Alliance Theological Seminary

Exegetical Paper on Isaiah Chapter 43

Submitted to Professor Dr. Russell Mack in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of the course

OT 751 Isaiah

by

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Introduction

1. Historical Background

Isaiah 6:1 informs us that Isaiah's ministry began in 740 BCE, the year of King Uzziah's death in Judah. It was a turbulent time. The northern Kingdom of Israel experienced a series of usurpations and had 6 kings in 30 years before Samaria's fall to Assyria in 722 BCE during King Hoshea's reign.[1] Before the fall, King Pekah, who was assassinated by King Hoshea (2 Kgs 15:30), joined Aram in rebelling against Assyria to avoid paying heavy tribute. Their attempt to force king Ahaz of Judah to join their collision resulted in the Syro-Ephraimite War (735-732 BCE)[2], which was the background of Isaiah 7-8. Isaiah 36-37 narrates king Hezekiah of Judah facing the Assyrian king Sennacherib's invasion and siege of Jerusalem (701 BCE)[3], and Chapter 39 describes the visit of Merodach-baladan's envoys from Babylon (713–714 or 703–702 BCE)[4]. Most scholars agree that the reversed narrative order is due to ideological considerations, and that Chapter 39 provides a link to the exile background of the following chapters.[5] There is general consensus that Chapters 40-55 contain prophesies written to a group of Hebrew exiles in Babylon.[6] Before and after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem (587 BCE), a few deportations took Judeans into captivity. Data concerning the number of exiles vary, but it is estimated that around 40,000, which makes up half the total population of Judah, were affected by the invasion and exile either as deportees or casualties.[7] Thus, the to-be-discussed Chapter 43 of Isaiah has a highly chaotic historical background. It was directed to a group of people who witnessed and experienced more than a century of chaos, destruction, and tragedy.

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[1] Kim Hyun Chul Paul, *Reading Isaiah: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2016), 7.
[2] Kim Hyun Chul Paul, *Reading Isaiah*, 8.
[3] Ibid
[4] Wilson De Angelo Cunha, "Isaiah 39 and the Motif of Human Trust in First Isaiah," *Journal of Biblical Literature,* 141:1(2022):106.
[5] Wilson Cunha, "Isaiah 39 and the Motif of Human Trust," 105.
[6] Gary V. Smith, "Isaiah 40-55: Which Audience was Addressed?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, JETS 54:4 (Dec 2011):701.
[7] Kim Hyun Chul Paul, *Reading Isaiah*, 11-2.

2. Literary Context

Chapter 43 belongs to what a lot of scholars identify as "Second Isaiah" (Chapters 40-55)[8], which deals with Israel's role in the world. A major theme is God's faithfulness in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness. There is hope in the future, for God will deliver and fulfill His promises to His people out of His merciful and faithful nature.[9] The section can be further divided into subdivisions, with Chapter 40 as an introduction, Chapters 41-48 addressing God's desire and ability to rescue, and chapters 49-55 dealing with the issue of sin.[10] In the Chapters preceding Isaiah 43, there is an imaginary court case (41:1) between God and the idols in which God demonstrates His supremacy and comforts Israel[11], what is known as the first of the four Servant Songs of "Second Isaiah" (42:1-4)[12], and the contrasting blind servant Israel (42:19).[13]

3. Main Characters

Chapter 43 is entirely a speech made by God. There are only two characters: God, and Israel whom He directly addresses.

3.1 God

The speaker is the Lord God YHWH, and He made many self-identifications throughout the chapter. He is the creator and redeemer of Israel (43:1, 14, 15), the Holy One of Israel (43:3, 14), the only savior (43:11), and king of Israel (43:15).

3.2 Israel

Starting from the opening verse, Israel is named three times (43:1, 22, 28). In all three instances, there is a dual reference to Jacob and Israel. Constable believes that this shows God's tenderness towards this nation[14], whereas Edward Young proposes that it hints a transformation from Jacob the deceiver to Israel the heir of God's promises.[15] Israel is clearly in a position that requires comfort and

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[8] Thomas L. Constable, *Dr Constable's Notes on Isaiah* (2023 Edition), 255-6.
[9] Ibid.
[10] John N. Oswalt, *The NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), 443.
[11] John Oswalt, *The NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah*, 458-60.
[12] Arland J. Hultgren, "Jesus and the Servant Songs of Isaiah," *Word & World*, Supplement Series (2017): 125.
[13] J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah* (Nottingham, England: IVP Academic, 2009), 299.
[14] Constable, *Dr Constable's Notes on Isaiah* (2023 Edition), 291.
[15] Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, Vol 3, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 139.

deliverance (43:1-3). She is the loved and chosen witness of God (43:4, 10, 12). Although she failed in her mission of honoring God (43:22-24), God will forgive her for His own sake (43:25).

