

ISAIAH'S SERVANT SONGS

BACKGROUND: The Book of Isaiah may well be the greatest challenge that modern readers will find in the biblical corpus to their notions of what constitutes a book. Isaiah, son of Amoz, a Jerusalemite, began his career as a prophet in the 730's B.C.E. He was still active and clearly regarded as an authoritative figure when the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. Like the other biblical prophets, he claimed that his pronouncements came to him on the direct authority of God. These included vehement castigations of social and economic injustices in Judahite society and of a corrupt and drunken ruling class, as well as the excoriation of paganizing practices. Isaiah also took political positions, objecting in particular to policies that favored an alliance with Egypt against Assyria.

Chapters 1-39 in the book that has come down to us incorporate the prophecies of Isaiah but also include much disparate material that is clearly later, some of it reflecting the imminent or actual fall of the Babylonian empire to the Persians in 539 B.C.E. Nothing from chapter 40 to the end of the book is the work of Isaiah, son of Amoz. The strong scholarly consensus is that chapters 40-55 were composed by a prophet of the Babylonian exile, whose name is beyond recovery, prophesying a triumphant return of the exiles to Zion through the agency of the Persian emperor Cyrus, who was poised to overwhelm the Babylonians. Even in this unit, however, it is far from clear that all the prophecies are from the same person. The so-called Second Isaiah is followed by a Third Isaiah in what is now the last eleven chapters. It is the predicament of the community in the Persian province of Judah, after the rebuilding of the Temple, so the historical setting would have to be the fifth century B.C.E., although probably before the decisive mission of Ezra and Nehemiah in the middle of that century. Especially in the texts grouped together as Third Isaiah, scholars have detected the presence of several different writers rather than a single prophet.

So, the Book of Isaiah breaks down into three major parts:

1. **First Isaiah:** *chapters 1-39* from the 8th century B.C.E.
2. **Second Isaiah:** *chapters 40-55 (34-35)* from 6th century B.C.E.
3. **Third Isaiah:** *chapters 56-66* from the 5th century B.C.E.

SUMMARY: Isaiah 1-39 (8th century B.C.E.)

For Isaiah, the rise of Assyria presented a pressing religious question, central to his recorded prophecies: To what extent should the Judeans attempt to confront their enemies using the usual military and diplomatic means (i.e., entering into alliances with other nations), and to what extent should the Judeans stay free of alliances and rely solely on God to protect them? Isaiah strongly preferred the latter option. A second major trend in Isaiah's day was the growth of large estates owned by aristocrats and the consequent impoverishment of the peasantry. Isaiah, like his contemporaries Micah and Amos, spoke out strongly against the accumulation of great wealth and the haughtiness of the rich.

Several main themes emerge from Isaiah's prophecies. Isaiah believed that Jerusalem, the holy city, would never fall to the Judah's enemies. He emphasized social and economic justice. He referred repeatedly to the remnant of Israel, who would survive an enormous catastrophe that God would send to punish the nation for its lack of faith and hypocrisy. This remnant would serve as the kernel from which a purified Israel would be renewed. He anticipated the dawn of a new era in which all nations would recognize the one true God. Each nation would be satisfied with its own land and would not covet other lands. Consequently empires—and warfare—would exist no more. During this new era the Judean king, a descendant of David, would rule all Israel in perfect justice. Common to all these ideas is Isaiah's stress that only God can be great; all other haughty things would be reduced to their proper place at the end of days. All sin, for Isaiah, stems from the failure to recognize that God alone can be exalted.

Isaiah 40-66 Second and Third Isaiah (6th and 5th Centuries B.C.E.)

Chapters 34-35 and 40-66 are first and foremost persuasive in character. Addressed to a despondent exilic and postexilic audience who have experienced a catastrophe or live in its aftermath, they attempt to convince the Judeans that the God of Israel is still powerful and still loyal to the people Israel. Second Isaiah proclaims in an especially insistent manner that only one God exists; this deity alone created the world and brings redemption. The author refers to God using not only masculine metaphors but feminine ones as well. Second Isaiah looks forward to the dawn of a new era, but no mention is made of the expectation that a descendent of King David will reign as king in the rebuilt Jerusalem. Rather, God alone will rule over all creation in that day. Thus, Second Isaiah believes in a messianic era, but not in a personal Messiah. Initially, Second Isaiah predicted

that the return to Zion at the time of the Persian King Cyrus would usher in the renewal of a Judean commonwealth, the era of peace among all nations, and the end of paganism the world over. In fact, the restoration did not have these far-reaching effects: Judah became not an independent kingdom directly ruled by God but the poor and insignificant Persian province of Judah; relatively few exiles availed themselves of the opportunity to return to Zion; and the world as a whole remained unchanged. Still, Second Isaiah continued to predict in chapters 49 and following that a larger-scale ingathering of exiles would occur and that the new world order would eventually materialize.

