

**The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
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Second Isaiah

**V: Isaiah 41:1–44:23
God's Coming Vindication and Deliverance**

Building on chapter 40's introduction, Second Isaiah announces the fulfillment of God's goals for Israel and the world. The Judean exiles in Babylonia have complained that God is disregarding their misery in captivity (Isa 40:27). Now God responds by summoning the nations to court, challenging the no-gods of earth, and presenting a chosen Servant who will start to set things right. Israel is suffering exile for good reason, but the new exodus that God is planning will entail a new creation. All the pain of Israel's history of sin will be soon forgotten. Transformed, the people will become an image of divine splendor on earth.

God's Otherness and God's Commitment: Isaiah 41:1-20

Second Isaiah's poetry transports us to a law court, where God is the prosecutor and the nations the defendants. The authors have good reasons for the legal language: they want to get people thinking, weighing the evidence. They insist that if one looks around and uses one's brain, one will see who is really God. Verse 4 makes the answer plain: "It is I, the LORD, the First and the Last. I alone am he" (NLT).

In vv. 1-7, the Lord calls for the attention of earth's far-flung peoples. They should come forth and argue out who is in control of the world. "Let us together draw near for judgment" (v. 1). Given the great international events of the times, the answer should be apparent. The static folly of business-as-usual is looking increasingly bankrupt.

Something enormous is off and running, redirecting history. Happening terribly fast, it is yanking history back on a course of God's choosing. Shaken, earth's idolaters huddle together. They nail down their idols firmly to their bases, lest the rising tempest topple them. Cyrus the Great of Persia (558-529 B.C.E.) is upending geopolitics, introducing the world to the spirit of reverence, and liberating God's exiles, still captive in Babylonia. Better get the idols

battered down! Things are going to be demoralizing enough without the embarrassment of the idols smashing.

Verses 8-16 establish the very different position of the exiles from earth's trembling pagans. Although the transcendent God of otherness cannot be accessed through idols, God has committed to Israel on God's own initiative! Twice the poem declares Israel, the offspring of Abraham, to be God's *servant* (vv. 8, 9). They are already aligned with God, ensconced in God's sure work in history. Their imperative is thrice repeated and crystal clear: "Do not fear" (vv. 10, 13, 14).

Israel's security is grounded in an ongoing relationship with God, stretching far back in time. As the "offspring of Abraham" (v. 8), the exiles are heirs to specific, eternal promises of God. As an "everlasting covenant," God promised Abraham "to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (Gen 17:7). This perpetual, unilateral commitment of God to God's people lies at the heart of Second Isaiah's theology. In calling Abraham "my friend" in v. 8, God uses a Hebrew idiom identifying him as an eternal covenant partner (cf. 2 Chr 20:7). Verse 10 affirms the promise, repeating the oath of Genesis 17:7 that "I am your God."

The reference to Israel as a "worm" and an "insect" in v. 14 is at first unsettling. How can God permit such dehumanizing? The exiles join the psalmist in crying, "I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people" (Ps 22:6). A powerful paradox, central to Second Isaiah's theology, emerges here. Such lowliness is a portal to amazing power. This "worm" is about to become a "threshing sledge, sharp, new and having teeth" (Isa 41:15).

For centuries, interpreters have noted how topsy-turvy is the world of Second Isaiah's thinking compared to what most of us encounter in our daily routines. Impressed by the radicalness of Second Isaiah, the fifth-century patristic commentator, Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus, described its claims as completely new and unexpected. Encountering these claims, he writes, is like entering a bizarre hospital where the physicians undergo the operations and their patients obtain the healing!

Verses 17-20 establish the security of God's people with alternative imagery: a vision of miraculous fecundity. Fecundity is the hallmark of the new world to which the exiles will be heading after their exodus from Babylonia.

Rivers, fountains, and pools of water appear in a parched and barren landscape (v. 18). The cedar, the cypress, and the pine spring up in the wilderness (v. 19). It is hard not to be reverent in the presence of such stately and majestic trees, which arise so inexplicably in what was previously a wasteland. Their towering grandeur will unite God's people in shared feelings of humility and finitude, reinforcing communal bonds of mutuality and caring.

