

Isaiah 25, Concluding Cantata: Isaiah's Song

Overview

Structure of the Cantata

The fundamental dynamic is an alternation of scenes of judgment and of rejoicing. The section falls into two parts.

In the first part, two major sections of judgment (24:1-12; 16b-22) alternate with a distant echo of songs of praise (13-16a, cf. 23). This section is marked by frequent¹ mention of the “earth” ארץ .

In the second part, the singers draw near, and we hear three songs, each followed by a description of the events of which they sing:

- Isaiah's Song (25:1-5) and a description of what will happen “in this mountain” (6-12)
- Judah's song (26:1-19) and advice and description for the coming judgment (26:20-27:1)
- The Lord's song (27:2-5) and description of the coming restoration of his people and judgment on the unbelievers (6-13).

25:1-12, Isaiah's Song and Expectation

The major division is between address *to* the Lord in the second person (1-5) and description *of* the Lord in the third person (6-10).

1-5, Song

The song alternates between statements of praise and the reasons for praise. First Isaiah himself praises the Lord, giving as reason the Lord's sovereign judgments. Then he states that those who were Israel's oppressors will glorify and fear the Lord. This time the reason is the Lord's protection of his people.

25:1 O LORD, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name;--The verse is an adaptation of Ps 118:28, which in turn (together with v. 14) is an adaptation of Exod 15:2, the Song of Moses after the Lord destroyed Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea.

Psa118:28 Thou *art* my God, and I will praise thee: *thou art* my God, I will exalt thee.

Psa 118:14 The LORD *is* my strength and song, and is become my salvation.

Exo 15:2 The LORD *is* my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he *is* my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt him.

Israel by the shores of the Red Sea after the destruction of Pharaoh's army thus becomes an image and anticipation of the remnant praising God after the judgment of the Day of the Lord.

¹ 4.3% of the words in ch. 24, compared with 0.6% over the entire book

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The initial clause is critical. The speaker begins by affirming that he recognizes God as his God. This is half of the relationship that binds God and his people together in every age. Early in Moses' dealings with Israel, the Lord proclaimed,

Exo 6:7 And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God.

And in the new heaven and the new earth,

Rev 21:3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

For us to be God's people depends on God's initiative, but for him to be our God depends on our reception of that initiative. The distinction is clear in Moses' words toward the end of his life,

Deu 26:17-19 Thou hast avouched² the LORD this day to be thy God, and to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and to hearken unto his voice: 18 And the LORD hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all his commandments; 19 And to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the LORD thy God, as he hath spoken.

Israel pledges to accept the Lord as her God, the one to whom she will be subject. God pledges to accept Israel as his people, whom he will protect and exalt.

The declaration, "Thou art my God," is thus a close parallel to the NT vocabulary of "receiving" the Lord, John 1:12.

Having taken the Lord as his God, Isaiah's first response is to praise him. The motives for this praise follow in 1b, 2. God is to be praised for his work in judgment. This work has three characteristics.

for thou hast done wonderful things;--It is *miraculous*, contrary to what human reason would expect. God can lay low the mightiest empire.

thy counsels of old are faithfulness and truth.--It is *sovereign*, the firm and unvarying performance of what God decreed "of old."

2 For thou hast made of a city an heap; of a defenced city a ruin: a palace of strangers to be no city; it shall never be built.--It is *effective*, overcoming all of the organization of which people are so proud. Isaiah is not looking at a particular city, but at cities in general, as in vv. 10-12.

Isaiah, as a believer, takes pleasure in God's judgment of evil. His praise reflects the song "for the majesty [pride] of the Lord" in 24:14.

It is tempting to start thanking the Lord for what he has done for us. This tendency reveals the selfishness and weakness of the flesh. Here, Isaiah focuses not on his deliverance, but on the demonstration of the Lord's power in his victory over the adversaries. John witnesses a broader

2 Hifil of אָמַר, lit. "cause to say." See my note on Deut 26:17 in BW for various renditions. "Avow, aver" is consistent with most translations, but the derivation of this meaning from the construction is not straightforward. I believe the best explanation is that the covenant was concluded, not directly between the people and God, but by way of an intermediary, Moses, whom each party "caused to say" to the other the terms of the agreement (Exod 19:7,8; 20:19; 24:7).

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demonstration of this praise in the Revelation:

Rev 19:1-2 And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: 2 For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand.

Only at the end does John mention the effect on the believers.

For a believer, praise that starts with my own benefits is weak and carnal. Healthy praise focuses on the Lord's glory and power in destroying the adversary.

Isaiah now turns his attention to the praise brought by the remnant among the vanquished.

