

Exegetical Study of Isaiah 2:1-4— The Prophecy and Its Fulfillment

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There are many prophecies in the Old Testament which speak of great changes in nature that will take place in the last days. Isaiah 2:1-4 is one such prophecy. According to Isaiah 2:2 the mountain of the LORD'S temple will be established in the last days as chief among the mountains. "It will be raised above the hills."

Let me, by way of introduction, name several other prophecies which also talk about great changes in geography.

According to Zechariah 14:10 all the land around Jerusalem will be changed into a plain, but Jerusalem will be raised up.

According to Isaiah 40:4 the LORD will come to his people, and then a way will be readied for him in the following manner: "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."

Zechariah speaks of the day when "a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (Zech. 13:1). "On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter" (Zech. 14:8).

Ezekiel saw water stream forth from the temple (Ezek. 47) and fruit trees of all kind on both banks of the river. "Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them" (Ezek. 47:12).

"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells", sing the sons of Korah (Ps. 46:4).

Isaiah saw water "gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert". "And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness" (Isa. 35:6, 8).

God also revealed to Isaiah that the LORD of Hosts on Mount Zion "will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever" (Isa. 25:6-8).

"The LORD will dry up the gulf of the Egyptian sea; with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand over the Euphrates River. He will break it up into seven streams so that men can cross over in sandals. There will be a highway for the remnant of his people that is left from Assyria, as there was for Israel when they came up from Egypt" (Isa. 11:15-16).

How should these prophecies be understood? Will the earth's geography and topography be dramatically changed, or is this rather picture language for the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation under the new covenant? Of the new covenant Jeremiah says, "Behold, days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31). In those days Israel will not be a "a sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers" (Isa. 1:4), but all of God's people will know the LORD, "from the least of them to the greatest, for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer. 31:34). God's true Israel does not include both believers and unbelievers. God's true Israel is not the same thing as the earthly, worldly Israel, but rather is those who are true Israelites or Jews, i.e., those who believe in the LORD'S promises (cf. Rom. 2:28-29 and John 1:47). Those who do not say AMEN to the LORD and his word of promise (i.e., those who do not believe firmly) have no lasting peace. Isaiah underlines that with a play on words (Isa. 7:9, Hebrew: *taAMINu—teAMENu*). Paul, thoroughly trained in

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biblical interpretation as a scribe and Pharisee, writes: "Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children... It is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is *the children of the promise* who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (Rom. 9:6-8). The LORD had revealed to Isaiah: "Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, *only a remnant will return*" (Isa. 10:22).

To rightly understand the true meaning of these prophecies, it is important to pay attention to the following: the difference between God's Israel during the time of the old covenant and the true Israel, the difference between the old and new covenants, and the difference between a theocratic nation in a specific geographical land and God's true Israel which cannot be seen with physical eyes (Luke 17:20). The new covenant is the true fulfillment of the old covenant's promises to "the house of Israel and the house of Judah."

Jesus never criticized the Scriptures of the old covenant, but considered them his Father's teaching which he came to fulfill. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law (*Torah*) or the Prophets (*Nevi'im*); I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them (*πληρῶσαι*)" (Matt. 5:17). "Everything must be fulfilled (*δεῖ πληρωθῆναι*) that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). Jesus and his saving work cast their shadow already in advance on the Scriptures of the old covenant. Therefore Jesus can say of the Scriptures: "It is these that bear witness of me" (John 5:39).

"The Law (*Torah*) is only a *shadow* of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves," writes the author of Hebrews (10:1). The old covenant's many purity regulations, sacrificial laws and rules for Sabbaths and festivals are a shadow of Christ and his kingdom, teaching that fellowship with God demands total purity, that sin is atoned for and fellowship with God is re-established through the only Pure One, a fellowship which gives rest, joy, peace and eternal life. "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Col. 2:16-17). "Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant" (Heb. 7:22). "The covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with the first covenant, no place would have been sought for another" (Heb. 8:6-7). "By calling this covenant 'new' (Jer. 32:31), he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (Heb. 8:13). Those who reject Christ as the fulfillment of the old covenant's shadows, pictures, and promises, have a veil over their heart, according to Paul, so that they cannot see and understand what the old covenant's Scriptures really say. "Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (2 Cor. 3:15-16).

