

Though the prophets spoke of a return from Babylon after seventy years of captivity, not all their prophecies of restoration can be contained within that context. There are much larger and far reaching prophecies that require some other explanation, and these are to be found in the majority of the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah stands out as one who both speaks specifically of the return from Babylon and also clearly points to a restoration in a future far beyond that from Babylon. Examples of these longer ranging prophecies of Isaiah are examined in this pamphlet.

A Restoration which follows the birth and life of Jesus.

Isaiah 49:1-9, and esp. vv 4-5, spells out the future context for this more distant restoration. This context is one in which the Messiah has been born and is at work among the gentiles:

4 And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength— 5 he says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

This is an extraordinary prophecy in which we hear the Messiah himself relating a conversation with his Father concerning his human birth and the purpose for which God is sending him; he is to be “*formed in the womb to be God’s servant to bring Jacob back to him*”. The name “*God’s servant*” is a well recognised Messianic title and is used several times by Isaiah. Though the emphasis of the passage is on the servant being a light to the gentiles and to the ends of the earth, there is none the less a very clear announcement of his work among the Jews: the Messiah will “*bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself*”. Such a restoration, therefore, like the work among the Gentiles, has a context after the birth of Jesus. It is a Messianic work.

Isaiah 11:10ff is another passage in which a restoration after the Messiah’s birth is prophesied: *10 “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. 11 In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. 12 He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth. 13 Ephraim’s jealousy will vanish, and Judah’s enemies will be cut off; Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah, nor Judah hostile toward Ephraim.”*

In this passage the Messiah is characterised as the “root of Jesse”, a description of his human origin from the kingly line of David, the son of Jesse. The same two things are said of his work in this passage as were said in Isaiah 49: he would have a ministry among the gentiles (symbolised as “*raising a banner for the peoples*”), and he would “*gather the exiles of Israel*”. Once again, therefore, the gathering of Israel would be a gathering that would take place after the birth of the Messiah.

A number of further points from these two passages need to be noted:

1. Both make a clear distinction between Israel as a nation and the gentile nations; the servant is “*to restore the tribes of Jacob*” and “*also*” to be “*a light to the gentiles*”. The restoration mentioned here cannot, therefore be construed in any symbolic way as relating to the church. The Messiah has a work amongst the Jews as a people and the restoration in mind is one that concerns the Jews.
2. The restoration is conceived as a “gathering” – “*he will gather the exiles*”, “*he will assemble the scattered people*”. There is a presumption here of a widespread exile and a collecting of the tribes together. It is not just a seeking out of Jews in exile and a revealing of the Messiah to selected individuals among them. In other words it has a dimension beyond that of simply bringing salvation to a believing remnant. The expression “*to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself*” is not one which fits comfortably with the ingathering of a remnant of the Jews who in the immediate sequel to Jesus’ ministry and throughout the age of the church have become believers. It fits better with the notion of a much bigger and national restoration. The expression “*the tribes of Jacob*” certainly requires this kind of bigger notion.
3. The second passage spells out the nature of this “gathering” in a strictly geographical sense. The Jews will be reclaimed and assembled “*from the four corners of the earth*” and particular lands are listed. They will come from a world-wide dispersion. The obvious implication is that they will be assembled in their own land of Israel. Thus a geographical restoration is in mind. The passage resists any “spiritualization”.
4. It is also obvious that neither the earthly ministry of Jesus, nor indeed the immediate years that followed it in which many Jews received Jesus as their Messiah can be an adequate context for the fulfilment of these prophecies. On the contrary the ministry of Jesus and the decades that followed saw not the gathering but the scattering of the Jews in general and also the believing Jews. That period saw the rejection of the Messiah by the nation, the consequent destruction of the nation and the beginning of exile all over again. It was as if the Messiah’s first coming actually set up the very conditions for a much later stage of his work when he would gather Jacob in fulfilment of prophecy. It is much more the case, therefore, that it is the wide dispersion which actually exists today that sets the scene for a literal gathering of the Jews through a great work of the Messiah. Such a work would answer to the plain meaning of the prophecy of Isaiah.
5. Both passages show that in some kind of way the gathering of Israel and the enlightening of the Gentiles work in tandem in the purposes of God
6. The only time reference given to us here is that the restoration will take place “*in that day*” (11:10, 11). This, however, is an indistinct term with no indication of a specific time, but it is generally agreed that its implication is of an “end time”; it is an “eschatological” term. Certainly from Isaiah’s perspective it was well in the future!

“he will gather the exiles of Israel and assemble the scattered people”

A Restoration of World-Wide Significance

Our understanding of this restoration is enlarged by a short but very powerful and pregnant prophecy in which Isaiah points to the immense blessing in store for Israel and, through Israel, for the whole world:

“In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit.” (Is. 27:6).