3 Therefore shall the strong people glorify thee, the city of the terrible nations shall fear thee.--

This prophecy recalls the salvation of pagan nations, Tyre, Egypt, and Assyria, anticipated in ch. 21 and 23. "Every knee shall bow," and praise the Lord.

We observed that the Isaiah, representing the remnant delivered from oppression, begins his praise with the destruction of the enemy. The example of similar praise in the Revelation brings in the benefit to the believer only at the end. The praise of the oppressor moves in just the opposite direction, focusing first on the blessing to the oppressed, and only at the end mentioning his own defeat.

The order is different because of the asymmetry between oppressor and oppressed, but the underlying principle is the same: true praise focuses on the one being praised, not on the effects of his actions on us.

The praise uttered by the terrible nations develops through a series of couplets, each more severe than the one before. The AV has reversed the order of the first two phrases in v. 5, and in so doing has obscured the repeated parallelism. The quotation below has been reordered accordingly.

4 For thou hast been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress,--First they acknowledge God's help to those who cannot help themselves, the weak and needy. God gives them strength when they are in distress.

a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat,--Now they focus their attention on the distress that afflicts the needy and poor, describing it as a raging storm and as burning summer heat. God now is more than their strength. He is their refuge.

when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall. 5 as the heat in a dry place;--

Following the Hebrew order of the phrases, we recognize in the two statements beginning with "as" a counterpart to the storm and heat earlier in v. 4. The storm and sun are now revealed to be a metaphor. The real oppression is "the blast [lit. breath] of the terrible ones," the very ones who are now glorifying the Lord. In repentance, they recognize that they themselves were the source of the oppression from which the Lord delivered his people.

Thou shalt bring down the noise of strangers, even the heat with the shadow of a cloud:--Once more we recognize the pair "storm" (now realized as the uproar of the invaders) and heat. Having confessed themselves as the oppressors, the remnant now return their attention to the Lord as the deliverer.

the branch [song] of the terrible ones shall be brought low.--The word rendered “branch” is more commonly translated “song,” and should be so rendered here also. Before, they sang in victory over their conquests. Now that song is ended, and they sing a new one, of submission to the Lord.

6-12, Expectation

As Isaiah turns from second-person address to the Lord to third-person description, he anticipates two developments in the coming Day of the Lord: blessing on God's people (vv. 6-8), and destruction to his adversaries (vv. 10-12). Both are “in this mountain.” The demonstrative “that” indicates that the mountain has already been mentioned. The reference is to 24:23, the vision of the Lord with his court in Jerusalem on Mount Zion.

The description of blessing actually mentions “this mountain” twice. The first describes the blessedness of those who submit to the Lord. The second envisions the degradation of those who persist in their own pride.

6-9, A Feast for the Confessors

6 And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people—Before, we saw the Lord and his ancients. Now he is gathered with “all the peoples.” The Gentiles join in this feast.

a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees,--The first blessing is a feast. For food, he gives them fattened animals. For drink, he provides wine that is well settled, old wine of high quality.

of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined.--He repeats the two menu items, emphasizing their excellent quality.

7 And he will destroy—The same verb as in v. 8. The second blessing is described twice, first figuratively, and second literally.

in this mountain—The destruction of death takes place “in this mountain,” in Jerusalem, predicting the sacrifice of Messiah there.

the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations.--We know from the case of Lazarus (John 11:44) and our Lord (John 20:7) that the face of a corpse was covered in preparation for burial. Isaiah envisions the nations as dead and ready to bury, but the Lord lifts off the graveclothes from their faces. The next verse makes this reference to death explicit, with a three-fold description of the coming victory.

8 He will swallow up death in victory;--Death itself will be done away. It entered the world as a consequence of sin, as God warned Adam in Gen 2:17,

in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

Now, in victory over sin, the Lord removes this curse.

and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces;--He also removes the result of the curse, the mourning that attends the death of loved ones.

and the rebuke [reproach] of his people shall he take away from off all the earth:--Finally, he

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renders ineffective the one who has brought death upon us.

To see this connection, we need to understand the allusion that Isaiah is making by his language. The noun, verb, and prepositional phrase are all repeated from 1 Sam 17:26,

And David spake to the men that stood by him, saying, What shall be done to the man that killeth this Philistine, and **taketh away the reproach from Israel?**

“Reproach” refers to Goliath's action in 17:10, “I defy the armies of Israel this day,” repeated in vv. 25, 26, 36, and 45. To take away the reproach is to kill the reprover.

