

Exegetical-Homiletical Study of Isaiah 9:1-7¹

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Chapter nine of Isaiah stands out as an oasis in the wilderness of God's judgment against apostasy and unbelief. It is the third chapter with obvious messianic prophecy. Chapter four foretold the Branch of the Lord, beautiful and glorious. In a single verse (14) chapter seven has told of a virgin bearing a son and calling his name Immanuel. Numerous additional Messianic prophecies will follow, especially in the second part which August Pieper calls the "Book of Comfort," which warrant calling Isaiah the Evangelist of the Old Testament. However, in the first part, which Pieper designates the "Book of Denunciation," the first seven verses of Isaiah chapter nine stand out in bold relief.

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 would not believe (ch 2-5); henceforth they shall not be able to believe (ch 6)." (Drechsler).

Israel has turned from the Lord. She has ignored the repeated warnings of God's previous heralds. The cup of God's wrath has become full. The nation will be cast aside. The house of David will be rejected. The land will be ravaged, the cities destroyed, the people left desolate. The proclamation of a message of doom is 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 have not turned from the Lord. Isaiah's preaching is to harden more and more hearts of those who have turned away from the Lord and at the same time set aside and strengthen a remnant unto himself. Our verses for study are words to thrill the hearts of those who still looked for redemption in Israel. They recommend themselves as an Old Testament lesson for Christmas Day.

v. 1 Nevertheless there will be no more gloom for those who were in anguish. As in past time he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, so in the future he will glorify the way of the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

Verse one serves as a transition between the prophecy of gloom and darkness of chapter eight and the light promised in chapter nine. 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, would include the region east of the Jordan River. Galilee of the Gentiles would then be the northern regions of Galilee. Even as the entire region has been exposed to corruption from Gentile influence and suppression by heathen forces since the time of the Judges, so the mighty deliverance to follow knows no boundaries.

Verse one, as well as the following verse, is cited by the mighty Deliverer in Capernaum early in his ministry: "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Mt 4:15-16).

v. 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.

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 [חֹשֶׁךְ] and light [אֹרֶךְ], shadow of death and dawning light. Shadow of death [צֶלְמֹת] is a composite noun, צֶלַךְ dark, shadow, and מָוֶת very thick darkness, death. The people (collective noun) walk in darkness. Before light, darkness. The darkness that covers the land, Jew and Gentile, is within as well as without. Without the people may expect desolation. On account of apostasy Israel faces only more misery and distress; finally she will be swept away and reduced to ruins, never to be restored. The greater darkness is within, ignorance, corruption, guilt, separation from God because of sin. Into this state of things a light will shine through the dark sky, 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

¹ English verse numbering is followed in this paper. In *Biblia Hebraica*, the corresponding verses are Isaiah 8:23-9:6.

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.

- v. 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.

The verse presents a textual problem. The Masoretic text has לֹא 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 orthographical variation לֵא , as strongly suggested by the verbs multiply and increase, the inclusion of the לֵא in the emphatic position, and the symmetry of the verse.

The result of the great light will be joy, a pure and holy joy. Israel has been reduced to a remnant. At the dawning of the light to come Israel will be multiplied. God will make of the true Israel a great host. They will rejoice before God. Their joy will be great as joy in the harvest, joy over blessings received, and joy as when men divided the spoil, joy over evil that has been averted and victory that has been won. The harvest and spoils of war are figures of speech, but the joy is not merely figurative. Victory and triumph await the people of God.

- v. 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.

The prophet continues with the reason $[\text{כִּי}]$ for their joy. Call it three reasons, if you will. The yoke $[\text{עֲלֵל}]$ the curved piece of wood which is a symbol of servitude, the staff $[\text{מַטֵּה}]$ of the shoulder, actually the whole upper back, and the rod $[\text{שֵׁבֶט}]$ used for beating have been broken. The yoke, the staff, and the rod stand for more than mere outward distress (cf. v.2). 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 bondage in Egypt or the Assyrian oppression. The victory 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 but 300 men that all might know it was a victory by God. So also the deliverance to come is not of men but of God, not a joy 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 revealed. Without supplying the information the prophet continues to build the expectation and the suspense with another כִּי .

- v. 5 For every soldier’s boot in battle and garment rolled in blood will be for burning, will be food for fire.

