

Isaiah 49:14-50:3

Overview

The praise of v. 13 raises an existential crisis for Zion, in view of the suffering she is experiencing. 49:14-26 is a conversation between her (under the figure of a bereaved widow) and the Lord about this crisis. The figure is especially strong in Hebrew, where the second person pronouns are not only singular, but feminine. Then in 50:1-3, with the shift to plural masculine pronouns (you instead of thee), the Lord turns to her children, and he reminds them that they are responsible for her suffering.

49:14-26 The Lord Comforts Mother Zion

Zion speaks twice, and the Lord responds. Her first statement is a protest against the glorious promise of v. 13. The Lord reassures her that he will restore her lost children. Her second statement asks how this can be, and the Lord explains what will happen.

14-20, Restoration Promised

First, to answer her discouragement, the Lord reinforces his promise that Zion's children will be restored.

14, Zion's Complaint

To understand fully the poignancy of her complaint, remember that "Zion" is first of all the name of a mountain ("Mount Zion"), the site of the Jebusite fortress that David conquered (2 Sam 5:7), which will one day be exalted far above the other hills that now look down on it (Isa 2:2-3). Verse 13 exhorts the mountains to join the heavens and earth in praise to the Lord. One of those mountains now refuses.

14 But Zion said (fem), The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me.--Note the shift in the capitalization of the divine titles. The first is God's personal name, יהוה. The second is literally "my lord," a respectful term that a woman would use of her husband (as Sarah does Abraham in Gen 18:12). The first statement is theological: YHWH has abandoned me. The second is personal and more emotional: my husband, on whose love I depended, has forgotten me.

15-20, God's Reassurance

15 Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?--The Lord's electing love is at least as strong as that of a mother for her child.

yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.--Even the closest of natural relations may sometimes break down. 2 Kings 6:28-29 records the pathetic situation of Samaria under siege, when a woman kills her son for food. But the Lord is more faithful than this.

16 Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands;--In Deut 6:8, the Lord commanded Israel to bind his law upon their hands to guide their actions, a command carried out by the Jews in the

form of phylacteries. Those could be taken off, but he promises to tattoo Zion's name upon his palms, so that he can never forget her.

thy walls are continually before me.--We vividly remember places that are dear to us. I will remember until I die the lovely home in the woods that our family enjoyed in Pitman. That's what Zion means to the Lord. Even after the army of Nebuchadnezzar casts down her walls, the Lord still pictures the city fondly in his mind.

The rest of the paragraph alternates between two themes: your children will return, and your adversaries will leave. The ABABA chiasm places the dominant theme, the returning children, at the center and extremes.

17 Thy children¹ shall make haste;--Her children are dispersed, but not gone. When the time comes, they will run back to her.

thy destroyers and they that made thee waste shall go forth of thee.--At the same time, her enemies will leave.

18 Lift up thine eyes round about, and behold: all these gather themselves together, and come to thee.--We move back now to the returning children. If only she will look, she will see them flocking to her.

*As I live, saith the LORD **נאם ייְהוָה**, thou shalt surely clothe thee with them all, as with an ornament, and bind them on thee, as a bride doeth.*--In place of her widow's weeds, she will be adorned like a bride, and her children will be her ornaments.

19 For thy waste and thy desolate places, and the land of thy destruction, shall even now be too narrow by reason of the inhabitants,--Now she is an abandoned ruin. But in the coming day she will be overflowing with inhabitants.

and they that swallowed thee up shall be far away.--What about those who destroyed her? They will be long gone.

20 The children which thou shalt have, after thou hast lost the other, shall say again in thine ears, The place is too strait for me: give place to me that I may dwell.--Oh, did we mention that she will have a lot of children crowding into her?

21-26, Restoration Explained

Zion finds this promise incredible.

21, Zion's Question

Two things are promised in 15-20: the return of Zion's children, and the destruction of her enemies.

Her next utterance focuses on the first of these promises. She asks three questions about "these," the children whom she now sees surging around her. The questions are motivated by statements of her own

¹ The alternative reading "thy builders" does not recognize dominant role of the two themes repeated in this paragraph (the return of Zion's children and the departure of her destroyers) in the broader symmetry of this section, including the parallel paragraphs in vv. 22-23 and 24-26.

desperate condition. Isaiah alternates the questions and the statements, QSQSQ.

