
Observations from Isaiah

LESSON XXXII : GOD'S PROMISES TO HIS SERVANTS (41:1-42:9)

General outline (from Oswalt's *Isaiah*):

- I. INTRODUCTION: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF GOD'S PEOPLE (1-5)
- II. A CALL TO SERVANTHOOD (6)
- III. BASIS FOR SERVANTHOOD: WHOM SHALL WE TRUST? (7-39)
- IV. THE VOCATION OF SERVANTHOOD (40-55)
 - A. MOTIVE FOR SERVANTHOOD: GRACE (40-48)
 - 1. The Servant's Lord (40)
 - 2. The Servant of the Lord (41-44)
 - a. God's Promises to His Servants (41:1-42:9)
 - (1) The fearful Servant (41:1-20)
 - (a) God's work terrifies idolaters (41:1-7)
 - (b) Israel need not fear (41:8-20)
 - (2) The Ministering Servant (41:21-42:9)
 - (a) Helpless idols (41:21-29)
 - (b) The Servant who brings justice (42:1-9)

Commentators differ as to how the segments in chapters 41-46 are constructed. Oswalt (of whose division I will follow for these lessons) note there are three transitional 'bridges' from one level of thought to another. These 'bridges' are calls to praise and are located at 42:10-13; 44:23 and 45:8. Oswalt uses these as clues to Isaiah's structure:

- 41:1-42:9 introduces **three basic themes**: the nations' inability to refute God's lordship; His promise to deliver fearful Israel; and His plan to use an ideal servant Israel as redeemer. The hymn in 42:10-13 is in response to the last announcement.
- 42:13-44:22 is the second segment and focuses on **God's superiority over other gods**, with no power in the universe being able to stop Him. It follows with the second hymn in 44:23.
- The third hymn is not an end of a major thought but rather a transition within a segment. The third segment therefore begins with 44:24-45:7 and announces **Cyrus' position**, then concludes with 45:9-13 which **declares God's plan to use Cyrus**. The hymn in this case is in the transition at 45:8.

Oswalt takes the first major portion of these chapters (41-44:22) focuses on God's controversy with idols. The next major unit (44:23-47:15) deals specifically with Cyrus and Babylon.

In today's lesson (41-42:9) Isaiah delivers two main promises to assure fearful Israel that God has both the power and the desire to deliver her and in so doing to bring salvation to the whole world. [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] To reassure Israel, Isaiah makes two points:

- *Israel need not fear the nations for they will be terrified by what the Lord will do to them in history* (41:1-7; 21-29)
- *God has not rejected His people but will in fact use them to accomplish His purposes* (41:8-20). This choosing is entirely of grace and therefore Israel need not fear.

The fearful Servant: God's work terrifies idolaters (41:1-7)

Be silent before me, you islands! Let the nations renew their strength! Let them come forward and speak; let us meet together at the place of judgment. Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow. He pursues them and moves on unscathed, by a path his feet have not traveled before. Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD — with the first of them and with the last — I am he. The islands have seen it and fear; the ends of the earth tremble. They approach and come forward; each helps the other and says to his brother, "Be strong!" The craftsman encourages the goldsmith, and he who smooths with the hammer spurs on him who strikes the anvil. He says of the welding, "It is good." He nails down the idol so it will not topple. (NIV)

Keep silence before me, O islands; and let the people renew their strength: let them come near; then let them speak: let us come near together to judgment. Who raised up the righteous man from the east, called him to his foot, gave the nations before him, and made him rule over kings? he gave them as the dust to his sword, and as driven stubble to his bow. He pursued them, and passed safely; even by the way that he had not gone with his feet. Who hath wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? I the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he. The isles saw it, and feared; the ends of the earth were afraid, drew near, and came. They helped every one his neighbor; and every one said to his brother, Be of good courage. So the carpenter encouraged the goldsmith, and he that smootheth with the hammer him that smote the anvil, saying, It is ready for the soldering: and he fastened it with nails, that it should not be moved. (KJV)

