
Isaiah Series 2

Lesson 11

“Isaiah 43:1-28”

Objective - To understand the meaning of specified passage from Isaiah for both the original audience, and what it came to mean to those that came later; especially to the Jews of the first century A. D. The passages were specifically selected because of their usage in the Gospel of Mark, either as direct quotes, or as allusions. The goal is to understand this material better in its original context, to its original audience, and in the fall to be able to examine the Gospel of Mark with a better understanding of the role of Isaiah in the theology of that Gospel and of the church.

Materials - Commentaries, Journal articles, Targums, Books.

Procedures

1. We will seek to set the basic background for the writing of the book of Isaiah.
2. Choose the texts that are applicable to Mark's Gospel.
3. Translate those texts from the Masoretic Text, with reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targum of Isaiah.
4. I will search commentaries, journal articles, and books for understanding of these texts both to their original audience and to later Judaism, especially the Judaism of the 1st century A. D. and the early church.

¹ But now, behold says Yahweh, he who created you Jacob and he who formed you Israel, “Do not be afraid because I have redeemed you, called you by your name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not engulf you; when you walk through fire you will not be burned, and the flame will not consume you. ³ For I am Yahweh your God, the Holy one of Israel, the one who delivered you. I gave Egypt as a ransom for you, Cush and Seba instead of you. ⁴ Since you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I dearly love you, I give mankind instead of you and nations instead of your soul. ⁵ Do not be afraid for I am with you; from the East I will cause your offspring to be brought and from the West I will collect you. ⁶ I will say to the north wind give and to the south wind to not restrain; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth. ⁷ Everyone being called by my name, for my glory I created him, I formed him, also I made him. ⁸ To bring forth the blind people, even though they have their eyes, those who are deaf though they have their ears. ⁹ Let all the nations assemble together, and gather together the people, who among them made known

this, and former things caused to be announced? Let them appoint their witnesses to justify them, and let us listen and let them speak truth. ¹⁰ You are my witnesses declares Yahweh and my servant whom I have chosen for the purpose of your learning and causing faithfulness in me, and for you to discern that I am he. Before me there was no other god formed, or after me did one come into existence. ¹¹ I, I am Yahweh and there is not apart from me, there is no deliverer. ¹² I caused to be made known and brought salvation and announced when there was not among you a strange (god), and you are my witness, declares Yahweh, and I am God. ¹³ Even from this day I am he, and there is no one who can deliver you from my hand, I will act, and from it whom will return. ¹⁴ Thus says Yahweh, your redeeming one, the holy one of Israel: for your sake I will send Babylon and bring down the fugitive, all of them, and the Chaldeans in ships of rejoicing. ¹⁵ I am Yahweh, your holy one, the one who created Israel, your king.” ¹⁶ Thus says Yahweh, “the one who setting a way in the sea, and in the mighty waters a path. ¹⁷ The one bringing forth chariot and horse, armies and powerful men together, they lie down and do not remain standing, they are

extinguished like a wick, they go out. ¹⁸ Do not remember the previous things, or the ancient things do not recall. ¹⁹ Behold, a new thing is being done; now it sprouts forth; do you observe it? Furthermore, I will put a highway in the wilderness, in the desert, rivers. ²⁰ The living things of the field will honor me, jackals and the daughters of ostriches because I gave streams of waters in the wilderness, in the desert I give drink to my chosen people. ²¹ That people which I formed for myself, they will be assigned to praise me. ²² Yet you did not call me, Oh Jacob, for you have been weary of me, Oh Israel. ²³ You have not brought to me a lamb for your burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices, I have not burdened you with offerings, nor wearied you with frankincense. ²⁴ You have not acquired for me with money a reed, or your sacrifice of fat, however you have not saturated me with your service in sin offerings, you have wearied me with your transgressions. ²⁵ I, I am he, the one who blots out your transgressions for my sake, and your sins I will not remember. ²⁶ Remind me, let us argue the case together, recount you, so that you may be just. ²⁷ Your first father sinned, and your interpreters rebelled against me. ²⁸ and I pierced

your holy princes, and gave as a devoted thing Jacob and Israel to reproach.”

Brueggemann says, “This unit articulates, as forcefully and compellingly as anywhere in the Bible, Yahweh’s defining and uncompromising love for Israel, a commitment and devotion that completely repositions Israel’s life in the world.”¹ This is a unit of Scripture that has inspired songs, poems, but more importantly lives. There is a power in these words that is electric and charges the air with the sense of being in the presence of God. A God who chooses to love and reach out in spite of the seemingly overwhelming barrier that divides him from the object of this love. With gentleness, faithfulness and with unrelenting pursuit relationship not only becomes possible. surely it becomes inevitable. As we read the words of the Bible it can so often seem that no matter what God does humanity in all of its creative acumen devises new avenues of failure, but here we have the heart of God revealed in a way that makes all of those failures fade into the background and the dawn of God’s love warms a new day.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, in the Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 52.

