Further first-century fulfillment of Isaiah's restoration prophecies

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Email: preteristadvocate@gmail.com.

Bible Version
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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

Introduction

In a previous article we considered how Jesus fulfilled a number of Isaiah's restoration prophecies.[1]
The present article continues to examine prophetic fulfillment.
I hope to show how many Old Testament (OT) prophecies were being fulfilled as Paul and others proclaimed the gospel across the first-century Roman world.
(Our focus will be mostly, but not exclusively, on the prophecies of Isaiah.)
That being the case, we can conclude that virtually every OT prophecy has been fulfilled already.

The apostle Paul summarized his mission as the proclamation of "the hope of Israel" (Acts 28:20).
What did he intend by that?
Answer:
Israel's "hope" encompassed all that the prophets had foretold — the promises concerning Messiah and his kingdom. Paul was proclaiming the fulfillment of these in Jesus (Ac 28:23).
Resurrection was part of that hope as well (Ac 23:6; 24:14-15; 26:6-8; cf. Jn 11:24).
Recall that the Jews divided world history into two great ages:
The hopelessly evil (then) present age would be superseded by the age of Messiah's righteous government.
Messiah would bring Israel's hope to fruition in the age to come (e.g., Mt 12:32; cf. 24:3).[2]
And Jesus has done just that: his kingdom has come, and he has opened up heaven for us.
Recall Jesus' declaration to Martha that all who believe in him will live even though they die — indeed, they will never die (Jn 11:25-26). Jesus was inaugurating the new age, and he proved it by raising Lazarus from the dead.

Expectations of the Jews under Roman rule

Apart from a brief period of independence (142 to 63 BC), the Jews had remained under foreign rule.
This is how we find the nation around the time of Jesus' birth:
Under the yoke of Roman rule and with OT promises as yet unfulfilled, the Jews viewed themselves as being, to all intents, still in exile. And therefore, still under God's judgment.
Devout Jews of that time longed for the definitive deliverance that the Messiah would bring.

[1] See my article on this website: *How Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's restoration prophecies*.
[2] Not in "the <u>world</u> to come", as found in traditional Bible versions such as the KJV. The Greek noun αἰών (*aiōn*, Strong's G165), from whence derives our English term "eon" (aeon), is better translated as "age". And so, in modern versions we have: "either in this age or in the one to come" (Mt 12:32; cf. Heb 6:5), as well as the phrase "end of the age" (Mt 13:39-40, 49; 24:3; 28:20).
These phrases reflect the Jewish belief in the two great eras of world history.

Via divine revelation, Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon knew that Jesus was the promised One.
Their respective "songs" reveal their deep faith in God and his promises.
They understood that through Jesus, OT prophecies relating to Israel's salvation were about to be realized.
Through him, God would:

- fulfill his covenant promises to Abraham (Lk 1:54-55, 72-73).
- "visit and redeem" his people (Lk 1:68; cf. Ex 4:31).
- deliver Israel from her enemies (Lk 1:71, 74), and from the darkness and death of foreign oppression (Lk 1:79; cf. Isa 9:2).
- provide salvation through the forgiveness of sins (Lk 1:77).
- accomplish his promised end-time salvation — for Gentiles as well as for Israel (Lk 2:30-32; cf. Isa 49:6).

Simeon was "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Lk 2:25) — a reference to the comfort that the Messiah would bring to God's people when he restored their fortunes (e.g., Isa 40:1-2; 49:13; 51:3, 52:9).
And Anna spoke of the Christ-child to those in the temple who were eagerly awaiting "the redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk 2:38; cf. Isa 52:9; Lk 1:68).
In short, OT promises of salvation and restoration for God's people were about to be fulfilled through Jesus.
We later find similar expectations in Joseph of Arimathea (Lk 23:51), and in Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:21).

The Olivet Discourse

In Luke's version of the Olivet Discourse, the Tribulation that will afflict the first-century Jewish world will represent the fulfillment of all Old Testament "day of vengeance" prophecies (Luke 21:20-22):

> 20 *"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, you will know that her desolation is near.*
> 21 *Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country stay out of the city.*
> 22 *For these are the days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written.*

Where in the Old Testament do we find prophecies concerning a day, or days, of vengeance?
Answer: In Isaiah 34:8; 35:4; 61:2; 63:4, where the context is God's deliverance of his people by means of his judgment of their enemies.
The irony of Jesus' prophecy is that such judgment will now come upon first-century Israel. For in the coming decades that nation will itself become the sworn enemy and persecutor of God's people.
This judgment was realized in the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 AD, with its culmination in the fall of Jerusalem.
Notice how Jesus declares that his coming in judgment would:

- bring "redemption" for his followers (Lk 21:28) — their deliverance from persecution.
- be tied to the coming of God's eternal kingdom (Lk 21:31).
- be witnessed by that generation (Lk 21:32).

