

Going Home — A Theology of Second Isaiah

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Late in the Babylonian exile, at a time when God's ability and willingness to save were seriously in doubt, a prophet about whose life we know absolutely nothing surveyed the scene and joyfully announced: Israel is going home—in style—to Jerusalem! He could be tender or polemical, forgiving or full of taunts. His audience, dazzled by the pretensions of the nations and their gods and critical of Yahweh's failure to act, was urged by this anonymous prophet to be loyal and prophetic servants of Yahweh. Because his lyrical words were preserved in a collection with Isaiah 1-39, attributed to Isaiah of Jerusalem of the 8th century, and with Isaiah 56-66, authored by his own disciples after the Babylonian exile, he has been named Second Isaiah.

The Prophet's Credentials

The report of Second Isaiah's commission begins with a vision of the heavenly council,² where he hears a voice urging the angels to give comfort to Jerusalem (40:1—2). "Comfort" is more than sympathy or condolence; "comforting Jerusalem" includes bringing her citizens home and rebuilding her ruins (cf. 52:9). A second voice commands the angels to construct a processional highway across the Arabian desert so that Yahweh, like an ancient victorious general, can lead his people home (40:3—5). A third voice calls to the prophet, "Cry!" And Second Isaiah replies, "What shall I cry?" The

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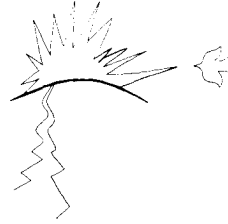
This manuscript was completed during a writing leave made possible by the Association of Theological Schools.

content of his message has been touched upon in verses 3—5 and it will unfold in the next sixteen chapters, but his real question is: "By whose authority do I dare to preach, especially since all people are as fickle and transient as vegetation on a scorching summer day?" (40:6). His angelic interlocutor concedes that grass does wither and flowers do fade, but one thing is sure and it is enough: "The word of our God will stand for ever." (40:8)

With the disappearance of all the symbols that had given support to Israel's faith — the king, the land, the temple, the Mosaic covenant — people in the exile could only cling to God's word, his promise. Even that had been put in some question, as we shall see in the discussion of the Trial Speeches below, but the *verbal* lifeline was central to Second Isaiah's message and references to it bracket the 16 chapters of his work. In the book's epilogue we read the reprise of 40:8:

For as the rain and the snow come
down from heaven,
and return not thither but water the
earth,
making it bring forth and sprout, giving
seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from
my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I
purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which I sent
it. (55:10—11).

Why should he preach? Because of the sure and abiding promise of Yahweh. What did that word promise? A new



Exodus, a procession to Zion, prosperity and fertility in the land (44:1—5), a new creation, and on and on.

God's Credentials

For all human miseries that went along with exile, the most serious problem of all was theological. How could people believe in a God who lost the latest war? Why not worship the gods of Babylon whose armies, after all, were the winners? Second Isaiah deals with these questions in a series of passages classified as Trial Speeches between Yahweh and the nations or their gods.³ In these speeches Yahweh summons the nations and their gods to a trial, and he argues his case in a stereotyped disputation style. The prosecution usually focuses around the question of who raised Cyrus or who created the world, and the answer to these questions is the key to resolving the dispute.

In the Trial Speeches Yahweh replaces the previously accepted proof of a god's divinity — his power to win military victory — with a different kind of proof: the dependable and unremitting continuity between what a real God *says* and what he *does*. This continuity between word and action is tested on the basis of Yahweh's and the gods' record in "the former things" and the "new things."⁴ Sometimes the term "former things" seems to be a specific reference to the power of Gods word in effecting the Exodus from Egypt (43:16—18), but at other times the reference is quite general, including, we believe, the fairly recent events of Jerusalem's destruction in 587.⁵ Yahweh's control of history, therefore,

involves not only his saving actions of Exodus and Conquest, but also the catastrophic judgment of 587, which he had long announced through the prophets. Instead of 587 being a sign of God's weakness, it became an additional piece of evidence for his strength; it showed the truth of Yahweh's prophets. Yahweh had said that exile was coming, and his own people were expert witnesses to the absolute fidelity of that word (43:9—10).

