

Exile in Babylon 597-538 Isaiah Scroll 40-55

10. Isaiah 49-55



From the opening words of chapter 49 it is clear that there has been a significant shift of focus. Two things have happened.

The first is that Cyrus did not live up to the expectations that the composers of Isaiah 40-48 had of him. Though Cyrus conquered the Babylonian Empire, Judah is still devastated and Jerusalem and its temple are still in ruins.

The second is partly a consequence of this: the doubts already expressed by the community have hardened into rejection of this School and of their prophetic message.

Yet the prophet-preachers remain convinced that it is YHWH's will to bring about the return of the exiles and to build up Judah so that the people can carry out the mission that they have inherited from Abraham and Jacob; namely, to reveal YHWH to the nations. Since the people are not in a position yet to do this, and since they are no longer listening to the prophetic message, the members of this exilic School realise that it is they who are called to be YHWH's 'servants', to keep the flame burning and to realise the mission given to Israel. They must, in that sense, *be* Israel.

Their opening words, then, are no longer addressed to the people of Judah, whether in Jerusalem or in exile. They are addressed to the nations, for it is YHWH's will for the nations to come to know him and experience freedom and salvation through following the way of the Torah, the way YHWH has revealed to Israel, the way that has its source in communion with YHWH and flows into a world order characterised by justice.

Isaiah 49-55 continue to speak of the redeeming action of YHWH, the Lord of creation and the Lord of history. They continue the theme of mission (49:5-7) and the call to leave the land of captivity (52:11). They add a call to be faithful to one's mission even when faced with rejection (see 50:4-10; 52:13 - 53:12). They speak of God's tender love (49:14-15) and of the offer of a covenant that will last forever (55:3).

[I have altered 'prophet' to 'prophet-preachers']

'A sombre sadness now muffles the enthusiasm. The people could not believe that God's compassion would reach this tenderly to the ends of the earth, nor could the people accept the price of sharing the covenant and its God with other nations. Worst of all, the *prophet-preachers* acclaimed the Persian Cyrus as another Moses in 44:24 - 45:7. Such openness clashed with the narrow prejudice of the people. The *prophet-preachers* were spurned, publicly humiliated, cast aside. In the solitary darkness they saw themselves reliving the history of their people in their dreadful suffering. They also sustained hopes beyond despair, life beyond death, absorbed from the tradition of Moses and the earlier prophets.'

Isaiah 49:1-3

Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
YHWH called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a sharpened arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
He said to me, "You are my servant, [The Isaiah School]
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

As YHWH's 'servants'(44:26), inheriting the prophetic spirit (48:16), the members of this School had called Israel to take up its prophetic role as YHWH's servant (see 41:8, 9; 42:1; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21; 45:4; 48:20).

Encountering scepticism and resistance, they had criticised the people for failing to hear and to see (see 42:19). Now they realise that it is *they* who must carry out the mission intended for Israel. YHWH is calling them to *be* Israel. He is saying to them: '*You are my servant Israel.*'

Isaiah 49:4

I said, “I have laboured in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with YHWH,
and my reward with my God.”

Isaiah 49:5-6

And now YHWH says,

who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,

and that Israel might be gathered to him,

for I am honoured in the sight of YHWH,

and my God has become my strength – he says:

“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.”

The last 2 lines are quoted by Paul in Acts 13:47

Isaiah 49:7

Thus says YHWH, the Redeemer of Israel
and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers:

“Kings shall see and stand up,
and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of YHWH, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Isaiah 49:8

Thus says YHWH: In a time of favour I have answered you,
on a day of salvation I have helped you;

I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages.

They are to be for their own people what their people
have been commissioned to be for the peoples of the
world: a 'covenant'(see 42:6) – a sign of the communion
which YHWH wants for Judah, and, through Judah, for
all peoples. Since the land of those who were deported
has been taken by others, re-apportioning of land was a
crucial issue for anyone who wanted to return from exile.
YHWH is commissioning this group of prophets to see
that it is done according to his will.

