

Second Isaiah

Calling Us Home

The last chapters of the scroll of Isaiah (chapter 40 and following) contain writings of an unnamed prophet who lived in the closing days of the Babylonian Exile among the exiled Judean families beginning 47 years earlier. The new historical situation of that time featured the conquests of the Babylonian Empire by the Persian Empire. The policies of this new leading force allowed exiles to return home to their native lands.

Many of these Judean families had become at home in Babylon and were opting to stay. Second Isaiah was rallying a band of Yahwist activists to go home to Judea and rebuild life for those now scattered and chaotic people. Without the success of this project, we might never have heard of the Mosaic breakthrough. This was being understood as a privilege to do this, but it was no easy task. Staying in Babylon was the easier choice.

Second Isaiah felt called to paint a very strong narrative about Yahweh as the God of history—featuring developments on this theme initiated by Amos, Hosea, First Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in recent years and in decades earlier. Here is some of Second Isaiah’s powerful poetry.

Comfort, Comfort my people
—it is the voice of your God
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem
and tell her this:
That her penalty is paid:
She has received from Yahweh’s hand
Double measure for all her sins.

There is a voice that cries
Prepare a Road for Yahweh through the wilderness,
Clear a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up
Every mountain and hill brought down
And mountain ranges become a plain
Thus shall the glory of Yahweh be revealed
And all humankind together shall see it.
For Yahweh himself has spoken.

A voice says, “Cry”,
And another asks, “What shall I cry?”

That all humankind is grass. [including Babylon and Judea]
They last no longer than a flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of Yahweh blows upon them.
The grass withers, the flowers fade,
but the word of our God endures for evermore.

Isaiah40:1-8

And here is a passage that is more specific:

Thus says Yahweh, your ransom,
Who fashioned you from birth.
I, Yahweh, who made all things
By myself I stretched out the skies.
Alone, I hammered out the floor of the Earth.
I frustrate false prophets and their signs,
And make fools of diviners
I reverse what wise men say
And make nonsense of their wisdom
I make my servants' prophecies come true.
And give effect to my messengers designs.
I say to Jerusalem,
"She shall be inhabited once more,"
And of the cities of Judah, they shall be rebuilt.
All their ruins I will restore.
I say to the deep water [to Babylon] "Be dried up;
I say to Cyrus, "You shall be my shepherd.
To carry out my purpose.
So that Jerusalem may be rebuilt.
And the foundations of the temple may be laid.

Isaiah: 44:24-28

Second Isaiah saw Cyrus, the Emperor of Persia, as the servant of Yahweh opening the way for and issuing the calling to these Yahwists in Babylon exile for their return to Judea after their families had been in exile in Babylon for the last 47 years.

This was seen as Yahweh calling for some hard travel to do some very hard work. They saw these sacrifices in the context of obedience to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as Moses, Joshua and so on. Jesus, in the poetry of John, is supposed to have said, "My Father is working and I am working." Second Isaiah might be said to have

pre-staged this Johannine spirit—a spirit about what we might call “attuned working” with Profound Reality.

“Attuned working” for us in the time of Putin, Trump, and other authoritarian demolishers of democracy is also a calling to hard work that we members of these 21st century societies can recognize. In this 21st century, we can also notice the Yahwist calling to “attuned working” being issued to and being taken in by people who do not practice , Jewish, Christian, or Islamic religion. One of the revelatory happenings to us today is that we are called to live in an inter-religious era. We are speaking of and to the same spirit realities with different religious languages—languages as different from the West as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. May strong Christian voices continue to bring the poetry of Second Isaiah to the tables of religious dialogue going on today.

Let us listen together to Second Isaiah calling us “homeward” to the revelations that have activated the long histories of our various religions traditions and to the opening in our current cultures for some much improved vision on acting human.

And let us give fresh restatement to the power narratives that previous prophets have powered the actions of those previous applications of our various revelatory gifts and to the applications called for today by our also troubled times.