Yahweh's word has been proven reliable in the former things; therefore, Israel could trust it in the new things. "New things" refers primarily to the rise of the Persian Cyrus and the forthcoming new Exodus and festive procession to Jerusalem (43:19—20). By claiming that Cyrus was *Yahweh's* agent, Second Isaiah again showed the impotence of the rival deities.

Who stirred up one from the east

[Cyrus]

whom victory meets at every step?... .

Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning?

I, Yahweh, who am the first and with the last; I am He (41:2 and 4).

Who declared it from the beginning that we might know,

and beforetime, that we might say, "He is right"?

There was none [among the gods] who declared it, none who pro-claimed, none who heard your words.

I first declared it to Zion,

and I give to Jerusalem a herald [Second Isaiah] of good tidings

(41:26—27).

Yahweh's defense is based on his domination of all history, from creation, to the first Exodus, to the exile, to the rise of Cyrus and the impending fall of Babylon, the events that will lead to the joyful re-turn to Zion. Israel (43:10) and even the nations (41:1) are summoned as witnesses to test whose words are really true. The gods wither before Yahweh's intense prosecution:

Tell us what is to come hereafter,
that we may know that you are gods; do
good, or do harm, [do something!] that
we may be dismayed and terri-
fied.

Behold, you are nothing,
and your work is nought;
an abomination is he who chooses you.
(41:23—24, cf. 41:29 and 43:10—11)

It was once felt that Second Isaiah was the first advocate of monotheism in Israel. That opinion needs to be corrected in at least two ways today. First it is now clear — witness the first commandment! — that Mosaic religion embodied a kind of monotheism or at least a radical monolatry that tolerated the *worship* of no other gods, even if at times Israel's religion seems to concede that such gods *exist*. More importantly, Second Isaiah advances monotheism neither as a philosophic category or a dogmatic break-through. Rather, Yahweh's exclusive claim to deity is the crucial theological issue on which hangs the credibility of his word and the hope for the future.

The argument is pounded home in 44:7:

Who is like me? Let him proclaim it, let
him declare and set it forth before me.

Who has announced from of old the
things to come?

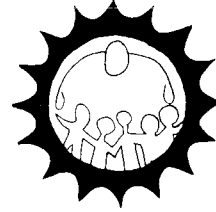
Let them tell us what is yet to be (44:7)

The "him" or the "them," who are asked to bring proofs of their divine ability, can be seen as objects of a taunt in this passage because the context continues with a satirical description of idol worship (44:9—20). Where do idols come from? A man chops down a tree from the forest. With half of it he builds a fire to cook his food and warm his house. The other half he turns into an idol and prays to it: "Deliver me, for thou art my god!" This polemic makes the challenge of 44:7 nothing but a taunt, a biting satire: fake deities are asked to predict the future. With the claims of his divine adversaries proved baseless, Yahweh's own being and his word become the sole basis for hope.

Cyrus the Messiah

A person can read Second Isaiah and get carried away by his triumphant words and soaring poetry. Closer examination, however, reveals that he was a most embattled theologian. As we have seen, Yahweh's claim to control Cyrus was at the core of his own self proof; it was also a most controversial promise.

Cyrus the Persian had achieved early triumphs over his Median rival, and by 546, with the defeat of Lydia, his star was clearly on the rise. We have no way of knowing how many shared Second Isaiah's views — which turned out to be



correct — that Cyrus would be the one to topple the Neo-Babylonian empire. His clearest word about Cyrus is a royal oracle of election in which Yahweh spells out that Cyrus is his anointed one.⁶ Note that the last lines hint that this pagan king, who is God's own elect, will come to recognize who his Elector really is:

Thus says Yahweh to his anointed to
Cyrus,

whose right hand I have grasped,
to subdue nations before him
and ungird the loins of kings,
to open doors before him
that gates may not be closed:

I will go before you and level the
mountains,

I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut asunder the bars of iron,
I will give you the treasures of darkness
and the hoards in secret places,
that you [!] may know that it is I,

Yahweh,

the God of Israel, who call you by your
name. (45:1—3)

