
Flourishing: Land, People, Community: A Bible Study on Isaiah 35:1-10

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Introduction: The Concept of Flourishing

The theme of flourishing has many nuances. Modern concepts tend to focus on individual wellness in psychological terms.¹ The United Nations 2015 Sustainable Development Goals have a more holistic approach to flourishing. These goals emphasize flourishing and sustainability for individuals, communities, and the natural world. They also move beyond psychological flourishing to include issues of health, well-being, infrastructure, and climate change. Some of these goals are no poverty or hunger; good health and well-being; quality education; clean water and sanitation; clean affordable energy; decent work and economic growth; innovation and infrastructure; sustainable cities and communities; responsible production and consumption; work on climate change; supporting life below sea and on land; peace; justice; and partnerships for all these goals.²

Flourishing in the Hebrew Bible

Two Hebrew terms, *shalom* (peace) and *tsedaqah* (righteousness) encompass larger, holistic concepts of flourishing in the Hebrew Bible. Peace includes not only the absence of violence, but the presence of prosperity, safety, and wholeness—all of the good blessings God wants creation to experience.

Righteousness has often been seen in legal terms. One is just, right before the law, acquitted, vindicated, delivered. It has a legal sense in the Hebrew Bible, but it means so much more. The legal sense was an easy way for Paul to talk about justification, of being righteous before God.

Righteousness also includes the sense of redemption and salvation. Recall that salvation in the Hebrew Bible is not about

1. The Harvard Human Flourishing program lists five domains of flourishing: happiness and life satisfaction; mental and physical health; meaning and purpose; character and virtue; and close social relationships. <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/measuring-flourishing>. Dr. Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania suggests positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (PERMA) promote human flourishing. <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/learn-more/perma-theory-well-being-and-perma-workshops>.

2. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

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the afterlife or eternal life but about being saved and delivered in this life. Sheol, the afterlife, was a shadowy existence where individuality was lost. There was no opportunity in the afterlife for justice for those who did not receive it while alive. In the Hebrew Bible, one must see God's justice and vindication now in this life. The term righteousness, like the term shalom, also includes a sense of prosperity, health, blessing, and wholeness.³

Righteousness in the Hebrew Bible also has a creational aspect. For one to be righteous before God, to be whole and complete, is to be what God created one to be. In this way all creation participates in righteousness. Part of being righteous is to live in relationship with God, each other, and creation.

The actual word for "flourish" in the Hebrew Bible is *parach*, and is about growing, living, and thriving. It is used both of creation and humans, especially in the psalms where the righteous will flourish (Psalm 1). Again, the idea goes back to our being what God created us to be. God wants all creation to flourish. And there is some human responsibility for the flourishing of creation.

Part of our creation is as stewards of creation (Gen 2:15), where the human is called to till and keep the garden. The Hebrew word for "till" (*abad*) can also mean "to serve" and the word for "keep" (*shamar*) is "to guard and protect." These two words are

3. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/6666.htm>

used in close connection to talk about service at the Tent of the Meeting during the wilderness period (Num 3:7). To till and keep the earth is a holy vocation. It is not quite the relational aspect that many indigenous peoples form with creation, but certainly challenges the idea of domination and subduing often seen in Christian theology.

Summarizing this brief study of flourishing in the Hebrew Bible we can conclude that God is the source of all flourishing, rather than from any human effort. Furthermore, God's intent for creation is shalom/wholeness/thriving/flourishing, that is, what life is meant to be. And biblical flourishing is holistic, not just economic, not just individualistic, not just happiness. Flourishing involves people, communities, and land.

Literary Context of Isaiah 35

Isaiah 35 was chosen for this study because it uses *parach* three times in the first two verses. Many scholars see Isaiah 35 as belonging to Second Isaiah but was placed here in First Isaiah by an editor to serve as a literary bridge between the different contexts of First and Second Isaiah. Israel's opponents have been removed in Isaiah 34, so that God's victorious might can be shown. The historical chapters of Isaiah 36-39, besides contrasting King Hezekiah with his father King Ahaz, shows God's protection and care by saving Jerusalem from the Assyrians. In this study, it is assumed that Isaiah 35 comes from Second Isaiah toward the end of the Babylonian Exile.

