

Isaiah's Christocentric Exegesis

Walking Backward

Israel walked into the future facing backward. She looked over her shoulder at “what had been” in order to speak of “what would be.” Her rearward gaze was not, however, mere nostalgia, not a simplistic hankering for the “good ole’ days” of her teenage past. Rather, what she longed for and waited for was a resurrection of her past and a transfiguration of that past in the day of the Messiah. Her hope was in another and better Genesis 1-2, without the possibility of the Fall of Genesis 3 (Isaiah 65-66). Her expectation was in a Second Adam from whom she would receive abundantly more than what she lost in the first (Romans 5). Her certainty was in a new exodus that would out-exodus the first (Is 11:11-16; 43:14-21; 51:9-11). For that reason, Israel painted the future with the colors of the past.

When her prophets, therefore, preached of the coming deliverance or warned of the approaching judgment, they clothed their sermons in verbal hand-me-downs. They wrapped their oracles in the vocabulary, images, and narratives of Israel's past. This they did because the past for Israel was never merely past – the dusty relics of yesteryear. Rather, the past described who Israel was at present and depicted who Israel would be once the past was made perfect in the Eternal One. His crucifixion cry, “Tetelestai” (John 19:30), signaled the summing up and perfection of all OT salvation history. He is the recapitulation of everything from Genesis through Malachi.

When Prophets Read Scripture

We are accustomed to thinking of the New Testament as an interpretation of the Old Testament – and so it is. St. Matthew, however, was not the first biblical exegete; that title is the rightful property of the author of Joshua. As Luther was fond of saying, [N]othing new has been added [in the writings after the Pentateuch], for the same thing that is found in the books of Moses is found also in the others. These other books, while using different words and narratives, do nothing more than illustrate how the word of Moses has been kept or not kept. Throughout them all there is one and the same teaching and thought. And here we challenge them to show us one word in all the books outside Moses that is not already found in the books of Moses (*Avoiding the Doctrines of Men*, LW 35:132).

Everything from Joshua onward is, therefore, an inspired commentary on the Torah. “Moses is the well of all wisdom and understanding,” as Luther says elsewhere, “out of which has sprung all that the prophets knew and said,” (*Prefaces to the OT*; LW 35:236). We would do well, therefore, to listen attentively for the voice of Moses in, with, and under the sermons of all his successors, for his five books are the lectionary upon which they all preach.

That is not to say, of course, that post-Mosaic narratives are never woven into the fabric of prophetic speech. Just like pastors today, as they preach on the Holy Gospel, incorporate also the other liturgical propers of the day, so the prophets, as they preached

upon the Torah, included allusions and references to events recorded in Joshua (Hos 2:15), Judges (Isa 9:4; 10:26), and other historical books. Indeed, oftentimes the prophets were quoting and exegeting one another's writings (Daniel 9:2ff).

This fact, *that* the prophets read and interpreted earlier Scriptures, is important to know; but knowing *how* they did so is vital. It is vital if we wish to learn how to read Scripture in the Hermeneutics classroom of the prophets. It is vital if we wish to preach not only truthfully but biblically, that is to say, letting the images, stories, and speech of the Scriptures mold our sermons instead of the images, stories, and speech of *Chicken Soup for the Modern Preacher*.

Isaiah – Exegete and Preacher

The honorific title of the “Fifth Evangelist” is often bestowed upon the prophet Isaiah – a title well-deserved. His sermons form the Gospel skeleton to which the four Evangelists add the flesh and blood of Christ's fulfillment. Isaiah's prophecies cover everything from the Messiah's conception in the Virgin's womb to his recreation of heaven and earth. Indeed, there is hardly an event in the life of the Anointed of which he has not spoken.

What is less often recognized, however, is the extent to which Isaiah depicts the person and work of the Christ as the fulfillment of prototypes in Israel's history. The prophet is first and foremost an exegete – an interpreter of Israel's texts and traditions. Glaring evidence of this is signaled already in the opening lines of his first recorded sermon (1:2ff), in which he borrows the language of the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32) to indict Israel for their rebellion against the heavenly Father who reared them. Why, in the first chapter alone, Isaiah references or alludes to the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah (1:9-10), the travels in the wilderness (1:20), the sacrificial liturgy of Leviticus (1:11-15), and the life of piety enjoined by the sermons of Deuteronomy (1:17,23; cf. Deut 10:18). In the prophet's Jerusalem pulpit the scroll of the Pentateuch is unrolled before him, and from it he addresses the people of his day.

