

Isaiah 63:1-6, The Redeemer Speaks

Overview

The exchange is what one might expect from a watchman on the city wall, interrogating someone who approaches the city. The first question has to do with the identity of one who approaches. The second asks an explanation for the striking appearance of his garments.

1, First Question

The watchman sees someone approaching, who is distinguished in two ways: the bright red color of his garments, and the swagger of his pace.

63:1 Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah?

Bozrah is a city of Edom, on the east side of the rift valley south of the Dead Sea (Figure 1, chart). The reference to Edom and Bozrah might mean either of two things.

1. Delitzsch sees the oracle as focused on the judgment of Edom. Recall earlier promises of God's judgment on these two:

Isa 11:12 And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. ... 14 But they shall fly upon the shoulders of the Philistines toward the west; they shall spoil them of the east together: they shall lay their hand upon **Edom** and Moab; and the children of Ammon shall obey them.

Isa 34:6 The sword of the LORD is filled with blood, it is made fat with fatness, *and* with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams: for the LORD hath a sacrifice in **Bozrah**, and a great slaughter in the land of **Idumea**.

But this is not a major emphasis of Isaiah, and vv. 3, 6 identify the peoples (plural), not just Edom, as his target.

2. The focus may be on the red color characteristic of Edom's territory, or of the grapes from Bozrah.¹

Gen 25:30 And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red *pottage*; for

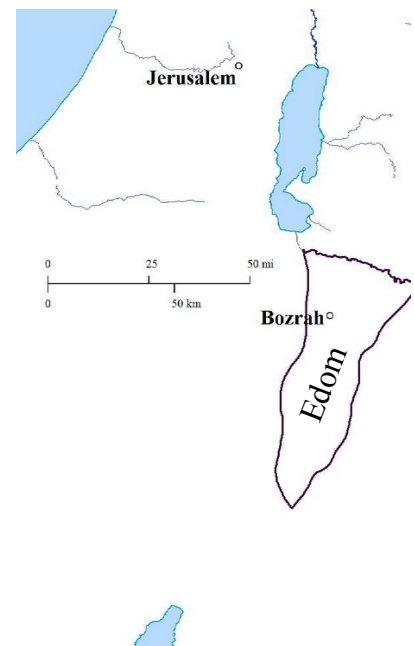


Figure 1: Bozrah and Edom

¹ T.K. Cheyne on 63:1 notes, "The name of Bozrah suggested the figure of the vintage (*bacir*), the names of countries or cities being regarded as emblematic of their fortunes. The wine-press, too, as DeSaulcy shows, appears as an emblem on the coins of Bostra (sic) during the Roman rule. Seir was a vine-country." The reference to DeSaulcy is *Numismatique de la Terre Sainte*, p 361ff, <http://archive.org/details/numismatiquedel00unkngoog> The reference to the wine press (pressoir) is on p. 370, bottom.

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I *am* faint: therefore was his name called Edom.

this that is glorious in his apparel,—The brightness of his garments makes him a striking figure.

travelling in the greatness of his strength?—The verb is very rare, and seems to mean “tilting” or “bending.” In the context of glorious apparel and evident strength, “swaggering” would be appropriate.

I that speak in righteousness,—There are two issues here: the sense of the preposition, and the meaning of צדקה.

The prepositional phrase “in righteousness” בצדקה is adverbial. It occurs 5x in Isaiah (along with four other uses of בצדק).² One particularly revealing instance (chart) is

Isa 48:1 Hear ye this, O house of Jacob, which are called by the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters of Judah, which swear by the name of the LORD, and make mention of the God of Israel, *but* not in truth, nor in righteousness.