Isaiah 49:9-10,13

Say to the prisoners, “Come out,”

to those who are in darkness, “Show yourselves.”

They shall feed along the ways,

on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;

they shall not hunger or thirst,

neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,

for he who has pity (rāḥam) on them will lead them,

and by springs of water will guide them ...

YHWH has comforted (nāḥam) his people,

and will have compassion (rāḥam) on his afflicted.

Isaiah 49:14-16

But Zion said, “YHWH has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me.”

Can a woman forget her unweaned child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

Even if these should forget, I will not forget you.

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.

YHWH's wanting to comfort them, and his feelings of compassion and love for them, are more than they can experience even from a mother who suckles her child.

Isaiah 49:17-26

Your builders outdo your destroyers ... Lift up your eyes, look about you; they have come to you.

As I live, says YHWH, you shall put all of them on like an ornament, and like a bride you shall bind them on ...

Surely now you will be too crowded for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away. The children born in the time of your bereavement will yet say in your hearing: "The place is too crowded for me; make room for me to settle." ...

Then all flesh shall know that I am YHWH your Saviour, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

Isaiah 50:4-6 The prophet-preachers are mocked

The Lord YHWH has given me the tongue of a disciple,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens –

wakens my ear to listen as disciples listen.

The Lord YHWH has opened my ear,

and I for my part was not rebellious, nor did I draw back.

I gave my back to those who struck me,

and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;

I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

Isaiah 50:7-9

The Lord YHWH helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who dares bring an accusation against me? Let us confront each other. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord YHWH who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Sustained by the help they receive from YHWH, they challenge their opponents to find fault with their ministry.

Isaiah 50:10

‘Who among you fears YHWH?

Heed the voice of his servant.

You who find yourself walking in the dark

without a glimmer of light,

put your trust in the name of YHWH

and rely upon your God.

Isaiah 51:1-3

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek YHWH. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.

Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. For YHWH will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of YHWH; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Isaiah 51:9-11

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of YHWH!
Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago!
Was it not you who cut **Rahab** in pieces [the mythical monster defeated by Marduk], who pierced the **Dragon**?
Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the **Great Deep** [Tehom = Tiamat]; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over? So the ransomed of YHWH shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 51:16

I have put my words in your mouth,
and hidden you in the shadow of my hand,
stretching out the heavens
and laying the foundations of the earth,
and saying to Zion, “You are my people.”

Isaiah 52:1-2

Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion! Put on
your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city;
for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall enter you
no more. Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, ascend
your throne, Jerusalem; loose the bonds from your
neck, O captive daughter Zion!

Isaiah 52:7

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces **peace**, who brings **good news**, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “**Your God reigns.**”

Isaiah 52:11-12

‘Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of it, purify yourselves, you who carry the vessels of YHWH.’ For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight; for YHWH will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12

1. Are the members of the Isaiah School recalling the terrible experiences of abuse and rejection suffered by Israel, YHWH's servant, and saying that the nation, the land, the city, has suffered because of the sins of its people, but that the nation, YHWH's suffering servant, would rise again?
2. Are they speaking of themselves as YHWH's faithful servants who have been rejected because of the sins of their compatriots, but confident that they would be vindicated?
3. Are they reflecting on the experience of a leader of their group?

Isaiah 52:13-15

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted, lifted up; he shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him – so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals – so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him. For that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

The last sentence is quoted by Paul in Romans 15:21, to describe the mission given to him

Isaiah 53:1

Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of YHWH been revealed?

‘They did not believe in Jesus. This was to fulfil the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ (John 12:37-38).

‘Not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says: Lord, who has believed our message?’ (Romans 10:16).

Isaiah 53:2-3

For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground; [devastated Judah]
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

‘He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ...
He became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.’ (Philippians 2:7-8)

Isaiah 53:4-5 Suffering can be redemptive!

