

Isaiah 60

A Future for Zion

1. Introduction

Isaiah 60 is full of the LORD's promises for the city of Zion. In flowery language all kinds of good things are exhibited to the people of God. They may have great expectations!

But how will these promises be fulfilled? Who may see them come true, and when? What kind of expectations may these words of Isaiah still evoke in us?

2. General Remarks

1. *Who is addressed here?*

Chapter 60 brings us to the third part of Isaiah, Chapter 56-66. It has a different character than Chapter 40-55, which seems to be directed more to the situation of the people who are still in exile. The third section appears to focus more on the people who have returned from exile. That is the starting point for many commentators.

Nothing has been said yet at this point about the author of this part. It was generally accepted that an unknown prophet who was referred to as the "Trito-Isaiah" wrote these last chapters. This prophet would then have lived in the time after the exile.

There are many questions with regard to the origin of the book of Isaiah and many scholars ask the question when and how the people heard these words.

Yet it is not necessary to assume the existence of such a Trito-Isaiah (see Outline 1 Section 5).

Upon their return from exile, the people find their homeland in a sorry state. Everything has to be rebuilt from the bottom up. In addition, the morale of the people was broken by the circumstances surrounding the exile. This is the backdrop of Chapter 60. It begins with an invitation: Arise! Zion may take courage.

2. *A telescopic perspective*

In Chapter 60 we are confronted with a phenomenon we meet more often among the prophets.

Often God allows his prophets in the old dispensation a look into the distant future and see many future events. We limit ourselves to Isaiah. We see that he may prophesy about the return from exile, the restoration of Jerusalem, the coming of the Christ, and also about the end of time. When he may speak this way about the future, the different perspectives are seen as one picture. You could compare it to a couple of double-exposed slides, so that you see a mixture of several images (see also Outline 2 Section 2).

The result is that you cannot always discern exactly which time Isaiah is alluding to. We have to realize that the fulfillment of what is said in one chapter could take many centuries. With respect to Isaiah 60

this means, that for the people of Israel, who lived after the exile, much of that has already become a reality: Jerusalem is restored to its former glory. But at the same time Isaiah speaks about Jerusalem in such a way that it is impossible to think of the earthly Jerusalem only. Through the image of the earthly Jerusalem shines forth the image of the heavenly Jerusalem. Much of what Isaiah says in this chapter, should also prompt us to eagerly look forward to the fulfillment of his prophecies.

3. Picturesque language

In this chapter Isaiah uses colourful language. We have to take that into account when we are trying to interpret his words. Not everything he says can be taken literally. This does not mean however, that the images are deceptive. They evoke in us a clear expectation of the salvation that God will give to his people. But God does not have Isaiah describe this salvation in a businesslike manner, explaining everything in exact detail. The vivid images of this chapter intensify all expectations.

3. Annotations to the text

Verse 1-3

In this chapter the city of Zion (for she is addressed here, see v.14) is pictured as a woman. In the first verse we see a glimpse of the background for this chapter: as a result of their exile Zion is without comfort. God's people are totally discouraged. But then comes the call from the LORD: "Arise..." This call makes it clear that this is the time for a new beginning; the misery of the past is now a closed chapter. A new day is dawning: just as the sun rises in the morning, so the LORD appears as a shining light for his people. The word "light" points to the joy of salvation that has been reserved for Israel. The LORD in all his majesty comes to their aid.

But that light is meant only for his people; the rest of the world remains in darkness. Yet there is hope also for the nations of the world: from the darkness that surrounds them, they see, like the rising of the sun, the brightly shining light of Zion. They are drawn to it and are allowed to come near.

One thing is clear: God has given Zion, Jerusalem, a central place in the world.

Verse 4-5

From every direction an enormous stream of people, animals and merchandise come towards Zion. A large part of the rest of this chapter describes this. Zion, downcast and discouraged, ought to look around and see who are all coming. She is pictured in these verses as a mother who sees her lost children return. The exile robbed her of her children, but now they all are returning: her sons and her "daughters are carried on the arm" (cf. Isaiah 49:22). Her heart will swell with joy.

The end of verse 5 is worked out in what follows.

Verse 6-7

These verses describe the flow of riches from the southeast, from Arabia, the place of the nations that are mentioned.

Camels come from Midian and Ephah. We should also think here of the cargo these camels carried as beasts of burden (cf. Genesis 37:25-28). From Sheba, a country in south-western Arabia, known for its

many riches, the inhabitants are coming, bearing gold and incense. Flocks of sheep and rams from Kedar and Nebaioth, shepherd-tribes with numerous livestock, flow toward Zion. The animals are meant for offerings to the LORD. Through all these riches sent by the LORD himself, the temple is restored in its full glory.