So the expression means “righteously.” The next step is to determine the meaning of “righteous” in this context. The primary meaning of the root צדק is conformity to a standard, and the one who approaches characterizes himself as one whose words (unlike those of Israel in 48:1) are absolutely reliable, coming from one who always conducts himself in complete accord with the will of God.³

Joh 12:49 I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak.

mighty to save.—He is great in his appearance and his swaggering manner. That greatness has a purpose: to deliver his people. We must keep in mind this purpose, and his righteousness in carrying it out, if we are to understand the second half of the oracle.

The traveler considers this twofold claim of righteous speech and powerful action sufficient to identify himself. As Jeremiah later recognizes, this combination applies only to the Lord:

Jer 32:18 the Great, the Mighty God, the LORD of hosts, *is* his name, 19 Great in counsel, and mighty in work

Only God can speak absolute truth, because only he has the power to carry out what he decrees. In particular, his promise of salvation is absolutely reliable, because he makes it happen.

2-6, Second Question

Now the questioner focuses on the unusual color of his garments.

2 Wherefore *art thou* red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the

- 2 Clines sees the כ as indicating “accompaniment, method, means, instrument.” Other complements that he puts in this category include arrogance, knowledge, wisdom, prosperity, presumptuousness, jealousy, anger, wrath, distress, and bitterness. Delitzsch agrees, citing 42:6; 45:13 as instances of Isaiah’s use of כ adverbially.
- 3 Clines translates צדקה “victory,” in the sense of “salvation, vindication, deliverance, redemption” (see meaning 7 under צדקה). Isaiah does use צדקה in parallel with “salvation” (45:8; 51:5 with the judgment of God’s strong arm; 59:16; 61:10 of the Redeemer’s garments; and in fact compare the second part of the Redeemer’s self-characterization here). But this pairing does not appear in the constructions with כ, where more common parallels are משפט (1:27; 5:16; 9:6; cf. association with the verb שפט in 11:4; 59:4) and אמת (48:1) or אמרה (59:4).

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winefat?—The redness of the garments looks like a stain, not the original color,⁴ like a wine-treader who has splashed himself. Figure 2 (chart) shows some images of people treading grapes. A recurrent feature is ropes to hold while they tread, so that they don't slip and fall. It was a pretty sloppy business. You can expect to get your garments thoroughly stained with grape juice.

The traveler's response is one of the most gruesome pictures in the Old Testament. The one who is approaching so proudly announces that he has been trampling down, not grapes, but people, and the bright stains on his garments are from their gore and blood.

The verb tenses in what follows are a perplexing mix (chart).⁵ A number of explanations have been offered.⁶ I think he's playing with the tenses to emphasize that this gruesome disaster is partly achieved, and partly yet to come.

This interpretation brings two OT principles to mind (chart). The past tenses remind us that God's wrath is visible all around us. We should understand any disaster that we see as a manifestation of God's power and his wrath:

Amos 3:6 Shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done *it*?

The future tenses recall a principle that Proverbs presents twice: God's wrath will fall again, so we should pay attention to these warnings, and take appropriate action.

Pro 22:3 = 27:12 A prudent *man* foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished.

Application: We do not understand natural disasters correctly unless we see them as “shots over the bow,” warnings of God's wrath against sin and the even greater disaster yet to come.

