

OpenTheo

November 14th: Isaiah 27 & Luke 1:57-80

November 13, 2021



Alastair Roberts

The defeat of Leviathan and the redemption of Israel. The birth of John the Baptist.

My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here:

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you are interested in supporting this project, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Isaiah chapter 27. In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea. In that day a pleasant vineyard sing of it.

I the Lord am its keeper. Every moment I water it. Lest anyone punish it, I keep it night and day.

I have no wrath. Would that I had thorns and briars to battle. I would march against them.

I would burn them up together. Or let them lay hold of my protection. Let them make peace with me.

Let them make peace with me. In days to come Jacob shall take root. Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.

Has he struck them as he struck those who struck them? Or have they been slain as their slayers were slain? Measure by measure, by exile you contended with them. He removed

them with his fierce breath in the day of the east wind. Therefore by this the guilt of Jacob will be atoned for.

And this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin. When he makes all the stones of the altars like chalk stones crushed to pieces, no asherim or incense altars will remain standing. For the fortified city is solitary.

A habitation deserted and forsaken, like the wilderness. There the calf grazes. There it lies down and strips its branches.

When its boughs are dry, they are broken. Women come and make a fire of them. For this is a people without discernment.

Therefore he who made them will not have compassion on them. He who formed them will show them no favor. In that day from the river Euphrates to the brook of Egypt, the Lord will thresh out the grain.

And you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown. And those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.

In Isaiah chapter 27 we arrive at the end of the section that began in chapter 24, prophecies of the judgment upon and renewal of the earth, of the downfall of the wicked city, and the establishment of the city of the righteous, of the defeat of death and the enemies of the Lord, and of the raising up of his people. Within these chapters, prophecy has been frequently punctuated with praise. While the oracles concerning the nations that preceded this section foretold judgments upon specific nations and cities, especially around 701 BC, this section has been more cosmic and general in its scope, presenting a more eschatological and archetypal vision of judgment and renewal for the cities of man and God respectively.

The figure of the sea monster Leviathan appears on several occasions in scripture, along with related figures such as Rahab. In places like Job chapter 3 verse 8, it is clearly more than merely a regular sea creature. It is a chaos monster of the deep, representing and personifying the forces of chaos and evil in the world.

In the Baal cycle, Lotan is a serpent dragon of the abyss with seven heads, defeated by Baal-Hadad. The Babylonian cosmogonic myth described Marjuk slaying the sea monster Tiamat. Leviathan recalls the great serpent, the dragon who is identified with Satan himself.

The sea monster is a figure that represents his terrifying might and destructive purpose, the powers of death, destruction, evil and disorder. His defeat is the end of the dominion of chaos and evil, and allows for the establishment and the securing of a new cosmic

order. For instance, Job chapter 26 verses 5 to 13.

The dead tremble under the waters and their inhabitants. Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering. He stretches out the north over the void, and hangs the earth on nothing.

He binds up the waters in his thick clouds, and the cloud is not split open under them. He covers the face of the full moon, and spreads over it his cloud. He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness.

The pillars of heaven tremble, and are astounded at his rebuke. By his power he stilled the sea. By his understanding he shattered Rahab.

By his wind the heavens were made fair. His hand pierced the fleeing serpent. Later in Isaiah chapter 51 verses 9 and 10.

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord. Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? At various points in scripture, Leviathan and other chaos monsters are associated with tyrannical rulers, as the great dragon Satan is manifested in the evil human powers that he establishes and empowers.

The defeat of Pharaoh and the Egyptians at the Red Sea, for instance, is a symbol and manifestation of the Lord's greater dominion over the powers of evil represented by the sea monster Leviathan. Psalm 74 verses 12 to 14. Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.

You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan.

You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. In such places we see mythological language being used to depict the Lord's dominion over evil and disorder in history. The power by which he establishes a secure and habitable world under his rule.

In Job chapters 40 and 41, the Lord describes Behemoth and Leviathan and his power over them to Job. These two chaos monsters represent the forces of death and evil that have been overwhelming Job. However, the Lord is the master over both of them and neither can escape his control or thwart his good purposes.

In the beginning of Azar chapter 27, the prophet describes the Lord's victory using such mythological imagery of the archetypal monster of chaos. In Revelation chapter 12 verse 9, John speaks of that same defeat. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who was called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

While there are human oppressors and evil powers, the great awaited victory of the Lord will involve the crushing of the power of death and the devil. And this victory is described in this section of Isaiah. The proper placing of verse 1 is a matter of debate among commentators.

Many argue that the chapter break is poorly placed with verse 1 belonging with the material that precedes it in chapter 26, or that the material from chapter 26 verse 20 to the end of chapter 27 should be treated as a unit. Others believe that it is an independent in that day saying. The rest of the chapter describes the glory of the vineyard of the Lord, the destruction of the enemies of his people and the return of the exiles of Israel.

In Azar chapter 5 verses 1 to 7, Israel was spoken of as a devastated vineyard. Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it. And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured.

I will break down its wall and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed and briars and thorns shall grow up.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry.