Why Cyrus? Why would God use a pagan to bring about his people's deliverance? Could there not be a new *Moses*, a new *David* or a new *Josiah*? Yahweh answers this question with a disputation (45:9—13), another form of speech de-signed to secure his credibility. The promise that Cyrus was God's elect agent was apparently distasteful for many in Israel. When they second guessed Yahweh, he confronted them with sharp, accusatory questions: "Does a lump of clay ask the potter, 'What are you making?' Or does it

offer the carping criticism, 'You forgot the handles on me, your pot?' Does an egg say to his father, 'What are you engendering?' or does a child cry out to his mother, 'What are you giving birth to?' Yahweh's point is clear: "Where do you get the audacity to criticize my plan? I am the creator, I have freely chosen Cyrus as my agent. He will build my city and set my exiles free — that's good news and not bad!" And the clincher comes with an appeal to Yahweh's word: "Thus says Yahweh of hosts." (45:13).

Such disputations form a major part of Second Isaiah's work. In 40:12—31 we have four disputations, drawing largely on references to creation, that make the point that Yahweh is both able and willing to save. The disputation in 44:24—28 seems intended to counter the notion of some people that Yahweh is not god. Take a look at the record, he says: "I am the creator, I make wise foolish and vice versa, I support the words of my prophets by promising to rebuild Jerusalem and by raising Cyrus to build the city and its temple." In 48:1—11 Yahweh shows how his word about the former things refutes those who say, "My idol did these things." In addition, his word, that alone causes the new things, must be kept hid-den until the last minute, lest people say, "Oh, I knew all along that Cyrus would set us free."

The disputation in 43:22—28 presupposes the following complaint: "How could you act this way, Yahweh, by bringing us into exile, since we served you faithfully in the sacrificial system?" Yahweh frankly replies. "You never called on

me, nor did you burden yourselves with offerings, frankincense, and animal sacrifices. You burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your iniquities."

A final disputation in 50:1–3 counters a complaint of the following sort: "Yahweh has forsaken us. He divorced our mother, sold us into slavery to pay his own debts. What's more, he is powerless to save." Yahweh replies, "Show me the divorce decree; bring on the alleged creditors. They don't exist. Your iniquities led to your sale into exile, and your transgressions caused me to divorce your mother. Am I powerless? Look at the record:"

Behold, by my rebuke I dry up the sea,
I make the rivers a desert;
their fish stink for lack of water,
and die of thirst.

I clothe the heavens with blackness, and
make sackcloth their covering (50:2–3).

Second Isaiah expresses his own astonishment: Do you dare to call this God — who creates the world and controls the cosmos — do you dare to call him power-less?

Rival nations and their deities, a pagan Cyrus as the agent of divine salvation, many critical and accusatory comments that had to be disputed by Yahweh him-self — all these were challenges to Yahweh's credibility. One final challenge for Second Isaiah remained: If Israel was in exile, not because the gods are powerful or because Yahweh had failed to act, but because their own sins and iniquities had led them there, was there any hope for

such sinners and covenant breakers?

Abundant Forgiveness

Unlike his predecessors, Second Isaiah needed to spend little time pointing out the peoples' sins though sometimes he did remind them that it was their sins, rather than Yahweh's weakness, that caused the exile. From the very beginning he offered generous and sure promises of forgiveness, that must have allayed much self doubt and self reproach:

Cry to her [Jerusalem]
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the Lord's
hand
double for all her sins. (40:2)

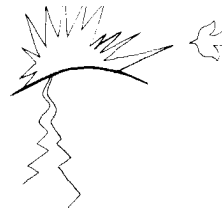
With this word overheard in the heavenly council, Second Isaiah reports that Israel's time of misery and hardship is over and that she has already received double the punishment she had coming.

A second reference to forgiveness appears in a disputation discussed above (43:22–28). Second Isaiah quotes Yahweh's frank refutation of Israel's claim to innocence and his insistence that she has burdened Yahweh with sins and iniquities (43:24), but then the prophet cites this word of God:

I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins (43:25).

Thus, Yahweh's readiness to forgive comes from his own nature (for my own sake), and he displays the kind of divine forgetfulness that is Israel's only hope.

