



Second Isaiah:
*Prophet of Hope to
a People in Exile*

CORK SCRIPTURE GROUP – ONLINE SPRING MODULE 2021

‘Seasons of Hope – Biblical Perspectives on Hope’

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The Book of Isaiah

Modern biblical scholars generally accept that the Book of Isaiah, as it has come down to us, is a collection of prophecies and oracles delivered over a minimum of two or three centuries.

Isaiah, chapters 1 -39, record the oracles of the prophet Isaiah, dated to the second half of the eighth century BCE when Israel was still living in the promised land and was still ruled by a king of the house of David, but they were under threat from the dominant Assyrian empire.

Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah, chapters 40-55, date from the time of the Babylonian exile [587-538 BCE] when the people of Israel are in exile in Babylon, the Temple has been destroyed and Jerusalem lay in ruins.

Third Isaiah, chapters 56-66, continues the themes of the previous parts but puts them in the context of the return from exile, with an emphasis on the importance of keeping the law and on the triumph of God.

The Experience of Exile

It is almost impossible for us to imagine how devastating a blow the exile must have been to Israel's sense of self-identity. They regarded themselves as God's chosen people. God had promised them the land and that they would be ruled in perpetuity by the house of David. The Temple was understood as the dwelling place of God. In the exile, all of the central elements of their self-understanding had been mercilessly stripped from them and they were deported to Babylon as slaves. Whilst the prophets interpreted the exile as a punishment for their failure to live as the people of the covenant, the experience of exile raised all sorts of questions for Israel.

- + Has God abandoned them? Is there any way back?
- + Have the gods of the Babylonians proved more powerful than Yahweh?
- + Where can they look for hope?

The sense of hopelessness experienced in exile is captured in Ezekiel 37:11:

'Son of man, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They keep saying, "Our bones are dry, our hope has gone; we are done for."

or again in Lamentations 1:17:

Zion stretches out her hands with no one to comfort her.

Their plight and anguish are powerfully expressed in the despondency of Psalm 137.

Because Second Isaiah refers to Babylon's fall to Cyrus, King of Persia, as imminent but not yet accomplished, scholars usually date Second Isaiah to the last years of the Babylonian Empire before Cyrus captured the city in 539 BCE. In contrast to the Babylonians, Cyrus pursued a general policy of repatriation to their homelands of peoples held captive in the lands he conquered.

Questions for Reflection

With this historical background in mind, I invite you to read the following passages and to reflect on the following questions:

1. *What is the prophet's dominant message to the people?*
2. *What is the basis of this message?*
3. *What does the prophet reveal about God and what effect do you believe his message would have had for a people in exile?*

Text A

Isaiah 40:1-11 NJB

- ¹ 'Console my people, console them,' says your God.
² 'Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and cry to her that her period of service is ended, that her guilt has been atoned for, that, from the hand of Yahweh, she has received double punishment for all her sins.'
³ A voice cries, 'Prepare in the desert a way for Yahweh. Make a straight highway for our God across the wastelands.
⁴ Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be levelled, every cliff become a plateau, every escarpment a plain;
⁵ then the glory of Yahweh will be revealed and all humanity will see it together, for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.'
⁶ A voice said, 'Cry aloud!' and I said, 'What shall I cry?' - 'All humanity is grass and all its beauty like the wild flower's.
⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of Yahweh blows on them.
⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God remains for ever.'
⁹ Go up on a high mountain, messenger of Zion. Shout as loud as you can, messenger of Jerusalem! Shout fearlessly, say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God.'
¹⁰ Here is Lord Yahweh coming with power, his arm maintains his authority, his reward is with him and his prize precedes him.
¹¹ He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast and leading to their rest the mother ewes.

Text B

Isaiah 44:24-28

- ²⁴ Thus says Yahweh, your redeemer, he who formed you in the womb: I, Yahweh, have made all things, I alone spread out the heavens. When I hammered the earth into shape, who was with me? ²⁵ I, who foil the omens of soothsayers and make fools of diviners, who confound sages turning their knowledge into folly, ²⁶ who confirm the word of my servant and make the plans of my envoys succeed; who say to Jerusalem, 'You will be inhabited,' and to the towns of Judah, 'You will be rebuilt and I shall restore the ruins of Jerusalem'; ²⁷ who say to the ocean, 'Dry up! I shall make your rivers run dry'; ²⁸ who say to Cyrus, 'My shepherd.' He will perform my entire will by saying to Jerusalem, 'You will be rebuilt,' and to the Temple, 'You will be refounded.'

Text C

Isaiah 54:4-10

⁴ Do not fear, you will not be put to shame again, do not worry, you will not be disgraced again; for you will forget the shame of your youth and no longer remember the dishonour of your widowhood. ⁵ For your Creator is your husband, Yahweh Sabaoth is his name, the Holy One of Israel is your redeemer, he is called God of the whole world. ⁶ Yes, Yahweh has called you back like a forsaken, grief-stricken wife, like the repudiated wife of his youth, says your God. ⁷ I did forsake you for a brief moment, but in great compassion I shall take you back. ⁸ In a flood of anger, for a moment I hid my face from you. But in everlasting love I have taken pity on you, says Yahweh, your redeemer. ⁹ For me it will be as in the days of Noah when I swore that Noah's waters should never flood the world again. So now I swear never to be angry with you and never to rebuke you again. ¹⁰ For the mountains may go away and the hills may totter, but my faithful love will never leave you, my covenant of peace will never totter, says Yahweh who takes pity on you.

Text D

Isaiah 55:10-13

¹⁰ For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not return before having watered the earth, fertilising it and making it germinate to provide seed for the sower and food to eat, ¹¹ so it is with the word that goes from my mouth: it will not return to me unfulfilled or before having carried out my good pleasure and having achieved what it was sent to do. ¹² Yes, you will go out with joy and be led away in safety. Mountains and hills will break into joyful cries before you and all the trees of the countryside clap their hands. ¹³ Cypress will grow instead of thorns, myrtle instead of nettles. And this will be fame for Yahweh, an eternal monument never to be effaced.