Redeeming the Desolate Woman: The Message of Isaiah 54 and 3 Nephi 22

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Third Nephi 22 (quoting Isaiah 54) addresses a desolate woman who will be redeemed in the latter days. The desolate woman represents Zion, which itself signifies the city of Enoch in ancient times, the hill where the temple was built in Jerusalem, the celestial city of God, the kingdom of God on earth, and a covenant community of temple-worthy Saints. The Lord promises to relieve the desolation of Zion felt through barrenness, lack of a permanent home, and being forsaken and persecuted. The destiny of Zion parallels the pattern of Noah—both remain faithful to their covenants and witness a cleansing of the earth. The Savior serves as Zion’s husband. The servants of the Lord are equated with Zion—the Lord will not allow oppressors to be successful against Zion. The Lord promises to redeem Zion as he sings a song of redeeming love.
Redeeming the Desolate Woman

The Message of Isaiah 54 and 3 Nephi 22

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N 3 Nephi 22 the risen Jesus quotes the fifty-fourth chapter of Isaiah, which addresses a desolate woman who will be redeemed in the latter days. The chapter heading explains that the desolate woman represents Zion. Zion was the name of the city of Enoch in ancient times; later, Zion was the hill where the temple was built in the city of Jerusalem. Zion often represents both the celestial city of God and the kingdom of God on earth, the stakes of the church. Throughout the scriptures, Zion refers to a covenant community of temple-worthy Saints, such as the happy people who lived the law of consecration in the New Testament and in the Book of Mormon. In such Zion societies, people are “married, and given in marriage” and are blessed according to the Lord’s promises (4 Nephi 1:11).

However, the faith of Zion must be proven in every generation. Zion receives a fulness of joy only after a time of loneliness, just as the spirit children of God receive eternal life only after they are tested by pain and death in mortality. Zion enters the presence of the Lord only after a period of hardship, just as the righteous Nephites see the face of Jesus only after they have survived the destruction of the wicked in tempests, whirlwinds, earthquakes, and other disasters. In 3 Nephi 22, latter-day Zion is portrayed as being desolate in spite of the Lord’s covenant that she will find joy as a wife and mother in the promised land.

Zion is desolate because (1) she has no children, (2) she has no permanent home or resting place, (3) her husband seems to have forsaken her, and (4) adversaries are trying to destroy her. The Lord promises to redeem Zion from such desolation by establishing a temple in her midst. The light of the temple will overpower the efforts of her enemies. The temple will gather the children of Israel to their home in Zion through ordinances for the living and the dead. The Lord invites Zion to sing a song of redeeming love in preparation for the homecoming of the children of Israel:

Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child; for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord. Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thy habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes. (3 Nephi 22:1–2)

The Lord invites Zion to expand the curtains of her tent to make room for children, just as he once stretched forth the curtains of the heavens to make a place for his spirit children on earth:

Bless the Lord... who stretcheth out the heavens like a curtain: Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters... Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed for ever. (Psalm 104:1–5)

[Have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he... that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in. (Isaiah 40:21–22; also Zechariah 12:1)]

The tent figuratively represents the priesthood organization of the church in Zion. The images of enlarging and stretching suggest the preparations in a woman’s body for the birth of a child. The lengthened and strengthened cords and stakes represent the growth of the church. Furthermore, the Lord transforms the portable tent of Zion into a permanent temple, just as he transforms the temporal tabernacle of our mortal bodies into perfect temples of immortal glory in the resurrection. Zion’s tent in the wilderness becomes the House of the Lord in the New Jerusalem, a new home for all the
families of the earth. The tent is thus a metaphor for the Lord's covenant with Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Children from all nations, kindreds, tongues, and peoples will eventually have the opportunity to dwell in the haven of gospel covenants in the latter days. 

**Zion as a Barren Woman**

The comparison of Zion to a childless woman evokes the stories of Eve, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth, and other female ancestors in Israel who received the blessings of posterity after a trial of their faith. Children are the greatest blessing that the Lord can bestow, so to be barren is a great affliction. In Near Eastern societies of the Bible, barren women were among the most vulnerable people, often subject to disgrace.

