

THE PROMISE OF DELIVERANCE



READING SECOND ISAIAH

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INTRODUCTION

Since the work of Bernhard Duhm toward the end of the nineteenth century, it is widely but not universally accepted that the Book of Isaiah is composed of three distinct segments: Chapters 1—39, 40—55, and 56—66. There is a possibility that the distinction is not as clear-cut as many would like, granted the long lines of transmission through which the text has passed.¹ While experts will continue to debate the issues, often on the basis of ideological preferences, there is value in approaching Second Isaiah, as a separate entity, composed between the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the Decree of Cyrus some fifty years later in 539 BCE. This is not necessarily to deny that Second Isaiah is the work of many hands or that it incorporates literary units that originally may have been independent. Nor is it to disregard the many linkages with First Isaiah (composed in the eighth and seventh centuries) and Third Isaiah (compiled after the return from the exile).

¹ Remembering that the division of the biblical books into discrete chapters occurred only in the Middle Ages. Chapter division is usually attributed to Stephen Langton (1150–1228), Archbishop of Canterbury. Verse-division appeared first in the printed edition of the Bible by Robert Estienne in 1555.

These sixteen chapters are among the Old Testament passages most frequently cited in the books of the New Testament.² The Gospels begin by presenting John the Baptist in terms drawn from the opening lines of Second Isaiah and reach their culmination in narrating the passion of Jesus and trying to explain it in terms of the Suffering Servant of Isa 52—53. Along with Deuteronomy and the Book of Psalms, Second Isaiah is a major source of the theology of the New Testament, not only in content, but also in terms of its rhetorical power and affective warmth. The New Testament is proclamation: its message is kerygma. It is not mere narrative or lawmaking. It has a strong prophetic voice, and that voice announces not doom and gloom but “good news,” as does this prophet. In both the New Testament and Second Isaiah, there is challenge and also rebuke, but the prevailing message is positive. Both speak of a loving and compassionate God who seeks to undo the harms that humanity has inflicted upon itself by being seduced away from the path of worship in spirit and in truth.

The people deported to Babylon were a much-reduced population. According to Jeremiah, those deported between 587 and 571 BCE numbered no more than forty-six hundred (cf. Jer 52:28–30). If this number refers only to adult males, then together with women and children, the exiles may have been as many as twenty thousand—no more than a small crowd watching a football game. They were conscious not only of their fewness, but also of their impotence. It is likely that their thoughts were dominated by an overwhelming grief for all they had lost: family, friends, possessions, national identity and pride, religious tradition and worship. No doubt they experienced the interior emptiness that follows the total deconstruction of a familiar world. For many, it must have seemed that Judah would go the way of the

² There are 29 quotations of Second Isaiah and 143 “allusions and verbal parallels” identified in the third edition of *The Greek New Testament* published by the United Bible Societies in 1983.

Northern Kingdom that had been lost to Assyria, and that there would be no future to their race or their religion. Children would be born and raised among the remnant of a people whose only hope was assimilation. Contact with their long tradition would be lost; all they could aspire to was to be accepted as “normal” Babylonians. It would be only a matter of time before they bowed down to Marduk.

The Babylonian Exile lasted some fifty years. If we superimpose a similar period on the life of the contemporary church, we may well find that although we have not been deported to Babylon, many of us have experienced an acute sense of displacement from where we were half a century ago.³ Most of our certainties have been exploded, and in many cases the thread of continuity has been broken. Scientific advances and historical criticism have exposed the temerity of many of the facile assumptions we employed to reinforce our faith. Secularization has brought into question the relevance of religious institutions. Aggressive atheism tries to convince us that belief in God is unintelligent. Religious fanaticism has undermined our notion that dedicated religious people are always good people. Sexual abuse, financial finagling, and administrative toleration of crimes have scuttled any claim that the Church is to be known by its holiness. Welcome to Babylon.

³ “The metaphor of exile may be useful to American Christians as a way of understanding the social context of the church in American culture [and beyond]. The exile of the contemporary American church is that we are bombarded by definitions of reality that are fundamentally alien to the gospel, definitions of reality that come from the military-industrial-scientific empire, which may be characterized as ‘consumer capitalism.’ In a variety of ways the voice of this empire wants to reshape our values, fears and dreams in ways that are fundamentally opposed to the voice of the gospel.” Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 92. See also, by the same author, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty* (New York: Cascade Books, 2020).