In another speech, called a Proclamation of Salvation⁸ by contemporary bibli-



cal scholars, we find Yahweh refuting Israel's fear that he had forsaken them:

For a brief moment I forsook you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.

In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you. . .

As I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
and will not rebuke you.
For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says Yahweh, who has compassion on you. (54:7—10)

Second Isaiah, therefore, meets the challenge raised by Israel's sinfulness with a message brimming with forgiveness. But he also urges the exiles to prepare themselves through personal repentance for the awesome approach of God (55:6—7). This God, known for creation, for an effective word, for promises to bring Israel home, is consistently proclaimed as the one who will "abundantly pardon." (55:7)

God's Promises

Whereas accusations against Israel play a very minor role in Second Isaiah, promises to the exiles abound. Many of them appear in the Oracles of Salvation, one of the most moving types of speech employed by the prophetic corpus.⁹ These

oracles are characterized by a spirit of joy, by intimate, personal language, and by the assertion that there has already been a change from judgment to salvation. Some forty years ago Joachim Begrich suggested that the Oracles of Salvation were modelled after a priest's response in the temple to individual psalms of supplication, often called Laments. This explains the many references in the Oracles to complaints, and it accounts for the warm and personal language since the priests delivered these oracles directly to individuals in pre-exilic times. In the new context of exile, Second Isaiah appropriated this form to speak words of assurance to the whole people. The fixed structure of these oracles is easily illustrated:

Fear not, for I am with you,
be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious hand (41:10)

Behold all who are incensed against you shall be put to shame and confounded;
those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish. (41:11)

You shall seek those who contend with you,
but you shall not find them;
those who war against you shall be as nothing at all. (41:12) These

verses are preceded by an address in which the elect people are designated as the heirs of Israel, Jacob, and Abraham (41:8). The text, as quoted above, continues with an assurance of salvation, de-

noted by the words "Fear not" and "Be not dismayed." (41:10)¹⁰ Such assurances are usually substantiated by nominal and verbal sentences. "I am with you" and "I am your God" are simple, profound, and moving examples of such nominal substantiations.¹¹ Next come the verbal substantiations: "I will strengthen," "I will help," and "I will up-hold you." What is not clear in the RSV and most other translations is that each of the verbs is in the Perfect (or past) tense in Hebrew. That is, they could just as well be translated as: "I have strengthened," "I have helped," and "I have up-held." Thus, the transition from judgment to salvation is viewed as an accomplished fact. Once God's decision has been made, the deed is as good as done, and the actual deliverance is totally predictable and even anticlimactic. Verses 11 and 12 are usually called the outcome. Here the verbs in Hebrew are Imperfect (=future), and they indicate what will be the consequences of God's action. These verses state that the hostile nations surrounding Israel will vanish into thin air when Yahweh strengthens, helps and up-holds Israel.

Second Isaiah refers to Yahweh as "Redeemer" in another of these Oracles (41:14—16). This word, which is a favorite of the prophet's, presupposes ongoing relationship between the redeemer (Yahweh) and the redeemed (Israel) just as in other contexts a "redeemer" is a kinsman acting to protect the rights of his relative (Lev. 25:25).¹² In this Oracle "Worm Jacob"¹³ is promised that it will become a threshing sledge to mow down the moun-

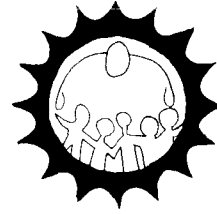
tains and hills (=Edom, Moab, Ammon). A third Oracle (43:1—4) promises Israel constant divine aid as it passes through the obstacles on its journey home from exile (fire, water, rivers, 43:2), and the greatness of God's love is indicated by the immense ransom he is willing to pay:

I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
(43:3)

In other words, Yahweh promises to give Cyrus temporal rule over all of then-known Africa in return for the freedom of the Jews.

