

Isaiah and the Redemption of Israel

According to Christians, the story of salvation through Jesus Christ began long before his birth in Bethlehem. That story was seen as the continuation and fulfillment of a story that the people of Israel had been telling for centuries, found in the Hebrew Scriptures, which Christians have called the “Old Testament”; and outside of the Psalms, no Old Testament book is alluded to more frequently in the New Testament than the book of the prophet Isaiah, where all of the basic elements of the story of salvation told in ancient Israel can be found.

The book of Isaiah was named after the prophet “son of Amoz” (Isa 1:1), who was active in Jerusalem and Judah toward the end of the eighth century BCE; he is mentioned several times in the book as well as elsewhere in the Old Testament. However, it is widely recognized that parts of the book, most notably chapters 40–66, were written at least a couple of centuries later, since they speak to the situation of the Israelites living in exile in Babylonia during the sixth century BCE (chapters 40–55) and those who had returned from the exile after the Babylonian Empire was subjected to the Persian king Cyrus in the year 539 BCE (chapters 56–66).¹ While it is not clear whether an individual or a group or school edited the book and put it into its present form, the fact that it now comprises a single work means that we can still speak of “Isaiah” as the implied author, referring not to the eighth-century prophet but to the person or persons who concluded the editorial process.² What concerns us here is the story of redemption that can be discerned from the book as it now stands, rather than the various theologies and ideas that can be identified in the different stages of its redaction.

Israel’s Sin

The book of Isaiah begins not with words of hope, consolation, or compassion but with a harsh rebuke of the people as well as a call to repentance:

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the LORD, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged! . . . Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. . . . How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her—but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them. (1:2-4, 16-17, 21-23)

Here we see what Israel's sin consists of: injustice, oppression, and a lack of concern for those in need. These same ideas are repeated throughout Isaiah, where the people are accused of "grinding the face of the poor" (3:15), taking bribes and depriving the innocent of their rights (5:23), speaking lies, and "conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity" (59:4); "their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation and destruction" (59:7). As Rainer Albertz has observed, these accusations are leveled primarily at the upper classes rather than at the oppressed themselves: "The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses" (3:14).³ At times, however, the people as a whole are accused of sin: "The LORD did not have pity on their young people, or compassion on their orphans and widows; for everyone was godless and an evildoer, and every mouth spoke folly" (9:17).

Closely tied to the sin of injustice is that of idolatry. "Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made" (2:8). While the relationship between injustice and idolatry may not seem immediately apparent, the two are closely connected. The law given by God to Israel contained many commandments aimed at promoting justice and providing for those in need. According to Isaiah, however, when the people abandon the Lord to serve other gods of their own making, they create for themselves their own religion characterized by cruel and oppressive practices. When they offer up sacrifices to their gods on the mountains and place statues of those gods in their homes, they make the righteous perish, "burn with lust," and even slaughter their own children as sacrificial offerings (57:1-9). Turning away from God thus involves turning away from God's law as well and replacing it with their own oppressive laws: "Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!" (10:1-2).

In Isaiah, therefore, *sin* is understood in terms of abandoning and rebelling against God so as to set up one's own gods, and consequently disobeying God's commandments so as to practice evil and injustice; this involves forgetting and abandoning God (17:10; 43:22; 51:13). Sin is also a lack of trust in God: when threatened by enemies, the king and the people are rebuked by the prophet for putting their trust in other gods or in other people or nations, rather than in the Lord alone (30:1-17). Finally, God's people sin in that they "do not understand" (1:3); thus sin is not just a problem of the will but also a lack of knowledge on their part.

God's Love and God's Wrath

Throughout the book of Isaiah, we repeatedly encounter expressions of God's wrath at Israel's sin. When the people suffered from hunger, war, and other disasters, they often believed that God was angry at them: "Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpses were like refuse in the streets" (5:25). Thus "devastation and destruction, famine and sword" were attributed to "the wrath of the LORD" and his "rebuke" (51:17-20).

According to Isaiah, a primary way that God punished Israel's sin was to send other nations, such as Assyria and Babylonia, to oppress the people. In 721 BCE, the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and then ravaged the countryside of Judah before laying siege to Jerusalem. Later, in 586 BCE, the



Jehu, King of Israel, prostrating himself before King Shalmaneser III of Assyria (British Museum, London). Isaiah, like the Old Testament in general, interpreted Israel's subjection to foreign powers as divine punishment for Israel's sins.