Case in Point – Gideon and the Midianites

An instructive example of how Isaiah read and interpreted earlier Scriptures is seen in the well-known messianic section of chapter 9. In a highly nuanced exegesis of the Gideon narrative of Judges 6-8, the prophet demonstrates that the future of the nation has already been foreshadowed in the ancient salvific deeds of YHWH on behalf of Israel. In particular, Isaiah prophesies that what God did for His people through Gideon was the blueprint for what the Lord would do for His Church through a new and better Gideon who would work a new and better deliverance from all her foes.

Before examining Isaiah's references to Gideon, however, it is important first to understand how Gideon's call narrative itself mirrored that of an even earlier account, the call of Moses. We will see that Gideon himself is portrayed as a Moses-type deliverer. What becomes evident in Isaiah is that he promises a Messiah who will be *like Gideon* who himself was *like Moses*, both of whom were unlikely instruments in the hands of the God works deliverance in unlikely ways.

Gideon – The Mosaic Judge

In the section of Judges 6 that leads up to the call of Gideon, the author taps his hearers on the shoulder three times and points a verbal finger backward in history to the time of the Exodus. He is alerting us to look toward “what had been” to see “what would be,” to note the connections between Gideon and Moses. The *first* of these concerns the enemies lording it over Israel. As you will recall, in Gideon’s day, Israel had been invaded by the Midianites and Amalekites, two nations that had warred with Israel since the time of their wilderness wanderings. *Second*, in language ironically reminiscent of the plagues upon Egypt, these foes allied in Gideon’s day to plague Israel. For example, they blanketed the land like innumerable locusts, as in the 8th plague upon Egypt (Ex 10:4-20). And, they destroyed (טXV' *shachath*; Exodus 8:20 [E 8:24]) the produce of the land – the same verb used to describe the devastation of the 4th plague. Thus, as the Lord had once delivered Israel from the land of a plagued people, so now Israel needed deliverance from a people who plagued them upon their own soil! *Third*, in the four verses immediately before the call of Gideon, a prophet indicts Israel for not listening the voice of YHWH, who is described as the One who “brought you up from Egypt,” (6:8). These three verbal taps on the shoulder – resurgence of war with the Midianites and Amalekites, the plague-like conditions in the land, and an explicit reference to the exodus – univocally herald the need for one like Moses, one such as Gideon.

Further connections between Moses and Gideon are recognizable in their respective call narrative. By placing the call of Gideon (6:11-24) and the call of Moses (Exodus 3-4) shoulder to shoulder, as it were, one sees unmistakable verbal kinship between the two. To begin with, to both Moses and Gideon the Malak YHWH (the Angel of the Lord) appears (*ra'ah har'*). With a sole exception (Judg 3:13), these are the only two times in the OT in which this Angel appears to someone. Next, Gideon himself, when addressed by the Angel, hearkens back to the exodus and queries, “Pray tell, if YHWH is with us, then why has all this happened to us, and where are all his wonders which our fathers recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not YHWH bring us up from Egypt?’”, (6:13). Following this, two more narrative links between Moses and Gideon are established: both men are sent (XlV'; *shalach*) by the Lord and both men protest due to their presumptive personal inadequacies. As Moses had stammered, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh,” (Exod 3:11) so Gideon protests, “Pray tell, my lord, with what shall I save Israel? My family is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in the house of my father,” (Judg 6:15).