When the prophets in the Old Testament describe what will happen when the Messiah comes and defeats their foes—and the reality behind Israel's foes (Babel, Edom, Moab, etc.), namely sin, death and the devil—they are using a series of metaphors or pictures to describe the blessings which will follow "the Day of the Lord," God's coming into the world to intervene. These metaphors have as their background the suffering which evil and falling away from God brought with them: destruction, ruins, wasteland, failed harvests, enemies that invade and destroy, lack of peace, oppression, captivity, etc. God's kingdom, which Israel and the geographical Canaan should have borne witness to, have through the people's falling away become a wasteland. The Prophet Zechariah summarizes: "They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry... I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land was left so desolate behind them that no one could come or go. *This is how they made the pleasant land desolate*" (Zech. 7:12, 14). Isaiah describes the wages of sin in the same way: "Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you" (Isa. 1:7).

When the promised Messiah comes, the Son of David and the Lord himself in one person, then the instigator of the falling away from God and of all the misery that the fall into sin brought with it will be defeated. With the Messiah comes the opposite of death, unrighteousness, oppression, lack of peace, captivity, etc. Therefore, Isaiah says in chapter 35 not only that "the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped" (v. 5) when the LORD comes, but also that "the desert and the parched land will be glad, and the wilderness will rejoice and blossom" (v. 1), "the burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground

bubbling springs" (v. 6), and "no lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it" (v. 9). All these are metaphors for that which belongs with the Messiah and his kingdom, namely joy and everlasting peace, life and blessing in overabundance. "They will enter Zion with singing, everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (v. 10). Salvation and the Savior are called "the way of holiness" (cf. Jesus' words: "I am the Way," (John 14:6). That way is *a gift to unclean sinners and therefore means that unclean sinners who are led down that path are reckoned as clean*. Isaiah says literally: "No one unclean shall pass along it, *but it shall be for them*"¹ (v. 8). The author of the epistle to the Hebrews has grasped what is really meant. "We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by *a new and living way* opened for us through the curtain, that is, *his body*" (Heb. 10:19-20).

The messianic kingdom of God is in contrast to the sinful situation in "the land" during the time of the old covenant: "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the water covers the sea" (Isa. 11:9). Jeremiah emphasizes that the new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah is "not like the covenant I made with their forefathers" (31:31). "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts...they will know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (v. 33-34). "No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise. The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and the Lord will be your glory" (Isa. 60:18-19).

Thus it is already made clear in the Old Testament that the messianic kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven is of an entirely different nature than the kingdoms of this world. Just as is the Messiah himself, this kingdom is "from above" (Dan. 7:13f, Joh. 8:23; 18:36). But the metaphors for the kingdom of the Messiah employ as their point of contrast and comparison the earthly situations that existed during the time of the old covenant. "You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose water never fails" (Isa. 58:11). "No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called 'My delight is in her', and your land 'Married'; for the LORD will take delight in you, and to him your land will be married" (Isa. 62:4). "O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires. I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. All your sons will be taught by the LORD, and great will be your children's peace. In righteousness you will be established... This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness (Hebrew: **הַקְּדוּשָׁה**) is from me" (Isa. 54:11-14, 17).

The fulfillment of the promises of the Messiah and his kingdom in the Old Testament is not to be found in the establishment of some earthly kingdom or theocracy. Already Abraham knew that the promised land of Canaan was only a picture foreshadowing God's eternal kingdom. "By faith he (Abraham) made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God... They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:9-16).

The cities in the land of Canaan may be turned into ruins, including Jerusalem. The sin of the people brought misfortune on God's city Jerusalem. "Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and provoked me to anger by all that their hands have made, my anger will be poured out on this place and will not be quenched" (2 Chr. 24:25). Of the earthly Canaan and Jerusalem Ezekiel says: "The land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of violence" (Ezek. 7:23). Earthly cities and kingdoms shall not endure forever. "Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:14). Therefore

¹ Many translators have not understood, and therefore mistranslated the literal "but it shall be for them". The new Swedish state-sponsored translation *Bibel 2000* opines in a footnote that Isa. 35:8b is so impossible to understand that it must be left untranslated.

the Lord promises already during the time of the old covenant a new covenant with the Messiah as its Mediator, "that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance" (Heb. 9:15).