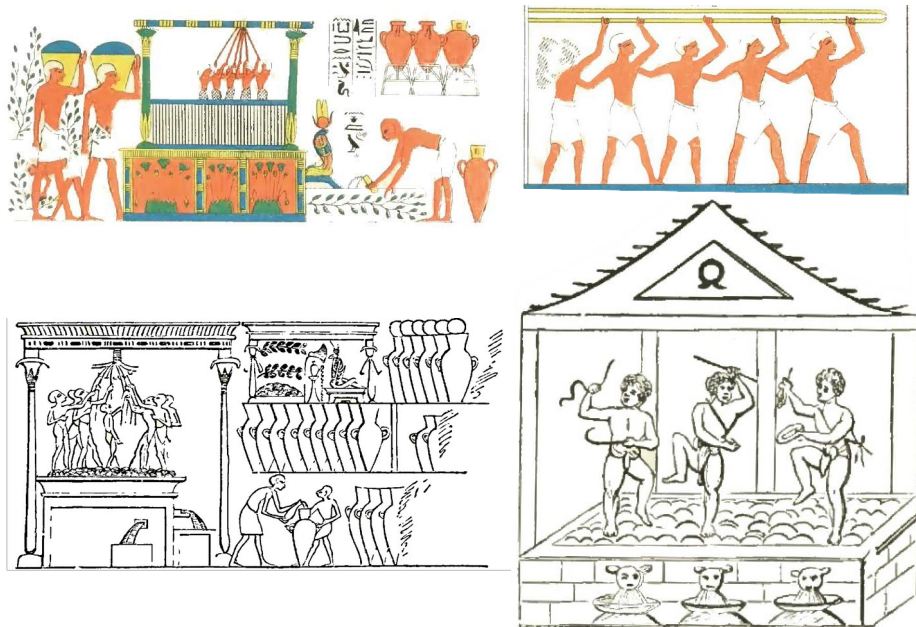


Figure 2: Treading Grapes (Wilkinson, Ancient Egyptians II)

4 “Red in thine apparel” is more literally “redness on thine apparel,” something that has been added later.

5 The most striking forms, in v. 3, are “shall be sprinkled,” which is a jussive form that would ordinarily be used only with *waw relative*, and “I will stain,” which has both an imperfect prefix and a perfect suffix. The speaker appears to be playing with the language; there are past and future aspects mingled together.

6 Some scholars think the verbs were once all past tense, and have been altered for some inexplicable reason. Delitzsch wants to see the imperfects as vivid descriptions of “the contemporary past,” in support of his notion that this is a focused oracle against Edom.

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The traveler’s response has a symmetrical structure, AB-C-AB (Table 1, chart), which emphasizes three themes.

- A is the **solitary** nature of his workmanship
- B is “I will X them in my anger and Y them in my fury,” with vivid description of the **vicious** judgment that will befall them
- C shows that the judgment is **determined**, according to 61:2. He does not act capriciously, but is carrying out a divine plan.

Solitary	Isa 63:3 I have trodden the winepress alone ; and of the peoples there was none with me :	5 And I looked, and there was none to help ; and I wondered that there was none to uphold : therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me; and my fury , it upheld me.
Vicious	for I will tread דרך them in mine anger , and trample them in my fury ; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment.	6 And I will tread down בוס the peoples in mine anger , and make them drunk in my fury , and I will bring down their strength [blood] to the earth.
Determined	4 For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come.	

Table 1: AB-C-AB Chiasm in 63:3-6

Let’s consider each of these, amplifying them with other Scriptures (chart).

I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the peoples there was none with me:—Yes, he has been treading in the winepress. As the pictures show, this was usually a communal activity, but no one joined him in this activity. The reason is that they were the grapes!⁷

In John, our Lord claims to have sole authority to judge:

Joh 5:22 For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son:

for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury;—“Anger” and “fury” are not words that one usually associates with the Redeemer. But John, in the Revelation, cites this passage to describe the return of the Lord Jesus in ch. 19.

Rev 19:15 And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the **fierceness** and **wrath** of Almighty God.

“Fierceness and wrath” are the Greek words used by the LXX here and in v. 6 to describe the motive for what the traveler is doing.⁸ Isaiah’s repetition warns us not to deemphasize this aspect of God..

The church today badly underestimates the wrath of God, and so deprives people of an important component of God’s self-revelation. God does not have a short fuse. He revealed himself to Moses as

7 7/7/19: I now think that the tense changes noted in the previous note distinguish a previous solitary staining, reflecting his redemptive work in ch. 53, from the future judgment. Note the same feature in Rev 19:13, clearly dependent on this passage, where the Savior’s garments are stained with blood *before* he treads the winepress of God’s wrath against the rebels in vv. 17-21.