John

John, in 12:37-41, cites from Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10 to show the cause of Israel's unbelief: God had himself hardened their hearts.

John further alludes to Isaiah's prophecies in the book of Revelation:

- Jesus is the "Root of David" (Rev 5:5; 22:16; cf. Isa 11:1, 10).
- The New Jerusalem (Revelation 21 – 22) shows the definitive first-century fulfillment of OT restoration prophecies — in particular, those of Isaiah and Ezekiel.

The Book of Acts

After Jesus' resurrection, we see the apostles asking him about their nation's restoration (Ac 1:6).

It seems that they still viewed God's coming kingdom in geopolitical terms, along the lines of the rule of David and Solomon.

But from Pentecost on, we see the apostles starting to comprehend the true nature of prophetic fulfillment:

- Pentecost (Acts 2): The activity and descent of God's Spirit were signs of the kingdom's arrival (cf. Mt 12:28).
  The Pentecost tongues — the miraculous declaration of God's praises in diverse human languages — powerfully affirmed God's intention to gather all nations into his kingdom.
  A reversal of the confusion and dispersal at Babel (Gen 11:1-9; cf. Zeph 3:9), this unity under God would fulfill his promise of blessing to the nations through Abraham (Gen 12:3).
- Acts 2:30-36: David's throne was restored in Jesus' ascension to the heavenly Zion (cf. Ps 2:6; 110:1-2).
  Such restoration naturally implies a people and kingdom to rule over — a new "Israel".
- Acts 3:18-26: First-century fulfillment of all that the prophets had foretold:
  3:18: Jesus' suffering had fulfilled many prophecies.
  3:21: The prophets had long ago foretold a time of universal restoration.
  3:22-23: Jesus fulfilled Moses' prophecy of the coming of a prophet like himself (cf. Dt 18:15, 18-19).
  3:24: All the prophets, from Samuel on, had prophesied of first-century events.
  3:25-26: The promise of universal blessing through Abraham was now to be realized (cf. Gen 22:18).
- Acts 13:32-37: Jesus' resurrection and exaltation fulfilled Psalm 2:7 and 16:10, and Isaiah 55:3:
  God's promises to David of a lasting dynasty (2Sam 7:11-16) are fulfilled in the risen and ascended Lord Jesus (13:34). Personal salvation involves one's incorporation into Messiah's kingdom (Isa 55:3).
- Dominion is restored in Jesus' gospel conquest of the Gentiles (Ac 15:14-19; cf. Am 9:11-12; Isa 11:14, etc.).
- The gospel is the good news of God's reign having begun. It's the proclamation that, through Jesus, God's kingdom has finally arrived (Ac 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31; cf. Lk 4:43; 8:1; 16:16).
- As aforementioned, Paul in his preaching proclaimed the "hope of Israel" (Ac 28:20).
  By that is meant all that the prophets had foretold — promises concerning Messiah and his kingdom, etc. (Ac 28:23). Central to this was the hope of resurrection (Ac 23:6; 24:14-15; 26:6-8).

Stephen

Stephen references Isaiah 66:1-2 in his last speech (Ac 7:49-50).
Perhaps answering the charges against him (Ac 6:13-14), he asserts that the temple is not so important.
Indeed, until Solomon, the tabernacle functioned quite adequately for worship (Ac 7:44-47).
In any case, God does not dwell in man-made structures (Ac 7:48).

By referencing Isaiah 66, Stephen suggests that the temple's forthcoming destruction had been foretold.
Recall that prophecy's context: the definitive restoration of Jerusalem under the Lord's Servant (Isa 65:17ff.).
Indeed, Isaiah 66 seems to have the first-century situation specifically in view:

- God esteems the one who is humble and contrite and who seriously listens to his word (66:2).
- The Israelites won't listen to God's revelation in Christ but will instead cling to the temple ritual (66:3-4).
- They will persecute and exclude their believing brothers (66:5).
- As a result, God's judgment will come upon them (66:6; cf. Isa 65:11-15; 66:14-16).