4. Argument

God created and chose Israel to be His witness. He has both the desire and the ability to deliver Israel. He will do so in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness.

5. Purpose

Israel was to be comforted and encouraged. She should understand that the nation's suffering was brought by sin. Israel can trust in God who will deliver her, and she will become the witness and servant of God that she was intended to be.

6. Key verse

"You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.
(Isaiah 43:10)

7. Major Themes

God's relationship with Israel
God's promise of deliverance
God's uniqueness and His ability to deliver
The role of Israel
The sins of Israel

Interpretation and Exposition

1. God loves Israel and will deliver her (43:1-4)

Chapter 43 opens with וְעַתָּה. Considering that the previous verse is about God's anger (42:25) and the following about God's salvation, the *vav* here is clearly an adversative one.[16] Coupled with עתה (now)[17], it signifies a new beginning. Israel

[16] Ronald J. Willians, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd Ed. (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2007), 432
[17] BDB774A

was blind and ignorant (42:19-20). The people of God have sinned against Him and are now facing His burning anger and the violence of war (42:24-5). They are desperately in need of a new beginning and God's comforting words: fear not. The foundation of such lies in the relationship between God and Israel, which is summed up in the proclamation לִי-אָתָּה (you are mine). As noted by J. Alec Motyer, God proclaims that Israel belongs to Him on three strong grounds. Firstly, because He created and formed Israel. Secondly, because He redeemed (גאל) her. In the Ancient Near East, the redeemer (גואל) is the "Next-of-Kin" that would shoulder the responsibilities of protecting and providing for the family. Thirdly, because God called Israel by name, indicating a personal relationship between God and His people.[18]

Fire and water are traditional symbols of trials and testing[19] and may allude to the hardships of the exile[20]. The appearance of waters, rivers, fire, and flame together in one verse (42:2) suggests a totality of danger and suffering.[21] Nevertheless, Israel will not be harmed for one simple reason: אִתְּךָ-אָנִי (I am with you). Then, God proclaims His identity again: "I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (43:3). The dual reminder of His promised presence and His identity should be enough to bring hope in midst of suffering. The mentioning of passing through waters might also recall memories of the Exodus, which would also be a great comfort to the exiles and would recur in later verses.

An important word that appeared three times in verses 3-4 is תחת, which means in place or instead of.[22] As mentioned, Chapter 42 lays out Israel's sin, but instead of a punishment oracle, God gave Israel words of comfort and love. The exact meaning of verse 3b is unclear and caused plenty of discussion. A possible explanation is that God will reward Persia for allowing the Israelites' return by granting her rulership over Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba.[23] However, the perfect aspect of the verb "give" (נתן) in contrast to the imperfect aspect of the same

[18] Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, 301-2.
[19] Constable, *Dr Constable's Notes on Isaiah* (2023 Edition), 291.
[20] Kim Hyun Chul Paul, *Reading Isaiah*, 204.
[21] Ibid.
[22] BDB1065B,
[23] Constable, *Dr Constable's Notes on Isaiah* (2023 Edition), 291.

verb in the following verse suggests that it might be referring to a past event.[24] John Goldingay, for example, believes that it specifically refers to "God's past act of bringing Israel out of Egypt" and that He will do it again (verse 4)[25].[26] In any case, Israel's sin has caused her own affliction, but God will send someone to replace His people from suffering because Israel is so precious in His eyes. It is an undeserving grace. Eventually, God would even send His only son to replace the many sinners whom He mercifully called.[27]

2. God will gather His people (43:5-7)

Verse 5 opens by repeating two phrases from the previous verses: אַל-תִּירָא (fear not), because אִתְּךָ-אֲנִי (I am with you). Here, the promise of deliverance has a strong sense of inclusion. The four corners of the Earth are all mentioned, again signifying totality.[28] Both sons and daughters are mentioned (43:6), showing that both genders are cared for in God's salvation plan.[29] "Everyone who is called by my name" will be saved. (43:7)

