

Session 10: The Unknown Prophet of the Exile

A. Second Isaiah

As soon as Jerusalem fell to Babylon for the first time in 597 B.C. a new note of hope came into the prophecies of Jeremiah. In chapter 29, writing to the exiles, he tells them to settle down in the place of exile, to bear sons and daughters and to pray for the 'shalom' of the city where they find themselves. After seventy years, he promises, Yahweh will 'visit' them and bring them back to Jerusalem.

In Babylon itself the same thing was happening in the prophecies of Ezekiel, who received his call in the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiakim (Ezekiel 1:2). For the next seven years until the city eventually fell he consistently foretold the doom of Jerusalem. In 33:21-22 we read of him hearing the news that the city had been taken, the Lord opens his mouth to speak and what comes out are messages of hope, of which the best known is the vision of the valley of dry bones, which ends thus:

Ezekiel 37:11-14

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.'

Although the messages of these two prophets changed dramatically, one thing remained the same: the people of Judah and Jerusalem did not believe them. As described in Ezekiel's vision, the mood of the people was one of despair. This despair is the background to the ministry of a remarkable prophet whose name we do not know, but who is usually known as Second Isaiah.

The words of this prophet are found in Isaiah chapters 40 to 55. There are many links between them and the words of Isaiah of Jerusalem in the 8th century. Their title for Yahweh, 'the Holy One of Israel' stands out in particular. Behind this title is a shared sense of the holiness and majesty of God and a conviction that he was pre-eminent over all rival gods and all nations. Just as Isaiah of Jerusalem sees Yahweh using Assyria, the world power of his day, as his instrument, Second Isaiah says exactly the same thing about the Persian emperor, Cyrus, with the difference that while Assyria was to be used to punish his people, Persia would be used to save them.

Like most of the messages of the prophets, these are originally given orally. Chapters 51 and 52 include a collection of several oracles each of which begins with the words, 'Listen.' They were probably spoken mainly when the people assembled for worship in what became the institution of the synagogue, since the form and rhythm of the messages is very similar to the psalms. Like the psalms, these messages include many of consolation.

They were written and collected very early, possibly by the prophet himself. In the messages, the same themes are constantly repeated: Yahweh as the great Creator of the world, Yahweh's love for Israel and for Jerusalem, the foolishness of idol-worship and Yahweh's plan to set his people free from exile. These themes have been combined and recombined throughout the book and yet they are edited in such a way that there is a clear development. There is also a break between chapters 48 and 49: one of the most significant differences between the two sections is that from chapter 49 'Jerusalem' is frequently addressed as 'Zion'.

Activity 10.1

Read Isaiah 40:1-11

These verses form the introduction to the whole book and verses 1 and 2 are the key message: that Jerusalem is now to be comforted. 'Jerusalem' refers both to the city, now largely in ruins, and to the people in exile who identify with the city. Hosea had predicted that in exile Yahweh would woo Israel once again, 'speaking tenderly' to her (Hosea 2:14): here the prophet says that the time of wooing has arrived. Yahweh is to 'speak tenderly' to Jerusalem. Her sins have been punished; in fact, she has received double the due penalty. Now the time of salvation is here.

Then follows the prophet's call narrative. One of the characteristics of a true prophet is to have stood in the council of Yahweh and to have heard his deliberations (Jeremiah 23:22). The voice the prophet hears in verses 3 to 5 is spoken in Yahweh's council: it announces what he is about to do. He is going to build a road through the wilderness and it is to be a 'highway for our God' – a road for God to walk along, since the return of the people from exile will be God's own return. As a later message says:

Isaiah 52:7-8

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.'
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
 together they sing for joy;
 for in plain sight they see
 the return of the Lord to Zion.

Here and at several places in the book the prophet compares the coming return of the exiles to the exodus from Egypt. It will be an act of redemption on a similar scale and through it all nations will witness the glory of the Lord (verse 5). Like most themes, this recurs throughout the book:

Isaiah 43:16-29

Thus says the Lord,
 who makes a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters,
 who brings out chariot and horse,
 army and warrior;
 they lie down, they cannot rise,
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
 Do not remember the former things,
 or consider the things of old.
 I am about to do a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
 I will make a way in the wilderness
 and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 51:9-10

Awake, awake, put on strength,
 O arm of the Lord!
 Awake, as in days of old,
 the generations of long ago!
 Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,
 who pierced the dragon?
 Was it not you who dried up the sea,
 the waters of the great deep;
 who made the depths of the sea a way
 for the redeemed to cross over?

Isaiah 52:10

The Lord has bared his holy arm
 before the eyes of all the nations;
 and all the ends of the earth shall see
 the salvation of our God.

The next thing the voice says is addressed to the prophet: 'Cry out,' and he asks what he is to cry. In one way the whole of the rest of the book is the answer, but the immediate answer is verses 6 to 8 and another theme that runs through the whole book: the fragility and inconstancy of human life in contrast with the permanence and certainty of the word of Yahweh. The certainty that God will do what he has said forms the underlying basis for the fulfillment of prophecy:

Isaiah 51:6-8

Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
 and look at the earth beneath;
 for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
 the earth will wear out like a garment,
 and those who live on it will die like gnats;
 but my salvation will be for ever,
 and my deliverance will never be ended.

Listen to me, you who know righteousness,
 you people who have my teaching in your hearts;
 do not fear the reproach of others,
 and do not be dismayed when they revile you.
 For the moth will eat them up like a garment,
 and the worm will eat them like wool;
 but my deliverance will be for ever,
 and my salvation to all generations.

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 the Lord, who has compassion on you.

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.

The earth itself is destined to vanish but Yahweh's salvation is eternal, his covenant love is unshakeable and his word is unstoppable. In fact the last two oracles of the book, 55:10-13, are a mirror of the book's opening, affirming the certainty of Yahweh's word and the imminence of the return through the wilderness.

Having stated the theme, verses 9 to 11 are the message. The prophet is to proclaim the coming return from exile. In verse 9 it is Zion herself who is to proclaim the good news, in other passages, such as 52:7-8, the good news is given to Zion or Jerusalem. There the sentinels lift up their voices; the people sing, passing on the good news to others; and the whole earth sees God's salvation, just as in 40:5 all nations were to see his glory.

Despite this message of hope, the prophet had an enormous problem: to convince the doubting exiles that these words could be relied on, that salvation was indeed on its way. Their condition was that described by Ezekiel: 'our bones are dried up'. They had very largely lost hope. The conquest of Jerusalem had appeared to represent a victory for the gods of Babylon over Yahweh. Now in Babylon itself they could all see the Babylonian gods worshipped with great splendour. Babylon, the great world power of its day, appeared to have all the nations in its grasp. How could the prophet convince them that the message he had received was true?