The New Exodus

The central content of Yahweh's promise in Second Isaiah is a new exodus from Babylon, a glorious trip across the Arabian desert, and a triumphant procession to Zion. In many ways this new Exodus escalates or heightens themes from the first Exodus. Whereas Yahweh had delivered Israel from Egypt at that time with a mighty hand, Second Isaiah announces that Yahweh will soon bare his martial arm before all nations (52:10). In the first Exodus Yahweh drove back the waters of the Reed Sea; now he will conquer the waters of the Deep as at the time of creation (51:10). The first Exodus was followed by Yahweh's leading his people through the trackless desert; the new Exodus will begin a trip on a desert super-highway constructed by the angels themselves (40:3—4). Yahweh gave food and water in that first wilderness wandering, but now, as part of the new creation that accompanies the new exodus, all the desert will be transformed into a virtual



garden of Eden: the thorn will be re-placed by the cypress, the brier by the myrtle (55:13, cf. 41:18—19). The heightened meaning given to "Exodus" by Second Isaiah can also be seen in the motif of forgiveness, which we have al-ready reviewed, and in the manifestation of God's glory to all the nations, which we shall discuss below.¹⁴

The new exodus contrasts with the old one; it even supercedes it. According to Dt. 16:3 the fugitives from Pharaoh had to celebrate passover in great haste, but Yahweh promises the exiles that they will not go out in haste or in flight, but in festal procession, with God marching before and behind them. (52:12). Israel reacted to the terrors of the first wilderness wandering by murmuring, but the new event that is coming will cause even the mountains and hills to break forth into singing while all the trees of the field will give Israel a standing ovation (55:12, cf. 42:10—13). The old, contractual covenant had once been made with David, but now it will be "democratized," that is, its benefits apply to the whole people (55:3). Second Isaiah at times urges Israel to remember God's former ways so that they may know his faithful and gracious identity (43:9—10 and 46:8—9), but the new exodus so transcends everything old that the prophet can also urge the exiles to give up their nostalgia for past times:

Remember not the former things
[=the first Exodus]
nor consider the things of old.

Behold I am doing a new thing
[=raising Cyrus and starting a new
exodus]

now it springs forth, do you not per-
ceive it? (43:18—19)

Once Second Isaiah envisioned a mes-senger running ahead of the entourage re-turning from exile (52:7), announcing to Zion that God had again become king. God's kingship was connected with the Exodus motif as early as Exodus 15:18, perhaps the oldest passage in the Bible, and Ezekiel quoted Yahweh's promise to be king over his people in a new exodus (20:33). In Ezekiel's time, in the early days of exile Yahweh had to support his intention with a stern oath, apparently designed to confound those of little faith among the exiles.¹⁵ But the kingship of Yahweh in Second Isaiah's new exodus is joyously shouted to the watchmen on Zion's ruined walls. They will be eyewit-nesses of the return of king Yahweh to Zion (52:8).

New Exodus, new and joyous wilder-ness journey, new festal return to Zion — in all these themes we find traces of crea-tion faith, which is used by Second Isaiah as proof of Yahweh's power, as promise of his renewal of dead things like the barren and wild wilderness, and as a pattern for his ongoing deliverance of his people. In a highly allusive passage, Second Isaiah passes imperceptibly from a celebration of Yahweh's creation victories, to his triumphs at the first Exodus, to the new exodus and joyful return to Jerusalem. All these actions — from first to last — are of one type by the one God. Second Isaiah prays:

Wake up, wake up, put on strength, O
arm of Yahweh;
wake up, as in days of old,

primeval generations.
 Weren't you the one who cut Rahab in
 pieces,
 weren't you the one who pierced the
 (primeval) dragon?
 Weren't you the one who dried up the
 sea,
 the waters of the great deep;
 that made the depths of the sea a way
 for the redeemed to pass over?
 And the ransomed of Yahweh shall re-
 turn,
 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.
 (51:9—11)

God and the Nations

Yahweh's and Israel's relationship to the nations is ambivalent and paradoxical. On the one hand, Babylon's fate at the hands of Cyrus is a foregone conclusion. In chapter 47 Second Isaiah records a taunt song informing Dame Babylon that she will be humiliated and disgraced like a prostitute. God had indeed been angry with his people, but Babylon had shown them no mercy, imposed heavy burdens on the aged, and had not considered the purpose of God's judgment (47:6—7). Her gods can offer no support. In fact, instead of supporting their worshipers, they must be carried around by them — such is their impotence (46:1—2). The people pray to a god that cannot save. (45:20).

