

Exegesis and Hermeneutics of Isaiah 49:1-6

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Exegesis and Hermeneutics: An Inductive Approach

We have talked a lot about *exegesis*, digging out the original meaning, and *hermeneutics*, handing off that meaning to the present generation. But we've never really tried it on a specific passage as a thoroughgoing study. We're not asking you in this case to write a whole book; although whole books, doctoral dissertations and term papers have been written on this passage. But this is just one day's assignment, a kind of flexing of the muscles. It's the attempt to pull together some of the different skills that you've already been developing, and to try to employ them on a passage which is probably one of the most important passages in the entire Bible.

I have a special problem in introducing this lesson: I would just love to tell you what I think this verse means. I would just love to tell you some of my own struggles with it over the years, and the nifty little things I've figured out, which may or may not be true from your point of view. But I've got to let that be for the Review, and let you do the thinking for yourself.

Our approach to knowledge in this course is *heuristic*, which is to say, the *discovery approach*. We want you to discover truth, as well as develop the skills of discovery, because learning is actually retained better when you come into it through a discovery process.

There are two reasons for reading the Bible in an inductive manner. You are doing it partly because you want to be able to arrive at the conclusions yourself. In addition you want to be able to measure your opinions against

someone else's, without having the other person's opinions before you look at the text. We have an emphasis upon this approach because it pays rich dividends in how long you retain as well as how much you understand and get out of a passage.

The inductive method considers *the larger context* of the whole Bible, a whole book, or a whole section of a chapter; and how that might throw light upon Isaiah 49:1-6. This passage is one of the four *Servant Songs* in Isaiah. The four so-called Servant Songs have always been a matter of great interest. You might look back at chapter 42, for example, or some of the other Servant Songs, in measuring the flavor and the meaning of this particular one.

Take time to look at *the passage itself*. Look at the unfolding structure of the passage, how it builds, what it's trying to say. It may seem very mysterious to you at first. The imagery may clog your mind as to the meaning at first.

Then take a look at *the phraseology*. Hebrew *parallelism* is a marvelous invention! *This Hebraic way of writing draws synonyms and equivalent meanings of phrases into parallel*, and allows you to be sure that you understand what you are reading. You will find some of that here.

Finally, go down to *the word level*. Trace the key words—like the word *servant*, or figure out what the *remnant of Israel* is, or *light*, or *nations* (or Gentiles, depending upon your translation), or *salvation*, or *ends of the earth*. To trace a word, a concordance will be important, but you will need to use a computer if you want to *trace a phrase*.

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Winter, Ralph D. et al, eds. (2006) *Global Civilization, Ancient World: Lesson Overviews*, 5th ed. Pasadena: William Carey Library. Pages 217-220.

Then, *lastly*, go to a Commentary and a Bible Handbook, which introduce not only the book, but maybe even the passage. In the footnotes of certain Study Bibles you will find comments on some of these passages. Those notes are the *last* things to consider. You can go there first, get an idea, and forget it quickly. If you think about the relevant issues on your own first—before considering another person’s point of view, then you will likely remember that other person’s point of view better once you get to it.

This is a very generalized introduction to considering Isaiah 49:1-6 with an inductive approach. Please take time to thoughtfully follow these steps and read Isaiah 49:1-6 before proceeding further in this article.

Thoughts on Isaiah 49:1-6

The extent of the significance of this passage, Isaiah 49:1-6 is difficult to explain adequately for it is a central passage in the Bible.

A personal story may help. I recall crossing one of the tourist lakes of Guatemala where there was an Israeli newspaperman in the same little boat. It took 45 minutes to cross the lake, and with the roar of the engines we could hardly talk. In such cramped quarters it was impossible not to talk about something. He found out that I was a Presbyterian missionary. Of course, Jews are not very excited about missionaries. But to be polite, instead of asking me, “Why are you a missionary?” he said, “Do you think the Jews should send missionaries?”

Aha! Just the right question! Because what I told him was, “Jews did send missionaries for centuries, and prior to the birth of Christ they were sending hundreds of missionaries all over the Roman Empire. Jesus actually made reference to the fact that they would traverse land and sea to make a single proselyte. But,” I said, “look, do you have a Bible with you?”

And he said, “Yes, I have one right across the lake in that hotel over there.” It was a Jewish Bible, and I began to think, “Would it be the same verses?” I was not sure. Regardless, I wrote on a little slip of paper “Isaiah 49:6.” Even in those days, this was an important verse to me.