The Soldier’s boot in battle and garment rolled in blood describes circumstances for the present and immediate future. The former depicts the noise and tumult of war, the latter the cruel results of the battle. This destruction of the oppressing power shall finally give way to peace at the beginning of the Messianic reign. The very garments of war and attire for battle shall be food for the fire, useful only for burning. The same thought, by another picture, is repeated by the prophet in the closing chapter: “The wolf and the Lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain” 65:25. (cf. also 11:6-9).

- v. 6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Having built the suspense in the preceding verses the prophet states the reason for the joy, the identity of the great deliverer. He is a son, a mere child, yet he has come to rule. The verse takes us back immediately to 7:14: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” In chapter seven the prophet speaks of him as a sign. Here he is spoken of as a gift of grace already given. In chapter seven the virgin names the child. Here his name is proclaimed by the people. Though the prophet does not expressly say he is the son of David, no other conclusion can be drawn. The government shall be upon his shoulders (cf. 2 Sa 7 and Ps 21). Child and son cannot refer to Hezekiah, as some have understood, for the names to follow can hardly apply. Though some may have falsely entertained such hopes at the beginning of Hezekiah’s reign, it would be sheer folly and blasphemy, to continue to hold such a view.

Likewise Jewish commentators falsely interpret the latter part of the verse. Instead of “his name shall be called” they translate “the God, who is called.” They apply the names Eternal Father and Mighty God to him

who would call the child by the aforementioned names. Neither the syntax, all nominatives, nor the context warrant such a translation. There is no good reason for a description of God in naming the child. In addition such an interpretation would ignore the obvious parallel construction. Only blind unbelief can cling to this obviously faulty conclusion.

Commentators differ to the number of names. The King James Version and August Pieper found five names, but lose most of the symmetry of the verse. The Vulgate and Luther have six names and thereby retain a measure of the apparent symmetry. The NIV has four names, each name consisting of two words. The arrangement is mostly a matter of personal preference. The meaning remains the same.

[פְּלֵא יוֹעֵץ] He is Counselor. His spirit of counsel is further described in 11:2, “The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.” Though a child, he has no need for counselors. He alone counsels those without counsel. He has a plan for man’s salvation. His plan is laid in eternity. It is a plan according to God’s love and mercy. As a Counselor He is wonderful, incomprehensible to mortal men. Not only is there great wonder in him, but he is throughout a wonder, both according to his person and his work.

[אֵל גְּבוּר] His plan shall not fail. He is the mighty God. Though [אֵל] is sometimes used to refer to gods (Exodus 15:1), to mighty ones, a hero (Ezekiel 31:11), and to angels (Psalm. 89:7), the context does not warrant anything less than God. In the writings of Isaiah it always refers to the name of God. Almighty God is the traditional name of God (Dt 10:17, Jer 32:18, Ne 9:32, Ps 24:8). No matter that this appellation might seem to go beyond what was known of the Messiah in Isaiah’s day. Is not this the very point—to expand the horizons of the faithful for their great comfort. What is said here fully compliments 7:14 where the child is called Immanuel.

[אָבִי־עַד] The third name follows the second and springs from it. The mighty God is the Everlasting Father. Not only is he possessor of eternity. As a faithful, wise, guardian friend he provides for his own in eternity, using His divine might for the eternal good of his people. “As a father has compassion on his children so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” Psalm 103:13.

[שַׁר־שְׁלוֹם] And he is the Prince of Peace. He is not only called so, he is the Prince of Peace. He it is who establishes peace, removing all that has robbed men of peace. He breaks down the barrier that separates sinners from God. “For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet” 1 Co 15:25.

v. 7 To the increase of (his) government and peace there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from now on and forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

As the Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace, the child shall rule on the throne of David. Unlike David’s kingdom that had been greatly weakened from within and without, his kingdom will continually increase. Unlike David’s rule that came to an end, his shall have no end. “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” Luke 1:32-33.

“To the increase” [לְמַרְבֵּה] presents an unusual matter. Why a closed *mem* at the beginning of the word? There seems to be no final reason. It may be nothing more than a copying error, though a highly unusual one. It has been suggested that since the word stands at the beginning of the final verse of this prophecy the final *mem*, was used here for emphasis, to key on this part of the prophecy. Some have also said that the closed *mem* stands for the stability of the Messianic rule. Another explanation is that this was to be read as two words [לִם רַבָּה]. At any rate we have here, not a participle, but a substantive from the root [רַבָּה] to express the result of the action.

