
ISAIAH 51: 1 "Listen to me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD: look to the rock you were cut from, and to the hold of the pit you were dug from.

The prophet exhorts the children of Abraham to trust in the Lord; and briefly, but beautifully, describes the great blessedness which should be the consequence, Isa 51:1-3. Then, turning to the Gentiles, encourages them to look for a portion in the same salvation, Isa 51:4, Isa 51:5; the everlasting duration of which is majestically described, Isa 51:6. And as it is everlasting, so is it sure to the righteous, notwithstanding all the machinations of their enemies, Isa 51:7, Isa 51:8. The faithful, then, with exultation and joy, lift their voices, reminding God of his wondrous works of old, which encourage them to look now for the like glorious accomplishment of these promises, Isa 51:9-11. In answer to this the Divinity is introduced comforting them under their trials, and telling them that the deliverer was already on his way to save and to establish them, Isa 51:12-16. On this the prophet turns to Jerusalem to comfort and congratulate her on so joyful a prospect. She is represented, by a bold image, as a person lying in the streets, under the intoxicating effects of the cup of the Divine wrath, without a single person from among her own people appointed to give her consolation, and trodden under the feet of her enemies; but, in the time allotted by the Divine providence, the cup of trembling shall be taken out of her hand, and put into that of her oppressors; and she shall drink it no more again for ever, Isa 51:17-22.

Verse 1

Ye that follow after righteousness - The people who, feeling the want of salvation, seek the Lord in order to be justified.

The rock - Abraham.

The hole of the pit - Sarah; as explained in Isa 51:2.

ISAIAH 51: 2 Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed him, and made him many.

Verse 2

I called him alone - As I have made out of one a great nation; so, although ye are brought low and minished, yet I can restore you to happiness, and greatly multiply your number.

ISAIAH 51: 3 For the LORD has comforted Zion; he has comforted all her waste places, and has made her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.

ISAIAH 51: 4 "Attend to me, my people; and give ear to me, my nation: for a law shall go out from me, and I will establish my justice for a light of the peoples.

Verse 4

By people - O my nation "O ye peoples - O ye nations" - For עמי ammi, my people, the Bodleian MS. and another read עמִים ammim, ye peoples; and for לאומי leumi, my nation, the Bodleian MS. and eight others, (two of them ancient), and four of De Rossi's, read לאמִים leummim, ye nations; and so the Syriac in both words. The difference is very material; for in this case the address is made not to the Jews, but to the Gentiles, as in all reason it ought to be; for this and the two following verses express the call of the Gentiles, the islands, or the distant lands on the coasts of the Mediterranean and other seas. It is also to be observed that God in no other place calls his people לאמי leummi, my nation. It has been before remarked that transcribers frequently omitted the final מ mem of nouns plural, and supplied it, for brevity's sake, and sometimes for want of room at the end of a line, by a small stroke thus /עמי; which mark, being effaced or overlooked, has been the occasion of many mistakes of this kind.

A law shall proceed from me - The new law, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus. Kimchi says, "After the war with Gog and Magog the King Messiah will teach the people to walk in the ways of the Lord."

ISAIAH 51: 5 My righteousness is near, my salvation has gone out, and my arms shall judge the peoples; the islands shall wait for me, and on my arm shall they trust.

Verse 5

My righteousness is near - The word צדק tzedek, righteousness, is used in such a great latitude of signification, for justice, truth, faithfulness, goodness, mercy, deliverance, salvation, etc., that it is not easy sometimes to give the precise meaning of it without much circumlocution; it means here the faithful completion of God's promises to deliver his people.

ISAIAH 51: 6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look on the earth beneath; for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment; and those who dwell therein shall die in the same way: but my salvation shall be forever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished.

Verse 6

My salvation shall be for ever - Aben Ezra says, From this verse divines have learnt the immortality of the soul. Men shall perish as the earth does, because they are formed from it; but they who are filled with the salvation of God shall remain for ever. See Kimchi.

ISAIAH 51: 7 "Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; don't fear the reproach of men, neither be dismayed at their insults.

ISAIAH 51: 8 For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worm shall eat them like wool; but my righteousness shall be forever, and my salvation to all generations."

ISAIAH 51: 9 Awake, awake, put on strength, arm of the LORD; awake, as in the days of old, the generations of ancient times. Isn't it you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the monster?

ISAIAH 51: 10 Isn't it you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?

