

## Isaiah 40-48

### BACKGROUND

- Isaiah 1-35 describe Isaiah's ministry up to the Assyrian crisis. 36-39 are a historical interlude describing events around the same time. 40-55 are a message of hope to Israel in the Babylonian captivity. 56-66 look further to the days after the exile.
- "Tradition outside the Bible says [Isaiah] lived a little longer [past Hezekiah's death], into the reign of the wicked King Manasseh, who resolved to kill him. Fleeing Manasseh, the elderly Isaiah hid in a hollow tree in the forest, only to be found by Manasseh's men, who cut down the tree with a saw, Isaiah still inside. There may be an echo of this in Heb 11:36-37."  
[Carson]
- Recall that there is debate over authorship of Isaiah 40-66, precisely because it presents such a detailed prophecy of Cyrus.

### QUESTIONS

1. John Oswalt<sup>1</sup>, points out the "new things" (Isa 43:19) God was giving Israel: a new perception of themselves; a new condition as forgiven and freed people; and a new anticipation of the end of exile and a quickened relationship to God. Do you think it's scriptural to *expect* God to act in new ways? (Is that even what Isaiah/God intended?) How have you seen him do new things in your life and lifetime?
2. While "servant" is used to describe Israel (e.g. 41:8-9), there are other parts of Isaiah 40-55 which don't seem to fit as well with Israel, and appear to have a different object in mind. These are the "servant songs" of Isaiah: 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12 (some add 61:1-4).

How does the description of the servant in 42:1-9 differ from that in the rest of 42?

3. The identity of the Servant in the servant songs has been debated for thousands of years. According to the *Jewish Study Bible*,

Possibilities include Cyrus<sup>2</sup> (according to Saadia Gaon), the prophet himself (so Ibn Ezra [see also the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:32-33]), the Messiah (so Targum [the Aramaic translation of the OT] and Radak), and the Israelite nation as a whole (so Septuagint [the Greek translation of the Scriptures made between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC] and Rashi). See 52:13-53:12. The term 'servant' in most other passages in chs 40-66 clearly refers to the nation Israel or to the faithful within Israel, and that is the most likely explanation here as well.

(Gaon, Radak, Ibn Ezra and Rashi were medieval rabbis.) That there was a range of views available in the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. is shown by the discrepancy between the Targum (in some versions, "the messiah" is actually inserted after "my servant" in 42:1) and the Septuagint. The intertestamental writings are also mixed, favoring either servant as messiah or Israel.<sup>3</sup> Other theories include a portion of Israel (e.g. a righteous remnant), Jeremiah, Jehoiachin (Judah's

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<sup>1</sup> "The God of Newness: A Sermon on Isaiah 43:14-21", *Calvin Theological Journal*, **39**, 386 (2004).

<sup>2</sup> To apparently complicate things further, note that 45:1 refers to Cyrus as the anointed—the messiah.

<sup>3</sup> See Beale & Carson, *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT* (Baker Academic), p. 44.

king who was a captive in Babylonia) and Moses (perhaps because he brought his people out of bondage as well).

In Mt 12:17-21 (and perhaps Lk 2:25-32), who did (at least some of) the first-century Jews think the Servant was?

Based on 42:1-9, can you rule out any of the theories given above for the servant's identity?<sup>4</sup>

4. These chapters were important for the early church's understanding of Jesus and his ministry. The two main quotations of this material in the NT are<sup>5</sup>
  - Isa 40:3, "A voice of one calling in the desert..." quoted in Mt 3:3 as describing John the Baptist—"This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah"<sup>6</sup>
  - Isa 42:1-4, "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen... A bruised reed he will not break...", quoted in Mt 12:18-21 describing Jesus' ministry—"This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah"; also alluded to in the Father's words from heaven at Jesus' baptism in Mt 3:17

If these chapters' first fulfillment is in the rescue of servant Israel from Babylonian exile, the early church saw the second fulfillment in Christ's ministry.

Just how *predictive* is Isaiah's prophecy? Is it restrictive enough to be convincing evidence of God's hand at work—much as these chapters repeatedly say that the prophecy of Cyrus' return of Israel from exile is conclusive proof of God's unique divinity?<sup>7</sup> How do passages like 44:8 speak to you?

