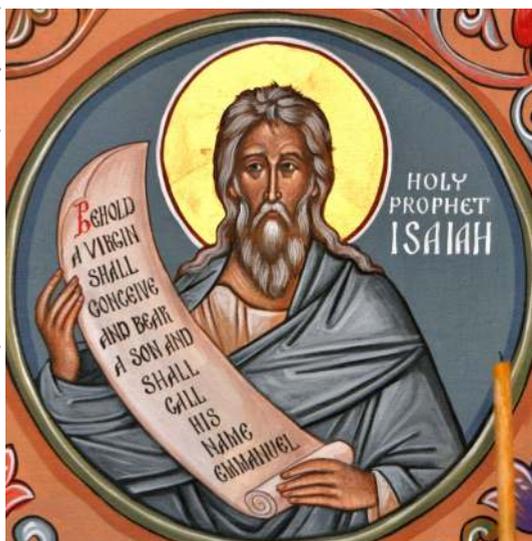


The God of Israel through the eyes of the prophet Isaiah

The prophecies in the book of Isaiah are recorded as being the work of the son of Amos, who prophesied in Judah in the Southern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century BCE. However, due to the variety of mood within the book, scholars have long suggested that there are at least two authors at work here. Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians in 787 BCE and the people of Israel were exiled into Babylonia, and it is this exile and subsequent second Exodus (the first Exodus being from Egypt) that the author is addressing. In effect, whereas the first thirty-nine chapters prophesy mainly judgement and doom because Israel has turned away from her God, chapter forty begins a new theme, that of comfort and consolation for her return to her one supreme God, who is 'first and last'. In contrast to this image of Israel's God, the gods of Babylon are but lifeless statues with no power to direct the course of human destiny.

The context for this message is national history. In the language of the major prophets, the invasions of Israel by Assyria and of Judah by Babylonia are not described in secular terms as invasion, deportation of peoples and economic decline. Instead, they are given a theological framework of reference where invasion is judgement caused by the nation's sin, deportation is the Exile and the land becomes the wilderness. The first Isaiah, up to chapter forty, shares this language code with other prophetic texts, which places its judgemental prophecy in the time of invasion and subsequent Babylonian exile. However, chapters forty onwards go on to offer encouragement after the invasions have occurred and the exodus from Babylonia achieved. This has led scholars to label this section of the book of Isaiah as the 'book of consolation'.



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Invasion and defeat are regarded as the work of God's judgement which the prophet justifies as divine authority, and which is used in order to discipline a people who have strayed from God's commandments. Ultimately, the conquest of a nation by foreign powers raises the question of a crisis in faith. For instance, how in fact did the foreigners triumph? Was it because Israel's God favoured the invaders at that time, or were the gods of the victorious nation more powerful? This second possibility suggests that the God of Israel either cannot, or will not, defend his people. Such a God would appear useless and the temptation in the near Middle East would have been to adopt the gods of the opposing nation as one's own. For Isaiah's contemporaries this would have meant changing to a belief in Marduk, the chief Babylonian god. Isaiah also refers to the God of Israel as the 'Lord of Hosts' and this term has a warfare basis, the Hosts being the divine army led by the warrior God to victory in a holy war. This warrior image of God is not contained in prophecy alone but is also evident in the Torah and the Psalms. Here however, God is in

warrior mode and is in action as salvific creator, his aim this time being a new Exodus from Babylon and a return home to Jerusalem which will then be rebuilt and the Temple foundations re-laid. Isaiah prophesies that God will achieve this in two ways.



The Cyrus cylinder: exploringbiblelands.com

Firstly, by naming, authorising and empowering a foreign king, Cyrus of Persia, as leader of the coming super power to act as his warrior on Israel's behalf. The use of rich enthronement language in respect to Cyrus may well reflect the ceremony which was enacted at the accession of Israelite kings. Furthermore, it is evident that a tradition from outside Israel has spread into the

wording of the Old Testament text here, because the wording parallels closely the text of the 'Cyrus Cylinder', 538 BCE. Here too, the Babylonian god, Marduk chooses Cyrus as his agent, takes him by the hand and calls him by name in order to grant him world dominion. The clay 'Cyrus Cylinder' is inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform, which is a form of wedge shaped writing relating to Cyrus the king of Persia, 559-530 BCE and the conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. The cylinder was discovered in the Babylonian ruins of Iraq in several fragments in the mid-nineteenth century. It is currently held in the British Museum.

Secondly, and even more remarkable, by naming Cyrus as his 'anointed one', God bestows on Cyrus the Jewish title for Messiah, a title normally applied to Israel's high priests. Certainly, it would appear that in commissioning Cyrus, God is breaking the link between his action in the political sphere on behalf of his chosen Israel and the Davidic monarchy. In effect, God will control events through Cyrus by smoothing his passage through the mountains and by shattering the 'gate-bars' of Babylon. We are given an interesting insight into the writer's perception of the God of Israel's understanding of nature here because there is no assumption of altruism in Cyrus. Rather, Cyrus is promised monetary reward and plunder for services rendered. God tells Cyrus that he, the God of Israel, is the only God and that any Persian or Babylonian gods that may have been adopted by Israel in exile are as nothing compared to him. All things are attributable to the God of Israel and indeed the salvation that God promises does indeed come. Nevertheless, echoes of the Babylonian astral and creation gods are still evident in the text. This is because the second Isaiah puts words of worship and praise into an agricultural context, re-enforcing the point that it is the God of Israel that causes the earth to prosper and not Marduk. This text has an enormous feel of energy about it which is communicated to the reader through the image of a proactive God whose intent it is to re-energise the very heart of Israel's faith.

To this end, the message of doom and punishment of the first Isaiah is thus inappropriate and we are ultimately left with the image of the God of Israel as a loving redeemer. 'Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her... that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.'

Barbara Knight