A number of nations are summoned for judgment in 41:1—7 and are shown to

have no justice. As a result, they will vanish into thin air (41:11—22), Israel will mow them down like a divine thresher (41:15—16), and Cyrus will trample on them as if he were a potter treading down his clay (41:25). The fury of the oppressing nations will disappear when confronted with Yahweh whose credentials were established at creation (51:15—16). The cup of divine wrath, from which Israel had drunk, will be given to Israel's tormentors (51:22). Now they will stagger. Israel's conquests will extend beyond the narrow confines of Palestine (54:3) as God reissues to Israel the command to conquer once given to David (55:4—5).

The paradox and ambivalence of Second Isaiah's attitude toward the nations comes out in a whole series of passages in which he talks about the nations being saved:

He [the servant] will not fail or be
 discouraged
 till he has established justice in the
 earth;
 and the coastlands wait for his law.
 (42:4)

I have given you [the servant] as a
 covenant to the people,
 a light to the nations,
 to open the eyes that are blind,
 to bring out the prisoners from the
 dungeon,
 from the prison those who sit in dark-
 ness. (42:6—7)

Turn to me and be saved,
 all the ends of the earth!
 For I am God, and there is no other.



By myself I have sworn,
from my mouth has gone forth in
righteousness
a word that shall never return:
To me every knee shall bow,
every tongue shall swear." (45:22—23)

It is too light a thing that you should be my
servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the preserved of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the
end of the earth. (49:6, cf. v. 7).

Listen to me, my people,
and give ear to me, my nation;
for a law will go forth from me,
and my justice for a light to the peoples.
(51:4).

Surely he [servant] has borne our [=the
nations'] griefs and carried our
sorrows.. .

He was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made
us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
(53:4—5)

This is not yet a full-fledged interna-
tional mission program. In fact, Second
Isaiah suggests that the nations will still be
slaves (they shall come over in chains,
45:14) even when they worship the God of
Israel. But these passages do show that
Israel was not an exclusive, private club,
open only to people of Hebrew blood.
Throughout its history — from the assembly
at Shechem in Joshua 24 and the

Yahwist's kerygma in Genesis 12:1—3,
down to Jonah's mission to Nineveh —
Israel can be said to be radically *inclusive*.
Second Isaiah calls upon servant Israel
to mediate justice and law (42:4) to the nations
and to be their liberating light (42:6—7, cf.
49:6). Kings and princes will see this light
as Yahweh reapportions the land to Israel
(49:7—8), and all human-kind will witness
God's saving glory or power when he leads
his people through the desert (40:5).
Finally, the servant's sufferings, which at
first seemed to be the judgment of God, are
beheld as a vicarious bearing of the nations'
guilt (53:4-5).

The double fate of the nations is dis-
cussed extensively in 41:1—42:13. Justice
for Israel and the nations means deliverance
of servant Israel and the defeat of the
nations in 41:1—20, but justice for the
nations also means that the servant is to
bring light to them and to save them
(41:21—42:9). The hymn of praise in
42:10—13, which brings this unit of Second
Isaiah to completion, balances the positive
message of 42:5—9 by celebrating again
Yahweh's victory in battle over the nations.
While some scholars hold that Second
Isaiah foresees a free acceptance by the
nations of the cult of Yahweh, others
believe that he only portrays the submission
of the nations to Yahweh's universal
sovereignty.

Israel's Vocation

Throughout Second Isaiah Israel's vo-
cation is portrayed as that of a servant.¹⁶ In
a negative picture of a disobedient servant
(42:18—25) the prophet depicts Israel

as blind, deaf, robbed and plundered. But Israel is called to a positive understanding of its role in a famous series of four passages that are called the Servant Songs. Israel of the future is to be faithful, re-lying only on Yahweh and not putting down those whose faith or life is weak (bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks, 42:1—4). The servant call is pre-natal, like the call of the prophet Jeremiah (49:1, cf. Jer. 1:5) and it has royal dimensions.⁷ Obedient Israel of the future will gladly confess, "My right is with Yahweh" (49:4), whereas disobedient Israel of the past and present complains, "My right is disregarded by my God." (40:27). In a psalm of confidence (50:4—9) the servant expresses his trust in God even when his vocation brings opposition and persecution. With face set like a flint, the servant asserts that he will never be put to shame. Since Yahweh is his helper, who would dare be his adversary?

