger, envy, zeal, and a spirit of stupor (cf. Ro 11:8). This is what it means to lessen their joy" Am. Ed. Vol. 16, pp 97-98. However most interpreters today opt for the variation lo

(to her) as strongly suggested by the verbs multiply and increase, the inclusion of the in the emphatic position, and the symmetry of the verse.

Two examples of joy, the joy at *harvest* and victory in warfare, express the idea of joy that is deep and complete. The two examples fit well for an agricultural nation that has experienced its share of invasions. Both harvest and victory are divine gifts (e.g. Dt. 28:2-8). Harvest belongs in the sphere of 'nature'; triumph and plunder is found in the sphere of history. The Lord is in charge of both. The Messianic day promises deliverance from all adversity, whether they are brought through circumstances, or by people, or by the forces of hell. The comparisons emphasize the grace of God. While the workers may sweat to bring in the harvest, they have done nothing to cause the crop to grow and mature. That only God can do. In the other comparison, as verse 4 will explain, the gathering of plunder is a picture of entering into the fruits of a victory which they have done nothing to win.

כִּי־אֶת־עַל־סַבְּלוֹ וְאֵת־מִטֵּה שְׁכָמוֹ שֶׁבַט הַנִּגְשׁ בֶּן הַחַתָּה כְּיוֹם מִדְיָן:
(9:4)

For the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder, the rod oppressing him you have broken, as in the day of Midian.

כִּי- conj. *for*

אֶת־עַל - particle, direct object - *the yoke of*

סַבְּלוֹ - noun, construct with third pers., mas., singular suffix *burdens him* (them)

וְאֵת־מִטֵּה - conj. & direct object *and the staff for*

שְׁכָמוֹ - noun, construct with third pers., mas., singular suffix *his* (their) *shoulder(s)*

שֶׁבַט - noun, mas., sing. *the rod of*

הַנִּגְשׁ - definite article, Qal act., mas. sing., participle, *oppressor*

בֶּן - part. with prep third pers. sing., mas., *his* (their)

הַחַתָּה - verb, hiphel perfect, second pers., sing., mas. *you have shattered, broken*

כְּיוֹם - prepositional construction, simile, *as in the day of*

מִדְיָן - proper noun, *Midian*

There are two sets of historical references in this verse. First, vocabulary is used which recalls Egypt, e.g. *yoke* (Lv. 26:13), *burdens* (Ex. 1:11; 2:11; 5:4-5; 6:6-7), *shoulders* (Ps. 81:6<7>) and *oppressor* (Ex. 3:7; 5:6, 10-14). The exodus, the pre-eminent act of God (Ex. 3:7-8; 2 Sa. 7:23), offers a background and fortaste to the coming Christchild. Secondly, the defeat of Midian recorded in Judges 6 - 8 is remembered. This is appropriate, for Gideon (a type of Christ) was in particular the deliverer of Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali and the narrative labours to emphasize the victory as an act of God, excluding human glory.

The prophet lays out the reason for the people's joy. Call it three reasons, if you will. The yoke the curved piece of wood (a symbol of servitude and a toilsome life), the staff the across the shoulders (a symbol of submission), and the rod used by the oppressor for beating have been broken. The yoke, the staff, and the rod stand for more than mere outward distress (cf. v.2). We all know that the real burden of all nations is sin and its corruption, departure from God, and all the consequences upon those who turn from Him. This is bondage greater than the past bondages in Egypt, or the Assyrian or Midianite oppressions.

The victory of God in Christ is likened to that of Gideon over the Midianites. With a handful of men an army of thousands was-thoroughly routed. The Lord purposely allowed Gideon to take to take an army of

32,000 men and sift it down to 300 that all might know it was a victory by God. So also the deliverance to come in the spiritual realm is not of men but of God. The joy men have is not one which has been earned but which is fully undeserved. With a wondrous display of divine power, and that in the same part of the country in Galilee, the Light will manifest itself to the endless joy of many. Who this hero, Gideon's antitype, is, the prophet has not yet revealed. Without supplying the information the prophet continues to build the expectation and the suspense with another verse that speaks of the end of warfare which is yet another picture of an earthly sort which is really depicting the peace which Christ provides by his atoning sacrifice. All lead to the ruler who will accomplish great things, Jesus, God's Son, who is described according to all his wonderful names in verses 6 and 7.

Homiletical Suggestions

As with many texts from Isaiah, this text provides concrete details and clear imagery with which to paint clear and vivid word pictures. The contrasts of darkness and light, gloom and joy, a kingdom on the decline and one emerging with greatness, slavery and release to freedom, harvest gathered and weaponry destroyed—all show how carefully God planned and carried out our salvation through the awesome gift of the Christ Child. This is a text with a strong gospel message and mission emphasis that is appropriate for the Advent, Christmas, or Epiphany seasons. One would be remiss to overlook the parallels to our own day, the darkness of ignorance that exists and boundless opportunities to give the light of God's truth. However, only in appreciating God's grace to us can we see the message that others also need. The following are possible outlines:

Joy to the World, the Lord Has Come! (Christmas)

1. Bringing light to our darkness. (vv. 2, 3)
2. Shattering our enemies' weapons. (vv. 4, 5)
3. Ruling in peace. (vv. 6, 7)

The Light is Shining!

1. He dispels the darkness of sin and ignorance (vv. 1,2)
2. He overcomes the shadow of death (vv.1,2)
3. He brings joy to those who see his deliverance (vv. 3,4)

Rejoice!

1. In the truth Christ brings (vv. 1,2)
2. In the redemption he provides (vv. 3,4)
3. In the people he saves (v. 3)

