

Exile in Babylon 597-538

Isaiah Scroll 40-55

09. Isaiah 42-48



Isaiah 42:1

Here is my servant [LXX adds 'Israel'], whom I uphold,
my chosen one, in whom my soul delights.

For the second time (see 41:8-9), Israel is referred to by YHWH as 'my servant', the one whom YHWH has chosen. In 41:8-10, Israel was assured that there was nothing to fear, for YHWH was with them. They would be able to do what they were being summoned to do, not by their own strength, but by the victorious power of YHWH. Here the focus is on the mission that YHWH is confiding to them.

Jesus' Baptism (Matthew 3:17)

Jesus' Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5)

Isaiah 42:1-4

I have put my spirit upon him;

he will establish justice for the nations.

He will not shout or raise his voice, or make it heard in the street;

a bruised reed he will not break,

and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.

He will establish a just order.

He will not grow faint or be crushed

until he has established justice in the earth;

and the coastlands wait for his law [Torah].

Abraham had been told: 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'(Genesis 12:3). Now Abraham's offspring (41:8) is being told that they are to establish justice'(mišpāṭ) for the nations, an order based on YHWH's 'law'(tôrâ, 41:4). They will do this, not in the manner of the empires of the day (by violence), but by teaching the world the ways of YHWH.

Isaiah 42:5-7

Thus says God, YHWH,

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:

I, YHWH, have called you in righteousness,

I have taken you by the hand and kept you;

I have given you as a covenant to the people,

a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,

from the prison those who sit in darkness.

It is by being faithful to their covenant with God that Israel will reveal YHWH to the world, and teach the nations how to live. It is this that will enlighten the nations and redeem the world.

Isaiah 42:8-12

I, YHWH, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.
See, the events predicted have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.
Sing to YHWH a new song,
his praise from the ends of the earth!
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,
the coastlands and their inhabitants.
Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the tops of the mountains.
Let them give glory to YHWH,
and declare his praise in the coastlands.

Isaiah 42:13-15

YHWH goes forth like a hero, like a warrior he stirs up his fury;
he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes.
For a long time I have held my peace, kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant.
I will lay waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their herbage;
I will turn the rivers into islands, and dry up the pools.

The fall of Babylon will open the way for the exiles to return home to restore Judah and to carry on the mission entrusted to them. For many years those in exile and those back home in Jerusalem could see no way out of their situation. The prophet-preachers began by exhorting them to prepare a way because YHWH, their God, was coming to them (see Isaiah 40:1-11). Now they tell them that YHWH has prepared a way for them.

Isaiah 42:16-17

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know,
by paths they have not known I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them.
They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame –
those who trust in carved images,
who say to cast images, “You are our gods.”

This is yet another assertion of the folly of trusting in carved images.
It is a criticism of Babylon, but it is also a warning to the people of
Judah, whether in exile or at home, not to compromise their faith,
but to place their trust in YHWH alone.

Isaiah 42:18-20

How can the prophet-preachers expect the people to listen? They were blind and deaf to God's prophetic word before. Why should they be expected to see and hear now? The prophet-preachers begin by highlighting the chronic blindness and deafness of the people whom YHWH has chosen as his 'servant' to carry out his will in the world.

Listen, you that are deaf; and you that are blind, look up and see!
Who is as blind as my servant,
or as deaf as my messenger whom I send?
Who is as blind as my dedicated one,
or as blind as the servant of YHWH?
He sees many things, but does not observe them;
his ears are open, but he does not hear.

Isaiah 42:21-25 focus on YHWH as the one responsible for the Exile

Isaiah 43:1-3

But now thus says YHWH,

he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am YHWH your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

It is true that YHWH saw fit to punish Judah, but it was in view of purifying the people. Now, however, 'she has served her term'(40:2).

YHWH, the lord of creation (see 40:12-31), and the lord of history, is their redeemer (see 41:14).

Isaiah 43:3-6

I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
I will say to the north, “Give them up,”
and to the south, “Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth ...

If it means that these
nations must be
conquered, so be it.

Isaiah 43:10-14

You are my witnesses, says YHWH,
and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that **I AM** (see 41:4).

Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

I, I am YHWH, and besides me there is no saviour.

I declared and saved and proclaimed,
when there was no strange god among you;
and you are my witnesses, says YHWH.