Paul

Paul frequently references Isaiah. For the most part he relates Isaiah's prophecies to the first-century responses of Jews and Gentiles to the gospel. He clearly regards Isaiah's prophecies as being fulfilled in his own day.
Note the following examples from Acts and Romans:

- Acts 28:25-27 (Isa 6:9-10).
- Romans 9:27-29 (Isa 1:9; 10:22-23).
- Romans 9:33 (Isa 8:14; 28:16).
- Romans 10:11 (Isa 28:16).
- Romans 10:15-16 (Isa 52:7; 53:1).
- Romans 10:20-21 (Isa 65:1-2).
- Romans 11:8 (Isa 29:10 and Dt 29:4)
- Romans 15:12 (Isa 11:10, LXX).

Paul also relates Isaiah's prophecies to his own ministry to the Gentiles:

- Acts 13:47 (Isa 49:6).
- Romans 15:21 (Isa 52:15).
- 2 Corinthians 6:2 (Isa 49:8).

Several of these references deserve further comment:

1. Isaiah 1:9 and 10:22-23 (quoted in Romans 9:27-29) concern the Israelite remnant who survive God's judgments. Paul regarded himself and other first-century believing Jews as constituting that faithful remnant anticipated by Isaiah and other OT prophets (Rom 11:1-6).
   Paul's great concern in Romans 9 – 11 is related to this: In view of God's OT promises of end-time salvation for Israel, how is it that only a small number of Israelites recognize their Messiah?
   Paul answers that God's promises have not failed. Mere physical descent never made one a true Israelite or a true child of Abraham or of God (Rom 9:6-8). Paul demonstrates this from the early patriarchal history.

Then, from the example of Pharaoh, and from the usual practice of a potter, Paul shows that God is entirely free to choose whom he will save (Rom 9:14-21).[3]

Yet having said this, Paul does seem to anticipate a final and widespread turning of ethnic Israelites to the Lord (Rom 11:12-16, 23-29).

2. Isaiah 11:10 (LXX) is cited in Romans 15:12 to support Paul's assertion that Gentile salvation was God's intention all along (Rom 15:9-12). In context, Paul is urging Christians to accept each other — to show love and forbearance; to have a spirit of unity and harmony (Rom 15:1-7).

   This prophecy ought to be related to a couple of others in Isaiah:

   - Isaiah 2:1-4 anticipates the Gentile nations journeying to Jerusalem to seek God, and as they start to obey his laws a radical transformation takes place in international relations.
   - Isaiah 19:23-25 anticipates the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Israelites — all mutual enemies — as jointly belonging to God, united in worship, together being a blessing to the world.

   So also, Isaiah 11:6-9 pictures perfect harmony between <u>natural enemies</u> — predators and prey:
   The wolf dwelling with the lamb, and so forth.

   Isaiah 11 is a prophecy about Messiah's reign and kingdom (cf. 11:1-5), and 11:10 anticipates even the Gentiles rallying to, and seeking out, this king.

   Paul viewed these prophecies as being fulfilled in his day via the gospel, as the "knowledge of the LORD" (Isa 11:9) spread throughout the world. Diverse groups were becoming united under the lordship of Christ. In church life, the natural hostility between Jews and Gentiles was being eroded as they worshipped God together (Rom 15:5-13; Eph 2:14-15).

3. Romans 11:8 is a composite citation from Isaiah 29:10 and Deuteronomy 29:4.

   Paul declares that, as in the time of Isaiah, so also in his own day the Jews have experienced judicial hardening, rendering them spiritually blind and deaf to the truths of the gospel. Paul follows with a further citation from Psalm 69:22-23 — his prayer for judgment upon those Jews who had rejected Christ.

   Note that Israel's hardening in Isaiah (6:9-10; 29:9-10) is not permanent, for in the messianic age God will finally heal their blindness and deafness. See Isaiah 29:17-24; 32:1-4; 35:5; 42:7 (cf. Dt 30:6).[4]

4. Four times Paul cites from the <u>Servant Songs</u> of Isaiah.[5]

   Paul was tasked with proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles (Ac 9:15; Rom 15:16; 1Tim 2:7), and he seems to have viewed his ministry as an extension and continuation of the Servant's own mission:

   - Isaiah 49:6 (quoted in Acts 13:47): The Servant is tasked with bringing salvation to the nations.
     Paul and his co-workers were aiding the prophecy's fulfillment as they evangelized the Roman world.
   - Isaiah 49:8 (quoted in 2 Corinthians 6:2): Yahweh promises to aid his Servant in his salvific task.
     The Corinthians must recognize Paul's own apostolic role — his God-given "ministry of reconciliation" (2Cor 5:18-20). Paul urges them "not to receive God's grace in vain" (2Cor 6:1); rather, they should accept without delay the full benefits of the grace and salvation offered to them through Paul.
   - Isaiah 52:15 (quoted in Romans 15:21): Paul sought to labor where Christ had not yet been proclaimed, so as not to build on someone else's work (Rom 15:20). In so doing he was directly fulfilling what Isaiah had foretold.
   - Isaiah 53:1: see the following point.