Not until many years later, however, did I begin to ask questions of Isaiah 49:6: “Is this comment here about the Jewish people being a light to the nations of the world so that the salvation of God might go to the ends of the earth? Is this a prediction? Is this something that

had already happened? Was this something that was supposed to be worked at by the Jewish people?” I had never, ever thought before that it was actually a Commission that was simply being re-stated from Genesis 12, and that Israel, so long as the nation had existed, had held this obligation to be a light to the nations.

A Priestly Nation

You may remember that Exodus speaks of the idea of a *priestly nation*, an intermediary nation between God and the other nations. This was, by the way, grossly and tragically distorted in the Reformation theology into what is called the “priesthood of all believers.” The idea being that you do not need a Roman priest, i.e. that you can pray directly to God. Coming to this doctrinal conclusion on the basis of the *priestly nation* of Exodus is the result of a complete misunderstanding/misinterpretation that took place in the Reformation. The far more important Biblical truth more readily proclaimed in Scripture is this: *the people of God are in a priestly relationship between God and the other nations.*

The “priesthood of all believers” ought to be a missionary truth rather than an iconoclastic truth or an anti-clerical or anti-Roman truth. An egalitarian “priesthood of all believers” is the furthest thing from the idea of the Bible in this case. It’s an exalted position, but it’s a relationship to people that you despise or hate or war against, rather than a benefit to yourself and your children by giving you direct access to God. It is a heavy burden and a difficult task which is found in that calling to be a “priestly nation,” however precious that other truth might be (that we all have direct access to God).

In reviewing Isaiah 49:6, therefore, we come to probably *one of the most pivotal events in the Old Testament.* Now, I don’t mean to downplay the events of the life of Christ; but beyond that, what other more pivotal event could there be?

Well, Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus was a pivotal event right? But we do not know fully what that meant, until he sets out and is in the act of preaching his first recorded sermon. He probably gave other sermons before this, of course; but in Acts 13, a very significant event happened. He goes to this mountain village and he talks to the people in the synagogue there. On the second Sabbath the people finally rustle up an opposition to him, and essentially force him out. Then he quotes Isaiah 49:6 in Acts 13:47. This, of course, is

the verse of the Old Testament, if there ever was one, which the people should have been familiar with (but probably did not understand), that justifies the outreach to the Gentiles. This was his justification for addressing in a synagogue not only the true Jews in the front rows, and the proselytes (maybe) in middle rows, but also the God-fearers or devout persons, those who were still Gentiles—in the back rows.

The fact that Paul directed this comment over the heads of the Jews, essentially telling the people in the back rows that God was equi-distant to them in love and concern and access, infuriated the Jews, who held the keys to the Kingdom and so felt privileged as the ones who could bargain with these outsiders who wanted to be part of the people of God. At this time, Gentiles had to put on Jewish clothes, adopt Jewish New Moons and Sabbaths, adopt dietary restrictions, and all kinds of terrible barriers before being truly incorporated into the people of God. Just like in parts of India today, to “become a Christian” you have to give up a vegetarian diet and start eating meat in many cases. So this was a very crucial passage in the Old Testament.

Now, the *context* here is, first of all, the four Servant Songs found in the second part of the book of Isaiah. This second part has a new flavor and tone to it in comparison with the previous sections of Isaiah. However, the two halves show signs of significant continuity as well. In fact, if you look up the words for Assyria and Babylon and Persia and Cyrus and so forth, those words just stream right through this book. The continuity of Isaiah is very clear. But when you come to these words in chapter 49, it seems somehow more quaint, more graphic or distinct than in any other book or other part of Isaiah, that God has a purpose for His people—maybe not all the people. There is a Servant who some conceive to be a faithful remnant within.

For a current illustration, look at American Christendom today and ask: How many Christians go to bed at night thinking about the Great Commission? Not very many! How many of them have never even heard the phrase? On how many Sundays in the 350,000 plus churches in America would there not be a single reference to the Great Commission: the theme of the Bible? But there are, nevertheless, a faithful few who are very interested in the subject, and God apparently is speaking of them when He speaks of “My servant.” Thinking of a remnant within the remnant gives a basis for further reflection.