Power through Vulnerability: Isaiah 41:21–42:17

Paralleling the initial poem of this section, vv. 21-29 challenge the idol-worshipping heathen to argue things out in court. The God's of pagan mythology are moored within the flux of creation, ensconced in nature's immanent forces. They know nothing of the towering, transcendent perspective of the true God, awesome, majestic, and other. They can neither explain what the past means nor accurately plot the course of the future. In fact, there is little if anything they can do. They are a "delusion" (v. 29). In contrast, the Holy One has declared beforehand the march of Cyrus the Great.

Where exactly within the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, you might ask, do we find God's accurate prediction of the rise of Cyrus of Persia? The answer might surprise you. The prediction is found right here in v. 25 of Isaiah chapter 41!

The authors of Second Isaiah may be writing during the Babylonian exile, 150 years after the ministry of the eighth-century Isaiah. Their intention, however, is to furnish us with the fullest possible picture of his prophecy. Thus, the words of Second Isaiah come out of the mouth of the same dramatic persona of Isaiah who speaks throughout the book's 66 chapters. Isaiah 1:1 introduces the whole scroll as "the vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." That includes Isaiah 41:25.

With our next poem, Isaiah 42:1-9, we come to something special: the first "Servant Song" of Second Isaiah. These "Songs" are unique prophetic poems that sketch out the life-style and story of an ideal figure, the Servant of the Lord. The poems have perplexed and engrossed readers for centuries. They speak of an individual with unique traits and a personal story, yet they do not tell us where, when, or how in the world to find her or him. Their language creates a strange new way of seeing things, and outlines a set of values, perceptions, and interactions foreign to many of us. In fact, it paints a portrait

of a new form of life, where much is upside down. I suggest that we view the Servant as an ideal figure—a spiritual meditation on servanthood. The description of the figure expands on Isaiah’s theme of the powerful potential of human frailty, which we encounter throughout Second Isaiah.

A sevenfold use of the word “not” strikes the reader of the poem, especially since in biblical symbolism *seven* signifies completion and perfection. Whoever the protagonist of this poem may be, clearly what he does *not* do is as important as what he does. The power of God’s Servant is power to refrain from self-assertion on the one hand, and power to resist the sway of external forces on the other. He is completely—even perfectly—*unpretentious* and *non-violent*. Simple, patient, and gentle, he is at the same time *not* stoppable. Completely assured and calmly resolute, he will never stop God’s work, or be stopped, until his mission is complete.

Verse 2 grapples with how God’s Servant gets people’s attention. Since time’s dawn, humans have tried to influence others through tirades, tantrums, grand standing, and threats of hell fire. History’s judgment is usually to smirk, for such public displays release plenty of energy but look foolish, or infantile, in retrospect. The ancient Greek comedy, *The Wasps*, by Aristophanes pokes fun at a judge who runs his courtroom as if he is Zeus, the thunder god: “‘O Lord! O Zeus!’ say the passers-by, ‘How thunders the court within!’”

Explosive theatrics often seem to get results, given their power to stimulate the reptilian core of the human brain. They do not win an enviable legacy, however. The example of a lifestyle of integrity is far more impressive in the long run, a lifestyle like that of Abraham and Sarah, Mahatma Gandhi, or Martin Luther King.

Verse 3 has even stronger poetic art than v. 2. Its imaginative negative understatements in parallel clauses portray the Servant’s quiet methods and great caution. He acts unobtrusively and empathetically, helping those struggling to find their way in the world, those in need. The Hebrew word for “reed” signals an easily bent water-plant that cannot stand up to much force. A flame that is “dim”—the Hebrew reveals—is one that is faint and barely noticeable.

The emphasis in each parallel clause is on the object of the Servant’s ministry, not on the Servant himself. The objects of his care come first in each verset, illustrating through the art of words how in his way of living, others

literally get priority. The self purposefully takes a back seat—a rear place in each verse segment. Subsequent Servant Songs in Second Isaiah will show just how far the Servant is willing to go in his commitment to self-sacrifice. Suffice it for now to note that the drama the Servant enacts has long sent shivers up readers’ spines.