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[3] John Piper examines Paul's theology of election in *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993).

[4] Jesus' healing ministry fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies (Lk 4:18; 7:22), though the focus in Isaiah is on <u>spiritual</u> disability. But of course, Jesus' physical healings were pointers to our need of deliverance from the underlying spiritual malady that afflicts us all.

[5] Isaiah's Servant Songs are found in 42:1-7; 49:1-9; 50:4-9; 52:13 – 53:12; and probably 61:1-3.

5. Isaiah 52:7 and 53:1 (quoted in Romans 10:15-16).
   The "good news" (in 52:7) announced to Jerusalem by the messenger concerns the release and imminent return of the Jewish exiles from captivity in Babylon. Paul sees this as anticipating the work of gospel preachers who proclaim the good news of release from the captivity of sin.
   But Paul cautions that Isaiah also foretold (in 53:1) that not many Israelites would believe this good news.[6]

As aforementioned, the "hope of Israel" (Ac 28:20) for Paul included the hope of Messiah and his kingdom and the resurrection — all that the prophets had foretold (Ac 28:23).
Isaiah 25:8 is referenced by Paul in his discourse on the Resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:54).
The connection between the Resurrection and Israel's restoration is more fully discussed in my article on this website: *Resurrection — the End of Exile*.

There's one instance where Paul applies an OT prophecy to a (possible) yet-future conversion of ethnic Israelites: Romans 11:26-27 cites loosely from Isaiah 59:20-21.
Yet this prophecy, like so many others from Isaiah, may also rightly be related to the first-century spiritual restoration of "Israel".

An important Pauline reference
In Galatians 4:27, Paul cites Isaiah 54:1.
Throughout Galatians Paul is dealing with the so-called Judaizers who were promoting a false, works-based "gospel" (see Galatians 1:6-9).
According to Paul:
Those who sought righteousness through obeying the Mosaic Law were born of the slave woman (Hagar) and so were themselves slaves; they belonged to "the present-day Jerusalem" (Gal 4:24-25).[7]
In contrast, the Galatian believers were like Isaac — children of the free woman (Sarah), born as a result of a "promise" and through the power of God's Spirit (Gal 4:23b, 28-29). They belonged to the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal 4:26).

What has Isaiah 54:1 got to do with all this?
Answer:
Isaiah 54 is part of Isaiah's final section (comprising chaps. 40 – 66) which foretells the release of the Jewish captives from Babylon, their return and gathering to their land, and the restoration of Jerusalem/Israel.
This chapter further describes the blessings attending the nation's restoration.
It immediately follows the fourth Servant Song, which relates the Servant's suffering through which the nation's sin is atoned for (Isa 52:13 – 53:12). Israel's restoration is a direct consequence of the Servant's death.
Yahweh will graciously call Israel back as his wife — never to reject her again (Isa 54:5-10).

[6] Isaiah 52:10: In delivering his people, Yahweh would act as a warrior who bares his "holy arm" for battle against their enemies. Such deliverance will be "in the sight of all the nations; [so that] all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God."
Yet when it comes to the ultimate deliverance through the suffering Servant, Israel herself will (for the most part) fail to believe the good news or recognize God's saving action — his "arm" they will refuse to see (Isa 53:1; cf. 51:5, 9).
[7] Jerusalem was the home and source of these Judaizers (Gal 2:12; Ac 15:1, 5). Indeed, the Jews (for the most part) misunderstood the purpose of the law and sought righteousness through "works" (Rom 9:32; cf. 10:3).

Verse 1 itself (which Paul cites) is God's promise to Zion of numerous children following the exile.
During the exile she was bereft of her children — barren (cf. Isa 49:21).
But with so many of the exiles returning, the nation will have to be enlarged. Israel's deserted cities will be resettled and foreign lands occupied (Isa 54:2-3).[8]

In declaring that the Galatians were children of the free woman/city (Gal 4:26), Paul probably has in mind what Yahweh had earlier stated through Isaiah concerning the nation's restoration (Isaiah 51:1-2):

> [1] *"Listen to Me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the LORD:*
> *Look to the rock from which you were cut, and to the quarry from which you were hewn.*
> [2] *Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who gave you birth.*
> *When I called him, he was but one; then I blessed him and multiplied him."*

God had made a great nation from one (barren) couple; he could equally revive desolate Zion and make her like the Garden of Eden (Isa 51:3).

