

## Second Servant Song of Isaiah

### **Isaiah 49:1-6**

An important transition<sup>1</sup> takes place in the Isaiah text. Contextually, the stanzas from Isaiah 40–48 have been about the restoration of Israel from the bondage of Babylon. There is much in the text that reminds the reader of the journey in the wilderness from the slavery of Egypt to the Promised Land. In fact, Isaiah brings those images back to mind through a number of references. One such reference lies at Isaiah 48:21, “they did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split open the rock and the water gushed out.” The entire tone of the chapters 40–48 begins with the voice of one crying, “In the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord.” The images are all present. God is creating a new Exodus from slavery to freedom, this time from Babylon. The first Servant Song in 42:1-4 reflected liberty from captivity.

Chapter 49 begins the interest of a new venture. The shift becomes evident in verse 6;

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.<sup>2</sup>

The texts and intent of God as reflected through the mouth of Isaiah the prophet has turned, once again to the universal approach of the whole world.<sup>3</sup> This is not a new thing. Once again, we must go back to the call of Abraham and Sarah to be the parents of a great nation with a commission. Abraham and his generations were being blessed by God to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. (Genesis 12) The plan of God began as universal employing a special people who were selected by God, not because of their inherent greatness, but out of great love from God. The plan directed to all the families of the world had not changed. Salvation embodied in the Exodus and reincarnated in the return from Exile was an event that was meant to reach toward all people and in all situations.

### **Salvation from What?**

Isaiah has given us an extensive image of the problem that angered God. Observe how often the prophet discusses idols and false gods. He talks about the Babylonian god, *Bel* (you may recall from the study of Daniel that one of the apocryphal additions to Daniel was the story, *Bel and the Dragon*). The other Chaldean god mentioned is *Nebo*. The

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<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 126ff.

<sup>2</sup> NRSV translation, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Hanson, 130.

prophet in chapter 45:9-20 presents an interesting excursus on the manufacture of idols from wood. The same wood that is cut up and used to cook with in the fire is used to craft the idol to whom people then pray and expect an answer.

At the center of all human disharmonies with God is the practice of idolatry. The use of idols is an easy problem for us to ignore. Outside of Buddhists, Hindi, modern societies like ours boast of being Judeo-Christian in which forms and images are either not allowed, or are understood to be reflective of the one depicted and nothing more. Martin Luther in his treatment of the 10 Commandments deals with the sin of idolatry in the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” This he identifies as the first and primary commandment upon which all the others rest. The human heart selects many such things that it places ahead of God. The “self” is primary with money and wealth, coming in at a very close second place. Anything that we humans cling to as our help and support that is not God is idolatry.

In Babylonian captivity, idolatry was most definitely an issue. The book of Daniel is about that period of Israel’s life. The story of the three sons, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s attempt to bring the children of Israel to service of their gods, specifically himself. The story tells of the king’s threat to throw anyone into the fiery furnace if they don’t bow down to the image of Nebuchadnezzar. These three remain faithful as does Daniel who is threatened with the lion’s den. Throughout chapters 40 –48 there are many repetitions stating the inability of these “hand-made” gods to accomplish anything while, “I the LORD, your God” created the heavens and the earth. The text of Genesis 1, the first creation epic is the narrative about God speaking, and by the Word of His mouth calling all things into being. This account tells of an orderly creation, taken day by day bringing sense and order out of the chaos. This creation text was written, it is believed by many, during these years of captivity when the order of their Promised Land had been turned into the chaos of captivity. The words of that text express the deep faith in God’s ability and desire to restore order to their chaos.

### **Who is the Servant of the Lord?**

We need to return to that question, in light of the text for this Second Servant Song.

These chapters have introduced several very interesting answers to that question.