5. Commentator Barry Webb counts six words of encouragement in 43:1-44:5 to the Jewish community in exile. What such messages do you find?
6. Of the exilic community, Webb writes,

Most of those who were young and fit enough to travel [out of Babylon back to Israel] would have been born in exile, and although Babylon was not their true home it would have been the only place they knew. The wilderness represented a break with even that limited security. Secondly, Jerusalem was a long way off, between 500 and 900 miles, depending on the route. The returnees could expect to be traveling for at least four months through harsh terrain, in which they would be vulnerable not only to exhaustion but also to attack by bandits. The wilderness meant hardship and danger. And what could they expect on arrival? Not hearth and home and plenty, but a devastated land, and the arduous task of

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<sup>4</sup> Note further Matthew's theme of Jesus *as* Israel: Jesus goes to Egypt (Hos 11:1/Mt 2:15); he is tempted in the desert, paralleling Israel in the desert; he passes through the waters of a new exodus in his baptism (1 Cor 10:1-5); at his baptism, the Father alludes to Isa 42:1, the first of the servant songs. Jesus ultimately "stands in" for the elect of Israel/the Church in his death and resurrection. Cf. Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, **64**, 511 (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Isa 43:19, "See, I am doing a new thing!", is also thought by many to be alluded to in 2 Cor 5:17 where Paul speaks of Christians being a "new creation". Note also the well-known passages, "Comfort, comfort my people" [40:1]; "They will soar on wings like eagles" [40:31]; "every knee will bow... every tongue will swear" [45:23; Rom 14:11; Philip 2:10]; "there is no peace for the wicked" [48:22].

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the Qumran community also saw themselves as a fulfillment of 40:3; cf. Beale & Carson. 9.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD repeatedly points out in these chapters his unique ability to know the "end from the beginning" (46:10; 44:7; 48:5, etc.). This foreknowledge is meant to comfort the afraid (44:8) and demonstrate his sovereignty over the nations (40:23) through Israel, his witnesses (43:10), and even to stubborn Israel itself (48:4-5).

rebuilding their lives from scratch. In a sense the wilderness was just as frightening a thing as Babylon.<sup>8</sup>

Peter sees Christians as “aliens and strangers in the world” (1 Pet 2:11) and James addresses his epistle to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (James 1:1). Discuss Christian life as analogous to life in, and return from, exile.

7. Don Carson sees 43:5-7 as assurance that, “Israel will not face extinction or assimilation.”<sup>9</sup> This assurance is supported in 44:21, where God explicitly says, “O Israel, I will not forget you”. God also promises that he himself will gather Israel’s children from the four points of the compass (43:5-6; also 49:12-15). On the perdurance of Israel, Walker Percy writes,

Where are the Hittites?

Why does no one find it remarkable that in most world cities today there are Jews but not one single Hittite even though the Hittites had a great flourishing civilization while the Hews nearby were a weak and obscure people?

When one meets a Jew in New York or New Orleans or Paris or Melbourne, it is remarkable that no one considers the event remarkable. What are they doing here? But it is even more remarkable to wonder, if the Jews are here, why are there not Hittites here?<sup>10</sup>

What is the significance of Jewish persistence in dispersion? How does this relate to their covenant relationship to God? Why was this true of the southern kingdom and not the northern? Is this true also of the new covenant community?

8. If Isaiah 40-55 is written by the same author as Isaiah 1-39, then “Isaiah spent the few remaining years of his life in a ministry of comfort designed to help the faithful remnant in the still darker days that were ahead... in the written page they would preserve until a new generation was again ready to listen to the words of God conveyed through him” [Carson]. If this theory of authorship is correct, why didn’t the Lord send a prophet contemporaneous with the community in exile, rather than using one who lived 150 years earlier?



*Fun quotation:* “What do you mean, ‘helped to create’?! I am Cyrus! I am Cyrus!”— President Harry Truman, when introduced at the Jewish Theological Seminary as “the man who helped create the state of Israel” [from “The Land,” Gerald McDermott, *Books & Culture*, 9, 8 (2003)]. Napoleon, who briefly helped reform a latter-day Sanhedrin, was also hailed in his day as Cyrus.

<sup>8</sup> *The Message of Isaiah* (IVP), 177-178.

<sup>9</sup> *For the Love of God*, vol. 2, Jun 7-16.

<sup>10</sup> Catholic novelist Walker Percy, quoted by Gary Anderson in “How to Think About Zionism” (*First Things*, Apr 2005, p. 30).