Keep silent towards Me, O isles, And the peoples pass on [to] power, They come nigh, then they speak, 'Together — to judgment we draw near.' Who stirred up from the east a righteous one? He calleth him to His foot, He giveth before him nations, And kings He causeth him to rule, He giveth [them] as dust [to] his sword, As driven stubble [to] his bow. He pursueth them, he passeth over in safety A path with his feet he entereth not. Who hath wrought and done, Calling the generations from the first? I, Jehovah, the first, and with the last I [am] He. Seen have isles and fear, ends of the earth tremble, They have drawn near, yea, they come. Each his neighbour they help, And to his brother he saith, 'Be strong.' And strengthen doth an artizan the refiner, A smoother [with] a hammer, Him who is beating [on] an anvil, Saying, 'For joining it [is] good,' And he strengtheneth it with nails, it is not moved! (YLT)

JUDAH ON TRIAL (v1) — Verses 1-7 present a trial scene, one of several in the book of Isaiah and a feature used often in this portion (41:21-29; 42:18-25; 43:8-13; 44:6-20; 45:20-25). ***"It is***

customary for most commentators now to dub this the beginning of a trial-speech, in which — as in 1:2 — the scene is a courtroom. We may accept this, of course, if we see it as a purely rhetorical device. In fact, in his dealings with men, God sustains a multiplicity of legal roles; for he is plaintiff, injured party, judge, law-giver, and creator, each role finding its place within his many-sided relationship with sinful men.” [Grogan, Isaiah] These verses are divided as follows: *the call to judgement (v1); God’s case: His actions in history (v2-4); and the nations’ frightened response (v5-7).* ‘You islands’ – used often by Isaiah to refer to the ends of the earth and therefore the whole earth. ‘Let them renew their strength’ – analogous to the cry of God in the book of Job: ‘Gird up your loins like a man and declare to me’ (Job 38:3).

THE LORD’S ACTIVITY IN HISTORY (v2-4) — God calls upon the nations to respond to the evidence He is here giving: His activity in human history. ‘One from the east’ is *almost certainly Cyrus, the first emperor of the Persian empire who conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to their homeland.* An alternative identity is that of Abraham and is held by many church fathers and even Calvin, although modern commentators have mostly abandoned that view. Other suggestions, each with their own difficulties, are Israel itself and even the Messiah. “Cyrus, king of Persia, crossed the Tigris from the east and so entered the Babylonian Empire. He marched swiftly and victoriously against Croesus, king of Lydia, and took his capital, Sardis, in western Asia Minor, having already subdued the Medes in the north (cf. v. 25). He could therefore be described as being both from the east and from the north. The references to dust and chaff remind us of 17:13; 29:5, and, in a more recent context, of 40:24. In fact, this reference to Cyrus is a particular example of the general principle stated in 40:23-24. The conquests of Cyrus took him into areas quite unfamiliar to men of his land.... The great conqueror does not hold the center of the prophetic stage for long, however, for he exists and is referred to only to exalt the name of the Lord. Verse 4 declares the absolute sovereignty of God over history — from its beginning, through all its generations, and to its end. No wonder he can predict and raise up Cyrus!” [Grogan, Isaiah]

‘I AM’ — ‘Who has done this?’ – given as evidence of the Lord’s providential control, Isaiah makes it clear it is the Lord who raises up Cyrus for His own purposes. “Hence the meaning is, Who is the author to whom both the origin and progress of such an occurrence are to be referred? It is He who ‘from the beginning,’ i.e., ever since there has been a human history, has called into existence the generations of men through His authoritative command. And this is no other than Jehovah, who can declare of Himself, in contrast with the heathen and their gods, who are of yesterday, and tomorrow will not be: I am Jehovah, the very first, whose being precedes all history; and with the men of the latest generations yet to come ‘I am it.’ ... *It is the full meaning of the name Jehovah which is unfolded here; for God is called Jehovah as the absolute I, the absolutely free Being, pervading all history, and yet above all history, as He who is Lord of His own absolute being, in revealing which He is purely self-determined; in a word, as the unconditionally free and unchangeably eternal personality.*” [K&D, Isaiah] “God is the one who called everything into being at the first, and the one whom the last will not be able to escape. He is with us, for good or ill, depending on our response to him. He is the one like whom there is no other; he is the only noncontingent being in the universe, the only one who can say ‘I Am.’ ... That Jesus would calmly apply this phrase to himself (cf. all the ‘I am’ statements, but esp. John 8:58 and 18:5) speaks volumes about his sense of self-identity. That the full implications of these statements were clear to the hearers in both John 8:58 and 18:5 is evident from their respective responses.” [Oswalt, Isaiah]