Socio-historical context of Isaiah 35: The Babylonian Exile

First, we have all recently experienced a sense of exile from many things during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our context may in some ways parallel that of the Israelites and allows us to hear the words of Isaiah 35 anew. In a study of how pastors and lay leadership handled the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, Eileen Campbell-Reed noted many experienced a sense of a loss of place, connected to the physical worship space. Many experienced pervasive anxiety, fear, and "scarcity" in the system. They noted a need to attend to grief, and lament what was lost and passing away. There was also a need to think about how to rebuild routines and connections to fit new realities. Most importantly, Campbell-Reed and others noted that communities and leaders need to begin singing a new song, telling a new story, filled with future possibilities for how to be beloved community. To remind each other, there is a future.⁴

This final point of envisioning and moving into the future is a key one as we look at Isaiah 35.

The Babylonian Exile (587/6 BCE) occurred when King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its Temple, killed the king of Jerusalem and his sons, and deported 10-15% of the population of Judah to Babylon. It was the greatest tragedy

4. Eileen Campbell-Reed, *#Pandemic Pastoring*, <https://eileencampbellreed.org/pandemicpastoring-report-download-2022/>.

The prophet is called to create a new vision, a reminder that the order of things as they are is not as God intends them to be and can be overcome by God's creative power. God's promise is not just the end of exile, but a redemptive reversal based in the coming of God that makes the people whole and transforms creation. All creation is restored.

faced by the people of God up to that point in time.

It was a time of intense theological questioning. Why did God allow this to happen? In the ancient world when nations went to war, their gods went to war. Since Babylon won, did that mean the Babylonian god Marduk was stronger than the LORD? Did God have the power to make a difference? Did God even care about God's people anymore?

Researchers studying people experiencing exile have noted a general process. This process includes a period of initial trauma, a long duration, and eventually, for many, acclimation.⁵

Once a people become acclimated, the known present can be more comfortable and secure than the promises of a glorious future. How does one help an acclimated people move forward? It is a question of the security of the present versus the hope and promise of the future. Is there flourishing beyond acclimation?

Acclimation is key for the context of Isaiah 35. The prophet is addressing a community defeated by war, removed by an oppressive power, experiencing desolation and dislocation, and then acclimation. The prophet is called to create a new vision, a reminder that the order of things as they are is not as God intends them to be and can be overcome by God's creative power. God's promise is not just the end of exile, but a redemptive reversal based in the coming of God that makes the people whole and transforms creation. All creation is restored.

Isaiah 35:1-2

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel

5. Brad E. Kelle. "An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Exile," in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (Society of Biblical Literature, Ancient Israel and Its Literature, 2011), 5-38.

and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

The first two verses contrast two types of natural ecologies that eventually become similar. The wilderness, dry land, and desert are places not usually inhabited by people. They are images of creation without a need to justify itself to humanity. These places were often imagined as barren and infertile.

The prophet announces these barren places will become fertile and given the glory and majesty of Lebanon, Sharon, and Carmel. Lebanon was known for its forests of cedars. Sharon was a fertile plain known as a breadbasket of the area. Carmel was both a beautifully wooded mountain and the entrance to the very fertile Jezreel Valley. A powerful transformation of creation is being announced. The language of glory and majesty refer to creation's fertility, abundance and beauty and links creation to God who is often described using the words "glory" and "majesty." Creation sees God's glory and majesty and participates in it. God's transformation of creation leads to creation rejoicing.