In the latter days the Lord will redeem Zion from barrenness just as he blessed Sarah in her old age with a son named Isaac. The name Isaac comes from the Hebrew word שִׁמְעוֹן, meaning “joy” or “joyful laughter.” The word joy evokes the image of promises fulfilled after a long wait. Thus Isaac, the long-awaited child of Abraham and Sarah, becomes a representation of any great joy that comes only at the end of deprivation, hard work, or intense longing:

Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him. For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places;

and he will make 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 51:2–3; 2 Nephi 8:2–3)

Zion will not remain forever desolate and barren. Someday she will have more children than any married wife can produce in a mortal lifetime:

Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man child. Who hath heard of such a thing? Who hath seen such things? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? or shall a nation be born at once? For as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children. (Isaiah 66:7–8)

Zion will receive so many children that she will not know where they came from, just as Saints in the latter-days marvel when missionaries throughout the world bring nearly 1000 persons per day into the new life of the gospel.

**Zion and Noah**

The destiny of latter-day Zion is parallel to the pattern of Noah, according to the Lord: “For this is as the waters of Noah unto me” (Isaiah 54:9). Both Noah and Zion strive to

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remain faithful to their covenants in darkening days of abomination and desolation. They each witness a cleansing of the earth, first by flood and later by fire. Their lives are spared, but they mourn for those who are lost. Zion feels homeless and tempest-tossed, like Noah and his family must have felt during the stormy days in the ark (see Genesis 7:6–20). Zion longs for a place to rest just as Noah looked hopefully for the birds to bring signs of land. The Lord redeems Zion by renewing the covenant of peace that he made with Noah, whose name in Hebrew means "comfort" or "rest":

For as I have sworn that the waters of Noah
should no more go over the earth,
so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee.
For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed,
but my kindness shall not depart from thee,
neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed,
saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.
(Isaiah 54:9–10)

The new covenant is an unconditional "Royal Grant" of land and blessings, typically given by a king to his faithful servants in the ancient Near East.

Like a rainbow after a storm, the promise moves from the waters of Noah to the shining beauty of the temple in the city of Zion. When the Lord redeems Zion, she and her children will receive all the blessings of the temple:

O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted,
behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colors,
and thy foundations with sapphires.
And I will make thy windows of agates,
and thy gates of carbuncles,
and all thy borders of pleasant stones.
And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord;
and great shall be the peace of thy children.
(Isaiah 54:11–13)

The temple will enable Zion to carry on the charge that the Lord gave to Noah after the flood: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Genesis 9:1). In other words, Zion will have children, the Lord will instruct them in his holy sanctuary, and the children will replenish the whole earth with the good news of the gospel. Just as Noah became the angel "Gabriel" who announced the birth of Jesus in the meridian of time, Zion and her children will become messengers to announce the second coming of Christ in the latter days.

**Zion and the Savior**

Like people who are widowed, divorced, or never married, Zion is alone for a season, but not forever. The Savior of the whole earth is her husband. The etymology of the English word husband is a compound of house and prepare; thus, a husband is "one who prepares or builds a house." The Lord is Zion's husband or "house builder" because he makes the earth as a home for all creatures, he creates bodies as temples for spirit children, he builds temples as places of worship, and he prepares heavenly mansions for his children:

For thy maker, thy husband,
the Lord of Hosts is his name;
and thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel—the God of the whole earth shall he be called.
For the Lord hath called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit,
and a wife of youth when thou wast refused,
saith thy God.
(Isaiah 54:5–6; compare 3 Nephi 22:5–6)

The Savior understands Zion's desolation because he too was stricken, smitten, oppressed, and afflicted (see Isaiah 53:4, 7). Zion is called to be a "woman forsaken and grieved" just as Christ was called to be "despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3; Mosiah 14:3). Christ was called to be the "stone which the builders refused" (Psalm 118:22), so he knows how to succor the "wife of youth" who was refused (3 Nephi 22:6). The desolate woman will forget the shame of her youth because the Lord will vindicate her (see Isaiah 60:15; 3 Nephi 22:4). After the Lord redeems her, Zion will no longer remember the reproach of being alone.