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Babylonians laid waste to Judah and Jerusalem, taking many of the leaders and people into exile in Babylon. These events were interpreted by the people of Israel and their prophets as divine punishment for their sins on the basis of their belief that God blesses and saves those who do good and obey God's commandments but punishes and destroys those who do evil. This belief is reflected in Isaiah's words to Israel in 1:19-20: "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Yet, alongside the frequent expressions of intense anger on God's part and the graphic descriptions of the death and destruction endured by the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem as divine punishment, we also find numerous expressions of God's immense love and deep compassion for Israel. At times, these are very tender and moving, such as when God is spoken of as Israel's father (64:8), husband, and mother.⁴ "You shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (62:4-5; cf. 54:5). "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" (66:13). "But Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.' Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (49:14-15).

It may seem surprising to encounter such expressions of intense anger and moving love alongside each other, often in the same immediate context. Yet, while these sentiments may seem to contradict each other, in the thought of Isaiah, God's wrath is rooted in God's love and mercy. This is true particularly with regard to God's anger at oppression: God's love for the poor, weak, needy, and oppressed moves God to react angrily when they are treated unjustly, so as to defend them and save them from their oppressors. God's wrath is also seen as fulfilling another loving purpose, that of purifying his people from their sin: rather than simply destroying or abandoning them when they sin, God attempts to correct the people by sending various afflictions upon them so as to bring them to see their evil ways and repent of their sin, just as a parent might do with a wayward child.⁵ As precious metals are purified through fire, the same is to happen to Israel and Jerusalem, so that they may become righteous and faithful once more (1:24-26). "Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy . . . once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning" (4:3-4).

However, at times even when God sends suffering on the people, they refuse to repent and change: "Because of their wicked covetousness I was angry; I struck them, I hid and was angry; but they kept turning back to their own ways" (57:17). When this happens, if God's love will not let him abandon them, his only option is to chastise them further or else destroy a portion of them so that the few who remain are purified, as a righteous remnant (6:11-13; 9:8-16; 10:20-22).

According to Isaiah, because of God's love for his people, God wishes that it were not necessary to punish them, since his true desire is only to bless them. Isaiah presents God asking the people, "Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel?" (1:5), and elsewhere writes:

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: I am the LORD your God, who teaches you for your own good, who leads you in the way you should go. O that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your prosperity would have been like a river, and your success like the waves of the sea; your offspring would have been like the sand, and your descendants like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me. (48:17-19)

But why can God not simply forgive the people every time they sin, without punishing them? Implicit in some of these passages is the idea that there is an *intrinsic* relationship between sin and its consequences—that is, *in and of itself human sin brings pain, suffering, and other negative consequences upon people*. This stands in contrast to the idea of an *extrinsic* relationship between sin and its consequences; according to this idea, the negative consequences of sin do not follow immediately or naturally from it but are instead caused by God as punishment. The difference between these two ideas can be explained with the help of an illustration. If a mother tells her daughter not to put her hand into a flame but the girl does so and as a result is burned, there is an *intrinsic* relation between the girl's act and the suffering she endures; the pain she feels is the natural and inevitable consequence of touching the flame. However, if the girl puts her hand near the flame (without getting burned) and the mother sees it and consequently punishes her in some way, such as by scolding her or taking away some privilege, the relation between the girl's act and the suffering she endures as a result of the punishment she receives is an *extrinsic* one, since it is something brought about not by the act itself but by her mother, who elects to discipline her daughter to teach her not to do things that might harm her.

In Isaiah, on occasion, the idea of an intrinsic relation between the people's sins and the suffering they endure is hinted at; for example, in 65:2, God says that the people "walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices." In this case, God wants the people to stop doing what is not good for them; when God tells them to abandon their evil ways, he is warning them of the natural and inevitable consequences of their sinful actions, rather than threatening to punish them. However, the latter idea seems to be much more prevalent in Isaiah and the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures: when Israel suffers, it is not merely because the people's sins in themselves have negative consequences, both for themselves and for other people whom God also loves, but because God is punishing them in order to correct, discipline, and purify them. Nevertheless, the idea of divine punishment and correction makes sense only if an *intrinsic* relation between sin and its consequences is maintained at the same time: whether things go well or poorly for Israel does not depend solely on God or God's response to what Israel

does; rather, God calls the people to repent and disciplines them, not for *God's own* sake but for *theirs*, since their sinful actions harm themselves and others whom God loves, such as the weak and needy.