21 Then shalt thou say in thine heart, Who hath begotten me these,²--She thought her children were gone, yet now they surround her. Where did they come from? Has some surrogate produced them for her, as did Hagar for Sarah, or Bilhah for Rachel, or Zilpah for Leah?

seeing I have lost my children, and am desolate, a captive, and removing to and fro?--“Look at me, childless, barren, wandering in exile. I had lost all hope.” The emphatic “I” (preposed אני) acknowledges that she can claim no credit for their appearance.

and who hath brought up these?--The first question concerned the origin of the children. The second concerns their nurture. Who cared for them, fed them, clothed them, and trained them?

Behold, I was left alone;--She was bereft of child, husband, and companion. “I” is again emphatic. None of this is due to her.

these, where had they been?--The third question is the most general. Where were they? Where did they come from?

22-26, God’s Explanation

While Zion’s question concerns only the promise that her children will return, the Lord’s explanation deals with both of the promises of 15-20. Each answer begins “Thus saith the Lord,” and each ends with a statement that somebody will know the Lord (Zion in v. 23, all flesh in v. 26).

22-23, *The submission of the Gentiles will persuade Zion.*

This paragraph explains the return of Zion’s children, the first of the two promises in vv. 15-20.

22 Thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard **נִסְיָא to the peoples: and they shall bring thy sons in *their* arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon *their* shoulders.**--The Lord echoes a promise that Isaiah made back in chapter 11, in his great vision of the rule of Jesse’s son over a renewed creation. There, he said,

Isa 11:10-12 And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an **ensign **נִסְיָא**** of the peoples; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious. 11 And it shall come to pass in that day, *that* the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. 12 And he shall set up an **ensign **נִסְיָא**** for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

In both cases, God summons the Gentiles, with a “standard” or “ensign” (the same Hebrew word in both cases, a visible signal like a flag). (Note that “people” in both 49:22 and 11:10 is plural, referring to the world’s many ethnic groups.) In both cases, they return bringing Zion’s children with them. Note that the Gentiles have not *become* spiritual Israel. Ethnically, Jew and Gentile are still distinct, though the NT makes clear that they will be one body in Christ.

² ילד לִי. Elsewhere this phrase is used of a woman who bears a child to a man.

We must distinguish these Gentiles who return from the destroyers of v. 17 or the swallowers of v. 19, who are now far from Zion. These Gentiles are those who, together with Zion's children, subject themselves to Zion's king. The picture here is parallel to Paul's teaching in Rom 11, how Israel is cast away so that the Gentiles might be saved, and then returned to favor. The natural branches of the domestic olive are broken off so that the Gentiles, from a wild olive, could be grafted in, but then the natural branches are grafted back in again, into a body that includes both Jew and Gentile.

23 And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers:--Zion asked, "Who hath brought up these?" The Lord answers, "I put kings and queens in charge of them for you." We have a beautiful example of this in the treatment of Daniel and his friends in Babylon. Deprived of home and family, God arranged for them to be cared for in the very palace of the king of Babylon, and as they trusted in the Lord, even the outward opposition of the pagan king led to their spiritual growth.

they shall bow down to thee with *their* face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet;-- Recall the homage of v. 7, and the hourglass. Kings and princes shall bow down before the Lord's Servant, whom they have despised. This is true of the Messianic servant. It is true of the bottom of the hourglass, the church. And it is also true of the top of the hourglass, the nation Israel. Those who humble God's Servant, in any of the forms that that Servant takes, will one day themselves be humbled.

and thou shalt know that I am the LORD:--He will demonstrate that he is יהוה, their covenant God, who faithfully cares for them. Far from forsaking her, he has been watching over her.

for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me.--If she will trust in him, he will restore her.

24-26, The destruction of all opposition will persuade all flesh.

This paragraph explains the departure of the enemy, which was the second promise from vv. 15-20.

He describes three aspects of the chain that binds captive Israel (chart).

24 Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful³ captive delivered?--As a general principle, one might expect that Israel was doomed to perpetual captivity. Two chains hold her. First, her adversary was mighty. Second, she was a lawful captive, sent into bondage because of her sin.