Yet during the desolate time, it may seem to Zion that the
Lord has abandoned her. Part of the agony that Christ experienced in the atonement was the moment when God the Father seemed to have turned away: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1). Just as the Son endured a moment of separation from the Father, Zion endures a period of separation from the Lord, but he promises to gather her again in mercy and kindness:

For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great mercies will I gather thee.
In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment, but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer.
(Isaiah 54:7–8)

A Jewish childbirth custom may shed light on the significance of the phrase I hid my face from thee for a moment. Among orthodox Jews, a husband is not allowed to watch his wife going through the labor of childbirth. He sits in the corner of the delivery room with his back turned so that she will not feel embarrassed or immodest in her unavoidable hour of agony. He does not abandon her, although she may feel very much alone. The woman recites or sings psalms as she endures contractions. When the pain becomes too great for her to continue singing, the husband takes over, reciting psalms for her. Although Zion cannot see the Lord in the time of her probation, when she weeps, he weeps with her; when she sings, he rejoices with her. The relationship between the Savior and Zion is one of “everlasting kindness.”

The Hebrew word for kindness is hesed, which has connotations of mercy, courtship, favors, loyalty, cherishing, marital duty, and constant attention. The mercy of the Lord is linked with the intimacy of kindness within the family. The earliest known source for the English word kindness is the reconstructed Indo-European root gen-−, meaning “to give birth, beget; with derivatives referring to... procreation and to familial and tribal groups.” Several other terms come from the same root as kindness: kin, king, kindred, and kinder (the German word for “children”), gentle, gentle, generation, genealogy, genesis, progenitor, pregnant, natal, nation, nativity. Such terms of kindness and relationship are woven throughout the scriptures as a testimony of the Savior. The Lord will show his “kindness” unto the “Gentiles” (2 Nephi 6:12). The “gentleness” of the Lord will make Zion great (Psalms 18:35), and he shall “gently” lead those that are with young in Zion (Isaiah 40:11). The “King of kings” will reign forever over the “generations” of Zion (Psalm 146:10; Revelation 17:14). Righteous people will gather to Zion from all “nations” and will sing songs of everlasting joy (D&C 45:71).

Those who have been redeemed in Zion will testify of the kindness of the Lord:

And now the year of my redeemed is come; and they shall mention the loving kindness of their Lord... In his love, and in his pity, he redeemed them, and carried them all the days of old;
And they shall sing the song of the Lamb, day and night forever and ever. (D&C 133:52–53, 56)

The Hebrew name for the poetic form the Lord uses in 3 Nephi 22 is šir yeledot, a “song of loves” or wedding song. The text reads like an epitalamium, a wedding poem from classical Greece that celebrates the joy of a bride and her groom. Singing is a symbol of the vibrant love that is possible between a man, a woman, and their children when they follow the Lord’s way.

In Bible lands, childbirth is often associated with rejoicing, singing, or chanting poetry in the form of psalms. A woman sings when she first discovers that she will have a baby. Mary sang after Noah appeared as the angel Gabriel to announce that she would bear the Christ child: “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46–47). A woman also sings when her baby is safely delivered, as Hannah did after the birth of Samuel: “My heart rejoiceth in the Lord... I rejoice in my salvation” (1 Samuel 2:1). Nursing professor Lynn Callister reports that even today an orthodox Jewish mother will recite the words of a psalm to give thanks for the birth of her firstborn child: “Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob” (Psalm 81:1). Singing is a token of the promise that the Lord’s covenant people will have children in their homes.

Paradoxically, Zion will cry aloud with pain as well as joy as she experiences the miracle and labor of bearing children, literally or figuratively. The cry of a woman enduring labor pains as she gives birth to a child mirrors the anguished prayers of Christ as he suffered agony to give new life to us through his atoning sacrifice (see Luke 22:44).

Zion and the Servants of the Lord

Zion is equated with the “servants of the Lord” in 3 Nephi 22:17:

No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn.

For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great mercies will I gather thee.
Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion, and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy. (Isaiah 51:11; 2 Nephi 8:11)
This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me.
(3 Nephi 22:17)

Throughout the scriptures, the Lord uses the word servant to refer to prophets, apostles, missionaries, priesthood holders, temple workers, and saints of all ages. Because the adversary wishes to thwart the plan of happiness, he and his followers seek to attack Zion. The Lord’s servants often suffer persecution as part of their mission on earth. But the Lord will not allow oppressors to be successful against Zion. In 1992 President Ezra Taft Benson referred to 3 Nephi 22:17 when he told the Saints how to face opposition and persecution:

Some of our members have become disturbed because of derogatory things said about the Church and its leaders.... But opposition is not new to the Church.... Do not become discouraged by what others say or do. Stay on the straight and narrow path. You do this by holding fast to the iron rod—the words of God as contained in the scriptures and as given by His living servants on this earth.12