In addition to these four ties between the two call narratives, three more follow. First, in response to the statements of inadequacy by Moses and Gideon, both men receive the exact same reply, “Surely, I will be with you (%Mli hyka, yki),” (Exod 3:12; Judg 6:16). Next, both men receive a sign (tAa; *oth*) that the Lord is with them. And, finally, both men are filled with trepidation when they realize they have seen God face-to-face (~yP'-l a, ~yP'; *panim-el-panim*). These seven parallels that link Gideon’s call to that of Moses, plus the exodus-laden introit that led up the Gideon section, provide more than sufficient evidence to affirm the consanguinity of the two accounts. The narrator has spun a rather tight web between the two. We might ask, Why? What effect does he intend? One effect is to plant the call of Gideon and his subsequent victory over Israel’s enemies deeply in the soil of the salvation history of the Exodus. In so doing, he

demonstrates that the fidelity of YHWH toward His oppressed people, demonstrated *par excellence* in the Exodus, continues to be the reason He acts salvifically on their behalf. Furthermore, by arraying Gideon in Mosaic raiment, the author leads us to expect him to effect a similar deliverance, which, indeed, Gideon does in his nocturnal battle with the invading armies in the valley of Jezreel (Judges 7).

Gideon and Moses – Forerunners of the Messiah

Now, as we return to Isaiah and his exegesis, let us do so with two questions in mind. First, as the prophet preached of the coming Messiah, how did he incorporate his exegesis of the Gideon narrative? And, secondly, did Isaiah also see links between Gideon and Moses, and, if so, how are these evident in his prophecies?

First, how did Isaiah incorporate his exegesis of the Gideon narrative in his preaching? That is, did he behold in Gideon an icon who was a window through which one gazed to see a preview of the Messiah's work? To answer these questions, we will examine two sections of Isaiah: 9:1-7 and 10:24-26.

In Isaiah 9, the prophet preaches

[8:23] For there is no gloom to her to whom there was distress. As in the former time he brought contempt to the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, so [in] the latter [time] he has brought honor [for] the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, territory of the peoples. [9:1] The people walking in the darkness see a great light; those dwelling in a land of deep darkness, a light shines upon them. [2] You multiply the nation; to him you have made great the joy; they rejoice before you as the rejoicing in the harvest, as they rejoice when they divide plunder. [3] For the yoke of his burden and the rod of his shoulder, the staff of the taskmaster on him, You shattered, as on the day of Midian. [4] For every soldier's boot, stomping in quaking, and garment rolled in blood is for burning, fuel for fire. [5] For a Child is born to us, a Son is given to us, and the rule will be upon his shoulder; and one will call His name Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. [6] Of the increase of His rule and peace there is no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom to establish it, with justice and righteousness, from now and unto eternity.

The zeal of YHWH Sabaoth will do this.

In the center of this sermon (9:3) is an explicit recollection of the day of Midian's overthrow by Gideon and his 300 soldiers. This recollection is signaled by the phrase, "the day of Midian." That this historically oriented phrase, "as on the day of Midian," refers to Gideon's defeat of that nation as recorded in Judges 7 (and not some other "day of Midian") is made irrefutably clear in the following chapter (10:26). There Isaiah says, "And YHWH Sabaoth will raise up over him a whip, as the slaughter of Midian *at the Rock of Oreb . . .*," the Rock of Oreb being the place designated in Judges 7:25 where Gideon slew Oreb, one of the Midianite leaders.

When Isaiah likens the coming defeat of Israel's enemies to the "day of Midian", he thereby raises the question, "How exactly will the Messiah's victory be like the victory of Gideon?" Similarly, Isaiah's articulated reference back to that victory invites a more careful scrutiny of the surrounding verses to see if they contain whisperings of more. What one hears – and this is as instructive for insights into Isaiah's preaching as is

it for preaching today – I repeat, what one hears are multiple allusions back to the Gideon narrative. In Isaiah’s preaching, as in all exemplary preaching today, a new vocabulary was not coined, neither were novel stories spun out of his imagination or personal experience. Rather, Isaiah preached from the past into the present, dipping his homiletical brush into the colors of Judges 6-8 (in this instance) to paint a Christocentric sermon before the eyes of his congregation.

