

Mission and Meaning
Essays Presented to Peter Cotterell

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The Meaning of Mission in Isaiah 40-55

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The traditional Christian view of the Book of Isaiah is that here and there it contains clear predictions of God's blessings to the nations, promises which were to find their fulfilment in the work of Christ and the creation of a worldwide church. The key passages are to be found in chapters 42 and 49, and are thus located within that major section of Isaiah, chapters 40-55, which is now generally labelled 'Second Isaiah'. The traditional viewpoint, of course, developed centuries before the rise of biblical criticism and the subsequent division of the Book of Isaiah. The widespread literary judgment that Isaiah 40-55 represented the work of a later prophet than the eighth century Isaiah of Jerusalem has had the effect of relocating the promises to the nations, attaching them to an exilic prophet instead, but has not in any way diminished the value or content of the passages concerned.

But the authorship of Isaiah 40-55 was not the only aspect of these chapters to come under critical scrutiny. Within this section of the Book of Isaiah four passages in particular came to be identified as separate and distinct poems, not primarily in terms of their origin or authorship, but because of their special concern with 'the Servant of Yahweh' and the nature of their predictions about him. These 'Servant Songs', as they came to be called, presented the future role of this Servant in terms which the New Testament and the Christian church had no hesitation in equating with the work of Jesus Christ. Old Testament scholarship, on the other hand, more concerned with the nature of the promises than the question of their fulfilment, has for over a century now found these passages to be an enigma. There is still no consensus about the import of them: whom do they describe? what sort of person or persons are envisaged? For that

Kings will be your foster fathers,
and their queens your nursing mothers.
They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground;
they will lick the dust at your feet. (49:23)

Several passages strike this same note; and in 52:10 the salvation of God is plainly intended for Israel alone, though seen and acknowledged by 'all the ends of the earth'.

Snaith's views soon attracted supporters, notably P.A.H. de Boer.⁸ These scholars were obliged, however, to give consideration to certain verses which on the face of it undermined their arguments; and so the exegesis of these verses has become crucial. The most important verses in this connection are 42:1-5 and 49:6. In the first of these passages God himself speaks:

I will put my Spirit on him
and he will bring justice to the nations...
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his law the islands will put their hope.

He speaks again in 49:6:

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

These passages, then, promise not only 'justice to the nations' but also 'a light for the Gentiles', and 49:6 adds that God's 'salvation' will reach 'to the ends of the earth'. The latter passage, moreover, explicitly states that the divine purposes were not to be limited to the mere rescue of Jewish exiles from Babylonia. Elsewhere the prophet envisages non-Jews joining the ranks of those who would worship Yahweh (44:5), but that is a more limited 'missionary' message, apparently visualising individuals here and there joining Jewish communities as proselytes; on the face of it, 'a light to the Gentiles' and 'salvation... to the ends of the earth' relate to a much wider prospect and promise. Had such verses, then, been misunderstood or possibly even mistranslated?

Nobody could deny that the word 'justice' in 42:1 is in itself neutral, in Hebrew and English alike. What might be a promise to one individual or nation, justice in the sense of equity, could be a threat of punishment to another – justice in the sense of well-deserved judgment. Thus the prediction of 42:1 could be read either as promise or threat: God's servant would bring 'justice' (*mišpāt*) to the nations – but that might be something to hope for or to dread! Is it not probable, the argument runs, that the prophet anticipated severe judgment upon the nations? Such an interpretation can be supported by the argument that the Hebrew verb *y-h-l* in 42:4 is equally neutral, comparable with the English 'expect'. It is true that among major English translations, the NIV is almost alone in translating it by the word 'hope' (most versions use the neutral term 'wait [for]'). So it can be argued that the enforcement of God's law (*tôrāh*), in the prophet's view, was to be a joyful hope for Israel but a fearful and ominous prospect for her enemies. By such arguments the prophet's message can be narrowed to focus solely on the welfare of the Jews.

As for the passage in chapter 49, the wider horizons of the prophet cannot be denied, but they do not necessarily include foreigners: Yahweh's blessings were not limited to the exiles in Babylon, clearly, but they could still be limited to the people of Israel wherever they might be found. In that way God's salvation might reach the ends of the earth without blessing a single Gentile!