The Catholic remnant remains as much in need of the prophetic word of hope as the remnant of Judah. Even those of us blessed with the gift of a holy obstinacy may sometimes feel a sense of loss. This is not to say that the changes wrought in the wake of the Second Vatican Council were not helpful. They were more than that; they were necessary and providential. Undeniably, there was collateral damage. Much of this can be traced to an insufficient preparation, not only of the people in the pews, but also of those who were supposed to support them and guide them through the time of transition. This is not to point the finger of blame; the task was formidable, given the massive changes in most cultures these past fifty years.⁴ Many burned themselves out attempting to bridge the gap between the immovable past and the ever-moving present; others fell into disrepute by seeming to change too quickly, or too slowly. There are polarizing tensions in God's people today that were unknown half a century ago.

We all appreciate that it is hard for a long-lasting institution to change quickly, since it can move only at the speed of its slowest members. Saint Paul experienced this in his dealings with the elders of the Jerusalem church. This means that a gap tends to open between what the group has to offer and what

⁴ Even before the coronavirus pitched its tent in our midst and the effects of climate change began to appear, it is obvious that secular society itself has changed much in the last fifty years both at the political and geopolitical levels. There has been an explosion of information technology and a resulting revolution in the way we do and view things. In a moment of desperation, I recently read a spy novel written in 1980. It was describing a vastly different world. The Cold War was still raging. There were no computers or cell phones or Internet. You found your way without the benefit of GPS, and at the airport there was little by way of security. The issues that dominate our conversations today went unmentioned. Those of us who lived through this period simply went with the flow and scarcely noticed the radicalism of what was changing around us. We may have come to the conclusion that others were changing but were less aware of inevitably shifting attitudes in ourselves. Only in retrospect are we stunned by the depth and extent of change.

the membership requires to sustain its life. The inevitable result is that even the most loyal among ordinary members will often go shopping to find some supplement to what they are being offered officially. Sometimes they end up in a cul-de-sac in which progress peters out. But others, inspired by good zeal, lay their hands on hidden treasures and bring them into the light. In today's Church—much more than fifty years ago—people are discovering for themselves the value of such interior practices as meditation and *lectio divina*, in helping them to move into an authentic practice of prayer. This, in turn, motivates and empowers them to find new ways of living their faith and encourages them to assume new roles in giving external expression to what they hold dear.

Finding in the Scriptures a pathway to a more abundant life not only makes one's personal life more meaningful but inevitably leads us back to the mystical Communion of Saints and, perhaps, to a fuller appreciation of the institutional Church. In particular, *lectio divina* may help us to leap over the overzealous moralism that has dominated Catholic thinking for the last few centuries. It places an emphasis on the Church as a school of mysticism, with an emphasis on the experience of coming closer to God. It is not only a matter of upgrading our public morals. It is not merely a question of intellectual learning so that we have all the right answers. It is more a question of a burgeoning affectivity in defiance of prevailing feelinglessness. Perhaps we grew up with the slogan "Faith not feeling," but faith without feeling is a void. Feeling indicates that we are alive, whether what we are experiencing is pleasant or challenging. Even when everything seems to be going well, our faith may lead us into an experience of desolation. This feeling, although disturbing, is better than no-feeling. Almost always it is a providential carrier of the truth. If we respond to it, it will almost certainly lead us to a better place. Our faith can never be merely an intellectual exercise. Even an apparently negative feeling may well be, not the end of prayer, but its beginning—not a sign of decline but a pointer to a more

solid way ahead. The fire alarm that wakes us up is a friend, not an enemy.

In trying to find our feet spiritually, we will find Second Isaiah a good companion and mentor. His message is addressed to those who feel somewhat alienated from God because the social order that sustained the relationship has broken down. His response is to point both to the power of God to accomplish good for us, and to the divine compassion which exceeds every human experience of tenderness. And he does this in a way that touches the heart. In fact, this is his mandate: To speak to the heart of Jerusalem (cf. Isa 40:2). To spend a few months in the company of this most perceptive of prophets probably won't teach us any new dogmas, but it may well kindle in us a greater sense of the subtle involvement of God in our life, working to bring us to a point of vision that is beyond anything we could imagine for ourselves.

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For the purposes of this book, I am taking a simple approach, regarding the chapters as a unity—even though there is a change in tone after Chapter 48, and the four passages designated as “Servant Songs” may be interpolations. For the sake of convenience, I refer to the prophet Second Isaiah as its “author”—although I understand that this role may well include the functions of writing, compiling, and editing, perhaps on different occasions and by several persons. I am conscious that such an uncomplicated view leaves many questions not only unanswered but also unasked. Such is life. I do not see the text of Second Isaiah as a Teutonic treatise following strict sequential logic, but as a message of hope and comfort, put together from a variety of sources following a circular, right-brain progression. My principal purpose in writing is to assist the reader to engage with the book through a process of *lectio divina*, without being drawn to wandering down the seductive byways of scholarly debate—to be more aware of the tides than the eddies, as it were.