The dedicatory prayer for the Kirtland temple in Ohio also includes a quotation from 3 Nephi 22:17, pleading that no weapon will affect the welfare of Zion:

We ask thee, Holy Father, to establish the people that shall worship, and honorably hold a name and standing in this thy house, to all generations and for eternity;
That no weapon formed against them shall prosper....
We ask thee, Holy Father, to confound, and astonish, and to bring to shame and confusion, all those who have spread lying reports abroad, over the world, against thy servant or servants, if they will not repent. (D&C 109:24–25, 29)

Enemies will revile or rise up against the servants of the Lord (see Alma 50:31). Instead of suffering permanent damage, Zion will be blessed when she remembers the Lord’s kind words of affirmation: “And blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake” (3 Nephi 12:11; compare Matthew 5:11).

The word this in “this is the heritage of the servants of the Lord” refers back to all of the ways in which the Lord will redeem the desolate woman in 3 Nephi 22. He will protect Zion from harm; he will build a House for her that cannot be moved; he will bless her with children in the House of the Lord. The most important feature of Zion’s redemption is the gift of life, the endowment of having children: “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord; and the fruit of the womb is his reward” (Psalm 127:3).

In Isaiah the Lord uses the promise of children to represent important events in the plan of salvation: “Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders” (2 Nephi 18:18; Isaiah 8:18). In the Lord’s plan, children are signs of genesis, probation, renewal, paradise, and celestial glory. For the Nephites and the Latter-day Saints, children are tangible representations of redemption through sacred covenants, gospel ordinances, and the wonders of godliness.

The Redemption of Zion

In 3 Nephi 22 Jesus uses a poetic text from Isaiah to address the more righteous part of the Nephites and an audience of Book of Mormon readers in the latter days. The Lord promises to redeem Zion and reestablish her reputation of righteousness:

1. He sings a song of redeeming love (šir yedidot) to Zion.
2. He compares her to faithful covenant women, such as Sarah and Hannah.
3. He trusts her to become a mother to children in the house of Israel.
4. He calls her to suffer as he suffered in the atonement.
5. He supports and protects her like a husband.
6. He compares her to Noah, a just and perfect man who walked with God (Genesis 6:9).
7. He extends temple blessings to Zion and her children.
8. He counts Zion among his servants.

The Lord redeems Zion through his covenant of peace and perfect love. Zion responds by singing a song of redeeming love and by bringing her children into the new and everlasting covenant:

Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away.
(Isaiah 51:11; 2 Nephi 8:11)

Today couples sing the song of redeeming love when they are sealed in temple marriage. Husbands and wives sing unto the Lord a new song when they receive and raise children. Members and missionaries of the true church break forth into singing when they help the Lord stretch the curtains of the gospel tent across the face of the whole earth. Each one of us will have to undergo times of total loneliness, regardless of our marital or parental status. We will be called to pass through deep waters and fiery trials. When the desolation is so great that only Christ can rescue us, he will be there, teaching us how to sing the song of redeeming love.
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For a much fuller and heavily documented treatment of this subject, see Cynthia L. Hallen, "The Lord's Covenant of Kindness: Isaiah 54 and 2 Nephi 22," in Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo: FARMS, 1998), 313-49.

1. See LDS Bible Dictionary, sv. "Zion."
4. The -band morpheme comes from Old Norse bha (to live, prepare) and bhask (to make oneself ready). See the Indo-European root *bhes- (to be, exist, grow) in the appendix, American Heritage Dictionary.
of the English Language, 3rd edition.

5. Personal communication, Lynn Clark Callister, 24 June 1995; compare note 10 below.


7. See appendix, American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd ed., s.v. "gen- - "

8. See NIV Study Bible, 782.

9. From Greek thalamos, "bridal chamber."


11. See Genesis 50:17; 1 Chronicles 6:49; 17:25; 2 Chronicles 24:9; Psalm 113:1; 134:1; 135:1; Jeremiah 30:10; Daniel 9:11; Ezra 5:11; Romans 1:1; 6:22; Philippians 1:1; James 1:1; Colossians 4:12; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 2:16; Revelation 7:3; 15:3; 19:5; Jacob 6:2; Alma 8:19; D&C 55:2; 69:1; 77:9; 109:4; 109:31; 121:6; 127:12; 132:32; 132:57; 133:38; Moses 1:36.