25 But thus saith the LORD, Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered:--The might of the captor is no match for the Lord. He says nothing about the lawfulness of Israel's captivity; that is dealt with in v. 26. But he adds a third chain: her adversary is "a terrible one" ערִיץ, an oppressive tyrant.

for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee,--Here is a precious, but sobering, reassurance. Babylon had set her hand against Israel. For that, she must answer, not to Israel, but to Israel's Lord. Nobody messes with God's people without giving an account to him. Let's consider other evidence for this (charts):

Gen 12:3 I will bless them that bless thee, **and curse him that curseth thee**

Deu 32:35 **To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence;**

3 Syriac, Vulgate, and 1QIsa read ערִיץ, which forms a perfect parallel with v. 25, but for that reason is *lectio facillior*. But LXX ἀδωκός surely reads something involving צדיק, and the chiasmic alignment of these three items with the three characteristics of the Lord in v. 26 is powerful. Since we can make good sense of MT, there is no reason to change.

Deu 32:43 Rejoice, O ye nations, with his people: for **he will avenge the blood of his servants, and will render vengeance to his adversaries.**

This is not just an OT teaching.

2Th 1:6 *it is* a righteous thing with God to **recompense tribulation** to them that trouble you;

Heb 10:30-31 For we know him that hath said, **Vengeance** belongeth unto me, **I will recompense**, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall **judge** his people. 31 It is a **fearful thing** to fall into the hands of the living God.

This principle lies at the heart of the biblical instruction that we are not to seek our own vengeance, trusting instead in the Lord to vindicate us.

Mat 5:39 But I say unto you, That ye **resist not evil**: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Rom 12:14 **Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.**

Rom 12:17 **Recompense to no man evil for evil.**

2Ti 2:24-25 the servant of the Lord must **not strive**; but **be gentle unto all men**, apt to teach, patient, 25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves;

We think of this as a NT principle, but in fact the OT also forbids personal vengeance.

Lev 19:18 Thou shalt **not avenge, nor bear any grudge** against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.

Pro 24:17-19 **Rejoice not** when thine enemy falleth, and **let not thine heart be glad** when he stumbleth:

When we seek our own defense or revenge, we glorify our own strength. When we rest on the Lord's promises, we proclaim our faith in him and allow him to get the glory for himself.

and I will save thy children.--Though this paragraph focuses on the defeat of the adversaries, the Lord reminds us of the larger picture. Destruction of those who have taken Judah captive is part of the process of restoring Judah.

26 And I will feed them that oppress thee with their own flesh; and they shall be drunken with their own blood, as with sweet wine:--The destiny that the Lord has in store for his enemies is not pretty. If I were to draw a picture of what is described here, you wouldn't want to show it to your children. God's love for his own is wonderful and precious, but how fearful is his wrath against those who oppose him.

In v. 23, the return of Israel to Zion taught Mother Zion that God is indeed her covenant Lord. This section also ends with a lesson, but both the students and the lesson content are different.

and all flesh shall know—In v. 23, where the focus was on how converted Gentiles bring the Jews back to Zion, the one who learned of the Lord's character was Mother Zion, "thou shalt know." Now, when the Lord takes vengeance on those who have abused his people, "all flesh" will learn.

that I the LORD am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer, the mighty One of Jacob.--The return of Israel taught Mother Zion that God is her covenant God. The destruction of the adversaries will teach that

Israel's God cares for her in three ways, answering chiasmatically to the three chains of Israel's captivity in vv. 24-25 (chart):

She was "the prey of the terrible" (25), under tyrannical oppressors, but the Lord is her "Savior," delivering her from distress.

She was a "lawful captive" (24), in bondage because of her sin. Israel's law provided a way for a lawful captive to be released, if a near relative redeemed them by paying a price.

Lev 25:47-49 And if a sojourner or stranger wax rich by thee, and thy brother *that dwelleth* by him wax poor, and sell himself unto the stranger *or sojourner* by thee, or to the stock of the stranger's family: 48 After that he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brethren may redeem him: 49 Either his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or *any* that is nigh of kin unto him of his family may redeem him; or if he be able, he may redeem himself.

The Lord calls himself Israel's Redeemer, the one who pays the price to set her free from her bondage. In a few chapters, Isaiah will make clear what that price is. The Servant of the Lord

was wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all (53:5-6).

