

Isa 49:1 Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name

Isa 49:5 And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength— 8 This is what the LORD says: “I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances...”

1. The “Servant” speaks for Himself.

In the Servant Song of Isaiah 49 the servant speaks for himself: *“Listen to me you islands; hear this, you distant nations; before I was born, the LORD called me. He said to me, ‘You are my servant’”* (49:1,3). It is very striking fact that the servant should speak for himself, and speak about his birth and life some seven centuries before it was fulfilled in the birth and life of Jesus. It certainly could not have been Isaiah speaking of himself, for Isaiah could scarcely have claimed for himself that “Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down” (v.7), nor could he have claimed he would “restore the tribes of Jacob” or be a “Light to the Gentiles” (v.6).

If this, then, is the servant speaking through the prophet, what are we to think about the nature of this servant? Whilst he may make full reference to his humanity by saying that he was “born” and “formed in the womb”, and that he was “made into a polished arrow”, who was he that he should speak through Isaiah? The prophets were the mouth piece of God and God alone. The explanation must be that we are being allowed a glimpse of the servant’s divinity, hearing his living voice long before his human birth.

2. The Servant speaks of his Mandate to restore Israel

The servant first addresses the “islands” and the “distant nations” (49.1), and tells them that God has given him a mandate to *“bring my salvation to the ends of the earth”* (49.6). There is, however, another part of his mandate that is spelled out in this song and spelled out with great clarity. This has to do, not with the Gentiles, but with the nation of Israel. In v5 the servant says he was *“formed in the womb to be God’s servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself.”* In v.6 he repeats the mandate: he is *“my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept”*. In v. 9 God speaks and says, *“I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances”*. Though in context the servant is making the point that the restoration of the tribes of Israel is too small a mandate, and that he has the much larger mandate of bringing salvation to the nations, nonetheless the restoration of Israel is very much a part of his mandate.

The first thing to note in this mandate to Israel is that it means precisely what it says – a restoration of the nation. Israel as a nation is distinguished quite clearly from the Gentiles as nations. This is obvious from the statement (v.6), *“it is too small a thing for the servant to restore the tribes of Israel, he will also be a light to the gentile nations”*. The servant has a work to do for the Jewish nation, and that is a work of restoration. He is clearly thinking nationally. **The second thing to note** is that this restoration involves two separate things for the nation: first a restoration to its land, and second a restoration to its God. Thus the servant is called *“to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances”* (v.8), and also *“to restore Israel to himself (i.e. God)”*. Both themes are constantly repeated throughout Isaiah’s prophecies. The restoration of Israel back to its own land, whilst clearly important, is not the final act of restoration. A much greater day is to come when the nation is restored to God. **The third factor to note** is these two aspects of restoration clearly presupposes a period when Israel is scattered across the world and when it is away from God. Though Isaiah could see the beginning of this in his own generation, he is evident that he is in fact prophesying a scenario of physical and spiritual exile much greater than his contemporary world could suggest.

3. Restoring the Land

The prophetic commission of the servant to restore the land fits in with repeated prophetic statements (not just from Isaiah but from most of the other prophets) that there would come a day when the nation would ultimately return to its own land. This was the great hope offered by God to Israel and Judah even whilst a prophecy of destruction and exile had been pronounced over them on account of their sin. The restoration of the nation to its land is one of the plainest and most frequent of the promises that we can find in the prophets. So for example Isaiah elsewhere says *“In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush (Ethiopia) from Elam (Persia), from Babylonia, from Hamath (Syria) and from the islands of the sea ... he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth”*. (11:11-12).

Clearly this scenario is not one which fits happily with the return from the exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C. It is of much greater scope than that; these exiles are not simply to come from one place, Babylon, but from “the four quarters of the earth” (11:12). Moreover, the Babylonian return featured Judah only, whereas Isaiah distinctly mentions that the return he had in mind would be one in which both Judah and Israel (Ephraim) would be involved, and that their enmity would not appear (11:12-13). They represent a people who have been “scattered”, who constitute a “remnant” among many lands, and who come

“from the islands of the sea” (11:11). The expression “the islands of the sea” denotes the outlying lands to the west and in the latter chapters of Isaiah and has been described as “virtually a technical term for the Gentile World”. It is, therefore, very much more of a “world-wide” scattering or dispersion that Isaiah perceives. This wide scope of a return is something that recurs elsewhere in his prophecies, as for example in 43:5-6: “I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back. Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth.” The same basic idea of a gathering from a far flung dispersion is echoed throughout the other prophets of Isaiah’s times.