In *Third Isaiah chapters 56-66*, further prophecies concerning the coming of a new age are expressed with a greater sense of frustration at the failure of the earlier prophecies to materialize but with enduring hope in the older predictions (chs. 60-62), and with a notable emphasis on the distinction between faithful Judeans and impious or corrupt ones.

FOUR SERVANT SONGS OF SECOND ISAIAH

Four Servant Songs are found in Second Isaiah:

1. Isaiah 42:1-9
2. Isaiah 49:1-13
3. Isaiah 50:4-11
4. Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Great discussion and debate have emerged as to the role and purpose of these servant songs. Who is the “servant”? What role does the “servant” play in the life of Israel? Why does the “servant” appear where he does? As we consider these passages there have been several suggestions by scholars: Israel (the nation), Cyrus, the prophet, Messiah, “a kingdom of Priests,” a deliverer who redeems not only Israel but also the world from bondage to sin, Jeremiah Consider all the possibilities. Certainly over the centuries the most famous servant song, Isaiah 52:13-53:12, has been co-opted by Christianity and G.F. Handel but Jewish scholars would refute this claim. So, have a go at it. Who, what and where does the “servant” fit in?

I. FIRST SERVANT SONG: ISAIAH 42:1-9

The identification of the servant in these verses and in other related chapters is hotly debated. Possibilities include Cyrus (according to Saadia Gaon), the prophet himself (so Ibn Ezra), the Messiah, and the Israelite nation as a whole. The term “servant” in most other passages in chapters 40-66 clearly refers to the nation Israel or to the faithful within Israel, and that is the most likely explanation here as well. This passage borrows vocabulary and ideas from both chapter 11 and Jeremiah 31:31-36. Like those passages, this text looks forward to the ideal world of the future, in which justice will reign and the covenant between Israel and God will be observed perfectly. The servant in this passage is parallel to, though not identical with, the ideal Davidic king described in chapter 11; promises made to the king there are transferred to the whole nation here, since the future ideal Davidic king has no place in Second Isaiah.

vv. 1-4: God introduces the servant whose gentle nature is emphasized. In these lines God addresses the nations of the world while pointing to the servant, the nation of Israel.

v. 1 *“This” or “Here is”* = The term deliberately contrasts God’s servant with the pagan gods and their worshippers introduced with the same term in the previous verse.

v. 4 *Coastlands:* Even nations far away will know God as a result of God’s treatment of Israel. This idea is further developed in v. 6 *His teaching, or “his law.”*

vv. 5-7 God addresses the servant directly and describes the reason that the servant has been chosen.

v. 6 *Created or “guarded.”* A covenant people, i.e., a nation that continues to exist by virtue of the covenant God formed with their ancestors long ago. In spite of their sins and in spite of the exile, the people of Israel are assured of restoration because of the covenant. A light to the nations: The nations of the world will witness God’s faithfulness to the covenant when Israel is redeemed. Consequently, the people will be the tool through

which God becomes known to all nations as mighty, just, and reliable. In contrast to many modern uses of this passage, the Israelites here are a light to the nations by virtue of what happens to them, not because of what they do.

v. 7: *Opening. . . . Rescuing:* The subject of the verbs may be either the people or God.

vv. 8-9: God's guarantee to the servant. The servant is guaranteed salvation because his sponsor is the Creator. **v. 9** *Things once predicted,* lit. "the former things," Cf. 41.4

II. SECOND SERVANT SONG: ISAIAH 49:1-13

This section begins a new portion of Second Isaiah in which the people are comforted and assured that Zion's full restoration is not far off.

vv. 1-13: The servant of the Lord and universal recognition of God. The motif of God's servant or servants appeared briefly in chapters 40-48 (42:1-9).

vv. 1-6: The servant speaks to the nations of the world as well as the Israelites. The identity of the servant has generated much debate. Most rabbinic commentators and some modern scholars argue that Second Isaiah speaks here in the first person and that these verses describe the prophet's own mission. Others argue that the whole nation Israel is the servant, and some suggest that an ideal Israel or a faithful subset of the nation is the servant.

v. 5: To bring: The subject of the Hebrew verb may be either God or the servant.

vv. 7-13: The servant announces that all the world will recognize the one God when the whole Israelite nation returns to its land. At this early stage of Cyrus's reign, only a few Judean exiles took the opportunity to return to Zion. (See Ezra chapters 1-3).

v. 12 *Sinim*: Aswan, in southern Egypt, where a colony of Israelite soldiers lives during the Persian period and before.