THE NATIONS RESPOND (v5-7) — The nations see the mighty hand of God move in the person of Cyrus and they respond in fear. But rather than that fear does not make them turn to the Lord but to idols! *“One cannot help feeling sorry for these people whose only hope is to whistle in the dark and tell one another they are building good idols. How much better to hear the voice of the transcendent God telling us to be strong (Deut 31:7,23; Isa 35:4) because of his lordship in history.”* [Oswalt, Isaiah]

The fearful Servant: Israel need not fear (41:8-20)

But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, “You are my servant”; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced; those who oppose you will be as nothing and perish. Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them. Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all. For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you, declares the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. See, I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them, and reduce the hills to chaff. You will winnow them, the

But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend. Thou whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called thee from the chief men thereof, and said unto thee, Thou art my servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away. Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. Behold, all they that were incensed against thee shall be ashamed and confounded: they shall be as nothing; and they that strive with thee shall perish. Thou shalt seek them, and shalt not find them, even them that contended with thee: they that war against thee shall be as nothing, and as a thing of nought. For I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee. Fear not, thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel; I will help thee, saith the LORD, and thy redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth: thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff. Thou shalt fan them,

— And thou, O Israel, My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, Seed of Abraham, My lover, Whom I have taken hold of, from the ends of the earth, And from its near places I have called thee, And I say to thee, My servant Thou [art], I have chosen thee, and not rejected thee. Be not afraid, for with thee I [am], Look not around, for I [am] thy God, I have strengthened thee, Yea, I have helped thee, yea, I upheld thee, With the right hand of My righteousness. Lo, all those displeased with thee, They are ashamed and blush, They are as nothing, yea, perish Do the men who strive with thee. Thou seekest them, and findest them not, The men who debate with thee, They are as nothing, yea, as nothing, The men who war with thee. For I, Jehovah thy God, Am strengthening thy right hand, He who is saying to thee, ‘Fear not, I have helped thee.’ Fear not, O worm Jacob, ye men of Israel, I helped thee, an affirmation of Jehovah, Even thy redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. Lo, I have set thee for a new sharp threshing instrument, Possessing teeth, thou threshest mountains, And beatest small, and hills as chaff thou makest. Thou winnowest them, and a wind

wind will pick them up, and a gale will blow them away. But you will rejoice in the LORD and glory in the Holy One of Israel. The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs. I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set pines in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together, so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the LORD has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it. (NIV)

and the wind shall carry them away, and the whirlwind shall scatter them: and thou shalt rejoice in the LORD, and shalt glory in the Holy One of Israel. When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the LORD will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys: I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the shittah tree, and the myrtle, and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the fir tree, and the pine, and the box tree together: That they may see, and know, and consider, and understand together, that the hand of the LORD hath done this, and the Holy One of Israel hath created it. (KJV)

lifteth them up, And a whirlwind scattereth them, And thou — thou rejoicest in Jehovah, In the Holy One of Israel dost boast thyself. The poor and the needy are seeking water, And there is none, Their tongue with thirst hath failed, I, Jehovah do answer them, The God of Israel — I forsake them not. I open on high places rivers, And in midst of valleys fountains, I make a wilderness become a pond of water, And a dry land become springs of water. I give in a wilderness the cedar, Shittah, and myrtle, and oil-tree, I set in a desert the fir-pine and box-wood together. So that they see, and know, And regard, and act wisely together, For the hand of Jehovah hath done this, And the Holy One of Israel hath prepared it. (YLT)