Paul's reference proves that "Jerusalem" was being restored in the 1st century through the gospel.
Those who responded in faith were admitted as citizens of the heavenly city.
They were released from spiritual captivity (to sin and Satan) and restored to God's presence in "Jerusalem".
The city was being enlarged through the (gospel) gathering of multitudes of believing Jews and Gentiles.

All this proves that Isaiah's restoration prophecies were not fulfilled in the people's return from Babylon.
The definitive restoration could only take place through Yahweh's Servant, Jesus.

So here is the main point:
Isaiah's prophecies looked beyond the return and restoration under Cyrus to the city's definitive restoration under the Messiah.

The Book of Hebrews

Hebrews was addressed to Jewish Christians in danger of reverting to Judaism.
To prevent this, the author shows that the Old Covenant has been superseded by the New — the types and shadows have given way to the spiritual realities to which they pointed.

Old Testament restoration promises have also been fulfilled:

- God's promise of a New Covenant for restored Israel has been fulfilled (Heb 10:16-17; cf. Jer 31:33-34).
- God's people are restored to his presence in "Jerusalem" — the heavenly city (Heb 12:22-23).
  They can enter through the inner curtain into the Most Holy Place itself (Heb 10:19-20; cf. Mt 27:51).

As the author shows, Jesus' atoning death is the crucial factor in bringing about this fulfillment.
Sin has been effectively dealt with.
Jesus has brought in the new order (Heb 9:10).

[8] Isaiah 49:19-21 describes the nation's restoration in very similar terms. So too does Isaiah 66:7-8: Zion will give birth effortlessly and instantly to a whole new nation!

Believers on earth are — legally and in Christ — citizens of the heavenly city (Gal 4:26; Php 3:20).
As justified saints we live in this city and in God's very presence.[9]

As Kurt Simmons notes:

> Our citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem begins *now* (Gal 4:21-31; Eph 2:6, 19; Php 3:20; Col 1:13).
> The scriptures make no legal distinction between the saints on this side of eternity and those that have crossed over. …
> In the church, God has gathered "together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him" (Eph 1:10).
> In terms of our justification from sin, Christians are represented as standing in the presence of God together with the holy angels and the spirits of just men made perfect (Heb 12:22-23).[10]

The original readers of Hebrews (in the early 60s AD) could see the signs of impending judgment upon earthly Jerusalem (Heb 10:25).[11] The old (Mosaic) order was soon to be fully terminated (Heb 8:13).
With the physical/typical order removed, only the spiritual city and kingdom would remain (Heb 12:27-28).

All of this was fulfilled when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Roman army in AD 70.

Revelation 21 – 22

The new creation, with its city "Jerusalem", shows the <u>definitive fulfillment</u> of OT prophecies through Jesus.
It depicts the new world order that Jesus has brought about, with the world's nations as his inheritance and firmly under his rule (Psalms 2, 72).

New Jerusalem represents the city restored after judgment (Isa 2:1-2; 60:1ff.; 65:17ff.).
The city has been purged of evildoers (Rev 21:27; cf. Isa 1:25-26; 35:8; Zec 14:21).
The new (or heavenly) Jerusalem is where we "live" under the New Covenant (Heb 12:22).
God himself dwells therein, amidst his holy people (Rev 22:3; cf. Isa 52:8; Zec 2:10; 8:3).
The nations enquire of God there, and walk in the light of his law (Rev 21:24; cf. Isa 2:3-5; 60:3).
They bring their treasures into the city (Rev 21:24-26; cf. Isa 60:5, 11).
The promised Davidic king reigns amidst God's people, having conquered all their enemies (Rev 22:3; cf. Isa 9:6-7; 11:1-5; 16:5; 32:1; 33:17; Rev 5:5).

New Jerusalem is also the Church — Christ's Bride, the people of God (Rev 21:2, 9-10).
And it's God's heavenly abode as well. As such, it is the final reward of the first-century martyrs (Rev 21:7), and it is our own posthumous destiny too (cf. Heb 11:10, 16; 13:14).
All the visions of Revelation were fulfilled by AD 70 (Rev 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10).
But the kingdom continues to grow; ultimately all nations will turn to God (Rev 15:4; cf. Ps 86:9; Isa 9:7).

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[9] To be justified means not merely to be acquitted from guilt, but to be actually declared righteous:
God sees us as being "in Christ" — united to and identified with his Son, granted his righteousness (Php 3:9) — therefore as perfect and holy and fit to live in his presence.
[10] Kurt Simmons, *The Consummation of the Ages* (Carlsbad, NM: Bimillennial Preterist Association, 2003), p. 399.
[11] This judgment was tied, of course, to Jesus' imminent return (Heb 10:37).