Without underestimating the importance of historical-critical study, this present work aims at facilitating a kind of conversation between the text and its contemporary readers—particularly those who are reading it not for the purpose of academic scrutiny, but to hear in the text a comforting and challenging word that speaks to each in their own particular situation. This is not a fundamentalist approach. It involves trying to come to as accurate an understanding of the text as is possible, given each person's concrete circumstances. What is distinctive about *lectio divina* is that, while paying attention to the text, the reader also allows the mind to roam through other books of the Bible and other sources of wisdom, including personal experience. It invites more participants to the party in the hope that approaching the text from a variety of standpoints will allow the reader to become aware of subtler nuances that otherwise might be missed. It is a fuller, ampler reading. It is not trying to prove anything; it is intended only for personal growth in wisdom.

An example of how personal experience allows us to become sensitive to less obvious aspects of the text can be seen in the way our years of reading the Bible can enrich our present understanding. Readers who are familiar with the Book of Psalms will quickly arrive at the conclusion that there are many parallels between Second Isaiah and the Psalter, as demonstrated by the marginal references in many editions of the Bible. There are more than a hundred linkages between the two books, because although individual psalms were composed over several centuries, they were compiled into the existing collection at some time in the postexilic period. Many psalms were in circulation at the time of the exile. Second Isaiah was thus probably at least passively familiar with some of them and, perhaps unconsciously, drew from them both in content and style. It is not impossible that influence went in both directions. While writing this book, I kept hearing echoes of the prophet in the usual psalms of the liturgy; the two parts of Scripture sparked off each other in a process of mutual enrichment.

Although Second Isaiah was originally composed in and for a particular historical setting, its inclusion in the biblical canon attached to First Isaiah seems to indicate that its message has a broader application than simply the return of the exiles from Babylon. Its message was reinterpreted to evoke the eschatological intervention of God in the ultimate act of deliverance; as such, it applies as much to us as it did to Second Isaiah's contemporaries. We know, as Haggai indicates, that the return of some of the exiles to the land was not a glorious triumph. It was a meager beginning to the ongoing action of God—a symbol and pledge of what was to come in the final age. “The discrepancy between what happened after the exile and the prophet's eschatological description of God's will is not a criticism of the truth of the promise, but rather an indication of how little the exilic community partook of the promised reality.”⁵ This message is addressed not only to the scattered remnant of Judah and its returnees, but also to us, who live in such different times and in such particular circumstances. It relays to us God's unswerving commitment not only to overcoming the obstacles that beset us but also to bringing us all together to eternal life. In particular, Second Isaiah contains an emergent notion of universalism, whereby salvation is not limited to Israel but offered to all. It references “a confessional community rather than a nation state, and therefore community adherence to which can come about by personal decision rather than by ascription.”⁶ The good news of

⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 327.

⁶ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40—55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 116. The expansion of the divine self-revelation made to Israel so that it is given to all nations represents a substantial step forward away from tribalism toward the notion of a more inclusive religion. This movement illustrates the suggestion that greater inclusivism is a key indicator of moral progress. See Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Second Isaiah is meant for all nations, and its message of comfort is for all peoples. As Abraham Heschel notes,

The message of Second Isaiah, as he is conventionally called, is of no age. It is prophecy tempered with human tears, mixed with a joy that heals all scars, clearing a way for understanding the future in spite of the present. No words have ever gone further in offering comfort when the sick world cries.⁷

We must never forget that Second Isaiah was written over two and a half millennia ago. It breathes an atmosphere that is strange to us, and we can hear its message only by transposing it into a different key. The effort is well worthwhile. It is astonishing that, so long ago, such a sophisticated theology could be formulated and expressed so elegantly. This is one of the most compelling parts of the Old Testament. It has been described as “the zenith of Yahweh’s revelation in the OT.”⁸ The prophet sees his proclamation as “good news”—we, likewise, may well regard his work as a precursor to the gospel. Spending a few months wandering around the text, imbibing its spirit and pondering its message, will be for most of us a rich experience that will generously repay whatever we have invested in it.

Second Isaiah has a very coherent theology, as represented schematically in Figure 1. It is a firm statement of monotheism. There is only one God, the God of Israel. This transcendent God must be seen as the creator of heaven and earth—a proposition familiar to us from the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, which attained its final form only about the time that Second Isaiah appeared. God has absolute and complete dominion and is, therefore, the Lord of history who has the power to influence

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 145.

⁸ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40—55* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 3.

events and, thus, is able to predict what will happen. Whatever God promises can be accomplished. Therefore, Israel will be preserved and will return from exile. Babylon will be destroyed, and to effect this, the campaign of Cyrus of Persia will be successful. As the only God, the God of Israel must also be the God of all nations, to whom all must turn to find salvation, which means that they will attach themselves to Israel, God's servant. Thus, Israel's mission is to be "a light for the Gentiles," and to do this, Israel must be preserved and return from exile. Thus God accomplishes the plan initiated in creation. Meanwhile, idols are nothing. Those who worship them are stupid, and both idols and their devotees are doomed to ultimate destruction.