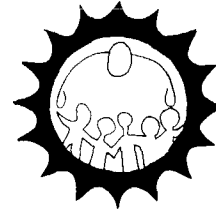
The final servant poem (52:13—53:12) begins with Yahweh's assessment of the servant's ultimate destiny: "My servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high." (52:13). The nations (in 53:1ff.) confess their surprise that the servant triumphed after his apparent disfavor in God's eyes. They come to acknowledge that his suffering was finally on their behalf. The will of Yahweh that led to his suffering was the same will that led to his ultimate vindication: he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied (53:11), and he shall have long life and many children (53:10). Driven to the point of death, the servant will triumph

at last and inherit great spoil. Though counted among sinners, he bears their sins and prays for them (53:12).

In the present arrangement of Isaiah 40—55, the servant is clearly to be identified with Israel. But there is an (intentional?) ambiguity about him. Identified as Israel (49:3), he nevertheless has a mission to Israel. (49:6). The personification is so vivid that the servant often seems to be a (prophetic) individual (see especially the pre-natal call in 49:1 and the references to his death and vindication in chapter 53). Perhaps the reason for this ambivalence is that Second Isaiah himself was Israel in a very real sense. His task was Israel's task; his word was the word of Israel the servant. His ministry was a kind of archetype for the mission of Israel. Second Isaiah cannot be separated from Israel. Rather, he loses his personal identity in the chosen people.

Conclusion

Second Isaiah was called to share with a group of exiles God's good word: Israel is going home. That promissory word met with disbelief and doubt, that had to be overcome by discrediting the claims of the foreign gods, disputing Israel's complaints against Yahweh, and overcoming their slavery to feelings of sin and guilt. With warm and vibrant tones, the prophet assured his audience of God's abiding presence and help. Yahweh was both willing and able to bring about a new exodus and a new settlement in the land. All oppressive nations would be silenced, but paradoxically they would also be drawn within the sovereignty of God, perhaps to



be reluctant worshipers of his glory. But the message of Second Isaiah was not triumphalistic. It was a call to a new vocation, in which Israel, with confident trust in Yahweh, would endure its sufferings with such fortitude that the nations, by watching Israel, would get a whole new picture of God. In this way, and in being the recipient of Yahweh's lavish benefactions, Israel would be a light to the nations.

Going Home. Second Isaiah's relevance did not end when the freed exiles stumbled home after Cyrus defeated Babylon in 539. Not all aspects of the promise were realized and the prophet's disciples wrestled with this gap between vision and reality in chapters 56-66. Their words, customarily called Third Isaiah, led people to confess that what the prophet had said was something yet to be fulfilled. People like Daniel, the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, the ascetics of Qumran, and many writers in the New Testament found words here for which fulfillment could only come eschatologically, at the last times. For Christians today the highway preparations in the wilderness have been "rerun" in the mission of John the Baptizer; in Jesus of Nazareth they see that obedient, trusting, defeated and yet victorious servant, who prayed for the transgressors. God's sons and daughters are still always on the way,¹⁸ always going home. No wonder that the pages of Second Isaiah are among the most well thumbed in the Bible.

Suggestions for Further Study *Commentaries*

- C.R. North. *The Second Isaiah*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964. (especially helpful on philological questions)
- Claus Westermann. *Isaiah 40—66* (Old Testament Library). Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969. (best commentary from a form critical perspective)
- R.N. Whybray. *Isaiah 40—66* (New Century Bible). Greenwood, S.C.: The Attic Press, 1975. (easy to follow and competent commentary on RSV)

Social Studies

- Roy F. Melugin. *The Formation of Isaiah 40—55* (BZAW 141). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976. (studies meaning of the present arrangement of the Second Isaiah collection)
- Anton Schoors. / **Am God Your Saviour**. Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum*, v. 24. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973. (detailed study of the main form critical genres)

Footnotes

¹The hypothesis that Isaiah 40—55 originated with a later poet was first formulated by J.C. Daderlein in 1775 and is now almost universally accepted. It is based on the historical background presupposed in these chapters (6th century Babylon), the language, literary style, and form, and the theological outlook.