The fulfillment of the old covenant's promises regarding God's city Jerusalem and Mount Zion has to do with "a better country—a heavenly one." Paul writes, "The present city of Jerusalem...is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother" (Gal. 4:25-26). This Mount Zion or Jerusalem which according to the epistle to the Hebrews is the fulfillment of the prophetic promises is "the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God...the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven" (Heb. 12:22-23). All who receive and trust in the Messiah and his work of redemption, wherever they may live, have come to this true Zion which is called the highest and most prominent of all mountains. This mountain "shall stand firm" (Hebrew: *nakon*, "unmovable", "*fest gegründet*") (Isa. 2:2). It cannot be shaken or disappear like earthly mountains. The author to the Hebrews writes, "Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:28). Paul writes, "We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:18).

The earthly Jerusalem at the time of Isaiah was no edifying sight (nor is it today): "See how the faithful city has become a harlot!" (Isa. 1:21). But Isaiah saw a completely different Jerusalem "in the last days". Isaiah differentiates between "the first time" and "the last time" (NIV: "in the past" and "in the future", cf. Isa. 9:1, Mat. 8:23). With the expression "the first time" Isaiah is referring to the time of the old covenant, and with the expression "the last days" he means the time of the new covenant, when "the people who walk in darkness" would "see a great light" (Isa. 9:2ff), namely the promised Messiah, whose name is "Wonder (Miracle), Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Swedish People's Bible Translation). The New Testament uses the expression "in the last days" of the whole New Testament era, not just the final days of the New Testament (cf. "these last days" in Heb. 1:2; "these last times" in 1 Peter 1:20; "the last hour" in 1 John 2:18; "the last days" in 2 Peter 3:3 and 2 Tim. 3:1, et. al.).

The mountain and temple Isaiah speaks of in chapter 2 is thus different from all other mountains and temples. Through the divine Teaching (*Torah*)—the Word of the LORD (דְּבַר־יְהוָה), which goes out from Zion—great miracles take place. The prophet sees how the enemies of God no longer will come to fight against and destroy his kingdom, but rather they come thirsting for his Word and seeking to join his people. "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation. He who believes in it will not be dismayed" (Isa. 28:16). Mount Zion and its temple refer to the Messiah and his kingdom. Through the coming of the Messiah the promise of blessing "for all peoples on earth" first made to Abraham is fulfilled (Gen. 12:3). Not only a remnant of the earthly Israel will come to the Messiah and receive "the word of the LORD" from him and from his true people. Nay, rather "all nations will stream to it"—to that mountain which is stable and stationary and eternal, the highest and foremost of all mountains. "God promised that he would send his Messiah and that the Messiah's work would become the most important epoch in the history of Judah and Jerusalem. Because of the fulfillment, the Lord would draw all nations to come and learn of his love for sinners."² And when Christ returns, all believers, wherever they live in this world, will be gathered to the new Jerusalem.

As I have already mentioned, the metaphors used in the prophecies employ earthly situations and circumstances as their point of comparison. In Isaiah 2:4 the earthly circumstances of hostility and war are contrasted with the spiritual peace that only the LORD and his Word can establish: "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore" (Isa. 2:4). "The peace promised is peace with God based on Christ and his forgiveness.

² John A. Braun, *Isaiah 1-39* (The People's Bible), p. 45.

It is a profound peace that affects what believers do; they live at peace with one another and the world around them. They become peacemakers as Jesus indicated. The gospel again has created a response: peace with God changes human hearts."³

The prophets often make use of so called "ring composition" in their prophetic books. Isaiah uses 2:1-5 and 4:2-6 as a ring composition around 2:6-4:1. Therefore it is legitimate to allow Isa. 4:2-6 to cast light on the introduction of 2:1-4:6. In 4:2, the coming Messiah is referred to as "the Branch of the LORD", for he will sprout like a branch from the root of Jesse, David's father. He is also called "the fruit of the land", for he will come from the land God had promised to Abraham. He is the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel, his true Judah and Jerusalem. "While Isaiah still refers to the church as 'Judah' and 'Jerusalem', it now includes the believers from the nations of the world who have heard the gospel and who by faith in Christ stream to the Lord's temple (2:2). This assembly of believers exists among the nations throughout the world... The Lord has washed and cleansed them and written their names among the living in the New Jerusalem above. But in this world, God's church is still beset with the heat and toil of the day."⁴