What are some of these “multiple allusions back to the Gideon narrative”? The prophet opens this section with a dark depiction of the suffering imposed upon the “land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,” (8:23). These two northern tribes had been brought to contempt; darkness and deep darkness cast a pall over their day-to-day existence; like beasts and slaves, they suffered under the yoke, rod, and staff of their enemies. The historical enemies of Isaiah’s day, i.e., the Assyrians, were only the masks of the greater enemy who long before had darkened this world and enslaved mankind. The geographical particularity of these two northern tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali, is highly provocative; these were some of the same territories most directly and direly affected during the Midianite invasions in Judges 6.

This geographical knot tied between Isaiah 9 and Judges 6 is tightened by the metaphors Isaiah chooses to describe the plight of the territories: “darkness (𐤀𐤅𐤆𐤁)” and “deep darkness (𐤕𐤅𐤌 𐤀𐤁).” Darkness (𐤀𐤅𐤆𐤁) is closely associated not only with the Egyptian bondage (Exod 10:21-22; Ps 105:28), but, in the Psalms, as a punishment inflicted upon those who rebel (𐤇𐤓𐤌) against the words of God (Ps 107:10-11), as Israel had done in Gideon’s day (Judg 6:1,10). Furthermore, the contrasting images of the darkness of oppression and the light of victory point our eyes back to the battle of Gideon in Judges 7, in which, under cover of darkness, YHWH wrought victory for Israel by means of the light from burning torches (7:15-23).

When Isaiah describes the joy of those who have been rescued by YHWH, he again chooses his words carefully, drawing from the vocabulary of Judges. He compares the happiness of Israel to the joy of those who celebrate the grain harvest (𐤓𐤕𐤕) and who divide the spoils of war (𐤌 𐤌 𐤅' ~𐤒𐤌𐤆𐤁). Both metaphors, harvest and spoils, resonate with the Gideon narrative. Regarding the grain harvest, the angel of YHWH appeared to Gideon while he was threshing grain in a wine press to hide it from the Midianites and their cohorts (Judg 6:11). The paucity of his harvest was emblematic of the agricultural calamity that had been starving the nation (6:4-5). Because hordes of foreigners and their livestock devoured the produce of the land, harvest time in Gideon’s day was a season of lamentation, not jubilation. All that changed after Gideon’s defeat of the enemy, however, for thereafter the land enjoyed a sabbath of two score years (Judg 8:28). Likewise, when Gideon and his men (no doubt, with great joy) divided the spoils of war (𐤀 𐤌 𐤅; 8:24) following the defeat of the sons of the east (8:21, 24-26), they foreshadowed the jubilation that would follow the vanguardism of Israel’s enemies at the coming of the Messiah.

By the time Isaiah says, “as on the day of Midian,” in vs. 3, he is only articulating the connection which he had been adumbrating all along. Here he says, “For the yoke of his burden and the rod of his shoulder, the staff of the taskmaster on him, You shattered, as on the day of Midian,” (9:3). In this verse, one would expect the prophet to borrow specific vocabulary from Judges 6-8. But surprisingly and significantly, he does not.

Instead, he employs images firmly embedded within the narratives of the Egyptian oppression that preceded the Exodus. Here we begin to answer the second question we introduced above, namely, “Did Isaiah see links between Gideon and Moses, and, if so, how are these evident in his prophecies?” The answer is “yes,” he did see links, and the evidence is in what follows. In Is 9:3, YHWH promises to shatter the “yoke of his burden (Al B’sul [ø] and indeed in the Exodus he “broke the bars of their yoke (~kL[u t j m o r B w a w],” (Lev 26:13) and freed them from the “burdens of Egypt (~y r’c m i t A l b s i),” (Exod 6:6-7; cf. Exod 1:11; 2:11; 5:4-5). In Isaiah’s day, YHWH shatters the “rod of his shoulder (A m k . v i h J e n)” as in the Exodus – as later psalmody recalls – he “took away the burden on his shoulder (A m k . v i l b S e i y t A r y s h),” (Ps 81:7). Now, the taskmaster (f g M) will no longer harass Israel, as he did in Egypt (Exod 3:7; 5:6, 10-14). So Isaiah certainly points to Midian’s defeat, but he describes the Midianite oppression as Egyptian in nature. The question is this: Why would Isaiah have chosen Exodus images when he concludes the verse with “as on the day of Midian? Based on the connection we saw earlier between the call of Moses and the call of Gideon, the answer seems obvious: because the prophet was cognizant of the literary bond between the two accounts. Because the narratives of Exodus 3ff and Judges 6-8 share common themes, vocabulary, and characters, Isaiah made no sharp distinction between the two. Instead, taking advantage of their verbal and historic kinship, he brought the two together to give dual testimony that YHWH would indeed rescue his nation – as He did through Moses and as He did through Gideon – by the Child who would be a New and Greater Moses and a New and Greater Gideon.