The Salvation of Israel

The idea that God saves or redeems Israel is repeated frequently throughout Isaiah. This salvation is usually understood in collective terms: it has to do not with isolated individuals but with the people *as a whole*. Salvation involves experiencing God's blessings of abundance, well-being, freedom, peace, and joy, as well as being free from excessive heat, hunger, thirst, slavery, sadness, and sighing (49:8-10; 51:11). "He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water" (30:23-25). Salvation also involves deliverance from enemies who oppress the people. Isaiah claims not only that Israel will be delivered from its subjection to other nations but that those nations and their kings will in turn be subjected in servitude to Israel, so that Israel becomes great in the eyes of all the earth (14:1-2; 60:10-16).

Yet is this salvation unconditional, or does it depend on what Israel does? On the basis of what we have seen previously, there is a *condition* for Israel to be saved, namely, that the people obey God's will: if they practice justice and righteousness and do good as God commands, they will enjoy God's blessing of salvation; but if they do evil and disobey God, they will face hardships, oppression, destruction, and death.⁶ In many passages, however, salvation is spoken of as *unconditional*: no matter what Israel does, God will ultimately have mercy on his people and save them. These promises of salvation are rooted in God's love for Israel: his steadfast love and compassion will not let him utterly destroy them or abandon them definitively; nor will it let his wrath at their sins endure forever (49:14-15; 54:7-10; 57:16-19). The idea of forgiveness should be understood against this background: God forgives the people's sins when he saves them from the plights they suffer. While at times this forgiveness is seen as depending on Israel's behavior, elsewhere it appears unconditional. After punishing his people, God will forgive them their sins, not because of any merit of theirs but out of sheer grace: "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (43:25; cf. 44:21-22).

At times, Israel's salvation and forgiveness are tied to sacrificial offerings to God. Isaiah repeatedly stresses, however, that in themselves these sacrifices and other similar rituals do not obtain divine forgiveness and acceptance, since if Israel continues to practice injustice and idolatry, God refuses to accept Israel's offerings, saying that they are a "burden" to him and that he is "weary of bearing them" (1:10-18; cf. 29:13-21; 58:5-7). This does not mean that Isaiah rejected

outright the worship of God through sacrificial offerings and other practices, such as fasting.⁷ In fact, a number of passages from Isaiah make it clear that Israel's sacrifices are pleasing to God, as long as the people are committed to doing God's will and sincerely repent when they sin (19:21; 43:23; 56:7). What must be stressed, however, is that ultimately what takes away sin is not sacrificial offerings themselves but doing what God commands, putting away idols, and serving him alone as God by keeping his ordinances: "Therefore by this the guilt of Jacob will be expiated, and this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin: when he makes all the stones of the altars like chalkstones crushed to pieces, no sacred poles or incense altars will remain standing" (27:9). Only when Israel turns to God in justice and obedience will God accept their sacrifices and worship and respond favorably to the prayers for forgiveness and blessing they offer up to him together with those sacrifices.

Yet, while God *demand*s from Israel a change of heart reflected in a life of obedience to his commandments, God also promises to graciously *give* them this change by bringing it about in them himself. God does this in part by correcting and disciplining the people, so as to purify a righteous remnant, and by teaching them his ways through those whom he sends. However, God also does this by giving them his Spirit so as to transform them internally: "I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring" (44:3); "this is my covenant with them, says the LORD: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the LORD, from now on and forever" (59:21; cf. 29:24; 32:3-4).⁸

These passages, as well as a majority of the other passages in Isaiah that speak of salvation, use the future tense: God *will save* Israel. Yet this raises the question of whether salvation is understood as something to take place *in history* or *beyond history*. At times, it appears that salvation merely has to do with an improved situation for Israel *within history*: the people will dwell in peace and security in Jerusalem (or Zion) and Judah, enjoy life, and have all that they need. Even though life will be prolonged, for example, people will still ultimately die (65:20). At other times, however, it appears that salvation has to do with a totally new age, one radically different from the present: the bodies of the dead will be raised (26:19), people will be healed from all of their illnesses, all violence, war, and bloodshed will disappear (2:4), and nature itself will be transformed:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (11:6-9)