ISRAEL AS GOD’S CHOSEN ‘SERVANT’ (v 8, 9) — The scene changes from the nations terrified before the Lord (v5-7) to the people of the Lord, who are told specifically not to be afraid. *“Whereas the nations, which put their trust in idols that they themselves had made, were thrown into alarm, and yielded before the world-wide commotions that had originated with the eastern conqueror, Israel, the nation of Jehovah, might take comfort to itself. Every word here breathes the deepest affection.”* [K&D, Isaiah] We are introduced here to the concept of Israel as God’s servant, something not used by Isaiah in chapters 1-39. *“It is evident that ‘servant’ is intended to be an encouraging term here by its connection with the vocabulary of election. Israel, like Abraham, Moses, and David, has been especially chosen to serve God. That chosen servanthood extends in a straight line back through their ancestors to Abraham himself, the prototype of election (see 1 Chron 16:13 and Ps 105:6), my friend (lit. ‘my lover’ or ‘my beloved’) suggests that election is not an austere, judicial act but is rooted and grounded in love, both the love of God for the chosen and the love of the chosen for God. Thus, as those particularly chosen to serve God, offspring of his unique friend (1 Chron 20:7; James 2:23), they have nothing to fear (John 15:14,15).... God’s continued reminder throughout chs. 41-45 that they are his chosen servants was aimed solely at encouraging them. Any sense of obligation or requirement in the term is in the distant background. To be sure, God has in mind a function for them: living evidence, witnesses, of his unique godhood (43:10). But that is not so much obligation as a simple fact of their existence.”* [Oswalt, Isaiah] “Verses 8-10 describe Israel in several

encouraging ways. *The name Israel suggests what God is determined to make of his people (Gen 32:28), while the name Jacob indicates that God loves them and has chosen them despite their demerit.* Taking them from the ends of the earth is hyperbole laying stress on the distance of Abraham's journey from Ur to Canaan, undertaken under God's watchful and caring eye. *God chose the people for a purpose of service; and so, of course, they cannot perish without that purpose being fulfilled.* These people are loved for the sake of beloved Abraham (cf. Deut 7:7-8), to whom God gave great promises (Gen 12:1-3; 17:1-8 et al.). The strength already promised (40:31) would be theirs. The threefold affirmation of strength comes to its consummation in a reference to the righteous right hand of God, a reminder possibly of the tender strength of the Shepherd-King in 40:9-11." [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

‘IF GOD BE FOR US, WHO CAN BE AGAINST US?’ (v 10-12) — there is a very real practical result of the Lord choosing Israel: *‘if we are His, we need not fear anything for God is sovereign.’ “But in a situation that would seem to make a mockery of all that they had believed about themselves and their identity (how could they be elect if they had been forcibly taken from God’s land?), they needed to hear in no uncertain terms that God was still with them and that he was still willing to be called their God.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

OUR MIGHTY AND CARING FATHER (v 13) — there is an interesting observation when one considers how v13 parallels with v10. In v10 the Lord is saying *‘don’t fear because I will fight your enemies with My mighty right hand,’* then in v13 it says the Lord holds the right hand of Israel to comfort them. If the Lord is holding our right hand, He must be using His ‘left hand’. I realize this is speaking anthropomorphically but *the image here is of a mighty Father holding His child’s right hand with His left hand while standing with a weapon in His right hand. “He does not merely stand by to defend, but he is also physically with the child; he will not allow the child to be separated from him.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

THE LORD OUR REDEEMER (v 14) — here ‘Redeemer’ is used for the first of thirteen times in chapters 40-66. *“Elsewhere in the OT it is used of the near relative who delivers a poor person from enslavement and the loss of the family inheritance consequent on their poverty (Lev 25:25; Ruth 4:1-8). But it is also used of the person who avenges the blood of a murdered person by killing the murderer (Num 35:21-27; Deut 19:6; Josh 20:5). Thus the term has both positive (for the oppressed) and negative (against the oppressor) connotations.* Its use here is typical of all but one of the rest: it is used as an epithet in connection with other titles that emphasize the greatness and uniqueness of God. Six times it appears in conjunction with ‘the Holy One of Israel’; three times with ‘Lord of Hosts’; twice with ‘the Mighty One of Jacob.’ Other terms appearing at least once are ‘King of Israel,’ ‘First and Last,’ ‘Formed You from the Womb,’ ‘Made Everything,’ ‘God of the whole earth,’ ‘Our Father.’ *What these connections serve to indicate is that God is able to carry out the tasks of the redeemer. He is strong enough, creative enough, and compassionate enough that no other being in the universe will be able to prevent him from carrying out his plan.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

