

Isaiah 49:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the LORD: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me.

Analysis

And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the LORD: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me. This remarkable prophecy promises royal patronage for God's people, with kings serving as omen (נָאֵל, "nursing fathers/guardians") and queens as wet nurses. The imagery conveys tender care and provision from the highest human authorities—a reversal of typical ancient Near Eastern power dynamics where conquered peoples served royalty.

The posture of bowing with faces to the ground and "licking the dust" depicts complete submission, using hyperbolic language common in ancient diplomatic correspondence. Importantly, this homage directs not toward Israel's inherent merit but toward the LORD whom they represent. The phrase "thou shalt know that I am the LORD" (ki ani YHWH, כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה) is Yahweh's self-revelation formula, establishing His identity through redemptive action.

The concluding promise—"they shall not be ashamed that wait for me"—connects to the biblical theme that trusting God never leads to ultimate disappointment

(Romans 5:5, 9:33, 10:11). From a Reformed perspective, this prophesies Christ's kingdom where earthly powers acknowledge His lordship (Philippians 2:10-11). The church's vindication comes not through political dominance but through Christ's exaltation. Those who wait on God in faith will see His promises fulfilled, however delayed they appear.

Historical Context

Historical antecedents include Persian kings supporting Israel's return: Cyrus authorized temple rebuilding, Darius confirmed it, Artaxerxes funded Ezra's mission and authorized Nehemiah's governorship. These Gentile monarchs acted as "nursing fathers" providing for God's people. Queen Esther's intervention also exemplifies royal protection.

The prophecy extends to Christian history where rulers like Constantine, Theodosius, and various Christian monarchs provided legal protection and resources for the church. However, the closer church-state alliance often led to corruption, reminding us that ultimate fulfillment awaits Christ's return when "every knee shall bow" (Isaiah 45:23, Philippians 2:10). The promise that those who wait won't be ashamed sustained Christians through centuries of persecution, vindicated by the faith's ultimate triumph.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does waiting on God's timing challenge your impatience for visible results?

2. In what ways should the church demonstrate Christ's lordship without worldly power-seeking?
3. How has God proven faithful to you in ways that vindicated your trust in Him?

Interlinear Text

וְהִי וְ	מְלָכִים	אֲמֵנִי	וְשָׂרוֹתֵיהֶם	מִיֵּן יִלְוֶה יְהוָה
H1961	And kings	shall be thy nursing fathers	and their queens	thy nursing mothers
	H4428	H539	H8282	H3243
אֶפְרַיִם	אֶרֶץ	יִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ	לְ	וַעֲפָר
to thee with their face	toward the earth	they shall bow down	H0	the dust
H639	H776	H7812		H6083
בְּגִלְיָהּ	וְלִיכּוּ	וְיָדַעְתָּ	אֲנִי	יְהוָה
of thy feet	and lick up	and thou shalt know	H3588	H589
H7272	H3897	H3045		H3068
אֲשֶׁר	לֹא	יִבְשׁוּ	קִוִּי:	
H834	H3808	for they shall not be ashamed	that wait	
		H954	H6960	

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 60:16 (Kingdom): Thou shalt also suck the milk of the Gentiles, and shalt suck the breast of kings: and thou shalt know that I the LORD am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer, the mighty One of Jacob.

Isaiah 60:3 (Kingdom): And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.

Isaiah 60:14 (References Lord): The sons also of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee; and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet; and they shall call thee, The city of the LORD, The Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

Micah 7:17 (References Lord): They shall lick the dust like a serpent, they shall move out of their holes like worms of the earth: they shall be afraid of the LORD our God, and shall fear because of thee.

Isaiah 45:14 (References Lord): Thus saith the LORD, The labour of Egypt, and merchandise of Ethiopia and of the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over unto thee, and they shall be thine: they shall come after thee; in chains they shall come over, and they shall fall down unto thee, they shall make supplication unto thee, saying, Surely God is in thee; and there is none else, there is no God.

Romans 10:11 (Parallel theme): For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.

Psalms 25:3 (Parallel theme): Yea, let none that wait on thee be ashamed: let them be ashamed which transgress without cause.

Revelation 3:9 (Parallel theme): Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.

Isaiah 49:7 (Kingdom): Thus saith the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the LORD that is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, and he shall choose thee.

Isaiah 64:4 (Sin): For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him.