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

‘This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: He took our infirmities and bore our diseases’(Mat 8:17).

‘Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.’

(1Cor 15:3)

‘He was handed over to death for our trespasses’(Romans 4:25).

If this is a poem about Israel (Judah), they are making a distinction. Judah is devastated, but the fault is not Judah's, it is the fault of the people of Judah who transgress. The terrible suffering of Judah and Jerusalem has been YHWH's way of bringing its people to their senses in order to heal them.

If the authors are thinking of themselves as a rejected minority, they are looking on their innocent suffering as redemptive for the community. They are not suffering *instead* of the community, but they are suffering *because* of the community, and *for* the community, and in some way they see their suffering as redemptive.

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Isaiah 53:6-7

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and YHWH has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

This is the passage the Eunuch wanted explained in Acts 8:32-33.

see John 1:29; Rev 5:9; Mat 27:12; Hebrews 9:28

Isaiah 53:8-9

By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who of his contemporaries gave this any thought? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of his people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

The NT consistently refers to Jesus' innocence:

'He was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin'(1John 3:5).

1Peter 2:21-25

‘Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.’

Isaiah 53:10-11

Yet it was the will of YHWH to crush him with pain.

[to cleanse him from his wound, LXX]

He has laid down his life as a reparation offering;
he will see his offspring; he will prolong his days;
through him the will of YHWH will prevail.

From his anguish of soul he will see and be content.

Judah will survive its destruction, as will the faithful servants of the Isaiah School. It is hard not to think here of Isaiah ben Amoz. They could make a martyr of him, but they could not destroy his message. It is proclaimed by his disciples, through whom he lives on (compare Isaiah 30:20-21).

Isaiah 53:11 [YHWH speaks]

By his knowledge my righteous servant, shall make many righteous; he bears the burden of their iniquities.

‘The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many (for the multitude)’ (Mark 10:45).

‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many (for the multitude)’ (Mark 14:24).

‘The free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many ... through the obedience of one, many shall be made righteous’ (Romans 5:15,19).

Isaiah 53:12

Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

‘The scripture must be fulfilled: He was numbered among the transgressors’ (Luke 22:37).

‘Jesus kept on praying: Father forgive them’ (Luke 23:34).

Isaiah 54:1-3

Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the abandoned wife will outnumber the children those living a married life, says YHWH. Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your ropes, drive the tent pegs home. For you will spread out to the right and to the left, and your descendants will dispossess the nations and will settle the desolate towns.

Isaiah 54:4-6

Do not fear, for you will not be disappointed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer reproach; for you will forget the shame of your youth, the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more.

Your Maker is your **husband**, YHWH of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your **Redeemer**, the God of the whole earth he is called.

For YHWH has called you back like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God.

Isaiah 54:7-8

For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love
I will have compassion on you,
says YHWH, your Redeemer.

Isaiah 54:9-10

This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says YHWH, who has compassion on you.

Isaiah 54:13

All your children shall be taught by YHWH.

It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.’ (John 6:45).

Isaiah 55

Chapter 55 seems to have been created to provide a transition from the exilic writings of Isaiah 40-54 to the post-exilic writings of Isaiah 56-66. It stresses the importance of accepting the prophetic word – a word that we should expect to be beyond human comprehension. However things might look, the promises conveyed through it will eventuate

Isaiah 55:1-4

All of you there who are thirsty, come to the waters.
You have no money? come, buy and eat! Come, buy
wine and milk without money and at no cost.
Why do you spend your money on what is not food?
Why spend your earnings on what does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me if you want to eat well, and you
will be delighted with the richest fare. Incline your
ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
showing you the faithful love I showed to David. See,
I made him a witness to the peoples, a prince who
ruled over nations. (see Acts 13:34).

Isaiah 55:6-9 : Appeal to those who have not welcomed the word
Seek YHWH while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to YHWH,
that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says YHWH.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:10-11

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:12-13

For you shall go out in joy, and be led out in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to YHWH for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.