1. The prophet himself acts as a servant of the Lord. “From my mother’s womb he called me,” says the prophet. This is highly reflective of the prophet Jeremiah also,  
Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. (Jer. 1:5)<sup>4</sup>
2. The Persian Ruler, Cyrus is called servant of the Lord as he is sent out by God to do the Lord’s bidding. Cyrus and his army is the conqueror that defeated Babylon to return the Israelites to their homeland. Isaiah says,

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<sup>4</sup> Paul D. Hanson, 127

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him – and the gates shall not be closed. (Is. 45:1)

For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. . . I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. (Is. 45:4-6)

3. It is apparent from the preceding text that Jacob and Israel are called servants. These names present double meaning. Jacob, also named Israel after his wrestling match with God was the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. The second generation descendant of Abraham and heir to the lineage and the promise made to Abraham (the promise of a land, and the promise of many descendants). The names Jacob and Israel had also after the division of the Kingdom of Israel into the North and the South came to reflect the two components of the split. The Southern Kingdom was known as Judah (often as here reflected as Jacob) and the Northern Kingdom was known as Israel. The designation of the two reflects God's graciousness and salvation to the whole nation. There are clear hints here to a restoration back to one nation.
4. The designation Servant of the Lord is reflexive of the one is spoken of in this Second Servant Song.
  - Called before I was born while in “my mother’s womb” and named by God
  - Armed with the word of God as a weapon with “mouth like a sharp sword”
  - Hidden in the “shadow of God’s hand”
  - Made as a polished arrow, hidden in God’s quiver
  - Israel is named, “You are my servant. . . in whom I will be glorified.”
  - This servant is overcome by despair and feelings of having worked in vain yet confident that “my cause is with the LORD and my reward with my God.”
  - The servant’s cause is with God, the salvation and restoration of Israel
  - Filled with confidence that “God has become my strength”
  - This servant is commissioned beyond the mission of Israel’s restoration and salvation. The servant is given also as a light to the gentiles to reach the whole earth.

At times the Servant of the Lord is an individual (Jeremiah, Isaiah, Israel/Jacob) and at times the Servant of the Lord is a nation (Israel). At times the Servant of the Lord is a foreigner (Cyrus). At times the Servant of the Lord is a present figure while yet also being a future figure, the Messiah who would fill the bill of the servant in every way. There is a great deal of vacillation throughout the texts of Isaiah. Paul Hanson writes,

The evidence when taken as a whole suggests that the Servant of the Yahweh is a metaphor richly multivalent in meaning. At times the prophet whom we call Second Isaiah seems to identify with the Servant personally. At other times the lives of figures like Jeremiah and Elijah seem to add color to this mysterious figure. Israel, in its rare

times of obedience to God's will, and especially the faithful remnant within the Israelite community, contributed features to the portrait of the Servant. Above all, however, it is important to recognize the eschatological<sup>5</sup> dimension in this metaphor. The Servant is both faithful individual and obedient community in the era in which God's plan begins to unfold among those identifying completely with God's will.<sup>6</sup>

### **Where do We Fit Into All of This?**

This, of course, is the questions that we always need to ask about any text that we try to understand. We, the church of Jesus Christ, also known as the Body of Christ fall into line with the prophets, the apostles, the children of Israel and all those who have joined God's plan for the salvation of the world. We are the Servant of the Lord in our time. Our mission is the eternal plan that God established bringing Abraham and his descendants into the plan to bring God's blessing to all the families of the earth. We operate under the same commission as Jesus sent out his disciples saying,

Go therefore and make disciples of all people, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded. (Mt 28:19-20)

God's plan has always been for his servants to bring the Word to all nations and therefore to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Nothing has demonstrated that plan as effectively and as poignantly as the ministry of Jesus Christ. The gospels have portrayed Jesus as reaching toward all people, both Jew and gentile. He reached his hand toward those where disenfranchised by the religious and political establishment. In the gospels Jesus is recorded as ministering to women who were considered as unclean by virtue of physical conditions and sinful reputations. He offers the Kingdom of God to a Roman centurion and invites a tax collector into discipleship (Levi). The Acts of the Apostles reports that Simon Peter is given a vision opening the call to baptism to those who are considered unclean by the Jewish religious establishment. The gospel records all depict Jesus as the Servant of the Lord, the perfect messianic Servant of the Lord and Jesus invites his disciples to follow in his footsteps. We cannot stop in the definition of the Servant of Lord to only figures of the past. In the call to discipleship, all who are called and invited by Jesus to take up their crosses and follow him are the servants of the Lord.

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<sup>5</sup>This is a Greek word that mean the "end times." When we talk about the eschaton we are talking about the day that Creeds confess when Jesus returns to raise the dead to eternal life and establish the perfect kingdom of God where there will be no more sin, tears, or death. Eschatological is the word to talk about the return of Christ.

<sup>6</sup>Paul D. Hanson, 128