In chapter 26 verses 2 to 6, we have a new song concerning the vineyard of the Lord. However, the contrast is stark. The vineyard that once bore only bad fruit and was broken down, overrun and abandoned to the wilderness is now described as a pleasant, fruitful and well-kept vineyard.

Having passed through judgment and come out the other side, the once rejected vineyard has now been restored. We should probably connect this song of the vineyard with earlier parts of this section of Isaiah, which spoke of the Lord's banquet of rich wine on his holy mountain and the victory songs of his people. The Lord himself is the one who guards and tends this vineyard.

It is his own good planting, which he waters and watches over. The Lord's anger against the iniquity of his people has been assuaged. Indeed, the Lord so cares for his formerly

abandoned vineyard that in verse 4, he expresses a wish that there were thorns and briars within it that he could fight against, merely in order to demonstrate his loving care for it.

In Joshua and elsewhere, the children of Israel were warned that if they were not faithful in driving out the adulterous peoples from the land, those peoples would remain in the land like thorns in their sides. However, in verse 5, the Lord describes an even better outcome, that thorns and briars, the enemies of his people, would themselves turn to him, make peace with him and find security under his protection. The restoration of the Lord's vineyard would involve the fruitfulness and expansion of the nation.

But this expansion and fruitfulness would have ramifications for the whole world. The entire world would be filled with Israel's fruit. Verses 7 to 11 are difficult ones to interpret and understand at points.

However, they seem to concern the fate of Israel relative to that of their enemies. While the Lord's judgment against the enemies of his people had been decisive and final, his judgments against Israel were not, and Israel would be purified through and restored after them. His judgments upon Israel had been carefully apportioned so that they would not ultimately destroy them.

Exile wasn't simply an abandonment, but a communicative act of judgment, by which Israel was supposed to learn the ways of the Lord and repent. As the Lord punished his people, he was disciplining them as a father disciplines his wayward son. Through punishment, repentance, and on the basis of divine grace, Israel would know atonement for its sin.

The restored people would utterly repudiate the idolatry that had led them to exile in the first place. The identity of the city in verses 10 and 11 is unclear. Is it a reference to Jerusalem, as some have argued? Does it represent the unfaithful among the people? Or is it about the cities of their foes? If we understand this city in terms of the city of man, there is no reason why it couldn't include all of these in its representation of the sinful enemies of the Lord and the unfaithful.

Their city would be ruined and left to the wilderness. It would be burned and never rebuilt. The larger section ends with a final declaration of the Lord's purpose to redeem and restore his people, judging their oppressors and bringing his people back to his land.

The image is of a harvest, with the whole near east a threshing floor, whether of grain or olives. The Lord would beat the nations, from Assyria to Egypt, and even if his people were like scattered olives on their branches, he would carefully pluck them one by one and return them to his land. The trumpet would be blown, summoning the exiles to return, flowing up to the worship of the Lord on the holy mountain of Zion.

Perhaps we should see an image of the resurrection here, with the lost in Assyria referring to the dead. The Lord would once more make his gracious presence known among his people, and the people would be assembled as a company of worshippers. A question to consider.

Where else in Isaiah do we see greater demonic enemies of the Lord coming into view, behind the immediate foes of the nations? How can the connection between the nations and the power of Satan help us better to understand the significance and the character of each? Luke chapter 1 verses 57-80. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they would have called him Zachariah after his father. But his mother answered, No, he shall be called John. And they said to her, None of your relatives is called by this name.

And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, His name is John. And they all wondered.

And immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, Blessing God! And fear came upon all their neighbours. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea. And all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What then will this child be? For the hand of the Lord was with him.

And his father Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel! For he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us, to show the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High. For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people, in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. The end of Luke chapter 1 concerns the birth and naming of John the Baptist and the celebration of his birth. The prominence given to John the Baptist at the beginning of Luke is remarkable.

In the first chapter, if we were judging by blocks of text alone, we might initially think that he received more attention than Jesus himself. Luke underlines the relationship

between Jesus and John, not just in their public ministry, but through prophecy, through songs, through signs, through family relations, and shared patterns of events. In the prophetic songs or speeches, Luke also interprets the ministries of John and Jesus in advance.

The more that we look at the parts seemingly devoted to John, however, it becomes clear that they are really primarily about Jesus. John's ministry is clearly subordinate to, and also pointing to, Christ. By describing the conceptions and the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, Luke is also able to heighten the sense of expectation and of divinely appointed destiny in the two.

In addition to the Old Testament prophecies that are highlighted in the other Gospels, Luke also has prophetic testimony concerning Jesus from Elizabeth, Mary, Zachariah, and Simeon, and presents several faithful Israelites awaiting what the Lord would do with these two miraculous children, who are surrounded by so many anticipatory manifestations of the work of the Spirit, promising a much greater outpouring of the Spirit's work in the future. By the time that this section is over, everyone is wondering what will happen next. The angel Gabriel had predicted rejoicing at the birth of John the Baptist, and that is what we see.