8 In Rev 19:15, “fierceness and wrath” is the two nouns θυμος and οργη. In the MT, both vv. 3 and 6 have two words for anger, but the LXX has only one in each: θυμος in v. 3 and οργη in v. 6. The two Greek words are used about the same for אַר, while חמה favors θυμος.

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Exo 34:6 The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering [אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם], elsewhere translated “slow to anger”), and abundant in goodness and truth.

But men are sufficiently wicked that the Psalmist can say,

Ps 7:11 God is angry *with the wicked* every day.

Note the italics. It’s true that the wicked are the object of his wrath, but David’s insight is more general. Because there are so many wicked people around, God’s wrath burns continually.

and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment.—He draws our attention back to his garments, splattered with the gore of those who have opposed him.

As we get to the center of the structure and work our way back out, the traveler describes himself using two earlier descriptions of the Redeemer. These repetitions link the three “Redeemer” sections together and are an important clue to the overall organization of ch. 58-66.

4 For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come.—We learned in 61:2 of two periods that God has determined on the earth:

Isa 61:2 To proclaim **the acceptable year** of the LORD, and **the day of vengeance** of our God;

In that passage, the acceptable year came first, then the day of vengeance. When our Lord introduced his ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth in Luke 4. Toward the end of his ministry, he explained,

Joh 12:47 I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

Several changes from 61:2 show the difference in emphasis (Table 2chart).

- The order is reversed. The first thing we encounter now is not salvation, but vengeance.
- He is not only “proclaiming,” but revealing his desire: “the day of vengeance is in mine heart.”
- The favorable year is now named after the object of salvation rather than the subject. It no longer describes God’s acceptance of sinners, but focuses on those who have received that salvation, his redeemed.⁹ He will finally satisfy the longing of those whom he has delivered:

Rev 6:9-10 I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: 10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

5 And I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold:

⁹ The Hebrew word translated “redeemed” גָּאֹל is a *hapax*. The KJV treats it as Qal passive of the verb. Modern translations render it as an abstract noun, “redemption” (ESV) or even “payback” (NET), but that would be more unambiguously expressed as the feminine גְּאוּלָּה, which is attested several times in this sense. It’s best to stay with AV.

61:2, First Advent	63:4, Second Advent
To proclaim	For ... is in mine heart,
1. the acceptable year of the LORD,	2. and the year of my redeemed [ones] is come.
2. and the day of vengeance of our God;	1. For the day of vengeance is in mine heart,

Table 2: Comparison of 61:2 and 63:4

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therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me; and my fury, it upheld me.—In repeating the emphasis on his solitary action, we again hear an echo of an earlier text, the first “redeemer” passage that we identified in this section (Table 3, chart).

Isa 59:16 And he saw that *there was* no man, and wondered that *there was* no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation unto him; and his righteousness, it sustained him.

59:16, Isaiah’s Description	63:5, The Redeemer Speaks
And he saw ראה that there was no man,	And I looked ביט, and there was none to help;
and wondered שמו that there was no intercessor:	and I wondered שמו that there was none to uphold:
therefore his arm brought salvation unto him;	therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me;
and his righteousness , it sustained צמך him.	and my fury , it upheld צמך me.

Table 3: Comparison of 59:16 and 63:5

Again, the emphasis changes. In the first passage, he is sustained by his righteousness as he brings salvation (the point of 63:1). Now, he is sustained by his fury.

6 And I will tread down the peoples in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury, and I will bring down their strength [blood]¹⁰ to the earth.—As in v. 3, he reminds us of his anger and fury. When the time of judgment comes, there will be absolutely no mercy.

Application: We recognize how completely the world ignores the wrath of God against sin. But I wonder whether we fully appreciate it ourselves. If we did, we would be much more eager to warn those around us of what is coming, and to tell them of the salvation that God has graciously provided.

¹⁰ “Blood” is the same rare word נצח used in the parallel in v. 3.