[מִשְׁפָּט] Unlike David’s kingdom, as great as it was, the Messiah’s kingdom is [צְדִיקָה] a perfect kingdom of justice and righteousness forever. Both terms, justice and righteousness are forensic. Concerning justice and righteousness (*Gericht* und *Gerechtigkeit*) Luther writes: “Justice is that part of Law which condemns. Righteousness is that part which absolves. In the kingdom of Christ the ungodly are condemned, the godly are justified, saved, set free from sin and death. A happy reign in which mercy flourishes” Am. Ed. Vol. 16, p. 102. The thought of a reign in which ungodliness is condemned and righteousness prevails is one on which Isaiah dwells at great length (chapters 1, 4, 11, 27). Jeremiah expresses this very safety and bliss of the righteous: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right (establish justice and righteousness) in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness’” Jeremiah 23:5-6.

Obviously the concept of the righteousness which avails before God as expressed by the apostle Paul in Romans 3:21-26 and in all of the New Testament writings is not foreign to Isaiah and the believers of the Old Testament. The righteousness of which Isaiah speaks is not a righteousness of the Law, but a righteousness such as “no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived” 1 Corinthians 2:9 (cf. also Isa 64:4).

The righteousness by which God declares sinners righteous is the very heart of Isaiah’s message of comfort to the remnant of Israel. It is the very basis of the second part of the book chapters 40-66. Midway in

second Isaiah stands the great chapter. Isaiah 53 spells out the Righteous One at work as the very substitute for sinners by which sinners are declared righteous and acceptable before God.

Verse seven and the entire text conclude in a most emphatic manner. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. [זֵאֵל] as used in the Old Testament is God's intense love for his people, a kind of jealousy by which he is determined to protect them at the great expense of any who interfere. Luther speaks of God's zeal as love mixed with hate, or an angry love. He will do as he has promised. He will rise up and consume all who set themselves against his people.

WE CELEBRATE THE BIRTH OF THE AGES

- I. This is who He is
- II. This is what He does

“JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD HAS COME”

- I. A noble birth
- II. A noble cause

THE GIFT WHICH KEEPS ON GIVING

- I. A gift from heaven
- II. A gift which gladdens
- III. A gift which endures

BEHOLD, YOUR LIGHT HAS COME

- I. He is the true light
- II. He has shined upon a dark world

THE GIFT WHICH KEEPS ON GIVING

- I. A gift from Heaven v.6
 - A. A gift for the poor (sinners)
 1. the fall into sin
 2. the burden of sin
 3. walking in darkness (Christmas story)
 4. shadow of death
 - B. A gift according to Promise
 1. Already foretold
 - a. Seed of woman
 - b. Son of David
 - c. born of a virgin (Is 7:14)
 2. Further revealed
 - a. Wonderful Counselor
 - b. Mighty God
 - c. Everlasting Father
 - d. Prince of Peace
 - C. A gift fulfilled in Bethlehem manger (Christmas story)
 - D. Application
 1. a priceless gift
 2. for all
- II. A gift which gladdens v.1-5
 - A. A gift of Light v.2
 1. Israel's distress
 2. Christian's delight (Luke 1:78-79)
 - B. Gift of Life v.2
 1. Israel's end
 2. New beginning (Luke 2:10-11)
 - C. Prosperity v.3
 1. day of harvest
 2. day of victory (Luke 1:53)
 - D. Freedom v.4
 1. God gave Midianites into Gideon's hand
 2. God exalts sinners (Luke 1:52)
 - E. Peace v.5
 1. instruments of war obsolete
 2. rule by the Gospel (Luke 1:52)
 - F. Application

1. no disappointment
2. perfect gift

III. A gift which endures v.7

A. David's kingdom

1. What it was—greatness
2. What it lacked—never perfect
3. What it became—extinct

B. Messianic Kingdom

1. justice and righteousness
2. forever, without end
3. zeal of the Lord

C. Application

1. no fad, no returns
2. for daily assurance and comfort
3. which we can share without losing any of it for ourselves.