I am God, and also henceforth **I AM**;

there is no one who can deliver from my hand;

I work and who can hinder it?

Thus says YHWH, your **Redeemer**, the **Holy One of Israel**.

Isaiah 43:14 - 44:8 replays earlier themes

Isaiah 43:25

‘I, I am He’ (’ānōkî ’ānōkî hû’). who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.’

Isaiah 44:1-4

But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen!
Thus says YHWH who made you,
who formed you in the womb and will help you:
Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen.
For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my spirit upon your descendants,
and my **blessing** on your offspring.
They shall spring up like a green tamarisk,
like willows by flowing streams.

Isaiah 44:6-8

Thus says YHWH, the King of Israel,
and his Redeemer, YHWH of hosts:

I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.

Who is like me? Let them proclaim it,
let them declare and set it forth before me.

Who has announced from of old the things to come?
Let them tell us what is yet to be.

Do not fear, or be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?

You are my witnesses!

Is there any god besides me?

There is no other rock; I know not one.

Isaiah 44:9-20 : a polemic against idolatry

Isaiah 44:21-26 YHWH is inviting his people into intimate communion.

Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant;

I formed you, you are my servant;

O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.

I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, your sins like mist;
return to me, for I have redeemed you.

Sing, O heavens, for YHWH has done it; shout, O depths of the earth;
break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it!

For YHWH has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel.

Thus says YHWH, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:

I am YHWH, 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 overturns the wise, reducing to folly their knowledge;

who confirms the word of his servant,

and fulfils the prediction of his messengers.

Isaiah 44:27 – 45:6 Oracle concerning Cyrus

Of Cyrus he says, “He is my shepherd,
and he shall carry out all my purpose” ...
For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I give you your title, though you do not know me.
I am YHWH, and there is no other; besides me there is no god.
I gird you with strength, though you do not know me,
so that they may know, from the rising of the sun to its setting,
that there is no one besides me;
I am YHWH, and there is no other.

The Persian record claims that Marduk chose Cyrus to capture Babylon. Not so, says the preacher. It is YHWH who chose him ‘for the sake of Israel’.

From the clay cylinder of Cyrus, 538BC

‘Marduk scoured all the lands for a friend, seeking for the upright prince ... He called Cyrus, king of Anshan. He nominated him to be ruler over all ... To them Cyrus tried to behave with justice and righteousness. Marduk, the great lord, compassionate to his people, looked with gladness on his good deeds and his upright intentions. He gave orders that he go against his city Babylon. He made him take the road to Babylon and he went at his side like a friend and comrade.’

Isaiah 45:7

I form light and create darkness,
I make well-being and create woe;
I Yahweh do all these things.

This extraordinary (and in the Bible, unique) statement stresses the all-embracing nature of YHWH's power. But it breaks the careful theological balance found in other texts, in which darkness and sin are not created by Yahweh, though they are not independent of God's lordship.

Isaiah 45:8

Drop down dew, O heavens, from above,
and let the skies rain down righteousness;
let the earth open, that salvation may spring up,
and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also;
I YHWH have created it.

The prophet-preachers know that what the world needs most is that people recognise that YHWH is the only real God and that people learn to do God's will. What the world needs is 'righteousness'. They burst into prayer, ending with an assurance that the prayer is being answered.

Isaiah 45:9-13

If God so chooses he can choose a foreign king, Cyrus, to carry out his purpose

Isaiah 45:14-17

Thus says YHWH: 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.”

Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour. All of them are put to shame and confounded, the makers of idols go in confusion together. But Israel is saved by YHWH with everlasting salvation; you shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity.

YHWH's decisions (including the decision to use Cyrus) are, indeed, mysterious, but this should not come as a surprise, for the prophet-preachers are speaking of YHWH, not one of the useless gods of the surrounding nations.

Isaiah 45:18-19

For thus says YHWH, 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 lived in!):
‘I am YHWH, and there is no other.

I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness;
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, “Seek me in chaos.”
I YHWH speak the truth, I declare what is right.’

Isaiah 45:22-23

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 bend, every tongue shall swear.”

Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:9-11

Isaiah 46:1-2 The Babylonian gods are packed off to exile

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops, their idols are loaded onto animals, beasts of burden; these things you once bore aloft are a load for weary animals. They stoop, they bow down together; they cannot rescue the load, but themselves go into captivity.

To grasp the significance of this text (and of a number of other references scattered throughout the preaching) we need to examine the New Year festival to the Babylonian god, Marduk, and the dramatic presentation of the Enuma Elish creation myth. The exiles would have witnessed this.



According to the Babylonian myth, celebrated in the New Year ritual, in the beginning there was nothing but the divine pair **Apsū** and **Tiamat**. From these primordial deities several generations of gods were begotten, but the repose of Apsū was disturbed by the secondary gods, whom he therefore decided to destroy, a proposal rejected by his consort, Tiamat. The wise god **Ea** then discovers the plan and takes pre-emptive action by killing Apsū with the help of magic. The birth of **Marduk** follows, and his many attributes are described. Meanwhile, Tiamat prepares for battle to avenge the death of Apsu, her consort, and appoints **Kingu** as head of the divine assembly, leader of her army, and keeper of the tablets of destiny. Since the gods are afraid to take on Tiamat, **Marduk**, also known as **Bēl**, agrees to do so with the condition that he is appointed supreme god in the divine assembly.

The gods accept with the acclamation “Marduk is king!”(Enuma Elish 4.28) and equip him with a sceptre, royal robe, throne and magical weapons. In the contest that follows, Tiamat is defeated and killed, and out of her body are created the sky, the stars, constellations, sun and moon, the earth and the waters surrounding the earth. The human being, a lowly creature (lullu), is created by the god Ea out of the blood of the slaughtered Kingu, mixed with slime. To humanity is assigned the task of relieving the secondary gods of the duty of serving the high gods. In gratitude, the gods erect the esagila sanctuary for Marduk, Enlil, and Ea. A banquet follows, and the destinies are fixed. The poem ends with the recital of a litany of the fifty names of Marduk and the praise of his incomparable greatness: “none among the gods can equal him”(Enuma Elish VII 14).

Once the creation myth is presented, the statues of Marduk (Bēl) and his son, Nabū (Nebo), were led in procession to the akitu house (bit akiti), outside the city. Isaiah 46:1-2 parodies this procession. It will not be long before the Babylonians will be packing up their gods in an effort to save them and processing out of the city – into exile! Isaiah 51:9-10 portrays YHWH (not Marduk) as slaying the beast of chaos. YHWH is presented as the cosmic creator throughout, and, against the Babylonian story of many gods, it is declared “Before me no god was formed, and there will be none after me”(Isaiah 43:10). YHWH has no need of a counsellor such as Ea (Isaiah 40:13-14; 41:28).

YHWH alone (not Marduk) controls the heavens (Isaiah 40:26; 45:12).
YHWH (not Marduk) 'reigns as king' (Isaiah 52:7). The Babylonians shout: 'None among the gods can equal Marduk!' Again and again the prophet-scribes proclaim that nothing can compare to YHWH: 'I am YHWH and there is no other' (Isaiah 45:5, 6, 18, 22; 46:9).

Isaiah 46:1-5

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops, their idols are loaded onto animals, beasts of burden; these things you once bore aloft are a load for weary animals. They stoop, they bow down together; they cannot rescue the load, 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, even when you turn grey I will carry you.

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

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

Isaiah 46:8-13

The people resist the thought that YHWH could choose Cyrus

Isaiah 46:9-10

I am God, and there is no other.

I am God, and there is no one like me,

My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfil my intention.

Isaiah 47:1-15 The prophet-preachers taunt Babylon

Isaiah 48:1-19

The prophet-preachers accuse the exiles of being caught up in the idolatrous practices of their Babylonian captors. YHWH wants to be known, for people can experience true life only through communion with him – not by worshiping man-made gods in a cult that keeps people locked in the pursuit of their own need for security and control. He must punish his chosen instrument, Israel, but only to purify them that they may not lose their way and fail in the mission that he has entrusted to them to make his glory known.

Isaiah 48:20-22

Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,
declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it,
send it forth to the end of the earth;
say, “YHWH has redeemed his servant Jacob!”
They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts;
he made water flow for them from the rock;
he split open the rock and the water gushed out.
“There is no peace,” says YHWH, “for the wicked.”