Unfortunately there is one Hebrew phrase very relevant to this discussion which remains obscure. The phrase *b'rit 'am* is unique to two verses in Isaiah, 42:6 and 49:8; literally it means 'covenant of people'. Both nouns are well known, but their combination in this way is surprising and hard to interpret. According to both these verses it is the Servant's destiny to be *b'rit 'am*; but how can a person constitute an agreement? And secondly, who are envisaged as 'people' or 'the people' in such a statement? Presumably either Israel or humanity in general must be meant; but the uncertainty leaves it open whether the prophet's perspective in using the phrase is national or universal. The context in chapter 49 seems to support the national interpretation, since the restoration of 'the land' is the next prediction made. If so, the most natural interpretation of 42:6 is that it sets side by side both blessing to Israel ('covenant') and to the nations ('light').

If we analyse 42:1-7 objectively, in other words without prejudging what the prophet was likely to say, and without deciding in advance the identity of the Servant, we will probably reach conclusions which allow a universal meaning. It is true that the two

⁸ P.A.H. de Boer, *Second Isaiah's Message*, Oudtestamentische Studiën 11 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1956).

Hebrew nouns *mišpāt* and *tôrāh* have a wide range of senses, and that *mišpāt* can mean 'judgment' as readily as it means 'justice'; but there is no indication in context of a negative sense. Indeed, the verb used with it seems inappropriate to the sense of 'judgment', for here *mišpāt* is something 'brought forth' rather than 'pronounced'. Some commentators, it is true, have linked the passage closely with the preceding chapter, allowing the possibility that *mišpāt* means a 'verdict'; but if so, it is a verdict on the trial between Yahweh and idols, not a condemnation of the nations at large. More probably 42:1-4 is a separate unit, discussing the establishment of God's laws among the nations. It is however going too far to say with Moffatt's translation that *tôrāh* here is synonymous with 'true religion'.⁹

The suggestion that in 42:4 the verb *y-ḥ-l* means in effect to 'wait with dread'¹⁰ finds no linguistic support anywhere. It is not a frequent Old Testament verb, but wherever its sense is clear, it is a positive term, expressing hope; this was certainly the sense of the word which continued into postbiblical Hebrew. Thus, from a linguistic point of view it seems a forced interpretation to treat such passages as threats rather than promise. The only reason for doing so would be the argument from coherence. Since the prophet could and did speak out so fiercely against Babylon and other nations, is it conceivable that he could also offer them hope? Where Babylon was concerned, then of course no political hope could be offered, nor was it; but what about the welfare of the nations in general? Was the prophet so immersed in the situation of his time that his vision was limited to hope for Israel and vengeance upon her enemies? Certainly he could speak in such terms as these, as several commentators have emphasised. His hostility to Babylon is not in dispute, nor the fact that he placed Israel above every other nation. However, there is no reason why he or his Jewish audience should have seen all other nations as subject to divine condemnation. Many a small nation had been overrun by the Babylonians in the same way as Judah, and we can conjecture that a degree of sympathy and fellow-feeling existed. The prophet's conviction that Cyrus of Persia would introduce a new era of government to the ancient Near East, an era promising bright hopes for Jewish exiles, must have included the belief that other oppressed peoples would also benefit. To

⁹ Cf. J. Lindblom, *The Servant-Songs in Deutero-Isaiah* (Gleerup: Lund, 1951), 16: 'the sum-total of divine requirements.' On this sort of interpretation, see C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, OTL (London: SCM, 1969), 95; C.R. North, *The Second Isaiah* (Oxford: OUP, 1964), 108.

¹⁰ So Snaith, 'Servant of the Lord', 193-94.

borrow a phrase from one of the Servant Songs, then, Cyrus was expected to function as 'a light to the nations'; if Cyrus, why not the anonymous Servant of Yahweh too? Against this possibility, it might be argued by those who understand the Servant to be a prophetic figure that a prophetic role was intrinsically different from that of Cyrus; but the prophets of Israel had long since interested themselves in the fate of other nations, in their so-called foreign oracles. To be sure, this prophetic tradition had hitherto been strongly critical of other nations; but then the prophetic tradition had also been strongly critical of both Israel and Judah! We cannot automatically deny Israel's prophets the possibility of pronouncing messages of hope to Israel and to other peoples as well.