This book is envisaged as a companion to the biblical text, not its replacement. It is not a commentary on Second Isaiah. It is a book of reflection that weaves in and out and round about the biblical text. It is intended to support your own reflections and responses and to begin a conversation that embraces also the reality of your own life. It aspires to help you, the reader, to appreciate the timely message that the prophet offers. The method to be employed is simply to take a number of themes that are important for understanding the text and reflect on them in a circular fashion, pulling together elements from different parts of the book and adding a few other considerations to the mix. It is hoped that in this process we will become more sensitive to the themes as we encounter them in our reading of Second Isaiah and move on to a richer understanding of the prophet's message. In my mind, the whole process could be spread over several months and, ideally, would involve several rereadings of the biblical text until it becomes familiar.

Instead of retranslating the text of Second Isaiah, I have decided to use the translation included in the Geneva Bible of 1562,⁹ for three related reasons. First, I hope that the archaic

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THE GOD OF ISRAEL

is
CREATOR



with

↙ TOTAL DOMINION ↘

LORD OF HISTORY

THE ONLY GOD



has
POWER
to SAVE

has
POWER
to PREDICT

GOD OF
ALL NATIONS

IDOLS ARE
FUTILE

↓
FAITHFUL
to
PROMISES

↓
ALL must
come for
SALVATION

↓
Idolatry is
senseless



↓
Attach themselves
to ISRAEL

↓
Israel has a
MISSION

↓
Israel will be
PRESERVED

↓
Israel will return
from EXILE

↓
BABYLON will fall

↓
CYRUS will succeed

style of this translation will alert the reader to the fact that the biblical book was written two and a half thousand years ago in a culture and political situation far different from anything that we have experienced, and in a language with which most of us are unfamiliar. I try to keep reminding the reader that we have to work hard to arrive at an honest interpretation of the text. It is foreign to us, and we have to read it carefully.

The second reason for using this translation is to make clear the distinction between the biblical text and my commentary. What I have to say does not demand the same respect as what Second Isaiah says. I should add that very occasionally I have made some slight changes to remove obscurity, but mostly I have allowed to stand what may seem to us an eccentric style. I presume the long-dead editors have no objection to this.

A third reason for using an unfamiliar text is that this ancient translation provides a basis for comparison with newer renderings. Comparing two translations can be a partial remedy for those unable to approach the text in the original. Going from one version to the other is a basic way of meditating on the text. Reading the same text in one version and then in another tends to set dormant thoughts astir and open up some space in our otherwise torpid minds into which inspiration can slip. This method initiates us into the process of close reading; as we make comparisons, we begin to pay attention to the minor differences between the versions, leading us into a state of wonderment. We try on the different readings, as we would a new pair of shoes, to see which one speaks to us more clearly and more dearly. Which one throws a fairer light on our personal experience? We might enhance the effect by reading the texts aloud, listening to their poetry, succumbing to the charm of the biblical eloquence.

Because Hebrew is a Semitic language, there are many

best translations in divers languages, with most profitable annotations upon all the hard places and other things of great importance as may appear in the epistle to the reader, printed at Geneva, MDLXII.

differences in vocabulary and grammar from what is usual in the Indo-European languages that are more familiar to us. In particular, the standard translation of certain Hebrew words usually does not coincide with the range of meanings and associations with the original. I have decided to presume on the readers' indulgence by explaining some key words in greater detail. Usually I cite a single form (or lexeme) within a word family to refer to the whole group of associated terms. In my transcription of Hebrew script, I have adopted simple equivalents, rather than use the more complex systems scholars employ.

A question that often raised its head while I was writing these chapters concerned the inclusion of references to the New Testament. It is true that the primary meaning of the New Testament text needs to be sought in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures of which it is a part. Yet, as a Christian reader, it is impossible for me to read Second Isaiah without calling to mind the New Testament use of this book, or the parallels that exist in the good news that each proclaims. I decided to act as naturally as I could; if a New Testament reference came to my mind, I considered including it. I did not go hunting for examples. Some references to monastic tradition also inevitably find their way into my text.

No doubt for many readers, as for myself, reading Second Isaiah will stir up memories of Handel's "Messiah." It is as though the text suddenly bursts into song before us. I think that the great value in this connection is that it serves as a reminder of the deep affective and emotional tone of many passages in the book. It speaks not only to the mind but also to the heart of Jerusalem. My hope is that these chapters do the same, though perhaps in a minor key.