Rejoicing and praising God are constant throughout these opening chapters, people and angels bursting forth in praise and singing with joy at what God is doing. When Elizabeth gives birth to John, her neighbours join her to rejoice, and when it comes to the time of the circumcision, which would have been the time of naming, as with baptism in some Christian traditions, the general opinion seems to be that he will receive the name of his father, Zachariah. However, Elizabeth insists that the child shall be called John, and then Zachariah confirms it.

Perhaps we are to see Elizabeth as arriving at this name independently, perhaps not. He is not to be named after the father, but he is to be named for the graciousness of God. And once again, it's important to recognise the presence of a wider audience here.

There are not just Elizabeth and Zachariah, there's all their neighbours, all these other people that have joined to celebrate with them. Zachariah is a figure of note within the community, and so people come around to celebrate this event with them. And when they see the sign of his mouth being opened, they realise that this is something auspicious, there's a sign, an omen of what's going to come to pass in the future.

As soon as Zachariah confirms the name of his son John, his mouth is opened, his tongue is loosed, and he blesses God. We can probably see parallels to Pentecost here, in Acts 2 verse 4. He is filled with the Holy Spirit, his bound tongue is loosed, and not just the voice of Zachariah, but the silenced voice of prophecy from the Old Testament bursts forth onto the scene of the new. He is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Once again, the opening chapters of Luke are full of anticipatory foreshocks of the great earthquake that will occur at Pentecost. Lots of people being filled with the Spirit, the Spirit coming upon people, overshadowing people. The Spirit is active here, and the Spirit is foreshadowing what will later happen at Pentecost, when he will be poured out on all flesh.

Zachariah's prophecy is packed with allusions to scripture. Verses 68-75 concern what the Lord is doing in Jesus and his benediction. Verses 76-79 speak of John's part in God's great work, and functions more as a direct prophecy, telling not what God will do, but how he will do it.

These opening prophecies and songs, again, are programmatic for Luke. They present readers and hearers with a framework to understand everything that will follow. Joel Green observes the subtle connections that the Song of Zachariah exhibits.

So, for instance, in verse 68 you have the language of visitation, God visiting his people, as he did at the Exodus. And then in verse 78, you have the language of the sunrise visiting from on high. The language of visitation attracts different connotations in these different contexts, but those different connotations are brought into relationship with each other.

Likewise, the language of salvation is used in verse 69 to refer to Davidic kingship and deliverance from enemies. But later on, in verse 77, it's the context of forgiveness of sins. Those two things belong together, and we're supposed to think about how they fit.

We also have a connection between John the Baptist as the prophet of the Most High, and the prophets of old, who foretold these things. The first half seems to present a far more politically focused vision, while the latter half is more spiritual, in the narrow sense that that term is often used. However, for Zachariah, these two things very much belong together.

When considering the sort of salvation being declared in the first part, we are in danger of jumping to one of two conclusions. Either we associate it primarily with the Romans as the occupying force, or we relate it wholly to spiritualised things that are detached from more concrete forms of deliverance. Deliverance from political enemies, or deliverance perhaps from poverty.

Yet in the Gospels, the oppressors are often primarily false teachers, or those mistreating the poor, demonic powers, and behind these things Satan himself as the strong man holding people in captivity. While Luke's concept of salvation most definitely includes the political, the social, and the material world, it is not necessarily focused upon the Romans. God redeeming his people might make us think of Jubilee themes.

It's also Exodus language. We find this sort of language in places like Psalm 106 verse

10. So he saved them from the hand of the foe, and redeemed them from the power of the enemy.

The song of Zechariah is saturated in the prophetic language and imagery of expectation. Here are several voices from the prophets that you can hear in the background. The covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days declares the Lord.

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord. For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.

For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. From Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34. In Psalm 130 verse 7 to 8. O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption, and he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

In Malachi chapter 3 verses 1 to 2. Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap.

In Isaiah chapter 60 verses 1 to 3. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you, and nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Malachi chapter 4 verse 2. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. Just a few verses later in verses 5 to 6 of that chapter.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with the decree of utter destruction. Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3. A voice cries, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our guard. Isaiah chapter 9 verses 2 to 7. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you

have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult, and every garment rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah chapter 42 verses 6 to 7. I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I will take you by the hand and keep you. I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. What we hear in the song of Zechariah is a glorious combination of the language of Jubilee, of Exodus, of New Covenant, of divine visitation, and of a new dawn.

This rich assembly of language and imagery gives us a sense of just how charged with anticipation and hope the Old Testament is for the prospect of this coming one. The chapter ends with a description of John the Baptist growing up and once again this language recalls stories from the Old Testament. Stories of sons whose births were announced and who were divinely destined for great things in the future.

Judges chapter 13 verse 24. And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson, and the young man grew and the Lord blessed him. Genesis chapter 21 verses 20 to 21.

And God was with the boy and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Referring to Ishmael. In 1 Samuel chapter 2 verse 26. Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and also with man.

The fact that John grows up in the wilderness prepares us for the physical and the symbolically important location of his future ministry. A question to consider. What other biblical characters were particularly associated with the wilderness?