If the portrait of the Servant in 42:1-4 is a royal one, as many scholars have held, then the brief discussion of the passage by J.H. Eaton is worth consideration. He draws attention to several psalms which depict the worldwide reign of God's chosen king, such as Psalm 98. This psalm invites Israel to rejoice in Yahweh's salvation, and adds (vs. 2-4):

The LORD has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations...
Shout for joy to the LORD all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music.

Evidently the psalmist, at least, anticipated not only worldwide dominion for Yahweh's king but also widespread joy resulting. This picture seems very probably the same as that in Isaiah 42, and Eaton argues that the prophet was making deliberate use of such earlier psalms.¹¹

Those scholars who reduce or deny the universalistic message of Second Isaiah frequently exaggerate his nationalism. The passages which express hostility to other nations are not in fact very numerous, and their focus is very much on Israel's enemies and oppressors, from Egypt in the past to Babylon in the contemporary situation. In general the nations are fairly neutrally presented, as spectators of the divine blessings to Israel – spectators, but drawn towards Israel in consequence of what they see:

I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants...
One will say, 'I belong to the LORD';

¹¹ Cf. J.H. Eaton, *Festal Drama in Deutero-Isaiah* (London: SPCK, 1979), 18, 47ff.

another will call himself by the name of Jacob;
still another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,
and will take the name Israel. (44:3-5)

The question of coherence also points us to the strong monotheistic features of Isaiah 40-55. This prophet was perhaps the first to perceive clearly that Yahweh was not merely the sole deity for Israel but the only God in the universe. He pours scorn on the idols of Babylon (46:1-7), and his sheer contempt for idolatry in general (as in 44:9-20) has often led commentators to accuse him of either failing to understand ancient religious practice, or at any rate misrepresenting it. More probably there was a distinction between the theologians of ancient religions, who were able to distinguish between gods and their iconic representations, and on the other hand ordinary worshippers who very probably equated gods and idols. The prophet was much closer to idolatrous practices than we are, and it seems unlikely that he was setting up a mere Aunt Sally for his denunciation. Be that as it may, his attitude towards other deities is absolutely clear: human beings across the world either worshipped Yahweh or else they worshipped a lie and a delusion.

Such a perception inevitably raises the question, sooner or later, What then are the prospects for those people who do not worship Yahweh? In theory it could be maintained that prophets are not systematic theologians, and that Second Isaiah did not work out the implications of his monotheistic stance. In fact, he clearly did envisage some foreign individuals as turning to the worship of Yahweh (44:5), so if he went no further, he at least began to work out the implications.

An alien note, to modern thinking, appears in a passage like 45:14, which depicts foreigners coming to worship the one true God – but doing so 'in chains' and in submission. Here no doubt the recollection of Egypt as an oppressor influenced the prophet to predict a reversal of the roles, as does 60:14 (whether or not this is the same prophet's words). In any case, it is the Egyptians who are taking the initiative in this verse, so Motyer reasonably deduces that 'the chains symbolize voluntary acceptance of subject status'.¹² The prophet undoubtedly visualised a coming Jewish hegemony, but he saw it primarily as a religious hegemony: the Egyptians come not because they have been conquered in battle and dragged off in literal chains, but because they perceive that 'Surely God is with you, and there is no other; there is no other god'.

Given the prophet's situation and the fact that his primary purpose was to stimulate Jewish hope and faith despite an apparently hopeless political situation, it is all the more remarkable that there are occasional passages which voice God's interest in other peoples. But there are such passages, and they are perfectly coherent with the prophet's conviction of the greatness, power and incomparability of the God of Israel.

To borrow words from Peter Cotterell, we may conclude that the prophet who wrote for us the matchless poetry of Isaiah 40-55 undoubtedly had a 'Mission' in view, even if he did not spell it out in prosaic detail; and we need not doubt that the mission he envisaged was no 'meaningless' one for the majority of humankind – the Gentile world who had yet to experience 'the salvation of our God' (Isa. 52:10). All of us who work and study at London Bible College owe a great deal more than evocative titles to Peter Cotterell, to whom this article is gratefully offered.

¹² Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 364.