This same dual testimony is reiterated in the next chapter, Isaiah 10, where the prophet addresses the inhabitants of Zion who tremble in the face of the coming Assyrian onslaught.

[24] Therefore, thus says Adonai YHWH Sabaoth, “O my people, who dwell in Zion, do not fear who strikes you with a staff and lifts up his rod upon you, in the manner of Egypt. [25] For yet a very little while and indignation will cease, and my anger [will be directed] to their destruction.

[26] And YHWH Sabaoth will raise up over him a whip, as the slaughter of Midian at the Rock of Oreb, and his rod [will be] over the sea and he will lift it up, in the manner of Egypt.

The inhabitants of Zion are told not to fear the Assyrian who attacks them “in the manner of Egypt (~y r’c m i % r d B),” (10:24). We saw in Chapter 9 (9:3) how the images of a “staff (j b v e)” and “rod (h J e n)” are intimately related to Egypt’s infamous oppression of Israel. In this chapter (10:26), the prophet expands the historic referent by painting Midian and the Rock of Oreb (7:25) into the picture. Simply put, the message he speaks is this: As YHWH dealt with Egypt through Moses and as YHWH dealt with Midian through Gideon, so YHWH will deal with Assyria. He who is the same yesterday, today, and forever will follow the pattern He Himself has established, of sending a deliverer to redeem His people, even when and especially when all hope seems lost. As the Egyptians were buried in the coffin of the Sea and as the Midianite soldiers slew their comrades in that night of dread and panic, so the Lord will see to it that Assyria will be reduced from a roaring lion to a squeaking mouse. In both Chapters 9 and 10, Isaiah

describes the oppression of the enemy and the vanguardism of the same. In the crescendo of 9:5 he proclaims the One who will accomplish this victory:

[5] For a Child is born to us, a Son is given to us, and the rule will be upon his shoulder; and one will call His name Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. [6] Of the increase of His rule and peace there is no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom to establish it, with justice and righteousness, from now and unto eternity. The zeal of YHWH Sabaoth will do this.

When the men of Israel attempted to force kingship upon Gideon, and to create a dynasty of his sons, he refused, saying, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; YHWH shall rule over you,” (Judg 8:22). Isaiah echoes Gideon in his prophesy of the Child to be born, for the Son given, whose rule is upon His shoulder, is YHWH enfleshed. He comes to write the full story of salvation which Moses and Gideon only recorded in shorthand.

Reading Scripture with Isaiah

Stepping back, let us ask ourselves: Given the fact that Isaiah saw clear ties between the work of Moses against the Egyptians and Gideon against the Midianites and the Messiah against the Church’s foes, what does this tell us about the way Isaiah read Scripture? And, further, to what extent does his hermeneutical appropriation and application of the Scriptures mold the exegesis and preaching of the Church today?

Let us note, first of all, that Isaiah read the Scriptural narratives with a view toward preaching. For Isaiah, as for all the biblical authors, interpretation was done within the context and for the context of proclamation, whether that proclamation was in sermon or song or wisdom saying. There is no divorce between “what it meant” and “what it means” for the prophets, as if exegesis were the former and application were the latter. The home of exegesis is and will ever remain the pulpit, wherein the Scriptures are interpreted *in the very act of proclamation*. Isaiah interprets – he does *not* merely use the story as a parenthetical illustration – he interprets the story of Gideon by incorporating the language, metaphors, and themes of the narrative in his proclamation of the Messiah. His exegesis is therefore homiletical and his homilies are exegesis.