III. THIRD SERVANT SONG: ISAIAH 50:4-11

vv. 4-11: The mission of the prophet and of the nation. As in 49:1-6, Second Isaiah speaks in the first person. By doing so the prophet sets a model that the nation as a whole should follow, since the whole nation has a prophetic role to the world at large.

vv. 4-5: The prophet is a disciple of older prophets, constantly borrowing their words and noting how their predictions proved true.

vv. 6-9: Second Isaiah, like all Judeans, suffered in the exile, but the prophet knows the punishment meted out to the exiles was just, accepts it, and awaits the vindication that surely follows.

vv. 10-11: Israel's response: Some of Second Isaiah's listeners will accept both divine punishment and divine reward, but others will continue to reject God's word, to their own detriment.

IV. FOURTH SERVANT SONG: ISAIAH 52:13-53:12

52:13-53:12: The servant. One of the most difficult and contested passages in the Bible, these fifteen verses have attracted an enormous amount of attention from ancient, medieval, and modern scholars. In particular, the identity of the servant is vigorously debated. Although the servant is spoken of as an individual, the reference may well be to the collective nation (or the remnant). Thus, many argue that the servant symbolizes the entire Jewish people. The passage, then, describes the nation's unjust tribulations at the hands of the Babylonians (and later oppressors) as well as the nation's salvific role for the world at large. Others maintain that the passage describes a pious minority within the Jewish people; this minority suffers as a result of the sins committed by the nation at large. (Bolstering these interpretations is the fact the term "servant" in Second Isaiah generally refers to the nation as a whole or an idealized representation of the nation.) Other scholars argue that the

servant in this passage is a specific individual (cf. 50:4-11). Targum and various midrashim identify the servant as the Messiah, but this suggestion is unlikely, since nowhere else does Second Isaiah refer to the Messiah, and the absence of a belief in an individual Messiah is one of the hallmarks of Second Isaiah's outlook (in contrast to First Isaiah). Because of marked similarities between the language describing the servant and Jeremiah's descriptions of himself (see Jer. 10:18-24; 11:19), Saadia Gaon argued that the text refers to Jeremiah, while the Talmud (b. Sot. 14a) records the opinion that it describes Moses. Both opinions have been echoed by modern scholars. On the other hand, equally impressive parallels between the servant and First Isaiah can be observed (chapter 6). Furthermore, many passages in Second Isaiah view the prophet Jeremiah as a model for the nation as a whole without equating the nation and that prophet. Christians have argued that this passage in fact predicts the coming of Jesus. Medieval rabbinic commentators devoted considerable attention to refuting this interpretation. The passage is deeply allusive, drawing on the texts from Jeremiah and Isaiah noted above and also on Isaiah 1:5-6; 2:12-14; 11:1-10; Psalm 91:15-16.

52:12-15: God's first speech. God describes the servant, who will ultimately, and surprisingly, achieve great things.

53:1-11a: The surprised observers' speech. The identity of the speakers who express shock at the career of the servant is unclear. Are they the kings and nations of the world? If so, then the servant is probably the nation Israel, and the nations are stunned that such an insignificant and lowly group turns out to have been so important to the divine plan. (Cf. Deut. 7:7) Alternatively, the speakers may be the Judeans themselves, in which case the servant is either a pious minority (the ideal Israel, in contrast to the mass of Judeans whose faith and behavior miss the mark God set for them) or some individual within the Israelite community.

vv. 4-6: Either the servant suffered on behalf of the speakers (i.e., the guilty were not punished at all), or he suffered along with the guilty, even though he himself did not share in the guilt of his fellow Israelites. The former idea (i.e., the notion of vicarious suffering)

would be unusual for the Bible; the latter idea (the idea of corporate guilt) is not.

vv. 8-9: *“Cut off from the land of the living . . . grave.”* Scholars debate whether these lines describe the literal death of the servant or the severe straits he was in. Exaggerated descriptions of one’s plight as equivalent to death are common in ancient Near Eastern literature, including the Bible.

vv. 10b-11a: The servant is vindicated. Either he is saved from a fate like death, or he is actually described as being resurrected. In the latter case, his resurrection is probably a metaphor for the renewal of the nation at the end of the exile. Similarly, in Ezekiel, chapter 37, Israel in exile is described as dead; the nation is brought back to life when the exile ends.

11b-12: God’s concluding speech. God describes the vindication of the servant, echoing and confirming the themes of the spectators’ speech.