I referred earlier to a number of prophecies, which, if they were not metaphors, would be describing massive geographical upheavals in the last days. But according to Luke 3:2-6 for example, Isaiah's prophecies in chapter 40 about great topographical changes are a metaphor for John the Baptist's road-paving proclamation. He is the voice crying out "in the desert prepare the way for the LORD, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God" (v. 3). Thus were fulfilled Isaiah's words: "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it" (v. 4-5). Other prophecies use other metaphors to describe how the New Testament fulfillment of salvation, "the glory of the LORD", will be revealed for all mankind: According to Zechariah 14:10 the way to God's kingdom will be cleared of all roadblocks by the land around Jerusalem being leveled into a plain and Jerusalem being elevated so that it will be clearly visible. The accessibility of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life is compared in Zechariah 13:1 with a fountain and in Ezekiel and the Psalms with a river "whose streams make glad the city of God" and miraculously pour out life and blessing to both the East and the West all year long. The miraculous nature of the Lord's salvation with its overflowing riches and blessing is pictured by the metaphors of fruit trees on both banks of the river: "Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them" (Ezek. 47:12). The great joy over the Messiah's salvation and victory over death is compared in Isa 25:6-8 with a festive meal on Mount Zion and salvation as a great miracle of God is portrayed through comparisons with the deliverance from Egypt, the land of slavery: the Euphrates River and the gulf of the Egyptian sea will not be able to stand in the way of the return from captivity out of Babylonia or Assyria or Egypt. There will be a highway for the remnant of his people and men can cross over in sandals (Isa. 11:15-16).

In Jesus' day, and during the centuries before his coming, the Jews wove many religious and political hopes and expectations together. They dreamt of a Messiah who was both a spiritual and earthly leader. The long-awaited Prophet, or Messiah, would lead the people of Israel as a military leader to victory over all their enemies and establish Israel as a divine state—God's theocracy on earth with earthly Jerusalem as its capital. Since the Messiah was perceived by so many Jews in this way, Jesus preferred to refer to himself as "the Son of Man," drawing on Daniel 7:13ff. As "Israel's King" he needed to guard against being misunderstood to be an earthly king of an earthly "kingdom of God". "My kingdom is not of this world", he emphasized. "If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36).

Judaism regards it as blasphemy that Jesus as Messiah is "Mighty God" (Isa 9:6)⁵, God's Son and one with the Father (cf. John 8:59; 10:31). To them it is a strange and foreign concept that the old covenant should

³ Braun, p. 48f.

⁴ Braun, p. 69.

⁵ The Jewish Publication Society (*JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, Philadelphia, 1999) translates Isa. 9:6b thus: "He has been named 'The Mighty God is planning grace; The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler.'" Thereby they seek to avoid the meaning of the words of

have found its fulfillment in the new covenant, that Jesus' victory over sin, death, and the devil means that the real enemies have been defeated and that the promise about the land of Canaan and the city of Jerusalem should have found their fulfillment in a land and city which are "a better country," a heavenly kingdom and a heavenly Jerusalem (Reb. 11:16). They still live in the old covenant and imagine a fulfillment of the prophets' messianic promises within the bounds of that old covenant, expecting an earthly city and an earthly temple. In the same way that the Israel of the old covenant was an earthly, theocratic kingdom, they expect the final victory of God's kingdom to be an earthly, theocratic victory with a Messiah who is both an earthly and spiritual king. A crucified Messiah is a totally foreign concept for most Jews—the Messiah who according to Isaiah 53 suffered and died vicariously for the sins of all people and rose again to life on the third day as proof of his victory over sin, death and the devil. Unfortunately a judaistic view of God's kingdom as an earthly kingdom and of the Messiah as both a political and spiritual king has rooted itself deeply also in groups which call themselves Christian.

The blindness of man to what God's true kingdom, the true Jerusalem, the true "City of Peace" (*Urusalim, Jeru-shalem*) is, brings sorrow to the Messiah, Zion's king, (Ps. 2:6), "the most excellent of men" (Ps. 45:2): "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you on every side" (Luke 19:42-43). The earthly Jerusalem shall be destroyed, but never the heavenly Jerusalem, God's eternal kingdom: "I myself will be a wall of fire around it, declares the Lord, and I will be its glory within" (Zech. 2:5). "Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail" (Isa. 51:6).

Therefore, "*Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD*" (Isa. 2:5). This is Isaiah's final admonition after the prophecy in Isaiah 2:1-4. And it is my final admonition as well.

the text, that the Messianic child is "Mighty God" equal with the LORD according to Isa. 10:21. There the JPS translates *El gibbor* correctly with "Mighty God".