TAKING THE OFFENSIVE (v 14-16) — *“Here the focus changes from defense to offense. Not only will God defend his people against those who trouble them, but he will make them the very tool in his hand to tear down any obstacle that would thwart his plans for them.... All that stood in Israel’s way — oppressors, sins, obstacles, and whatever else — will be swept away as swiftly as a strong wind sweeps the chaff from the winnowing fork. In a moment it will be gone.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] There seems to have been two main types of threshing sledges in the ancient Near East. One was heavy timbers with metal and stones driven into the underside. The

other was a roller style which was held in place by a heavy frame with stones or metal driven into the roller. The sledges were driven around by animals over a pile of cut grain until the kernels were separated from the husks. The Lord here describes Israel as a new sledge, one in which the teeth were sharp and not worn nor broken. “Just like such a threshing machine would Israel thresh and grind to powder from that time forth both mountains and hills. This is evidently a figurative expression for proud and mighty foes, just as wind and tempest denote the irresistible force of Jehovah’s aid. The might of the enemy would be broken down to the very last remnant, whereas Israel would be able to rejoice and glory in its God.” [K&D, *Isaiah*]

GOD WILL USE AND BLESS ISRAEL (v 17-20) — *“Using the imagery of desert and water, wilderness and fertile field, which are familiar throughout the book, Isaiah paints the picture of what God’s undertaking will mean in the desolate lives of his people. It will mean not only provision of needs for them (vv. 18,19) but also a recognition by the world that Israel’s God is in another class altogether than the rest of the gods (v. 20).”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] “Though the picture is wonderful, it is not outside the scope of possible literal fulfillment. It may be understood as three different but connected fulfillments. In relation to the return from exile, it will be **figurative**, indicating simply that God would supply all that his people needed. In relation to the eschatological future, it may represent a **literal** transformation of the environment of God’s people (cf. Rom 8:18-22). In the light of the NT, it may also relate **symbolically** to the complete fulfillment of every spiritual need in Christ.” [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

‘FOR THE GLORY OF THE LORD’ (v 20) — *“Here God’s purpose in electing and delivering his people is stated as directly as it is anywhere in the book. It is in order that people may recognize who God is by reflecting on his creative, miracle-working power in Israel. Finally, this is what Israel’s servanthood is all about. Just as Isaiah himself was, the nation is called, and cleansed, and empowered, not for its own enjoyment but as a vehicle of God’s revelation.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

The Ministering Servant: Helpless idols (41:21-29)

<i>Present your case, says the LORD. Set forth your arguments, says Jacob’s King. Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Or declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods. Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear. But you are less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless;</i>	<i>Produce your cause, saith the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob. Let them bring them forth, and shew us what shall happen: let them shew the former things, what they be, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare us things for to come. Shew the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods: yea, do good, or do evil, that we may be dismayed, and behold it together. Behold, ye are of nothing, and your work of nought: an abomination is he that chooseth you. I have raised</i>	<i>Bring near your cause, saith Jehovah, Bring nigh your mighty ones, saith the king of Jacob. They bring nigh, and declare to us that which doth happen, The first things — what they [are] declare ye, And we set our heart, and know their latter end, Or the coming things cause us to hear. Declare the things that are coming hereafter, And we know that ye [are] gods, Yea, ye may do good or do evil, And we look around and see [it] together. Lo, ye [are] of nothing, and your work of nought, An abomination — it</i>
---	--	---

he who chooses you is detestable. I have stirred up one from the north, and he comes — one from the rising sun who calls on my name. He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay. Who told of this from the beginning, so we could know, or beforehand, so we could say, “He was right”? No one told of this, no one foretold it, no one heard any words from you. I was the first to tell Zion, “Look, here they are!” I gave to Jerusalem a messenger of good tidings. I look but there is no one — no one among them to give counsel, no one to give answer when I ask them. See, they are all false! Their deeds amount to nothing; their images are but wind and confusion. (NIV)