ISAIAH 51: 11 The ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come with singing to Zion; and everlasting joy shall be on their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy. Sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Verse 11

They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and mourning shall flee away - Nineteen MSS. and the two oldest editions have יגשׁוּ yasigu; and forty-six MSS. of Kennicott's and ten of De Rossi's, and the same two editions, and agreeably to them the Chaldee and Syriac, have יונסו venasu; and so both words are expressed, Isa 35:10, of which place this is a repetition. And from comparing both together it appears that the ו vau in this place is become by mistake in the present text final, nun of the preceding word.

ISAIAH 51: 12 "I, even I, am he who comforts you: who are you, that you are afraid of man who shall die, and of the son of man who shall be made as grass;

ISAIAH 51: 13 and have forgotten the LORD your Maker, who stretched out the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth; and fear continually all the day because of the fury of the oppressor, when he makes ready to destroy? and where is the fury of the oppressor?

Verse 13

Of the oppressor, as if he, etc. - "The כ caph in כֹּשֵׁר keasher seems clearly to have changed its situation from the end of the preceding word to the beginning of this; or rather, to have been omitted by mistake there, because it was here. That it was there the Septuagint show by rendering ἡμιψικεχ θλιβοντος σε, of him, that oppressed thee. And so they render this word in both its places in this verse. The Vulgate also has the pronoun in the first instance; furoris ejus qui te tribulabat." Dr. Jubb. The correction seems well founded; I have not conformed the translation to it, because it makes little difference in the sense.

ISAIAH 51: 14 The captive exile shall speedily be freed; and he shall not die and go down into the pit, neither shall his bread fail.

Verse 14

The captive exile hasteneth that he may be loosed "He marcheth on with speed, who cometh to set free the captive" - Cyrus, if understood of the temporal redemption from the captivity of Babylon; in the spiritual sense, the Messiah, who comes to open the prison to them that are bound.

ISAIAH 51: 15 For I am the LORD your God, who stirs up the sea, so that its waves roar: the LORD of Armies is his name.

ISAIAH 51: 16 I have put my words in your mouth, and have covered you in the shadow of my hand, that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, and tell Zion, 'You are my people.'"

Verse 16

That I may plant the heavens "To stretch out the heavens" - In the present text it is לִנְתַע lintoa, "to plant the heavens:" the phrase is certainly very obscure, and in all probability is a mistake for לִנְטוֹת lintoth. This latter is the word used in Isa 51:13 just before, in the very same sentence; and this phrase occurs very frequently in Isaiah, Isa 40:22, Isa 42:5, Isa 44:24, Isa 45:12; the former in no other place. It is also very remarkable, that in the Samaritan text, Num 24:6, these two words are twice changed by mistake, one for the other, in the same verse.

ISAIAH 51: 17 Awake, awake, stand up, Jerusalem, that have drunk at the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath; you have drunken the bowl of the cup of staggering, and drained it.

Verse 17

The cup of trembling - הַתְּרַעֲלָה כּוֹסֵי הַמָּוֶת cos hattarelah, "the cup of mortal poison," veneni mortiferi. - Montan. This may also allude to the ancient custom of taking off criminals by a cup of poison. Socrates is well known to have been sentenced by the Areopagus to drink a cup of the juice of hemlock, which occasioned his death. See the note on Heb 2:9, and see also Bishop Lowth's note on Isa 51:21.

ISAIAH 51: 18 There is no one to guide her among all the sons to whom she has given birth; neither is there any who takes her by the hand among all the sons who she has brought up.

ISAIAH 51: 19 These two things have happened to you. Who will bemoan you? Desolation and destruction, and the famine and the sword; how shall I comfort you?

Verse 19

These two things - desolation, and destruction, and the famine, and the sword - That is, desolation by famine, and destruction by the sword, taking the terms alternately: of which form of construction see other examples. De S. Poesi, Hebrews Prael. xix., and Prelim. Dissert. p. 30. The Chaldee paraphrast, not rightly understanding this, has had recourse to the following expedient: "Two afflictions are come upon thee, and when four shall come upon thee, depredation, and destruction, and the famine, and the sword" Five MSS. הָרַעַב haraab, without the conjunction וּ vau; and so the Septuagint and Syriac.

By whom shall I comfort thee "Who shall comfort thee" - A MS., the Septuagint, Syriac, Chaldee, and Vulgate have it in the third person, יִנְחָמֶךָ yenchamech, which is evidently right.

ISAIAH 51: 20 Your sons have fainted, they lie at the head of all the streets, as an antelope in a net; they are full of the wrath of the LORD, the rebuke of your God.