The Hebrew word (43:5) זרע means seed or offspring. In its verb form it describes the action of scattering seed.[30] God foresaw the worldwide scattering of the Israelites, but this could not stop Him from saving Israel. He promised a worldwide regathering "from the end of the earth" (43:6).[31] For a destructed nation and a people group in captivity, the fate of their future generation is of great concern and therefore this is a significant promise. Again, the relationship between God and Israel is the foundation of this promise. In verse 7, three different words with similar meaning together with an emphatic אף [32]are used to reinforce the

[24] Willians, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 162. It is also possible that it is a prophetic perfect, but given the aspect change in verse 4, it is more likely that verse 3 refers to a completed event (complete-action perfect) and verse 4 refers to a future event (Incomplete-action imperfect, see Williams' 167).
[25] The same verb for "give" (נתן) appears again in verse 4, this time in the imperfect aspect.
[26] John Goldingay, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2012), 246.
[27] Constable, *Dr Constable's Notes on Isaiah* (2023 Edition), 292.
[28] Kim Hyun Chul Paul, *Reading Isaiah*, 204.
[29] Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 246.
[30] BDB281A and 282A.
[31] Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, 303.
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importance of this relationship: God created (ברא), formed (יצר), and yes, indeed He made (עשה) Israel for His own glory.

3. Israel is God's witness in the world (43:8-10)

As mentioned, there is an ongoing imaginary court case in Isaiah. Here, the courtroom scenario resumes, and the plaintiff (God) summons Israel and the nations (43:8-9).[33] Israel is referred to as "the blind people that have eyes" and the "deaf that have ears", echoing Isaiah 42:18-19. God's declaration that Israel is His witness (43:10) is astonishing. As Motyer notes, how could anyone expect the blind and the deaf to testify what they saw and heard?[34] Yet, God had given Israel eyes and ears, in other words, "faculties of spiritual perception"[35]. In contrasting comparison to Isaiah 42:20, this time God declares that Israel is to know, believe, and understand who He is (43:10). The preposition למען indicates that this is precisely God's purpose of choosing Israel as His servant. Goldingay sums it up beautifully, "Their being called to bring other people out of darkness will be the means by which they themselves are brought out of darkness, by which their eyes and ears are opened." [36]

4. The uniqueness and supremacy of God (43:11-13)

Although God repeatedly proclaims that Israel is His witness, He goes on to testify for Himself.[37] Following the declaration that there is no god before nor after Him in 43:10b, God reiterates His unique identity. Verse 11 starts with אָנֹכִי יְהוָה (I, I am YHWH). In Biblical Hebrew, repetition is a common way to denote emphasis.[38] In three consecutive verses that follow, God's uniqueness and supremacy is emphasized. He is the only Savior (43:11). His relationship with Israel is exclusive (43:12). Finally, in the form of a verdict, He proclaims that He has been the One since the beginning of time (מיום, literally "from day")[39], no one else can alter the work of His hands. (43:13) The exiles were living in an alien land surrounded by

[33] Kim Hyun Chul Paul, *Reading Isaiah*, 206.
[34] Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, 304.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 248.
[37] Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, 305.
[38] Willians, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 16a.
[39] Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, 304.

foreign gods and their believers, they needed to be reminded of the uniqueness of YHWH.[40] Since He is the only God and savior, He is also the only one who has the ability to redeem Israel.

5. God redeems (43:14-21)

After demonstrating both His desire and ability to save, verse 14 starts with another "Thus says the Lord" where God grandly announces His redemption plan. Babylon is mentioned for the first time since Chapter 39. The Chaldeans were part of Babylon's population and is used as a poetic variant.[41] Ships are also mentioned to denote the fall of a great city in figurative language.[42] The image of Babylon's fall is vivid, but the details of the plan are lacking. God declares that for the sake of Israel "I have sent to Babylon" (43:14) without mentioning who or what He has sent.[43] The purpose is to invoke trust. All Israel needs to know is that God can, and God will surely save her. The identity of the sender is much more important than what is being sent. Therefore, sandwiching this grand announcement we find God's reiteration of His identity: the Holy One of Israel, redeemer, creator, and king. (43:14a, 15)

Then, in verses 16-17, God uses the old exodus to build trust on the certainty of the new exodus. He reminded the Israelites how He made way for their ancestors in the middle of the sea, and that earthly powers rise and fall while He remains sovereign and incomparable. הַמּוֹצִיא(who brings forth) is a substantival participle where the verb functions as a noun.[44] In this way, the name of the "doer" can be hidden. Again, whoever brings forth earthly might is not important. Whether Egypt or Babylon, God can save Israel.