The lifestyle at issue in our poem wields a unique kind of power, entirely more effective than coercion. No wonder it is the Servant’s life-manner of choice in pursuing justice on earth. What exactly is this power? It is a kind of power today’s world does not know well. It is the power of patience and sacrifice, which postpones immediate gratification in favor of a greater, long-term good. It is the power of non-violent resistance, which defeats its enemies by changing their hearts rather than hardening them. And it is the power of human community, which may so protect and nurture the lives of all its members—even the weakest—that they selflessly promote its cause, even when the reward is merely preserving fellowship.

The Servant does his work “faithfully” (v. 3c), that is, as the Hebrew says, with “firm commitment” despite the odds. He works to set earth right *steadily and firmly*, even though success looks like a long shot given such a cautious, caring program. A modern Christian covenant from Zimbabwe, Africa, captures the same spirit of faith and discipleship: “I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded, or delayed.... I will go on until Christ comes, and work until Christ stops me. I am a disciple of Jesus.”

The final poetic line in v. 4 plays upon the language of v. 3, using identical Hebrew verbal roots. Although the Servant is protective of other’s *dim* lights, he refuses to allow his own light to burn *dim* (“grow faint”). Although caring about those around him who are *bruised* reeds, he lets no one *bruise* (“crush”) him until his work for God is finished. The well-crafted poetic wordplays of our text drive home the theological paradox. Allowing one’s energy and concern to move out beyond the boundaries of self—out in the direction of others—does not make one weak. It does not lower one’s worth and power. In God’s mysterious grace, it affirms and strengthens them.

The “coastlands” wait for the Servant’s “teaching,” according to the climactic end of our poem in v. 4. The word “teaching” here is literally *torah*, that is, God-revealed instruction. Such *torah* points or shows God’s true way of life, the way to go if one wants to live life abundantly. How astonishing that the

Servant possesses such a torah, and more astonishing still that earth's *coastlands* are interested in the fact. In Hebrew idiom, the *coastlands* are the foreign, distant lands beyond the seas. They are earth's far-flung corners. The poetry presents this extreme image as a way of pointing to everyone, that is, all peoples of the earth, everyone imaginable.

Contrary to what one often hears, God's ways in the Old Testament are not merely for the benefit of one tiny cross-section of humanity. God's plans and God's purposes extend to the ends of the earth, whose people God hopes to grant new lives and indeed, in God's time, new creation.

Following the Song, vv. 10-17 round off chapter 42 with a hymn of praise and a startling image of God, who appears gasping and panting like a woman in childbirth. The rhetorical strategy at work here is marvelous! The exiles had deep suspicions that God is powerless. After all, God had been silent for decades. But what if God is "like a woman in labor"? If God is at the point of birthing new life, then a lot has been going on for months without it being apparent to the people.

God's helplessness has actually been a means of doing something quite powerful indeed. A woman's helplessness and frailty during labor is nothing less than power, the power to bring about new life—something a "powerful" male cannot do! This theological theme that vulnerability and frailty is a source of stupendous power is truly central in Second Isaiah.

God's "pain" is the suffering to which a stance of vulnerability exposes one. When one puts aside the ego-self, drops one's guard on behalf of something greater than the self, then one is almost guaranteed to be hurt. In Second Isaiah God is seen to put aside God's right to justice, to put aside what is fair and deserved. Others should be doing their part, but God ends up having to pull everyone else's weight for them (cf. Isa 41:28; 59:16; 63:5). When you embrace other-centeredness, you often get "burned," you take the "fall," you open yourself up to misunderstanding and deep rejection precisely at a point where you have exposed your soft flesh. I believe that this is the nature of the pain that God is feeling here in Isaiah 42.

Bring Out the Blind and the Deaf: Isaiah 42:18–43:21

Verses 18-25 of chapter 42 bite the bullet and explain why God must birth a new creation in the first place. Why must God do a new thing in Cyrus?

Why must God call forth a unique new Servant? After all, the exiles themselves, the extant posterity of Abraham, should be fulfilling the role of servant of the Lord. The answer is that God's people have thus far failed in the role of servant. God has exiled them to Babylonia for good reason, which has nothing to do with divine ignorance or apathy (cf. Isa 40:27; Lam 5:20). The focal problem has been a spiritual imperception and obtuseness, which even now show no signs of improving.