This promise is fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, who died to redeem his people from their bondage to sin, and rose again to prove that his sacrifice was sufficient.

The third characteristic of Israel's misfortune is that she is "the prey" of "the mighty" (v. 24). As the Mighty One, he is superior to anyone who might stand against him to hinder his deliverance of his people.

50:1-3 The Lord Rebukes Zion's Rebellious Children

The shift in pronouns shows that the Lord now turns from Zion (feminine singular) to her children (masculine plural). Having comforted her, he now reminds them of the reason that she needed comforting in the first place.

The Lord is not simply being vindictive after the fact. Remember that Isaiah writes *before* the disaster of the Babylonian conquest happens. There is still time for Judah to turn from her sin and return to the one who has already showed his power to save in delivering them from Assyria in 701. The disaster is coming, to be followed by restoration, but it need not have happened at all.

The section is structured as three questions. The first and third, but not the second, have answers, each introduced by "Behold." The answer to the second question awaits vv. 4-9.

1, Q: Why were you put away? A: Because of your sin.

50:1 Thus saith the LORD, Where is the bill of your [2mp] mother's divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you?--Zion complained of being forsaken and forgotten (49:14). As the Lord turns to her children, he asks them, "Was this my fault?"

He cites two particularly shameful transactions that might lead to her desolate condition:

- He might have divorced her.
- He might have sold her into slavery.

She is both sold and put away, but not in any manner that discredits the Lord.

Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves,--Better, “were ye sold.” The verb is passive (as in Lev 25:47), not reflexive (as in 1 Kings 21:25). He allowed them to go into bondage, because of their sin.

and for your transgressions is your mother put away.--Remarkably, the Lord does describe the separation of Israel as divorce. It’s passive here, but in Jer 3:8, perhaps inspired by this text, Jeremiah boldly says,

And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also.

The longer book talks about this metaphor. God does what is not permitted to us. That in itself is not surprising. He also describes himself as angry, and cruel, and arrogant, none of which is appropriate for us. Note, though, that he does not take another wife, but after a time of chastisement, restores her to himself.

2a, Q: Why did no one respond to my appeals? A: (none)

2 Wherefore, when I came, was there no man? when I called, was there none to answer?--They have been rejected because of their sin. But the Lord did not leave them in that state. He reached out to restore them. The second question is, Why didn’t they respond when he offered them redemption? His call came to them by his “servants the prophets” (2 Kings 9:7). These included Isaiah, and the Servant, who in the next section (50:4-9) describes his particular case of rejection.

2b-3, Q: Am I unable to deliver? A: No. Recall the Exodus.

Is my hand shortened at all, that it cannot redeem? or have I no power to deliver?--The third question comes from Num. 11. The people are complaining about the food: they have manna, but want flesh (vv. 4-6). Moses cries out to the Lord, who promises to send abundant flesh. When Moses protests that there aren’t any animals around, the Lord responds,

Num 11:23 **Is the LORD'S hand waxed short?** thou shalt see now whether my word shall come to pass unto thee or not.

Then he sends the quail into the camp. Each person gathers at least ten homers, that is, about 100 bushels of quail. They are overwhelmed with food, but when they greedily partake, the Lord smites many of them with a plague.

By recalling this phraseology, the Lord takes the people back to the time of the Exodus. He delivered them at that time; he can do it again.

Behold,--The answer to this question consists of a series of vignettes from the Exodus.

at my rebuke I dry up the sea,--He dried up the Red Sea so that the Israelites could pass over.

I make the rivers a wilderness:--The allusion here is probably to the dividing of the Jordan River.

their fish stinketh, because *there is no water, and dieth for thirst*.--This is a natural consequence of his drying up of the sea and the rivers. In addition, it recalls the effect of the first plague, turning the Nile into blood,

Exo 7:20-21 all the waters that *were* in the river were turned to blood. 21 And the fish that *was* in the river died; and the river stank

3 I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering.--This was the ninth plague,

Exo 10:21-23 21 And the LORD said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness *which* may be felt. 22 And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days: 23 They saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days: but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.

As before (11:11, 15-16; 12:2; 37:36; 43:3, 16-17), Isaiah cites the the Exodus as a prototype for the return from Babylon.