Verse 20

As a wild bull in a net: they are full, etc. "Like the oryx taken in the toils; drenched to the full" - "Perhaps מלאים מלמרה michmerah meleim." Secker. The demonstrative ה he, prefixed to מלאים meleim, full, seems improper in this place.

ISAIAH 51: 21 Therefore hear now this, you afflicted, and drunken, but not with wine:

Verse 21

Drunken, but not with wine - Aeschylus has the same expression: - Αοινοις εμμανεις θυμωμασι· Eumen. 863.

Intoxicated with passion, not with wine.

Schultens thinks that this circumlocution, as he calls it, gradum adfert incomparabiliter majorem; and that it means, not simply without wine, but much more than with wine. Gram. Hebrews p. 182. See his note on Job 30:38.

The bold image of the cup of God's wrath, often employed by the sacred writers, (see note on Isa 1:22), is nowhere handled with greater force and sublimity than in this passage of Isaiah, Isa 51:17-23. Jerusalem is represented in person as staggering under the effects of it, destitute of that assistance which she might expect from her children; not one of them being able to support or to lead her. They, abject and amazed, lie at the head of every street, overwhelmed with the greatness of their distress; like the oryx entangled in a net, in vain struggling to rend it, and extricate himself. This is poetry of the first order, sublimity of the highest character.

Plato had an idea something like this: "Suppose," says he, "God had given to men a medicating potion inducing fear, so that the more any one should drink of it, so much the more miserable he should find himself at every draught, and become fearful of every thing both present and future; and at last, though the most courageous of men, should be totally possessed by fear: and afterwards, having slept off the effects of it, should become himself again." De Leg. i., near the end. He pursues at large this hypothesis, applying it to his own purpose, which has no relation to the present subject. Homer places two vessels at the disposal of Jupiter, one of good, the other of evil. He gives to some a potion mixed of both; to others from the evil vessel only: these are completely miserable. Iliad 24:527-533. Δοιοι γαρ τε πιθοι κατακεινται εν Διοσ ουδει Δωρων, οια διδωσι, κακων, ετερος δε εαων, Ω μεν καμμιξας δωη Ζευς τερπικεραυνος, Αλλοτε μεν τε κακω όγε κυρεται, αλλοτε δ' εσθλω· Ω δε κε των λυγρων δωη, λωβητον εθηκε. Κα ι ε κακη βουβρωστις επι χθονα διαν ελαυνει· Φοιτα δ' ουτε θεοισι τετιμενος, ουτι βροτοισιν. "Two urns by Jove's high throne have ever stood,

The source of evil one, and one of good;

From thence the cup of mortal man he fills,

Blessings to these, to those distributes ills;
 To most he mingles both: the wretch decreed
 To taste the bad unmixed, is cursed indeed:
 Pursued by wrongs, by meagre famine driven,
 He wanders outcast both of earth and heaven."
 Pope

ISAIAH 51: 22 Thus says your Lord GOD, and your God who pleads the cause of his people, "Behold, I have taken out of your hand the cup of staggering, even the bowl of the cup of my wrath; you shall no more drink it again:

ISAIAH 51: 23 and I will put it into the hand of those who afflict you, who have said to your soul, 'Bow down, that we may walk over you;' and you have laid your back as the ground, and as the street, to those who walk over."

Verse 23

Them that afflict thee "Them who oppress thee" - The Septuagint, Chaldee, Syriac, and Vulgate appear to have read מוֹנִיךְ monayich, as in Isa 40:26." - Secker.

Which have said to thy soul, Bow down "Who say to thee, Bow down thy body" - A very strong and most expressive description of the insolent pride of eastern conquerors; which, though it may seem greatly exaggerated, yet hardly exceeds the strict truth. An example has already been given of it in the note to Isa 49:23. I will here add one or two more. "Joshua called for all the men of Israel; and said unto the captains of the men of war that went with him, Come near, put your feet upon the necks of these kings," Jos 10:24. "Adonibezek said, Threescore and ten kings, having their thumbs and their great toes cut off, gathered their meat under my table: As I have done, so hath God requited me," Jdg 1:7. The Emperor Valerianus, being through treachery taken prisoner by Sapor king of Persia, was treated by him as the basest and most abject slave: for the Persian monarch commanded the unhappy Roman to bow himself down, and offer him his back, on which he set his foot, in order to mount his chariot or horse whenever he had occasion. - Lactantius, De Mort. Persec. cap. 5. Aurel. Victor. Epitome, cap. xxxii. - L.