

DEUTERO (Second) ISAIAH - Chapters 40-55

Short Version

Historical setting. Whereas the author of First Isaiah addressed the people of Judah (the southern kingdom) *prior* to the Babylonian exile, the author of Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) was an exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC addressing his fellow exiles seeking to give them hope and consolation.

At the time when deutero-Isaiah is ministering to his people in exile, a huge shift in their political world is taking place. Cyrus, King of Persia, is in the process of overthrowing the Babylonians, the oppressors of the exiles. In addition, he has a very different attitude towards exiles in his territory. Cyrus does not believe, as the Babylonians do, that deportation and resettlement is the best way to control conquered peoples. Instead, Cyrus allows them to return to their lands of origin, to rebuild their cities and sanctuaries, and to reestablish religious customs and practices.

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra tell the story of how the Israelites return to their native land, rebuild their cities and Temple, and reestablish their religion.

Purpose of Second Isaiah. The purpose of the anonymous author of chapters 40-55 is to console, encourage and inspire the disillusioned, faint-hearted exiles who see no hope of returning to Jerusalem and are in danger of being won over to the pagan idolatry of the Babylonians. In contrast to First Isaiah and other prophets who speak words of doom, Second Isaiah mainly speaks words of comfort and consolation. Chapter 40 opens with the words: *“Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God.”* Because of the positive, uplifting tone of chapters 40-55, Second Isaiah has been subtitled *The Book of Consolation*. Israel’s time of punishment for her infidelity to her covenant with God is over. Second Isaiah portrays a God whose arms are reaching out to a disheartened people, a God planning to bring about a new Exodus. In an attempt to encourage his fellow downhearted exiles, the anonymous author of these chapters will often stress the following truths:

- God is all powerful. In contrast, all human flesh (power) is nothing.
- God is the creator of the universe; saving Israel is a small matter.
- God plans to save Israel because he has a mission for her, namely, to be a light to all the nations.

- God will raise up a suffering servant to save the world. A unique feature of Second Isaiah is the series of four “servant songs” (42:1-7, 49:1-7, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12) that speak about a mysterious figure whose suffering for the sake of others’ sinfulness will restore integrity to God’s people.

The author. We do not know the name of the author of Second Isaiah, or how long he preached, or anything about his background, except that he was among the exiles in Babylon. *“He has hidden his identity behind the great prophet Isaiah so that those who hear or read his prophecies will see only the continuity of what God is doing from Isaiah’s age to his own”*(Lawrence Boadt). His writing is so beautiful that he has been called the Dante of the Old Testament.

Division of chapters. The fifteen chapters of Second Isaiah are usually divided into two parts:

Part 1: Israel’s liberation from Babylon
(Chapters 40-48)

Part 2: Restoration and salvation through suffering
(Chapters 49-55)

Suggested texts to read

40:1-31: Like an overture to a good piece of music, chapter 40 summarizes in beautiful poetry all the key themes of chapters 40-55: comfort, God’s mercy and power, and the power of his word. At a time when the exiles are most discouraged, God speaks words of comfort, mercy and of his power to save. The above words are spoken to a people who lament in Psalm 137: *“By the rivers of Babylon we sat mourning and weeping”* (v.1).

42:1-2: The first servant song

43:4: *“You are precious in my eyes...”* is one of the best known scriptures in the Bible.

49:1-6: The second servant song

50:4-9: The third servant song

52:12-53:12: The fourth servant song. This is the magnificent first reading in our Good Friday Passion of the Lord service.

55:1-13. This is one of the Easter Vigil readings.