



Second Isaiah

Isaiah 44:24-48:22: The Agents of God's Redemption

This section of Second Isaiah opens with an oracle identifying God as the speaker. This is a normal pattern for prophetic oracles, but it is rare in Second Isaiah (Isa. 44:23). The use of the traditional opening here gives particular emphasis to the divine origin of the words which follow. In the world of this prophecy, God is talking directly to Israel here.

Two other important theological points are made in the opening verse.

First, God is given the title "Redeemer," a title that occurs frequently elsewhere in Second Isaiah. The title refers originally to family members, who have an obligation to "buy back" property belonging to the family so that it will not be separated from the family. Sometimes this "property" is even a family member. For example, a family member who has been sold into slavery for the non-payment of debt may be redeemed so that the family may remain whole (Lev. 25:47-55). Similarly, family property may be redeemed so that it will not leave the family (Lev. 25:23-34). If a member of the family is injured or killed by an outsider, a family redeemer may take vengeance on the perpetrator and "redeem" or pay back the harm done to the family (Num. 35:31-34).

The implication of the title "Redeemer" in this context is that Israel is part of God's family, and God therefore recognizes an obligation to redeem family members. Exactly how God will do this is unclear. Nevertheless, this is an extraordinary claim, and it is very different from the idea that Israel's suffering in exile brings about its own redemption. Israel has always been part of God's family and was not taken into the family at some point late in the nation's history. Israel became family by virtue of God's creation of the nation at its birth. The theological message of this statement is clear. Israel has been in God's family from the beginning, and neither the behavior and events leading up to the exile, nor the exile itself did anything to change that fact. Israel remains part of God's family, and God now recognizes an obligation to redeem members of the family.

The second important theological point here has to do with God's ability to redeem God's people. God has the power to redeem Israel because God is the creator of the entire cosmos and is therefore powerful enough to bring Israel back from captivity in Babylon. This sort of creation language is common throughout Second Isaiah and underlines the notions of God's power that were already present in First Isaiah's call vision in Isaiah 6. As for God's power over

history, the stories in First Isaiah of Ahaz and Hezekiah both feature the prophet's firm conviction that God stands over history and moves history according to God's design.

Isa. 44:25-28 addresses several issues connected with Israel's redemption.

God first challenges the truthfulness of other prophets, diviners, and the wise, who deliver messages that are different from the one that Second Isaiah is delivering. The word of God's servant, the prophet Isaiah, is confirmed, and God also assures the fulfillment of the words of the divine messengers, perhaps the people addressed in Isa. 40:1 (Isa. 44:25-26). These words would have been aimed at boosting the confidence of exiles in Babylon, newly-but-tentatively hopeful about their/God's future.

Second, God repeats the promise that Second Isaiah has been emphasizing, the promise that God will cause Jerusalem to be reinhabited and Judah's cities to be rebuilt (Isa. 44:26; see Isa. 40:1-11). Given the horrors of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, these words may have been incredible to the exiles.

Third, God designates the Persian king, Cyrus, as God's shepherd, a title traditionally given to legitimate kings, and Cyrus is designated God's agent, who will rebuild Jerusalem and its temple. Again, here we see emphasis on God's orchestration of history, which would have been a comfort to these Israelites, who must have been tempted to feel like pawns of other kings.

The direct commissioning of Cyrus takes place in Isa. 45:1-8. God speaks directly to the king and promises divine aid to accomplish his intentions. By grasping the king's hand, God legitimates him and gives him the power to subdue nations and take over kingdoms. Just as God will prepare the way for Israel to return from exile (Isa. 40:3-4), so here God prepares the way for Cyrus and gives him the spoil of nations, a sign that God supports the Persian's efforts, even though Cyrus does not know Israel's God. All of this is done for the sake of God's servant Jacob/Israel, God's chosen. Israel's God is able to do this because this God is the only God in the cosmos (cf. Isaiah 6). Second Isaiah is an absolute monotheist. There are no other gods in the cosmos except Israel's God, who alone has the power to shape events in the world. Israel's God controls all things that happen: "I am the Lord and there is not another, the one who makes light and creates darkness, the one who makes good/well-being and creates evil" (Isa. 45:6-7 [my translation]). Of all of God's servants mentioned in Second Isaiah, this is the most extraordinary one. After Isaiah 40, the prophet says nothing about the restoration of the Davidic monarchy in Israel. Rather political power is to be given to Cyrus, who is designated as God's anointed one, God's messiah (Isa. 45:1). Just as God used the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, as a tool to punish Israel (Isaiah 10), so now God designates Cyrus as the agent of Israel's restoration to the land. The promise of the restoration of a Davidic ruler in Isaiah 11 seems to have been forgotten, and the promise of a future just king in Isa. 9:1-7 may now be understood to refer to Cyrus.

The themes that are highlighted in Isaiah 44:24-45:8 are repeated for emphasis in chs. 45:9-48:22. God's plan will be worked out, even though people question its wisdom, and in particular God resists the idea that the divine will cannot be done through Cyrus, whose special status is reaffirmed (Isa. 45:9-17). God has made the divine plan known through the prophet (Isa. 45:18-19), and there are no other divine powers in the cosmos to thwart God's will (Isa. 45:20-46:2).

God's care for Israel in the past will continue in the future, for God has planned future events from the beginning, and the divine plan will inevitably be fulfilled (Isa. 46:3-13). Israel's captor, Babylon will fall (Isa. 47:1-15), and Israel has long ago been promised a glorious future. The words of promise spoken by First Isaiah are now to come to pass, and Israel's redemption is at hand (Isa. 48:1-22).

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