up one from the north, and he shall come: from the rising of the sun shall he call upon my name: and he shall come upon princes as upon mortar, and as the potter treadeth clay. Who hath declared from the beginning, that we may know? and beforetime, that we may say, He is righteous? yea, there is none that sheweth, yea, there is none that declareth, yea, there is none that heareth your words. The first shall say to Zion, Behold, behold them: and I will give to Jerusalem one that bringeth good tidings. For I beheld, and there was no man; even among them, and there was no counsellor, that, when I asked of them, could answer a word. Behold, they are all vanity; their works are nothing: their molten images are wind and confusion. (KJV)

fixeth on you. I have stirred up [one] from the north, And he cometh, From the rising of the sun he calleth in My name, And he cometh in [on] prefects as [on] clay, And as a potter treadeth down mire. Who hath declared from the first, and we know? And beforetime, and we say, ‘Righteous?’ yea, there is none declaring, Yea, there is none proclaiming, Yea, there is none hearing your sayings. First to Zion, Behold, behold them, And to Jerusalem one proclaiming tidings I give, And I see that there is no man, Yea, of these that there is no counsellor, And I ask them, and they return word: ‘Lo, all of them [are] vanity, Nought [are] their works, Wind and emptiness their molten images!’ (YLT)

RETURN TO THE COURT OF v 1-7 — Isaiah returns to the train of thought he had at the beginning of the chapter: in contrast to the nations, Israel had nothing to fear from the conquests of Cyrus. The former comments were addressed to the idol worshipers, here the idols themselves are called to account (v23). The Lord again uses His sovereign providential control of history as proof of who He is and who the idols *are not*! Following the Lord’s reproof of the idols is another reference to the Servant, not the fearful Servant addressed before (v8-20) but now a ministering Servant (42:1-9).

THE TESTIMONY OF IDOLS (v 21-24) — *“Here the idols are called to give evidence that they can tell the future, or that they have ever done so. Can they explain how the world began or how it will end? Is there any place where an idol’s interpretation of the future has been recorded so that its accuracy can be checked? The prophet answers all these with a resounding no and a scathing denunciation of the worship of such things.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] Ancient pagans did indeed ‘predict the future’ but their prophecies were always veiled in vagueness as to protect the false prophet. For example Oswalt notes one king’s question regarding the outcome of a coming battle in which the false prophet responded *“a mighty empire will be destroyed.”* The king went forth and lost the conflict, after which the oracle said he was speaking of the king’s own empire being destroyed, not the enemies’! *In contrast, the accuracy and abundance of biblical prophecy is one of the apologetic proofs of the inspiration of the Bible. Indeed, it is due to the detailed accuracy of Isaiah’s prophecies concerning Cyrus that prompts liberals to state Isaiah did not write the prophecy!*

‘WHERE DID WE COME FROM? WHERE ARE WE GOING? DO ANYTHING TO PROVE YOUR DEITY!’ (v 22, 23) — *“The proofs of their deity that the gods are required to bring is some evidence that they are independent of the cosmos and its functioning. Much more than merely telling the future is at stake here. This is a highly sophisticated attack at the very roots of the pagan understanding of existence. What separates God from the gods is this concept of absolute transcendence that allows him to act independently of the system and to predict what the system will do in new and as yet unexperienced situations.”* [Oswalt, Isaiah]