The desert, dry land, and wilderness will be glad and rejoice, rejoice with joy and singing. An abundance of Hebrew rejoicing words are used here. These words convey images of exalting, excitement and delight, a lifting of the heart, and being bright. Creation is making a soundscape.⁶

The term *parach*, "flourish," here translated as "blossom" is used three times in the Hebrew in this text. These first two verses are about creation flourishing. Nothing has been said about humanity. Creation is being transformed by God and is rejoicing. Creation is created to be fertile, abundant, and rejoice in God.

Isaiah 35:3-4

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. God will come with vengeance (vindication), with recompense. God will come and save you."

The prophet now addresses the people. The commands to strengthen, make firm, and say are plural commands. It is the community that is to strengthen, make firm, and speak, not just the prophet. The community is to move out of its comfortable acclimation to exile and to prepare itself for God's new work. The community is being given a mission, a purpose. For the exilic community, having a meaningful purpose is a part of flourishing.

In the Hebrew Bible, whenever it is said, "Do not fear" good news always follows. First and foremost, in this text is the good news of God's presence. The good news also includes God's salvation which is not otherworldly, but rather about changing their exilic existence. Recall, that Sheol is not a place of justice, or reward and punishment. If one wishes to experience God's

6. See Gil Waldkoenig's article in this issue about soundscapes. The rejoicing nature of creation moves the soundscape into a soundscape.

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salvation or vindication it must occur in this lifetime. The term vengeance shows God's power but has other meanings as well. It can also be about God righting wrongs, redressing negative circumstances, and the ordering of chaos.⁷

Isaiah 35:5-7

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Second Isaiah is reusing the theme of creation and transformation to talk about God's salvific action as a new Exodus event. It highlights the transformational power of God's presence, where both human and nonhuman creation is transformed. The water of the Red Sea and the lack of water in the wilderness is no longer an issue. There is a life-giving overabundance of waters for the people.

Care needs to be taken about ableism in this text. Certainly, some differently abled people today do not see themselves in need of transformation in order to be whole and as God created them to be. Some now suggest that the motif of deafness and blindness, a motif throughout all of Isaiah, is used here to show restoration and reconciliation with God. God's imputing spiritual deafness and blindness to the people (Isaiah 6:10) as judgement is now replaced with God's forgiveness and grace.

Isaiah 35:8-9

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

7. <https://biblehub.com/bdb/5359.htm>.

The Holy Way may also hint at a new Exodus event, perhaps a pilgrimage way back to Zion. The “unclean” may limit it to God’s people but may also suggest that the unclean will be made clean. The term for fools is often used of those who are morally “directionally challenged.” The transformation is such that the people will not get lost physically or morally. The LORD as Israel’s redeemer is a common theme in Isaiah 40-66. It not only lifts up God’s power to redeem but is a term that suggests a kinship relationship. Israel as the redeemed is a welcome reminder of their identity as the people of God. Safety and security are emphasized in this text.

Isaiah 35:10

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

The language of “ransomed” grounds Israel’s identity and connects the idea of Exodus and exile. The word for “joy” (*simchah*) is a word emphasizing gladness, mirth, and festivity. It is about communal and public celebration. It is a joy that cannot be contained; it must be expressed and bears public witness to God’s actions in the world. Sorrow and sighing shall not just take flight but will disappear. Creation, people, and the community will flourish and celebrate and rejoice in their God.

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Bringing It Together

Isaiah 35 is a good text to talk about the flourishing of people, communities, and the land. It emphasizes how God will transform human and nonhuman creation from their present conditions to conditions of abundance, fruitfulness, song, and joy. The prophet calls for the community to witness and participate in God’s transforming of creation and their community. They have an identity as the people of God and a mission to support one another and proclaim the Good News. It is a new song and a new story to share and live.

Isaiah 35 is a vision to move out of acclimation to the present into God’s glorious future. For there is a future hope despite our present reality, grounded in God’s being, action, and promises. The people of God can move forward into an uncertain future, knowing that God is both already there and with them on their journey to the future. The response to these promises and transformation is communal and public joy. People, community, and creation rejoice and flourish.