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. . . . Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. (35:1-2, 5-7)

Elsewhere, Isaiah speaks of God creating “new heavens and a new earth,” where there will be no more “sound of weeping” or “cry of distress,” and where infants will all live a long, full life (65:17-25). But is all of this merely metaphorical language, or is it to be taken literally? Does Isaiah conceive of salvation in terms of the creation of a totally new world, radically different from the present one, or simply as the arrival of a time of greater prosperity and well-being within history? However these questions are answered, it should be stressed that for Isaiah and his contemporaries, the future hope still revolved around Jerusalem, or Zion, and the promised land: the idea is not that God’s people will “go to heaven” to dwell in some spiritual, otherworldly paradise after they die but, rather, that they will live on earth in the land given them by God. Salvation, therefore, is conceived of in *corporal* and *material* terms, not just in spiritual terms: in the coming new age, people will still dwell in Jerusalem, live in houses, plant vineyards, and eat their fruit, thus enjoying physical pleasures along with spiritual well-being.

Israel, the Nations, and the Divine Plan

In accordance with the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Isaiah affirms that God has chosen Israel from among all the nations of the earth to be his special people and to be the recipient of his blessings of salvation:

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”; do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. Yes, all who are incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish. (41:8-11)

This passage and others contain several key ideas with regard to Isaiah’s view of the relation between Israel and the nations. On the one hand, Israel repeatedly experienced suffering and oppression at the hands of other nations, such as Assyria, Edom, and Babylonia. While God is said to have used these nations for his purposes, God also promised ultimately to deliver Israel from their power and to destroy these nations for their own sins. Thus, for example, after calling Assyria the “rod of God’s anger” chosen to punish sinful Israel (10:5-6), Isaiah



The Peaceable Kingdom (Edward Hicks, 19th century). Isaiah conceived of salvation as a new age in which peace and harmony would reign in nature: carnivorous beasts such as lions, leopards, and bears would feed instead on plants and coexist peacefully with lambs and calves, and all would be led by a little child (Isa 11:6-9; 65:19-25).

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adds, “When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride” (10:12). Elsewhere, God promises to take vengeance upon Israel’s enemies for their oppressive ways and their mistreatment of Israel: “But thus says the LORD: Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued; for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (49:25-26).

On the other hand, however, Isaiah contains many promises of salvation with regard to the nations. In this respect, as indicated in the passage from 41:8-11 just cited, God chose Israel not merely for blessing and salvation but to be his “servant”; in fact, in virtually every passage where Israel’s election is mentioned, the idea that Israel is to serve God is also stressed. Israel is to be “a light to the nations” and a “covenant” to them, as well as God’s “witnesses” (42:6; 43:10). “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (60:3). Furthermore, as the passage from 49:25-26 just quoted makes clear, one of God’s ultimate objectives in pouring out his wrath on the nations is that they

might learn that he alone is the all-powerful God and thus come to know and serve him, as Israel is to do.

Isaiah therefore conceives of a coming time of salvation in which people from all the nations will share in the salvation of Jerusalem and Israel.⁹ They will flock to Jerusalem to worship in the temple there and will come to obey the law given by God to Israel: “In days to come the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (2:2-3; cf. 56:6-7). This salvation is spoken of as an eschatological banquet, in which both Israel and the nations will share “a feast of rich food” and “well-aged wines” and “the tears from all faces” shall be wiped away (25:6-8). Isaiah even speaks, in surprising fashion, of Assyria and Egypt as God’s beloved chosen people, together with Israel: after “striking and healing” Egypt, God will “listen to their supplications,” and then “Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage’” (19:22, 24-25).

In Isaiah, therefore, the idea that God will punish but then bless and save is applied not only to Israel but to all the nations. Nevertheless, God’s promises of blessing still revolve around Israel and Jerusalem;¹⁰ other peoples will be saved to the extent that they share in the salvation of Israel. For this reason, it is important that God purify and redeem Israel, because through them and the witness they are to give, he will bring redemption to other nations as well.