Perhaps such preaching is uncommon today not only because (as is commonly the complaint) the parishioners don’t really know the biblical stories, but also because those who stand in the pulpit don’t really know them that well either. Perhaps. Or, as is more likely, the OT is read as dead history that describes *who Israel was* instead of living history that defines *who we are* because it portrays who He is that bestows Life. As a premier example of a preacher who read and interpreted the narratives of Israel as living history, consider the Lutheran father Johann Gerhard. Listen, for instance, to the introduction to this sermon on Mark 16 for the Resurrection of our Lord:

In Judges 7:12-15 it is recorded that at one time the Midianites, Amalikites and many other nations from the East had assembled such a huge host that it looked like a swarm of grasshoppers, and their camels before the horde could not be counted—like the sand on the shore of the ocean. By God’s power the Israelites overcame this great horde of their enemies in this

way: Upon the command of Gideon they grasped a trumpet in one hand and an empty jug that contained a burning torch in the other hand. Just as they were about to come to blows, they blew the trumpets and broke the jugs. With that the enemy was driven into flight.

This was a type of how Christ, to whom Gideon, the valiant hero and rescuer of the Israelite nation, pointed, would overcome all enemies of the people of God to the extent and in such a manner that He indeed would allow the temple of His body to be broken into death, John 2:19, and all power would be dried up like a potsherd, Ps. 22:16 [v. 15 in English Bibles], and would become like a broken vase, Ps. 31:13 [v. 12]. However, the light of His divine power would once again shine forth in the resurrection, as He then would manifest Himself as a mighty Victor over all enemies. Later He would let such a victory be proclaimed by the trumpet of the Gospel, that is, through the preaching of the Apostles in all the world. As a result, one would rejoice before Him as one rejoices in the harvest, and as one is happy when the spoils are distributed because He has broken the yoke of our burden, the rod on our shoulder, and the stick [whip] of our slave-driver, just as in the days of Midian, Isa. 9:3,4. This is the kind of victory which the Lord Christ achieved against His and our enemies and which He brought along with Him in His resurrection from the grave *Eleven Easter and Pentecost Sermons: Resurrection Power and Comfort for Faith and Love*, trans. E. M. Hohle, (Decatur, IL: Repristination Press, 1996), 19-20.

As did Isaiah, Gerhard saw foreshadowed in the story of Gideon the story of Jesus. He therefore interpreted this story, in the act of preaching, as a Christocentric message, as indeed Isaiah had done long before him.

For Isaiah, then, the Scriptures of Israel were not a sterile repository of antiquated information, but a literary womb that was pregnant with Christological life. He read Genesis 1 and 2 asking, "What does this have to do with the new creation that is to come at the advent of the Messiah?" He read the story of Noah and the Flood asking, "What does this have to do with the removal of divine wrath in the sacrifice of the Christ?" (Is 54:9). He read the story of the exodus and the wilderness wanderings asking, "In what way will there be a new and better exodus when Emmanuel is born?" (Is 11:11-16; 43:14-21). Time and again, Isaiah reveals a hermeneutic that is guided by and directed toward the person and work of the Divine Servant.

Isaiah's use of Gideon and Moses is thus exemplary for exegesis today. He is not merely telling us that one judge and one victory from Israel's past prefigures messianic salvation. For if the victory of the Messiah over His enemies is like the victory of Gideon, then it is also like the victory of Joshua over the Canaanites, the victory of Samson over the Philistines, and the victory of David over Goliath. Every God-given victory in Israel's past is a foretaste of our Lord's resurrection feast. Every divinely appointed leader in the OT is a preview of the New and Greater Adam, the New and Greater Joshua, the New and Greater David. In their lives and in their victories the Spirit is sketching in pencil what will be seen in full color at the Advent of the King. Their stories are read and preached rightly only when they are seen as the swaddling clothes of

the Virgin's Son. "All of Scripture everywhere deals only with Christ," says Luther (WA 46:414). To which the Church sings a hearty Amen as she says,

The cause is God's; obey his call

And to his hand commit your all

And fear no ill impending!

Though not yet seen by human eyes,

His Gideon shall for you arise,

God's Word and you defending.

("Do Not Despair, O Little Flock" *Lutheran Worship* #300)