

## Session 10: The Unknown Prophet of the Exile

### B. Second Isaiah's theology

The prophet in exile had the enormous task of convincing a generation who had grown used to living without hope that the time of renewal and restoration was about to arrive. He had to convince a people used to living under the domination of the powerful gods of Babylon that their own God, Yahweh, was even more powerful. How was he to go about it? There are four main elements in his explanation – the ‘theology’ or picture of God, with which he aims to convince the doubting exiles. We will look at the first three in this section and then focus in detail on the fourth and crucial part of the jig-saw.

#### 1. Yahweh is the sole creator of the world

##### Activity 10.2

Read Isaiah 40:12-end

Israel had always believed that Yahweh was creator of the world. At least part of the creation narratives of Genesis, which we will be looking at in a future session, had been existence for hundreds of years. In the 8th century Amos interjected praise to Yahweh the creator among his prophetic oracles:

##### Amos 4:13

For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind,  
reveals his thoughts to mortals,  
makes the morning darkness,  
and treads on the heights of the earth—  
the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name!

##### Amos 9:5-6

The Lord, God of hosts,  
he who touches the earth and it melts,  
and all who live in it mourn,  
and all of it rises like the Nile,  
and sinks again, like the Nile of Egypt;  
who builds his upper chambers in the heavens,  
and finds his vault upon the earth;  
who calls for the waters of the sea,  
and pours them out upon the surface of the earth—  
the Lord is his name.

But the prophet wants the exiles to give these traditions full weight. After the introductory oracle he places this long poem on the majesty of Yahweh as creator. It is a theme that recurs throughout the book:

**Isaiah 42:5**

Thus says God, the Lord,  
 who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
 who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
 who gives breath to the people upon it  
 and spirit to those who walk in it:

**Isaiah 45:18**

For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (he is God!),  
 who formed the earth and made it  
 (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!):  
 I am the Lord, and there is no other.

Part of the background to the thoughts the prophet expresses here is the first commandment: 'You shall have no other gods beside me.' He uses this traditional belief of the Judaean community in exile to develop a polemic against Babylonian religion. In Babylonian mythology the world was made by a committee in which several gods co-operated. Yahweh, on the other hand, does not need help from anyone else (verses 13-14). The stars are not gods influencing human destiny, and the Babylonian astrologers thought them to be, but simply part of the created order (26). In fact the prophet's polemic against astrology recurs in several other passages:

**Isaiah 47:12-13**

Stand fast in your enchantments and your many sorceries,  
 with which you have laboured from your youth;  
 perhaps you may be able to succeed, perhaps you may inspire terror.

13 You are wearied with your many consultations;  
 let those who study the heavens stand up and save you,  
 those who gaze at the stars and at each new moon predict what shall befall you.

In verse 18 the prophet begins his polemic against idol-worship, which again he will continue throughout the book, most notably in chapters 44 and 46. Here he is drawing on the second commandment, 'You shall not make for yourselves graven images,' and giving it a rationale. Unlike the idols of Babylon, Yahweh is not a god you can see. No image can fully convey his reality because he is incomparable. He sits above the earth and pours contempt on those who think that a man-made image is capable of conveying anything of the divine. Chapter 46 brilliantly compares the gods who have to be carried (in sacred procession) with the God who carries his people:

**Isaiah 46:1-5**

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops, their idols are on beasts and cattle;  
 these things you carry are loaded as burdens on weary animals.  
 They stoop, they bow down together; they cannot save the burden,  
 but themselves go into captivity.

Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn grey I will carry you.

I have made, and I will bear; will carry and will save.

To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, as though we were alike?

thirdly, because Yahweh is creator, the nations are nothing: they are like a drop in a bucket, dust on the scales (verse 15). Yahweh brings their rulers to nothing (23): if he wants to save his people from Babylon he is perfectly capable of doing it.

Finally, he points the immediate application for his people: Yahweh the great creator is the one who gives power to his people. In exile, Israel is faint and weak, with no might and no hope. But Yahweh is the creator who never grows weary. He gives strength to those who 'wait' for him, or as we would put it, who 'trust' or 'put their faith' in him.

## 2. Yahweh has revealed what he is about to do through the prophets

### Activity 10.3

Read Isaiah 41

Make a note of the key themes occurring in these verses that we have already encountered.