²An assembly of angelic beings, sometimes called "sons of God" (Ps. 29:1, Job 1:6 and 2:1), sitting together with Yahweh and making decisions concerning affairs of heaven and earth.

³41:1—7, 21—29; 43:8—13; 44:6—8; 45:18—21. These speeches are extensively described in Melugin, Schoors, and Westermann (see bibliography at end of article).

⁴In addition to the passages cited in this paragraph, see 41:22—23; 42:9; 44:7; 46:9; 48:3—6 and 14—16 for further references to former and newer things.

⁵Odil Hannes Steck, "Deuterotesaja als theologische Denker," *Kerygma and Dogma* 15 (1969) 280—293 and Westermann, pp. 15—16.

⁶This is the only time the word "anointed" (Hebrew: Messiah) is used in all of Second

Isaiah. Cyrus seems to be referred to in 41:2—3,25; 44:24—45:15; 46:9—13; and 48:12—15. Only in 44:28 and 45:1 is he specifically named.

⁷40:12—31; 42:18—25*; 43:22—28*; 44:24—28; 45:9—13; 46:5—11; 48:1—11, 12—15; 50:1—3*; 55:8—13. See the form critical discussions in Melugin, Schoors, and Westermann. The passages with an asterisk are often considered Trial Speeches between Yahweh and Israel, but the ties to the disputations are also close.

⁸Westermann notes that these speeches lack the assurance of Salvation and Substantiation sections of the Oracles of Salvation. He believes they are modelled after replies to collective, rather than individual, psalms of supplication. Examples appear in 41:17—20; 42:14—17; 43:16—21; 45:14—17; 46:12—13; 49:7—12, 14—26; 51:1—3, 6—8, 9—14, 17—23; 54:7—10, 11—17; 55:1—5.

⁹41:8—13, 14—16; 43:1—4, 5—7; 44:1—5; 54:4—6. See the form critical discussions in Melugin, Schoors, and Westermann.

¹⁰Verse 13, which is also part of this Oracle, repeats the essential characteristics of the Form (the assurance of salvation and the nominal and verbal substantiations).

¹¹They are called nominal because the verb "am" is merely implied in Hebrew. Thus, the sentence consists only of nouns.

¹²The priestly writer in Exodus 6:6 gave a deeper dimension to the word redeem that may have been known already by Second Isaiah. He used redeem to describe God's actions for Israel at the first Exodus.

¹³The word worm may reflect the self-deprecating language of the psalms of supplication.

¹⁴These materials on the new Exodus have been drawn from Bernhard W. Anderson, "Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah," *Israel's Prophetic Heritage* (New York: Harper, 1962), 177—195.

¹⁵The new Exodus in Ezekiel leads to a wilderness confrontation with Yahweh in which he functions as judge and shepherd to weed out all the rebels. Interestingly, Yahweh is not pictured as judge in Second Isaiah, and the word shepherd denotes his loving care for the weak (40:11) and not his judicial activities.

¹⁶The identity of the servant is among the most controverted questions in all of biblical studies. Two identifications, however, predominate: the servant is Israel or he is the prophet Second Isaiah himself. I have been persuaded by Melugin, p. 155 (see bibliography), that in the present collection of Second Isaiah's words only the identification as Israel is possible.

¹⁷Kings were commissioned and chosen by God. They were, at times, endowed with the spirit and had a strong interest in justice. Many of these traits would also be appropriate for a prophetic figure.

¹⁸The "way" describes the highway through the desert in 40:3—5; 42:16; 43:19; and 35:8—10, a passage related closely to Second Isaiah. John the Baptist urged people to prepare the "way" of the Lord and early Christians were called those belonging to the "way." (Acts 9:2)