All of this means that, for Isaiah, God is the sovereign Lord in control of history; ultimately, God will accomplish his purposes and plans, no matter what either Israel or the nations do. Isaiah’s affirmations that God is the Creator of all underscore this idea;¹¹ all people and all things are subject to him. In the case of human beings, God is like the potter and they are the clay, which God does with as he sees fit (45:9; 64:8). In fact, when it serves God’s purposes, God may even use a prophet like Isaiah to make the people blind and deaf, so that they do not understand and consequently are not healed (6:9-13). While this idea no doubt sounds problematic, the reasoning appears to be that God is tired of the temporary and half-hearted repentance manifested by his people, on account of which he must delay punishing them; thus he desires that they *not* repent so that he may be justified in purifying them through punishment and in this way finally bring about a truly righteous remnant that will no longer turn back to sin.

Isaiah’s understanding of God’s sovereignty leads him to claim not only that God has the power to bring about either obedience or hardness of heart in his people but that God can also create and cause evil as well as good: “I form light and create darkness. I make peace and I create evil. I the LORD make all these things” (45:7).¹² In Isaiah, we find no allusions to any evil power, such as the devil or demonic spirits, inducing people to sin or bringing harm on them; evil and

suffering are brought about either by human beings themselves through their actions or by God.

Of course, all of this raises once more the question of whether or not Israel's salvation depends on the people: if ultimately it is God who brings about in the people either the righteousness he requires or the sin he punishes, it would appear that, like the inanimate clay in the hands of the potter, human beings have no say in their salvation or condemnation. This tension is not resolved in Isaiah, who maintains the absolute sovereignty of God as the potter while nevertheless insisting that salvation depends on human beings' responding properly to God's love, mercy, and grace. Yet all of this must be seen in the context of the divine plan of which Isaiah repeatedly speaks, which involves the establishment of a righteous remnant of Israel so that it may serve as a light to draw other nations to God in order that they too may be saved: God's plan "has as its goal his lordship over all the earth through the realization of his holiness and dominion."¹³ For Isaiah, as the creator of all things, God is in total control of history so that all of his purposes may be accomplished.

Savior Figures

According to Isaiah, in order to save his people, God raises up a number of savior figures. Perhaps the most important of these are the kings, including not only the kings of Israel or Judah, such as Hezekiah and other descendants of King David, but foreign kings, such as the Persian king Cyrus, who allowed those in exile in Babylon to return to Judah and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple; Isaiah even calls Cyrus God's "anointed" ("messiah" in Hebrew), which was a kingly title (44:28—45:7). In a number of passages from the first part of the book of Isaiah, God promises to raise up a king who will deliver his people from their oppressors and establish justice, equity, and peace in the land:¹⁴

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. (9:6-7)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. (11:1-4; cf. 16:4-5)

Although these passages probably referred to specific kings in Israel's history, the things they promised never came fully to fruition under any king in the years before or after the Babylonian exile. Because these promises apparently remained unfulfilled, like many of the other promises of salvation and blessing found in Isaiah, they eventually came to be interpreted as referring to a future hope: God would send a Messiah figure or king descended from David to bring about the glorious new age he had promised.

The second part of the book of Isaiah speaks of another savior figure, who is simply called God's "servant." While at times the people of Israel or Judah as a whole are called God's servant, chosen by him to carry out his will, in several passages (often called the "servant songs," 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12), this servant is spoken of as an individual. His task is to bring Israel and the nations back to God. God promises to pour out his Spirit upon him, so that he will "faithfully bring forth justice" both for Israel and the nations throughout the world (42:1-4). Although one or more of these passages may originally have referred to a kingly figure (such as Cyrus),¹⁵ the "servant" spoken of appears primarily to be a prophet, particularly since he speaks to others on behalf of God to bring them back to him and because he teaches the people (42:4; 49:5-6; 50:4; 53:11). A similar figure is spoken of in 61:1-11; as in 42:1, it is said there that God's Spirit will be poured out upon him and that, as God's anointed, he will be sent "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor."

Significantly, a couple of these passages speak of the *suffering* of the servant. In 50:6, for example, the servant says: "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting." The passage that particularly underscores the servant's suffering, however, is 52:13—53:12. There, the servant is described in the past tense as a "man of suffering" who was "despised and rejected" and "has borne our infirmities" as if stricken and afflicted by God; "he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." The song goes on to tell how he was silent in his afflictions like a lamb led to the slaughter and how he "poured out himself to death," making his life an "offering for sin" so as to bear the sin and iniquities of many and to make intercession for the transgressors.