The following poem, Isaiah 43:1-7, assures the people that although their exile was deserved, the time of redemption and regathering is at hand. They remain obtuse, but, amazingly, God's grace will triumph anyway. The gathering of the dispersed remnant has been prophesied back in Isaiah 11:12-16, and that Word stands. Israel is God's special people, destined to become an *imago Dei* that will channel the splendor of the high and lofty one to earth.

Next, the poetry of vv. 8-13 renews the metaphor of earth's nations on trial, but this time God's people are present offering hope. Ensconced in God's ongoing implementation of salvation, Israel can attest to the truth of God's work ("the former things," v. 9). The chosen people stand at the center of this poem as God's *witnesses* to the entire globe. Their destiny is to make the Holy One known universally on earth.

Verses 14-21 conclude this section of Isaiah. The power of Babylonia will indeed be broken, and Israel shall certainly go free in a new exodus. The old exodus from Egypt through "a path in the mighty waters" (v. 16) was monumental, but the new exodus that is coming will so far transcend it as to render it hardly worth recalling (v. 18)! Second Isaiah builds its theology of comfort on God's eternal promises to the ancestors, God's commitments to Abraham and to Sarah long before the sojourn in Egypt. God is finally fulfilling these commitments in radical acts of new creation. Israel's sorry history of unfaith and murmuring from the time of the Egyptian sojourn is no longer to impinge on its destiny.

A New Israel: Isaiah 43:22–44:23

Isaiah 43:22-28 begins a new subsection, which picks up earlier themes and pushes them farther. The unit begins with continued trial speech, in which God reiterates Israel's culpability in its exile. The people's problem has not been God's disregard of them, but their lack of respect for God's radical otherness. They did not even do the minimum of offering sufficient sacrifices

to ritually cleanse the temple. In the priestly theology of reverence borne by the Second Isaiah community, God experiences Israel's sin as a tainting, repelling force. It makes continued contact with the people burdensome. Yet, there is great hope, for God is "He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake" (v. 25).

Reiterating the theme of bountiful new life, Isaiah 44:1-5 promises deliverance to God's sin-tainted people. A sprouting, blossoming new creation is coming. An image of effortless fertility appeared already in Isaiah 41:17-20 (cf. Isa 43:19-20), but here the spiritual dimensions are far more obvious. Alongside ecological transformation comes a pouring out of God's spirit on descendents, a blessing on offspring (v. 3).

This *offspring* (v. 3) is none other than the "offspring of Abraham," already mentioned in Isaiah 41:8-16. The Hebrew wording of v. 3 again emphasizes how the specific commitments of Genesis 17 are finally reaching fulfillment. A new emphasis on universalism is present, however. New followers of God are sprouting up like grass on a prairie—uncultivated, uncontrolled. As God will later declare, "To me *every* knee shall bow, *every* tongue shall swear" (Isa 45:22-23).

Verses 6-23 round off this division of Isaiah by reiterating God's otherness, God's singular incomparability. From the beginning, the role of God's people, Israel, has been to bear witness to this otherness, to the Lord's transcendent perspective and work. Verses 9-20 are a long, prose polemic against idols, greatly extending the satirical critique we glimpsed in Isaiah 41:5-7. The short poem in vv. 21-23 issues a concluding call for the people to return to God. Why should they not, for they already stand redeemed? In overpowering transcendence, God has disposed of their transgressions "like a cloud," their sins "like mist." Through God's mighty redemption, the divine splendor shall manifest itself on earth in Israel. All creation should belt out its praise.

4. This section of Second Isaiah contains some biting satire and taunts aimed against idolatry. Should modern people view this as objectionable, or is it an appropriate spirituality? Is satire a sign of “irreverence,” or can we somehow envision it as a mark of reverence (defined as awe before the transcendent otherness of God)?

For Further Study

Walter Brueggemann, “Second Isaiah: An Evangelical Re-reading of Communal Experience,” in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, ed. by Christopher R. Seitz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 71-90.