Make a note of other new themes occurring for the first time in this chapter.

Here the prophet is claiming to stand in the tradition of his predecessors, who have stood in the heavenly council and revealed Yahweh's plans to his people. Hosea had foretold that the exile would become a second wooing; Isaiah of Jerusalem had foretold that Yahweh would use Assyria to punish the proud and the oppressors among his people; Jeremiah had foretold that Jerusalem would fall but also that the exiles would eventually return. These are the servants of Yahweh, who foretell 'the end from the beginning' (46:10). Now he is continuing in that tradition.

His specific prophecy is that Yahweh is raising 'one from the east' (verse 2) to serve him. Cyrus the Persian is on his way and to prove that this is Yahweh's doing the unknown prophet is revealing it to his people beforehand, something the so-called prophets of Babylon are completely unable to do (verses 21-29). Later in the book, the predictions become even more specific:

### Isaiah 44:24 – 45:1

Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:  
 I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens,  
     who by myself spread out the earth;  
     who frustrates the omens of liars, and makes fools of diviners;  
     who turns back the wise, and makes their knowledge foolish;  
 who confirms the word of his servant, and fulfils the prediction of his messengers;  
     who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited',  
 and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be rebuilt, and I will raise up their ruins';

who says to the deep, 'Be dry—I will dry up your rivers';  
 who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose';  
 and who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be rebuilt',  
 and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'

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:

The fact that Yahweh does these things and that his prophets predict them is not separated in the prophet's mind: the one who does them is the one who gives the power to foretell. In 45:1 he even calls Cyrus Yahweh's 'messiah' or anointed: he is to be used to fulfil Yahweh's purpose, even though he does not acknowledge him.

### 3. Yahweh's great love for his people

So Yahweh has to power to set his people free, but does he want to? The prophet's third great theme is the Lord's undying love for his people. This theme includes their forgiveness, since they have to acknowledge that all their suffering is punishment for sins in order to believe that the punishment can come to an end and salvation come.

This theme begins to be developed in chapter 43:

#### Activity 10.4

Read Isaiah 43

Yahweh, Israel's creator calls them not to fear. He is their 'go-el' or 'redeemer, the near relative with the task of looking after members of the family who fell on hard times (verse 1). Israel is more precious to him than any of the other nations: in fact, he is going to judge all the nations that are hostile to Israel and they will become tributary to Israel and recognise him as the only God:

#### Isaiah 45:14, 23

Thus says the Lord:

The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia,  
 and the Sabeans, tall of stature, shall come over to you and be yours,  
 they shall follow you;

they shall come over in chains and bow down to you.

They will make supplication to you, saying,  
 'God is with you alone, and there is no other; there is no god besides him.'

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!  
 For I am God, and there is no other.

By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness  
 a word that shall not return:  
 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.'

In verses 8-13 the prophet goes on to say that Yahweh's purpose in doing all this is that Israel are to be witnesses to all the other nations, even though at present they do not realise it and Yahweh is having to work without their co-operation. Similarly in chapter 49 the purpose of Israel, Yahweh's servant, is to bring his salvation to the ends of the earth.

In the second part of the book the prophet develops the theme of the forsaken bride, which occurs in the introductory oracle in 40:1-2, when the prophet is told to woo Jerusalem. The next mention comes in 49:18 when those who come to Jerusalem to rebuild the city are compared to a bride's ornaments and in the following verses to the returning children of a bereaved and barren mother. In 50:1 the prophet asks whether Jerusalem has been divorced or sold to a creditor that she finds herself without a husband or children. The answer is No: Yahweh does not have any creditors; it was for her sins that Jerusalem, the unfaithful wife, was put away. In 51:1-2 comes a reminder of Abraham and Sarah: Sarah was barren but now has many descendants. Finally in chapter 54 the theme comes its full expression. Again with Sarah in mind, the barren woman is about to bear many children: her humiliation is over. Her maker is her husband (54:5) the Holy One of Israel is her redeemer: he has fulfilled his obligation by marrying the deserted wife and she is to have children. Her abandonment was for a brief moment, but his love is for eternity.

### Isaiah 54:4-10

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

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

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

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 the Lord, your Redeemer.

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.