This is one of the most difficult, complex, and controversial passages in the Hebrew Scriptures and has been understood in many different ways by both Jewish and Christian interpreters. While we can therefore hardly expect to do justice to it in this brief overview of Isaiah, it is important to examine the relationship that the passage establishes between the servant's suffering and the people's salvation. As noted previously, in the thought of Isaiah and much of the Hebrew Scriptures, suffering and oppression are sent by God as punishment for sin. In this case, however, rather than inflicting suffering upon the people themselves for their sins, God afflicts the servant, who unjustly suffers various calamities and,

ultimately, death.¹⁶ The innocent servant voluntarily endures these sufferings and the injustices done to him, offering himself up sacrificially for the people's sins and interceding to God for the wrongdoers. As a result, he is ultimately vindicated and exalted by God, and in the end many are made righteous.

Yet exactly how do the servant's sufferings bring wholeness, healing, and righteousness to others? While this is not entirely clear from the passage, it is important to stress once more that, like the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, Isaiah repeatedly maintains that when God sends suffering upon people on account of their sins, his purpose is to purify them, bring them back to him in righteousness and obedience, and establish a righteous remnant. According to this idea, God punishes sin not *for his own sake* (that is, to satisfy some inner need of his own that sin be punished so that his own justice may be upheld) but *for the sake of his people* (that is, in order to discipline and correct them). Thus, in this passage, it is not the servant's sufferings and death *in themselves* that lead to the people's being made whole and healed and becoming righteous. As in the rest of Isaiah and the Hebrew Scriptures, the condition for people to be saved is not that they or some substitute (such as the "servant" or a sacrificial victim) be punished for their sins but that they turn back to God in obedience to live according to his will.

When read in the context of these beliefs, then, the sufferings and death inflicted by evildoers on the servant in accordance with God's will must be seen as resulting in salvation for others in that *they are thereby brought back to God*. Christoph Schroeder, among others, notes that the passage speaks of the impact that the servant's suffering has on the onlookers when they see that the servant has suffered unjustly on account of their sins rather than for his own: "They will confess their sins and this will ultimately create reconciliation among them."¹⁷

Evaluation

In many respects, Isaiah's teaching regarding salvation is grandiose and glorious. Particularly moving are the images he uses to describe the coming age of redemption as well as God's deep love and compassion for Israel; such images have inspired writers and artists from biblical times to the present.¹⁸ Other aspects of Isaiah's thought, such as his insistence that there can be no worship that is pleasing to God unless it is accompanied by the practice of justice, mercy, and care for those in greatest need, are also timely and pertinent today.

However, Isaiah's teaching on salvation also raises many questions and problems. Perhaps the most serious of these has to do with the idea that God punishes sin by sending suffering, oppression, and even death upon people. This seems to lead to the view that when people suffer, it is because God is punishing or disciplining them for their sins; conversely, when things go well for people, it is thought that God is blessing them for having been obedient to his will. When a tragic event, such as the spread of AIDS or the mass extermination of Jews, Gypsies, Poles, homosexuals, and others at the hands of the Nazi authorities during the Second World War, is interpreted on the basis of such ideas, it is claimed that

those who suffer are being punished by God for their sins or, perhaps, that God is attempting to discipline and purify them. Those who torture and kill others, as the Nazi authorities did, are also then viewed as God's instrument for punishing the guilty for their sins, just as Isaiah regarded the Assyrians as God's instrument for punishing sinful Israel. Most people today would find such ideas not only unacceptable but repulsive.

Equally problematic for modern thought is Isaiah's teaching that God's election and salvation have to do with entire nations. Such a claim has commonly been used to justify many injustices, including the oppression and domination of certain nations and peoples by others, as if God were on the side of the rich and powerful nations and were blessing them, perhaps as a reward for their piety, goodness, and righteousness. Isaiah's discussion regarding salvation also seems to leave open the questions of whether salvation is a work of God alone or of human beings as well, and whether it involves the creation of a radically new world *beyond* human history as we now know it or merely the arrival of a better world *within* history, perhaps as the result of a period of gradual progress and improvement in human living conditions. Thus, while there is no doubt much to be admired about Isaiah's understanding of salvation, it also involves a number of problems and tensions that are not easily resolved.