ISAIAH’S ENTIRE ARGUMENT RESTS ON THE FACT GOD ALONE CONTROLS HISTORY — *“After pronouncing judgement on the gods for their inability to answer his challenge, God here brings forth his own evidence. He has raised up Cyrus (v 25). Did the gods predict it? No! (v26) But God had done so (v 27). So the judgement is pronounced again, both because the gods cannot perform the activities of deity, and because the Lord has done what he challenged them to do.... When did God make this prediction? In 545 BC, after the Persian’s conquest had begun? ... Thus it would have been entirely possible, even likely, for Babylonian oracles to have made the same prediction. Yet Isaiah speaks of something which was said to Jerusalem (v27), which was clearly neither expected nor ordinary. If these predictions were something any prescient person could have made, then what is the point of the argument here? If these predictions were indeed made at least 160 years in advance, as the present form of the book clearly maintains, there is every reason to believe that the argument is stunningly correct. In other words, all the arguments from predictive prophecy are useless unless the idols clearly could not duplicate such prediction. If the only kinds of predictive prophecy that existed were those that modern critics are willing to admit — those with no supernatural intervention necessary — then the ground is cut out from under the central argument for God’s uniqueness. Then the supposed writers are not gifted theologians, but either ignorant poets or crafty charlatans.”* [Oswalt, Isaiah]

The Ministering Servant: The Servant who brings justice (42:1-9)

<i>Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. 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. This is what God the LORD says — he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who</i>	<i>Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law. Thus saith God the LORD, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that</i>	<i>Lo, My servant, I take hold on him, My chosen one — My soul hath accepted, I have put My Spirit upon him, Judgment to nations he bringeth forth. He doth not cry, nor lift up, Nor cause his voice to be heard, in the street. A bruised reed he breaketh not, And dim flax he quencheth not, To truth he bringeth forth judgment. He doth not become weak nor bruised, Till he setteth judgment in the earth, And for his law isles wait with hope. Thus said God, Jehovah, preparing The heavens, and stretching them</i>
--	--	--

spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you. (NIV)

which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein: I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house. I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images. Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare: before they spring forth I tell you of them. (KJV)

out, Spreading out the earth and its productions, Giving breath to the people on it, And spirit to those walking in it. I, Jehovah, did call thee in righteousness, And I lay hold on thy hand, and keep thee, And I give thee for a covenant of a people, And a light of nations. To open the eyes of the blind, To bring forth from prison the bound one, From the house of restraint those sitting in darkness. I [am] Jehovah, this [is] My name, And Mine honour to another I give not, Nor My praise to graven images. The former things, lo, have come, And new things I am declaring, Before they spring up I cause you to hear. (YLT)

THE FIRST OF THE ‘SERVANT SONGS’ — both liberal and conservative commentators agree there are a series of ‘Servant Songs’ interspersed within the writings of Isaiah, the first being here (either v1-4 or v1-9); the others being 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52-13-53:12. The liberals however take the songs to be written at a much later date and added, while conservatives take the songs within the context of chapters 40-55; and some have gone so far as to argue these songs cannot be separated from the context without doing great damage. *These songs have the following characteristics: the language becomes more exalted and sweeping; the Servant is either left unidentified or identified in the broadest of terms; the descriptions tend to be graphic and detailed; and there is a unique emphasis on what the Servant will accomplish for the world.* [Oswalt, Isaiah] *This section divides in two: v1-4 presents the Servant to the hearers; v5-9 is an address from the Lord to His Servant.*

WHO IS THIS SERVANT? — “Over and around the entire discussion is the NT’s unequivocal attestation that at least some of these passages refer to Jesus Christ, the Messiah (Matt 8:17; 12:18-21; Luke 22:37; 23:33,34; John 12:38; Rev 7:16,17; etc). My position is that in *these passages Isaiah is speaking of an individual, almost certainly the Messiah, who will be the ideal Israel. Through his obedient service to God, Israel will be enabled to perform the service of blessing the nations that had been prophesied in Gen 12:3 and elsewhere.*” [Oswalt, Isaiah] “In Isa 41:8 this epithet was applied to the nation, which had been chosen as the servant and for the service of Jehovah. But the servant of Jehovah who is presented to us here is distinct from Israel, and has so strong an individuality and such marked personal features, that the expression cannot possibly be merely a personified collective. Nor can the prophet himself be intended; for what is here affirmed of this servant of Jehovah goes infinitely beyond anything to which a prophet was ever called, or of which a man was ever capable. It must therefore be the future Christ; and this is the view taken in the Targums.... *Hence the ‘servant of Jehovah’ must be that one Person who was the goal and*