1 Sam 17 is the defining chapter for this verb, using it five times. No other chapter uses it more than two, except for 2 Kings 19 and Isa 37 (vv. 4, 17, 23, 24), describing Rabshakeh as a latter-day Goliath.

The allusion to Goliath strongly suggests that Isaiah is using “reproach” as metonymy of the effect, representing the one delivering the reproach. God removes the reproach by removing the reprover. The final step of delivering us from death is to destroy the one whose reproach brought death upon us.

But Isaiah's scope goes beyond Goliath or Rabshakeh. They in turn are only images of the great reprover, Satan, whose very name means “accuser.” He first reproved God and his care for his people with his challenge in Gen 3:1, “yea, hath God said?” He continually reproves God's people in heaven:

Rev 12:10 for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.

His reproach led our race into death, and continually demands our destruction, but God now promises to destroy him.

for the LORD hath spoken it.--Isaiah ultimately traces everything that happens in history to God's sovereign counsel (v. 1 “thy counsels”) and his supreme command (9:8 “the Lord hath sent a word against Jacob”).

9 And it shall be said in that day,--To the Lord's word, the people respond. This confession is contrasted with the pride of vv. 11b-12.

The two lines are almost the same. Both describe the believers as waiting for the Lord; both anticipate his salvation. The major distinction between them lies in the names that they ascribe to God. These names recall the “people-God” relation that we studied in connection with v. 1.

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us:--The first name is “God.” The possessive construction, “Our God,” echos Isaiah's confession of v. 1.

this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.--The second name is “Lord,” יהוה. This is the covenant name of God. By using it, they acknowledge that he has owned them as his people.

Now the theme shifts, Instead of God's blessing on his people, Isaiah contemplates the fate of those who reject the Lord.

10-12, A Dunghill for the Proud

10 For in this mountain shall the hand of the LORD rest,--“This mountain” can hardly be any other

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than the mountain of v. 6, Mount Zion.³ How can the Lord's hand in this mountain bring judgment on Moab?

For יָרָחַף, cf. Exod 17:11; Eccl 7:18; 11:6. The idiom means to withdraw the hand, to lower or pull it back from action. The point is not that the Lord “lowers the boom” on Moab, but that he withdraws his hand of restraint, and gives them up to their own perversity (cf. Rom 1:24, 26, 28). Recall our discussion of 13:14-16.

and Moab—Recall from ch. 15-16 that Moab exhibited the antithesis of the faith shown in v. 9.

Isa 16:6 We have heard of the pride of Moab; *he is* very proud: *even* of his haughtiness, and his pride, and his wrath:

Isa 16:12 And it shall come to pass, when it is seen that Moab is weary on the high place, that he shall come to his sanctuary to pray; but he shall not prevail.

Moab was offered the opportunity to trust in the Lord, but chose to trust in her own strength and her idols.

shall be trodden down under him,--“Under him” is an idiom, better translated “in her place” or “where she is.” The emphasis here is not on the Lord's agency (note the passive verb), but on the natural outworking of Moab's self-confidence.

even as straw is trodden down for the dunghill.--Here is a vivid description of Moab's plight. Farmers often put straw in the stable as bedding for animals. When it becomes soiled with dung, it is removed to a midden where it rots until it is ready to be spread on the fields. Moab is like straw being trodden down in dung, good for nothing but fertilizer.

11 And he shall spread forth his hands in the midst of them, as he that swimmeth spreadeth forth his hands to swim:--The nation is pictured as a man immersed in this filthy, smelly mass, struggling to keep his head aloft. What a contrast this presents with the feast of fattened animals and fine wine that the redeemed enjoy in v. 6! Those who receive the Lord as their God will feast at God's table; those who rely on their own strength will end up wallowing in the dungheap.

and he shall bring down their pride together with the spoils of their hands. 12 And the fortress of the high fort of thy walls shall he bring down, lay low, and bring to the ground, even to the dust.--At first glance, it seems that the pronoun must now refer to the Lord. This would be an awkward construction for two reasons. First, it would be an unannounced shift from “Moab” as subject in the first part of the verse. Second, the Lord is said to have withdrawn his hand (v. 10). There is another option.⁴

“Pride” as an attribute of Moab is mentioned not only in 25:11 but also in the burden of Moab, explaining why the nation rejected the offer of refuge with the Messiah:

Isa 16:6 We have heard of the pride of Moab; *he is* very proud: *even* of his **haughtiness**, and his pride, and his wrath:

³ In spite of the effort by some commentators, such as Young, to refer it to the mountains of Moab on the other side of Jordan.

⁴ See the Notes for a discussion of several technical points of this interpretation.

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There, his pride causes his humbling, rather than simply being what is humbled.