Knowledge of God: Creation and Christ

Before this nation of Israel was born (Isa 49:1-6), the purpose was clear: “From my birth, He has made mention of my name.” The imagery is of a sharp sword and a polished arrow, and so forth. “Israel, in whom I will display My splendor.” This is not something that you would probably think of.

In the *festschrift* (a volume of articles, essays, etc., contributed by many authors in honor of a colleague) on the retirement of Arthur Glasser, a chapter was included which had been written by Ralph Covell. Ralph Covell is a retired professor from Denver Seminary in Colorado and a long-standing friend of mine and wrote in this *festschrift* about “Christ and the World Religions.” Although a remarkably fresh, summary of the different views and trends of thought in evangelical missions circles about the uniqueness of our faith vis-a-vis the other major religions, there is a reference to Adoniram Judson; something I’d never heard before. Judson was dealing with the people in Burma, probably the tribal people, who had all kinds of weird ideas about eclipses and the changing shape of the moon. These phenomena were things they did not understand, for they had little astronomical insight. He knew better than they did. But Covell points out with apparent, but I would say doubtfully valid, approval that Judson did not want to take advantage of them and persuade them to be Christians by some kind of a magical flourish of insight about astronomy. He wanted the gospel to reach through to their hearts.

Now, I think Judson’s decision reveals what is an artificial distinction between knowledge of God in creation and the full knowledge of God in Jesus. I have been so troubled by this perspective, since it’s so different from my own, that I have labeled it the “The Judson Fallacy.” I would not call it a heresy. Judson was in many remarkable respects a marvelous man, way ahead of me and many others. But on this point, I do not believe that missionaries should withhold information about the creation of God in order for the gospel to be more fully understood.

The gospel includes all that we know about God the Creator as part of the Good News. The goodness of the news is, in part, the greatness of God; and simply to withhold the information about what makes the moon change shape, and let them continue in superstition, seems me to be worthy of so negative a categorization

as “The Judson Fallacy.” In this Isaiah 49 passage, it says, “Israel in whom I will display My splendor.” And that splendor includes all sorts of scientific wonders, including the marvel of the DNA molecule.

But, you know, this continues to be a problem. When you go to church, you would not expect an enterprising pastor to have a big model of a section of the DNA molecule. You go to scientific lectures at the California Institute of Technology where you will find marvelous models of this incredible, double-helix molecule. It is astonishing, impressive, awing, subduing! The scientists are almost worshipful about it, it is so impressive. They need to be; they ought to be. There is nothing wrong with this. This is a holy response to the creative beauty of God and His wisdom.

The reality is that these models should be jerked out of the science lab and taken into the church. They ought to be properly presented as part of the splendor of the living God, in my opinion. But do not be too impatient. I doubt if our artificially battered, distorted and perverted society, has the capacity to rediscover the God of creation in modern times, the way we ought to. But here it is in the text of Isaiah.

Failure or Opportunity?

There is also the reference in Isaiah 49:4 to: “I spent my strength in vain and for nothing.” Here is a nation that has been going for over a thousand years, and yet they do not seem to have arrived. They did not have their land in hand. The splendor of Solomon’s empire is gone, and they are now in captivity. Humanly speaking, and from a limited, non-spiritual, non-missiological perspective, they *had* failed.

Now, they had made a great achievement, in actual fact, by being transported (even against their will) to a foreign country, where they could be missionaries. The nation of Israel did not think that was a great achievement; they thought in terms of their human objectives of self-serving salvation and human survival. They looked at the razing of the Temple and the ruins of their country as being “back to square one.” If you trace back “for nothing” here, one of the two words is exactly the same word as in Genesis 1:2, that the earth was “without form.” In other words, “We’re back to square one! How, O God, can you make anything purposeful out of us?”

Frankly, this was not just a curious question directed heavenward. This was a rebellious question, a question

of faithlessness that could not penetrate the purposes of God, through disobedience and recurrent sin. These people did not know and were angry, and were shaking their fists in the face of God and saying, “You promised! You promised! You haven’t delivered on Your promises!” This cry is not found so much just in this passage, but this was the tenor of the situation in general. So, this Isaiah passage goes beyond this kind of anger, and turns things upside down, and says, “Now, wait just a minute.” The person He’s using here—whoever it is—the “Servant” is saying, “The Lord is my hope. God has been my strength.”