It is not a coincidence that precisely these names are mentioned here. Without exception they are descendants of Abraham. Midian was the son of Abraham's wife Keturah; Ephah was the son of Midian. Sheba was a descendant of Jokshan, who was also a son of Keturah. Nebaioth and Kedar were sons of Ishmael (see Genesis 25:1-18). During his lifetime Abraham sent all these descendants away. Isaac is the son to whom God had given the promise. But the others are not entirely out of the picture. They have to contribute to the glory of Israel and may also share in it. In Abraham all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

Verse 8-9

These two verses look towards the west, the sea. As doves come flying toward their "nests", so the "ships of Tarshish" come sailing across the Mediterranean Sea in the direction of Zion. Tarshish (the name of a Greek settlement, probably in Spain) often indicates the far west, the other side of the sea. Ships from Tarshish are huge merchant ships that come every so often loaded with cargo of all kinds of merchandise.

Besides gold and silver, they also carry back the sons of Zion: from every corner of the earth the exiles are returning home. The Holy One of Israel restores his people's reputation.

The "islands" in verse 9 are the countries and islands in and around the Mediterranean Sea. Apparently the light of Zion attracts the nations: the islands are waiting for the LORD; the ships of Tarshish regard Zion's harbour as their home.

Verse 10-12

The nations that flow to Zion will do their share to contribute to the restoration of the city. "Foreigners will rebuild your walls". Here we may think, among other things, of the financial support that Cyrus and Darius gave to restore the temple and the walls of Jerusalem (Ezra 6:1-12). While first threatened by foreign kings and ruined by the people, these will now be subject to Zion: the time of punishment is over.

The city "gates will always stand open". That means that there is no threat of enemies. But at the same time the gates also have to be open to allow the constant flow of goods to enter the city (Revelation 21:25).

Verse 12, like verse 1, makes clear, how central the place of Zion is. The nations have no future unless they become subject to Zion. Those who refuse to serve will be "utterly ruined".

Verse 13-14

The trees of Lebanon come walking in procession. Even though cedar was used for the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 3:7), it is not likely that all these different kinds of wood were used as building materials. It is more probable that they were used to adorn the city and the area surrounding the temple and parks.

The LORD creates a suitable setting for his throne. We could think of what is written in Revelation 22 about the trees that will grow in the New Jerusalem.

The former oppressors humble themselves before Zion and come to offer their services. Jerusalem, trampled under foot and despised, will be greatly glorified. The name they bestow on the city reflects the exalted position she now has.

This is an important moment: she has the reputation among the nations of being “the City of the LORD”. There is only one city like that: “Zion of the Holy One of Israel” who allows his people to share in his glory. All the nations will now have to acknowledge that.

Verse 15-16

Jerusalem is in for a tremendous change. After Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city, the ruins of the city were desolate and forsaken. Travellers avoided Jerusalem (cf. Lamentations 1). But from now on Jerusalem will be an object of pride.

She shall drink “the milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts”. This expresses how the nations and kings will personally come to offer their services, and how great an honour Zion will receive (Isaiah 49:23).

The work of the LORD is obvious: he alone is the One who saves and redeems. He is the “Mighty One of Jacob”.

What a privilege it is that God calls himself by this name. He will always care about his people and is ready to use his power to come to their aid. He is faithful to Jacob throughout the ages.

Verse 17-18

It becomes clear in these verses that the city will be filled with riches and that peace and security will reign there.

The LORD replaces bronze, iron, wood and stones with gold, silver, bronze and iron respectively. The splendour of Jerusalem during the time of Solomon (2 Chronicles 1:14-17; 9:13-28) will be surpassed. And these riches will remain because of the way the city is governed: “peace” and “righteousness” are portrayed as the persons who rule over the city. Thus “violence”, “destruction” and “ruin” are no longer given opportunity. The descriptive names of the walls and the gates reveal the measure of the city’s prosperity and joy.

Verse 19-20

The people will no longer need the light of the sun, nor the brightness of the moon: the LORD will be their everlasting light; the glory of God will give them light (cf. Revelation 21:23-24; 22:5).

It is obvious that all this will not find its fulfillment in the earthly Jerusalem. We get a glimpse of the new creation here, the New Jerusalem where God will live among his people and where salvation is perfected. There will be no more mourning and all grief will be a thing of the past forever (Revelation 21:1-5).

Verse 20-21

At the end of this chapter something is said about the inhabitants of the city.

Then all your people will be righteous, they will want to live in communion with God. They will live there forever, and the result of a population explosion will be visible: even “the least of you will become a thousand”. What God has planted will in this way experience much growth, all to the glory of his name.

This chapter, filled with promises, ends with a personal guarantee from the LORD: “I will do this swiftly”. He will hasten to do what he has promised. The LORD too is eager to reach his goal.

4. Application for today

1. Zion as centre of the world

Isaiah 60 abundantly shows us the wonderful future that is dawning for Zion. The fulfillment of all these promises is not limited to the people of Israel as they returned from exile. It is not only about the restoration of the earthly Jerusalem, but, enriched by a stream of foreigners, Israel also receives promises that far exceed this. It speaks of a perfect city where the LORD himself is the light and where life is perfect.

All this means that the content of this chapter is not far removed from us. By faith in Jesus Christ we also are allowed to enter the gates of Jerusalem and that wonderful future is also for us. In this faith we may know that we ourselves are included in that stream of foreigners. We seek our salvation in the only place where it can be found. The Redeemer is to be found in Zion. In him there is light and outside of him there is darkness.