Among the sayings of Solomon, we find a similar recognition that pride can be the agent in humbling.

Pro 29:23 A man's pride shall bring him low [same verb השפיל as “bring down” in 25:11]: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit.

We have seen already (see notes on 5:21 and 11:2) that Isaiah is well versed in the Proverbs. If he has this verse in mind, we ought to understand “pride” as the subject of השפיל rather than its object. Then we would translate,

Isa 25:11-12 his pride shall bring [him] down, with the spoils of his hands. 12 even the fortress of the high fort of thy walls shall it bring down, lay low, *and* bring to the ground, *even* to the dust.

Thus understood, 11b-12 is the counterpart to the confession of the remnant in v. 9. Those who receive the Lord as their own God will enjoy the heavenly feast. Those who persist in their own pride will go swimming in the dunghill.

Notes

My God

The notion that people claim God as their own (25:1) lies at the root of the biblical covenant, but is marred by human faithlessness. Thus it becomes a sign of eschatological restoration.

People-God Relation

Exo 6:7 And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I *am* the LORD your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Lev 26:12 And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people.

Deu 26:17-19 Thou hast avouched the LORD this day to be thy God, and to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and to hearken unto his voice: 18 And the LORD hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, and that *thou* shouldest keep all his commandments; 19 And to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the LORD thy God, as he hath spoken.

Jer 31:1 At the same time, saith the LORD, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.

Jer 24:7 And I will give them an heart to know me, that I am the LORD: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God: for they shall return unto me with their whole heart.

Jer 30:22 And ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Jer 32:38 And they shall be my people, and I will be their God:

Eze 11:20 That they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

Eze 37:27 My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Zec 13:9 And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God.

Hos 2:23 And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God.

Eze 36:28 And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Jer 31:33 But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Gen 17:7 And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. **Gen 17:8** And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

Exo 15:2 The LORD *is* my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he *is* my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt him.-->Ps 118:14, 28

Psa 22:10 I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother's belly.

Lev 26:44-45 And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I *am* the LORD their God. **45** But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I *am* the LORD.

Psa 144:15 Happy is that people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is that people, whose God is the LORD.

Rev 21:3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, *and be* their God.

Subject of Clauses in 25:11-12

Who is the subject of the 3ms verbs in vv. 11-12?

Commentators universally understand the subject of the four hifil's (*bis*, השפיל) to be the Lord. This then makes it likely that the subject of פּרַשׁ is also the Lord, as Gill and others, including Jewish commentators going back to the Targum, conclude. But this interpretation conflicts with the

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notion that Moab's judgment results from his own pride, the Lord having withdrawn his restraining hand. It also interrupts the vivid image of Moab swimming in a dungheap.

It's not impossible that the subject changes. Throughout the OT, the subject of **השפיל** is overwhelmingly the Lord, and the use of this verb might be enough to trigger the shift. This interpretation still does not address the emphasis on the Lord's passivity in v. 10.

There is another option, which I have followed in the notes. The verse mentions the **גאווה** of Moab.

גאווה is the attribute of Moab mentioned not only in 25:11 but also in the burden of Moab, explaining why the nation rejected the offer of refuge with the Messiah:

Isa 16:6 We have heard of the pride **גאון** of Moab; *he is* very proud **גא**: *even* of his haughtiness **גאווה**, and his pride **גאונו**, and his wrath:

There, it is not the object of God's humbling, but the motive for it.

Among the sayings of Solomon, we find

Pro 29:23 A man's pride shall bring him low **גאון אדם תשפילנו**: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit.

We have seen already (1:11; 2:8; 3:9; 5:21*; 9:11 stretched out hand; 11:2*; 12:4; 22:8) that Isaiah alludes to the literature of the Solomonic era. If he has this verse in mind, we ought to understand **גאונו** as the subject of **השפיל** rather than its object. Then we would translate,

Isa 25:11-12 his pride shall bring down, with the spoils of their hands. 12 even the fortress of the high fort of thy walls shall it bring down, lay low, *and* bring to the ground, *even* to the dust.

The lack of a direct object for **השפיל** in v. 11 is not a problem, since the verb is often used absolutely, e.g., 1 Sam 2:7; 22:28; Isa 57:9; Jer 13:18. A more serious concern is that **גאונו** is feminine but the verb form is masculine. However, use of the 3ms verb for a feminine subject is not uncommon, particularly when the subject follows the verb (Joüon 150 k; Gesenius 145 o). In fact, the ambiguity may be intentional. The judgment, due immediately to Moab's own pride, is ultimately the result of the Lord's withdrawal of his restraining hand.