*culminating point to which, from the very first, the history of Israel was ever pressing on; that One who throws into the shade not only all that prophets did before, but all that had been ever done by Israel's priests of kings; that One who arose out of Israel, for Israel and the whole human race, and who stood in the same relation not only to the wider circle of the whole nation, but also to the inner circle of the best and noblest within it, as the heart to the body which it animates, or the head to the body over which it rules. All that Cyrus did, was simply to throw the idolatrous nations into a state of alarm, and set the exiles free. **But the Servant of Jehovah opens blind eyes; and therefore the deliverance which He brings is not only redemption from bodily captivity, but from spiritual bondage also. He leads His people (cf., Isa 49:8-9), and the Gentiles also, out of night into light; He is the Redeemer of all that need redemption and desire salvation.*** [K&D, Isaiah]

THE SERVANT IN RESPONSE TO GOD'S CONTROL OF HISTORY — This passage parallels the former: in 41:1-7 Isaiah highlighted the fear among the idol worshipers when the Lord sent Cyrus against Babylon, then in 41:8-20 he comforts Israel that they need not fear because of Cyrus. Isaiah continues in 41:21-29 by emphasizing God's ability to foretell and control the future, something the idols could not do. Since He can guide history, Isaiah describes in 42:1-9 how He will bring about the change to His beneficial ruling of the world.

THE SPIRIT-ANOINTED SERVANT — the Servant will not function in his own strength but rather will be controlled by the Spirit of God, which the Father did without measure upon Jesus (Mt 3:16; Jn 3:34; cp Ps 45:7; Isa 11:2; 61:1). Reading this reminds one of the baptism of Jesus, and indeed the passage is quoted by Matthew later in Jesus' ministry: *'This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.'* (Matt 12:17-21).

JUSTICE TO THE NATIONS — in v1,3 and 4 it is repeated that one of the functions of the Servant will be to bring justice to the nations. This implies more than mere judicial equity but rather includes all of societies' ills which will be brought into order. ***"This is that life-giving order which exists when the creation is functioning in accordance with the design of the Lord."*** [Oswalt, Isaiah]

THE COMPASSIONATE SERVANT (v 2, 3) — *He will not shout or cry out* – the 'crying' is not the shouts of victory but rather the ranting of a fool, the kind of shouting associated with arguing. Not the meek and gentle Saviour. ***"The spirit of Christ is not a spirit of contention, murmuring, clamor, or litigiousness. He who loves these does not belong to Him."*** [Clarke, Commentary] "That is, He shall not be contentious, noisy, or ostentatious: but gentle, quiet, and lowly. We may observe each word rises above the other, expressing a still higher degree of humility and gentleness." [Wesley, Commentary] *A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench* – since the context is speaking of justice being proclaimed to the Gentiles, the "bruised reed" and "smoking flax" must be taken figuratively to refer to those afar, those of little faith, to the weak and helpless, etc. Again, contrast the cruelty and self-righteous judgmental attitude of the Pharisees. ***"The feeblest are not disdained by our Lord Jesus, though apparently useless as a bruised reed, or even actually offensive as a smoking flax. He is gentle, and exercises no harsh severity. He bears and forbears with those who are unlovely in his eyes. He longs to bind up the broken reed, and fan the smoking, flax into flaming life. Oh, that poor sinners would remember this, and trust him!"*** [Spurgeon, Matthew]

THE SERVANT'S COMMISSION (v 5-7) — the Servant's authority comes directly from the Creator of the universe. Thus the Servant will not be imposing a new regime but rather will be bringing to fruition the original design of the creation. The commission given to the Servant by the Creator is one of salvation for Jews and Gentiles.

THE REASON FOR THE REVELATION OF THE SERVANT (v 8, 9) — these verses ties in the Servant Song with what was preceding: God's glory is partially revealed by Him being able to do things the idols cannot do. *“Because he alone transcends the cosmos he alone can explain the course of history; he alone can turn that course in a whole new direction and tell the world in advance that he is going to do it. Whatever and whoever this Servant is, his ministry will be a confirmation that God, whose character is epitomized in the name Yahweh, is the only God and only Savior.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

“I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my
glory to another or my praise to idols.”

— Isaiah 42:8 NIV