You have to realize, however, that the earthly Jerusalem is not the place where salvation is to be found. You are not saved by earthly pilgrimages, but only through the pilgrimage of faith. We seek Jesus Christ and give him the glory.

Thus you may let yourself be gathered into the congregation of Jesus Christ. The Word of the light is proclaimed there and salvation administered. It is this congregation that Christ makes into a city on a hill and a light to the world (Matthew 5:14-16).

This is how the church of Jesus Christ in this world has to attract the people. She can do that for it is the Lord who gives his people respect; he makes his congregation rich and glorious through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The congregation of Christ possesses enough treasures to attract people. But are the doors and windows open wide enough to radiate these riches to the outside? Is the congregation active in this respect?

This is a very important matter, for Zion is made the centre of the world (vv. 1-3, 12). Those who do not find salvation there will perish. In the New Testament dispensation we see the church of Jesus Christ as the new Zion that is important for the whole world. You may not minimize the significance of the church. God wants to use his congregation to let the light of Jesus Christ shine into the world. In this way you may see the church as a rescue centre. It is very important that the church is visible in this world.

Yet, the extent of this chapter reaches further. For what the Lord says here is ultimately not fulfilled in the church here on earth. The heavenly Jerusalem as our ultimate destination comes into view. To be church here on earth is a journey to that destination.

You may have great expectations. It may also comfort and encourage you. This chapter starts with an exhortation: "Arise!" There is an end to all the misery. There is also an end to the great exile caused by the fall into sin. The gates of paradise were closed to sinners, but in the distance we see the open gates of that great city: the New Jerusalem. You can see the light already and hear the festal shouts.

You do not have to doubt it: the LORD himself guarantees it; he is hastening to that day!!

2. The position of Israel

Isaiah 60 speaks about the restoration of the city of Jerusalem. We have just noted that we have to look beyond the earthly Jerusalem. In a few words we want to say something yet about the position of the Jewish people and the Jewish nation.

In a way the earthly Jerusalem has been restored. After the exile the temple was rebuilt. The city once again became the centre of Israel. Yet the restoration was not complete. Israel never again became a politically independent nation; that did not happen until our century. Is this what the LORD meant with his promises of restoration? Or may we say that the future of his people does not include the restoration of Israel as an independent nation? The latter is certainly the case. The principal purpose of the partial restoration that God gave to the people of Israel after the exile was to fulfil the promise of the Messiah. Apart from the Messiah there will be no salvation for Israel. Therefore it is not correct to use the prophecies about the restoration of Israel, as we find them also in the book of Isaiah, to speculate about the future of the Jewish state.

Isaiah emphatically points to the Servant of the LORD: it is through him that God's people will find salvation. He is at the centre of God's promises. Through him the Jewish people will be divided. The Jews who in repentance turn to him will find salvation, together with the Christians from among the Gentiles. And so all Israel will be saved (cf. Romans 10:11-13; 11:25ff.).

Therefore the full meaning of God's promises does not lie in an independent Jewish nation and state. Scripture makes that clear to us already in the first promises to Abraham: in Abraham *all* peoples on earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Abraham too knew already that he was on the way to a better, a heavenly country, to the city with foundations that God had prepared for him (Hebrews 11:10, 16).

Those who merely focus on the earthly restoration of the Jewish people are short-sighted, for God's promises of salvation reach beyond the Jewish state. He gave his Son Jesus Christ. By faith in him the way to God's kingdom is opened. Those who enter therein will truly see the end of their exile.

5. Suggestions for the introduction and preparatory study

1. Use the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Zechariah to find out the state of mind of Israel after the return from exile and how the LORD reacts to that (see especially Ezra 4; 5:1-5; Nehemiah 1:1-3; Haggai 1:1-2:9; Zechariah 1:1-17; 8).

2. Check with the help of a concordance how the book of Isaiah uses the word *light*. What can you conclude from that?
3. Discuss the question whether there are still special promises for the country and nation of Israel.
4. Compare the description of Jerusalem in Isaiah 60 with what is written in Revelation 21 and 22 about the New Jerusalem.

6. Ideas for the discussion

1. Search the prophecies for more examples of a “double-exposure perspective.” Why would the LORD choose to prophesy in this manner regarding the future?
2. The LORD commands his people to *arise!* Does this call still apply to us today, in connection with our redemption from sin (Romans 6:1-14)?
3. May we see the great move of Jews to Israel after the Second World War, as a fulfillment of what God promises in this chapter?
4. What treasures do we as “Christians from among the Gentiles” bring to the church of Jesus Christ?
5. The gates of Jerusalem are wide-open for foreigners. How could you contribute to make the congregation of Christ hospitable?
6. Salvation can only be found in *Zion*. How could we convince the world around us that the situation is serious?
7. Too often we don’t seem to long eagerly for the wonderful future that God has reserved for his people. What could be the reasons for that? How could we revive that longing?

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