

SECOND ISAIAH – Isaiah 40-55

In the thirty-five years from 550-515 BC that are addressed in these 27 chapters, the Jewish people find themselves neither robust nor secure. As a result of the devastating attacks of the Babylonian armies a large segment of the population of Judah now dwelled as captives and exiles along the banks of the Euphrates, surrounded by worshipers of Marduk and Nebo and the other members of the Babylonian pantheon.

Spiritual alienation did not necessarily imply economic hardship however. The exiles enjoyed better chances of prospering in commerce and trade than their kinsfolk who had remained on native soil. Whereas the Babylonians granted their captive quests considerable freedom to enter into business relationships, the people dwelling in Judah occupied a land that had been left in ruins both by the original Babylonian destruction and by successive waves of marauders. These opportunities did not remove the reality that they were in captivity with the added threat of cultural and religious assimilation. Their very identity as a people with deep religious roots as a family descended from Abraham and Sarah was at stake.

Enter the prophet, Second Isaiah, the prophet of the exile. Most scholars assume that Second Isaiah crafted the message in 40-55 while living with the exiles in Babylon. Second Isaiah presented God as a dynamic, destiny-shaping presence in the midst of human history. All that exists, from the heavenly bodies to the sphere inhabited by human beings, finds its being and purpose in relation to that Center. His message, therefore, on its most fundamental level presents a comprehensive vision of the entire creation restored to its divinely intended wholeness accompanied by ongoing comment regarding the role that Israel was to play in the fulfillment of that vision.

This explains why we observe in Isaiah 40-55 a constant fluctuation between bold envisioning of God's order of righteous compassion and pragmatic description of the real-life situations of the people. In a chaotic situation in which people were tempted either to throw out all forms of the past or to cling mindlessly to tradition out of fear of change, it is terribly important to maintain a comprehensive vision of reality ordered around one life-giving Center. As Second Isaiah sought to direct the attention of the community beyond tragedy to the restoration of a vital faith community, what was there to say about the institutions of kingship and temple? The answer could be discovered only in relationship to the Center, that is, the God who was present with the people before the introduction of either temple or kingship and by whose assent both had entered into Israel's history.

All parts of Isaiah 40-55 can be viewed as aspects of the prophet's effort to call the people back to recognition of their Center.

The following Outline may be helpful as you continue your reading of Isaiah.

(notes and Outline from Interpretation Commentary on Isaiah 40-66 by Paul D. Hanson)

PART ONE

Second Isaiah – Isaiah 40-55

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| 40:1-11 | A New Message for Israel |
| 40:12-31 | An Argument with Doubt |
| 41:1-29 | The Nations and Their Gods in the Courtroom of History |
| 42:1-9 | Here Is My Servant |
| 42:10-17 | The Lord Goes Forth like a Warrior |
| 41:18-25 | The Deaf Must Hear! The Blind Must See! |
| 43:1-7 | You are Precious in My Sight |
| 43:8-15 | You Are My Witnesses |
| 43:16-21 | I Am About to Do a New Thing |
| 43:22-28 | The Burden of Your Sins |
| 44:1-5 | I Will Pour Out My Spirit |
| 44:6-23 | Besides Me There is No God |
| 44:24-45:7 | Cyrus, My Anointed |
| 45:8-13 | Will You Question Me? |
| 45:14-19 | The Mystery and Mercy of God |
| 45:20-25 | Every Knee Shall Bow |
| 46:1-13 | Gods That Are Carried or the God Who Carries? |
| 47:1-15 | The Fall of Babylon and the Failure of the Human Illusion |
| 48:1-22 | The Promise of God and the Problems of His People |
| 49:1-13 | The Servant and the Salvation of the World |
| 49:14-26 | Answer to a Lament |
| 50:1-3 | Encounter with the Truth |
| 50:4-11 | The Teacher Who is Taught |
| 51:1-52:12 | The Taught Teacher's Lesson |
| 52:13-53:12 | The Power of the Powerless Servant |
| 54:1-17 | The Wrath and Love of God |
| 55:1-13 | The Word of God stands |

PART TWO

THIRD ISAIAH-ISAIAH 56-66

Historical Setting

In the 540s BC, Second Isaiah had announced to the Jewish exiles in Babylon God's intentions to bring about their release from captivity and their return to Zion. He had even specified that King Cyrus of Persia was the one whom God had chosen for this purpose.

In 538 BC, Cyrus issued an edict allowing the Jews to return to their homeland and to rebuild their temple. Although only part of the exiled community chose to leave Babylon for the uncertainties of repatriation, they carried with them plans for rebuilding Zion and restoring their customs and institutions.

Under the leadership of Sheshbazzar-likely one of King Jehoiachin's sons whom Cyrus had named governor-they laid the foundation of the temple in Jerusalem. But soon the situation began to deteriorate.

The major portion of Isaiah 56-66 arose against the background of the severe hardships that prevailed in the time between Sheshbazzar's unsuccessful early attempt to rebuild the temple and its completion under Zerebabbel in 515 BC. They describe bitter enmity between rival groups in Judah. They reflect a low level of community morale and a vindictive spirit that excluded the other nations of the world from any participation in God's plan save destruction. The contrast in tone between chapters 40-55 and chapters 56-66 is enormous.

OUTLINE

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| 56:1-8 | The God Who Gathers the Outcasts |
| 56:9-57:13 | All Have Turned to Their Own Way |
| 57:14-21 | God Is with the Humble and Contrite |
| 58:1-14 | Your Own Interests, or the Interests of God? |
| 59:1-21 | Mercy That Requires Repentance |
| 60:1-22 | Peace Your Overseer and Righteousness Your Taskmaster |
| 61:1-11 | A Prophet for the Lowly |
| 62:1-12 | A City Not Forsaken |
| 63:1-6 | The Divine Warrior Comes |
| 63:7-64:12 | Where are Your Zeal and Compassion? |
| 65:1-25 | By Judgment and Salvation a New Heaven and Earth |
| 66:1-24 | Those to Whom God Looks |