The reality is that Isaiah is pointing to a much bigger scenario, a scenario that involves a truly world-wide dispersion; and it is an extraordinary fact that history has actually unfolded such a bigger scenario of dispersion. From the time of the sixth century exile to Babylon the Jewish dispersion simply grew bigger and bigger. As Paul Johnson writes in his History of the Jews, “Between 734 and 581 B.C. there were six distinct deportations of the Israelites, and more fled voluntarily to Egypt and other parts of the Near East. From this time onwards, a majority of Jews would always live outside the Promised Land.”. The freedom to return to Jerusalem accorded by the Persian king, Cyrus, when he conquered Babylon later in the sixth century brought some Jews back home, but it did not materially affect the momentum of dispersion. A great many Jews stayed in the homes that they had built in Babylon, and they stayed there in great numbers for a further thousand years, before dispersing to Spain and other areas of the Mediterranean. The Jews who did return from Babylon were only to reside in Israel until the beginning of the second century A.D. At that point a greater phase of exile began with the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem by the Romans, resulting in the land being lost for two thousand years, and the Jews roaming the earth with no fixed abode, and being pushed and persecuted from country to country.

“There will be both a restoration to the land, and a Restoration to God”

Living some two and a half thousand years after Isaiah’s prophecy we may well feel inclined to relate his prophecy more to our own times. Certainly, as far as a world-wide Jewish dispersion is concerned, our present situation provides a much more fitting context to which Isaiah was pointing for the return of Israel. The return of Jews to the state of Israel cannot but demand our careful consideration. We live in times in which the work of the “servant” and the “Shoot of Jesse” seems to be gathering pace. They are times for

us to keep watch.

4. Restoring the Jewish Nation to God

The second part of the servant’s mandate is the restoration of Israel to its God: he is “to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself” (49:5). This will come because the servant is going to be made a “covenant for the people” (49:8). What did Isaiah mean by that? He meant simply that the servant, the Messiah, would embody a new covenant which they would accept and which would make them once again his people. What would be the nature of that new covenant?

The best starting point for examining this question is Isaiah 49:7 (part of the same servant song we are considering), where we are told that the servant (Jesus), as well as restoring the nation, would at some point be “*abhorred and despised by the nation*”. This means that there would be some historical episode or event which reflected this rejection of the servant by Israel. The crucifixion of Jesus by the nation is the only possible fulfilment (and a most astonishing fulfilment) of this event. That episode of rejection was certainly not the moment in which he restored the land or the people. In fact the crucifixion was followed in due course by the greatest scattering that Israel was ever to know, and to the total loss of the land. Thus the restoration of which Isaiah spoke must relate to a later stage of history than Jesus’ first coming. Indeed it can only relate to the dispersion of the nation consequent on Jesus’ death, a dispersion which became world-wide, and in which it still remains estranged from God and in need of reconciliation.

Israel restored through a New Covenant

However, the fact is that it was the first coming of Jesus and the crucifixion and rejection that he experienced at the hands of the nation that laid the essential foundation for the later restoration of Israel to God and made it possible. By rejecting him and crucifying him the Jews had, albeit unwittingly, shared in the process by which God made the servant an offering for the sin of the world. His death made forgiveness possible not only for the nations but also for Israel. If Israel was to be restored to God it would have to come back to God and find restoration in the same way as the Gentiles had, namely by believing in Jesus and appropriating the benefits of his death.

Its restoration, in other words, would rest on a new basis of forgiveness. God would enter into a “new covenant” of which Jesus would be the central guarantee (Heb.9:15). That covenant would give the people forgiveness. This is exactly what God was pointing to in Isaiah 49:8 when he said of the servant, “I will keep you and make you a covenant for the people”. The servant who was so badly marred and punished as a guilt offering (Is.53) would, by his death, usher in a new covenant with Israel. This is what Jeremiah meant when, a century later than Isaiah, he prophesied, “The time is coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jer.31:31). It was also what Jesus meant when, at the Last Supper he said, “This is my blood of the new covenant, shed for you and many for the forgiveness of sins”.

The new covenant inaugurated by and through Jesus would also involve a gift of the Spirit, and through the Spirit the nation would be enlightened. The people would “mourn bitterly” over the “one they had pierced”, and would come in deep confession and repentance (Zech.12:10). Zion would then know its ultimate blessing, and finally itself bring blessing to the nations of the world.

5. Living in Significant Times

Frequently Isaiah puts together the servant’s full mandate of being both a light to the Gentiles and a restorer of Israel, strongly implying a connection between them in terms of timing. In our modern world with the gospel banner now being flown world wide and large numbers of Jews finding their way back to the land of Israel we are seeing the same juxtaposition of events. This again makes our own times of the utmost significance, and times for careful watching and praying.