After recalling the past God immediately tells the Israelites not to "remember the former things" (43:18) because He is about to do a new thing (43:19). God wants them to focus on Him and not on former glory or the patterns of past events. As Kim Hyun

[40] Ibid, 303.
[41] Ibid, 305.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 249.
[44] Willians, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 217.

Chul comments, the new exodus "mirrors yet surpasses the old exodus"[45]. The Israelites should know and trust that God will do something new and unimaginable for His people. The section concludes with the reason: they are the chosen people that God formed for Himself. The last part of the verse תְּהִלָּתִי יְסַפֵּרוּ (tell of my praise) is in the imperfect aspect. It is most possibly a permissive imperfect, meaning that (someone/something) authorizes the subject to perform the action.[46] Thus, God created Israel *so that they may* tell of His praise. This is the role of Israel as the servant and witness of YHWH, and the desirable outcome of God's redemption plan.

6. The transgressions of Israel (43:22-28)

In the final section, there is a change in the comforting tone that prevails in the rest of the chapter. At first glance, God's complain that Israel has not been fulfilling her sacrificial duties (43:23-4) might seem strange. Afterall, the Israelites were in exile, the temple was unreachable and sacrifice impossible.[47] Furthermore, God had claimed that Israel's sacrifices mean nothing to Him right in the beginning of the book of Isaiah. (1:11) The key lies in verse 22. 22a is very clear, the real problem is not sacrifice but that Israel has not called upon the Lord. 22b can be translated in different ways, depending on how the conjunction כי is interpreted. Given the context, I believe it is an adversative כי.[48] *Instead* of calling upon the Lord, Israel is wearied about Him. The verb "weary" (יגע) is one of the two critical verbs that bring out the message of verses 22-24 and it appears in all three verses. Israel is *weary* (qal) about God (43:22) although God had never *made her weary* (hiphil) (43:23). The other critical verb is "burden" (עבד hiphil), literally meaning "make (someone) serve". Israel is the servant of God, but God did not want her to be a servant of "rituals and sacrifices" (43:23). Ironically, it is God who eventually became weary and burdened like a servant because of the sins of Israel (43:24).[49] A major theme of what is known as "second Isaiah" is the role of Israel. The ridiculous mismatches brought out by these two verbs demonstrate the undeniable shortcomings of Israel. She has not been performing her role.

[45] Kim Hyun Chul Paul, *Reading Isaiah*, 207.
[46] Willians, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 170.
[47] Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, 307.
[48] Willians, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 447.
[49] Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 251-2.

Still, God promises to forgive and forget the sins of Israel. (43:25) Once more, the only logical connection between the hopeless situation and salvation is the identity of God: אֲנֹכִי אֲנֹכִי הוּא (I, I am He).[50] God will forgive Israel for His own sake. Finally, the chapter concludes with language that is again reminiscent of a court case. God invites Israel to justify herself (43:26), but she is clearly guilty (43:27) and therefore God's judgment is justified (43:28).[51]

Application

1. Given our fallen nature, it would only be fair to expect judgment from God. Yet, instead of harsh judgment God brings comforting words when we are in self-induced suffering. Whatever we did, it is never too late to repent and turn to Him, because He loves us passionately and desires to save us.
2. Relationship is key. The reason that we need not be afraid is God's promise, "I am with you". Isaiah 43 is filled with relational terminology. God is not merely the creator, the king, the savior; He is *our* creator, *our* king, and *our* savior. God's desire is not for us to blindly perform the duties of a servant, but for us to call upon and trust in Him because we know that we have a relationship with Him.
3. God's identity is the reason why He would save and love us despite our sins. He repeatedly states that He created will save His people for His own sake. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that we learn to know, believe, and understand who He is. (43:10) It is not because of who we are or what we did that God saves us. We have no reason to boast. Our only way is to surrender and trust in Him.
4. God's identity defines our identity. We are His witnesses and servants. We need to ask God to open our eyes and ears so that we may know Him and be able to perform our role properly.
5. Remembering the old but expecting the new. What God did for us in the past builds up our faith, but God can always do things in new and unimaginable ways. Whatever situation we are in, God is not confined by our past

[50] Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, 309.
[51] Ibid.

experiences and we can always trust Him to save us. Again, we need to know who He is. God is God, and we belong to our creator who loves us. We will never be able to imagine what God can and will do for us in the future, but we can surely have peace knowing that the only savior is with us and will do new things for us.

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