Then, finally, you come to verse 6, which is just an incredible statement, an electrifying statement! “That you should be My servant to save yourselves is a secondary matter. Your national salvation is not all that important. You’ve got to have enough faith— *to die*. Then and only then the will of God might be accomplished.” Jesus said, “He who seeks to save himself shall lose his life; he who will lose his life for My sake and for the gospel’s will find it” (Mark 8:35).

They recognized that they had lost their life; they lost their national identity; they lost their land. They lost everything that they thought was important, except the most important thing that they had been promised, that they should be the conduits, the intermediary priests between God and the other nations. And they were now, right now, stationed in their new assignment, so to speak, at the ends of the earth. (Persia, the mountains of Iran—this curtain of mountains across there was considered the ends of the earth. It was literally “the ends of the plains,” and in the battering of translation the phrase comes into our language in such a way that we can also understand it to mean “the ends of the planet.”)

The point is this: they were literally where God wanted them to be. They were literally able to do what was most important in their commission. And in that moment of great opportunity, they felt failure and hopelessness.

Now, suppose some great force would smash our cities to bits. I live in California. Suppose an earthquake, the great earthquake, would come, and every building in California crumbled into ruins. I can imagine a lot of people saying, “Oh, now we really have a hopeless situation.” Humanly speaking, there would be no hope. But God uses all kinds of events for His purposes. In this case, the two aspects of hope and hopelessness are

kept in juxtaposition. In Genesis 12 and Matthew 28, the Great Commission is given as a single, positive statement. But I believe that the positive commission is given in Isaiah 49:6 alongside the contrasting idea of self-aggrandizement. This is an effort to highlight the true task of the people of God as opposed to what we so often mistake as our calling.

By the way, the NIV translation throws you off course here. This is a poor translation, where it 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.” The parallelism is there, of course, but this translation does not show the contrast I am speaking of. You can see it: to restore the tribes of Jacob, to bring back those of Israel. This is Jacob and Israel (the same people here) and “to restore” or “bring back”—these are the same things. That restatement for the purpose of clarity is so common and marvelous in the Hebrew language. But the great physical, political achievement of restoring this nation was secondary, was a means to the end at best.

But the salvation and restoration of Israel was not too small a thing for God! Our salvation is never too small for God; it is just secondary. If we focus on self-salvation, we lose it; if we will give it up, we will gain it. It is just that simple. The whole Bible reverberates with this perplexing statement of faith, that we can gain by losing, or that we can’t gain without losing. “Except a corn of wheat fall to the ground and die” (John 12:24), it will not be reborn in productivity. So it is with the Christian faith at every point: we gain by losing. “The meek shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5). The earth is not inherited by great military victory.

This was, perhaps, part of what Judson did not want to do. He did not want to overawe the Burmese people with whom he was dealing. Now, a legitimate modern thing to avoid, for example, would be for a missionary, or even a village exile, to come back from the city with flashy clothes and a car and things—that would be a wrong and ineffective kind of overawing. The result of

this approach would be the “Rice Christian” syndrome. This is the situation where the people want to become Christians because of what the Christians *have*. No, this is not good enough! But the sheer knowledge that Judson could have shared—not about himself, not about his civilization, but about God—seems to me to be a little bit different.

Key Words

As we trace these verses, notice how many *key words* are here. You have, of course, the servant. You have the nations; you have light; you have salvation. You have the phrase “to the ends of the earth.” There is, loaded into this passage, 49:1-6, all kinds of marvelous and wonderful insights. Let me encourage you to do further Inductive Bible Study to freshen your minds so that you are then prepared for reading about the things which others have thought about the passage in question. At the point when you have wrestled with the text for yourself; then you can begin to determine whether you fully agree with others’ points of view or not.

Conclusion

Of all the passages in the Bible, at least for me, Isaiah 49:1-6 is an absolutely central passage. Long before I rediscovered this passage from a new light (the missiological light which understands that this was a missionary mandate in force since the time of Abraham), I revered this passage, and even spoke on the passage. People would ask me, “*Where is the Great Commission in the Bible?*” I would say, “*Isaiah 49:6.*” It is here, and only here, contrasted with the pseudo-commission to save ourselves. Wherever you go, you hear: “Heal *our* nation, revive *our* people, revive *our* church.” The revival of the church is not a meaningful goal unless it prepares us and equips us to reach beyond. Many a revival has been simply a “flash in the pan” that has swept past ever so quickly in history. But, often, a true revival is related to a missionary vision. Here in Isaiah 49, the revival spoken of most certainly is.