This is a succinct and massive statement in beautiful imagery of a glorious future, a restoration not simply of land and people but of purpose and destiny.

1. The expression *“in days to come”* is akin to *“in that day”* and points to an end time. It is obvious that we have not seen a time anything like this in Jewish history, where the Jewish nation has *“rooted”* and *“filled the world with fruit”*.

2. The notion of *“rooting”* suggests a gathering and planting of Jacob in a specific geographical place. It certainly means a spiritual rooting. Once rooted, Jacob (Israel) will begin to bud and blossom. This depicts great spiritual growth. The ensuing fruit will be found to benefit the whole world; the nation will do what God always intended it should do, bring spiritual blessing to the world. There could scarcely be a more plain and comprehensive prophecy of the future purpose of Israel than this.

3. The plain meaning of the text quite clearly points to Jacob and Israel as descriptive of the Jewish nation. It is quite unnecessary to *“spiritualise”* Jacob here and think of Jacob as the church. We have seen in the previous passages from Isaiah how clear a distinction the prophet makes between Jacob and gentiles, and that distinction remains our best guide. This reference is to Jacob, Israel, the original people of God in which God is working out a great final purpose for the world. That is the simple basic meaning of the text as it stands, and unless or until the event proves otherwise, that is what should be adhered to. It must be said that on the basis of a scripture like this it is not difficult to see how Paul could refer to the great riches that Israel would bring to the world when the time of its *“fullness”* arrived and its blindness was removed (Rom 11:12).

4. That Paul did have in mind scriptures like this when he wrote in Romans 11 about God’s future dealings with the Jews is clear from Romans 11:26. There he quotes from another passage in Isaiah (59:20-21), *“The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob”*. Paul’s treatment of this scripture from Isaiah is obviously very helpful for our own understanding of Isaiah. He advances this scripture in support of his revelation that the hardening which came on Israel in the time of Jesus’ first appearance will ultimately be taken away and allow Israel to turn to the Lord. This will be accomplished by the Messiah-deliverer in Zion and will be a time of complete forgiveness of sin, a day when *“all Israel will be saved”* and when the nation will enter into real covenant relationship with God. This points us not simply to a time of national physical restoration but a time of total spiritual restoration. The dimension of complete spiritual renewal is a fundamental characteristic of this end time restoration.

“In days to come Israel will fill the world with fruit”

It is important to note that Paul is not associating his quotation of a *“deliverer who will turn godlessness away from Israel”* with the appearance of Jesus during his earthly ministry. The turning away of godlessness that is in Paul’s mind is the turning away of the godlessness that led the nation to reject its Messiah and persisted all through the *“hardening”* which came over the Jews in the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry and beyond. This *“turning away of godlessness”* relates to a time when Israel comes to realise who its deliverer is. And, interestingly enough, that occasion is related geographically to Zion or Jerusalem with all that implies for a physical restoration.

A Permanent and Glorious Restoration

Isaiah’s prophecies indicate a permanence in this spiritual restoration of Israel that separates it from any thing that has happened to Israel in history. In 45:17 we read, *“But Israel will be saved by the LORD with an everlasting salvation; you will never be put to shame or disgraced, to ages everlasting”*. It is a deep and powerful event, full of glory and from which there will be no falling away. If it is indeed a work accomplished directly by Jesus the deliverer coming to Zion (59:20-21) it can scarcely be less than that. The details of such a happening are in no way spelt out but the fact of it leaves us in no doubt that it will be of immeasurable consequence for Israel and for the world.

The glory associated with this end time restoration becomes a major theme of Isaiah’s later prophetic writings. Take the magnificent passage in Is. 62:1-5 for example:

1 For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. 2 The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow. 3 You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD’S hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. 4 No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married. 5 As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

The expressions *“her righteousness shining out like the dawn”* and *“her salvation like a blazing torch”* indicate the depth and majesty of the spiritual restoration of this nation. The glory of God will be like a fire on the nation. Both the people and its land will see desolation no longer. It will be a *“wedding day”* restoration. It is this that the gentiles and the nations will see. There will be no hiding of it. Neither will there be any ignoring of it; it will be a witness to the nations of massive proportions. If, as a consequence of the Jewish rejection of Jesus, the preaching of the gospel on the world has brought great gain, then the impact of this spiritual restoration of Israel will be of an even higher order. As Paul wrote in Romans 11:17, *“if their transgression means riches for the world How much greater riches will their fullness bring.”*

Some of what Isaiah prophesies here may justifiably be applied to the glory of the church, which, for example, will indeed be *“a crown of splendour in the LORD’s hand”*. This double application becomes increasingly fitting as the book continues with Isaiah’s final great prophecies in which the final restoration of Jerusalem seems to foreshadow even greater and heavenly ages. But essentially his prophecy thus far is clearly addressed to the nation, and is meant for the nation. Our eyes need to be open in that direction.

Bob Dunnett