The initial, “But now” likely acts here to contrast what is said here with the abrasive harshness of 42:21-25². Now, in this present moment Israel is made acutely aware of Yahweh’s profound and abiding commitment to them. This is a commitment that persists through, and in spite of, disturbed circumstances. This is an oracle that comes from the creator, the one who formed Israel and in the darkness of despair it cries out for them not to fear. The basis of this call for them not to be afraid is because Yahweh has redeemed them.³ Most often when we think of God in terms of the creation of matter, we think about the creation of the world, but here the idea is connected with the creation and formation of Israel as a nation, as a people, and not with the original creation. Israel owes its identity, its

² The Lord was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness,
to magnify his teaching and make it glorious.

²² But this is a people robbed and plundered,
all of them are trapped in holes
and hidden in prisons;

they have become a prey with no one to rescue,
a spoil with no one to say, “Restore!”

²³ Who among you will give heed to this,
who will attend and listen for the time to come?

²⁴ Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler,
and Israel to the robbers?

Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned,
in whose ways they would not walk,
and whose law they would not obey?

²⁵ So he poured upon him the heat of his anger
and the fury of war;
it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand;
it burned him, but he did not take it to heart. NRSV

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 52.

reason for existence to Yahweh. The character and origin of Israel is due to the efforts of God. They are what he has made them to be. Israel belongs to Yahweh in a unique and powerful way.⁴ The word used here for “redeem” (כָּפַר) is a word used to describe the kinsman redeemer within the ancient history of Israel. The *go’el*, in ancient Israel, is the next of kin who acts to maintain the vitality of his extended family group. He acts to prevent any breaches from occurring in this family group. In this vein he acquires alienated property (Leviticus 25:25⁵), or purchases it when it is danger of being lost to someone outside the family group (Jeremiah 32:6-8⁶). At

⁴ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Volume 25, Revised Edition (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 675.

⁵ **25 If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold. NRSV**

⁶ **6 Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me: 7 Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.” 8 Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.” Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord. NRSV**

times he supports the widow of his next of kin (Ruth 4:1-10⁷). He

redeems a clansman who has been reduced to slavery by poverty

(Leviticus 25:47-55⁸) and avenges his blood when it is shed (Numbers

⁷ 4 No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin,^a of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, "Come over, friend; sit down here." And he went over and sat down. ² Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, "Sit down here"; so they sat down. ³ He then said to the next-of-kin,^b "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. ⁴ So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you." So he said, "I will redeem it." ⁵ Then Boaz said, "The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance." ⁶ At this, the next-of-kin said, "I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it."

⁷ Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. ⁸ So when the next-of-kin^c said to Boaz, "Acquire it for yourself," he took off his sandal. ⁹ Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. ¹⁰ I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses." NRSV

⁸ ⁴⁷ If resident aliens among you prosper, and if any of your kin fall into difficulty with one of them and sell themselves to an alien, or to a branch of the alien's family, ⁴⁸ after they have sold themselves they shall have the right of redemption; one of their brothers may redeem them, ⁴⁹ or their uncle or their uncle's son may redeem them, or anyone of their family who is of their own flesh may redeem them; or if they prosper they may redeem themselves. ⁵⁰ They shall compute with the purchaser the total from the year when they sold themselves to the alien until the jubilee year; the price of the sale shall be applied to the number of years: the time they were with the owner shall be rated as the time of a hired laborer. ⁵¹ If many years remain, they shall pay for their redemption in proportion to the purchase price; ⁵² and if few years remain until the jubilee year, they shall compute thus: according to the years involved they shall make payment for their redemption. ⁵³ As a laborer hired by the year they shall be under the alien's authority, who shall not, however, rule with harshness over them in your sight. ⁵⁴ And if they have not been redeemed in any of these ways, they and their children with them shall go free in the jubilee year. ⁵⁵ For to me the people of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. NRSV

35:17-19⁹). When the term *go'el* is applied to God it loses its strictly Juridical meaning and takes on a meaning of “to deliver,” though (cf. Genesis 48:15-16¹⁰) it still does retain some of its original overtones even when applied to God. Proverbs (23:10-11¹¹) speaks of the *go'el* as the next of kin who is duty bound to protect orphans and Job believes God is duty bound to protect the persecuted (Job 19:21-25¹²). Yahweh is the *go'el* of Israel (Isaiah 41:14; 43:14; 44:6, 24; 47:4; 48:17, etc.). The prophets uses this term to reassure Israel.

^{9 17} Or anyone who strikes another with a stone in hand that could cause death, and death ensues, is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁸ Or anyone who strikes another with a weapon of wood in hand that could cause death, and death ensues, is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁹ The avenger of blood is the one who shall put the murderer to death; when they meet, the avenger of blood shall execute the sentence. NRSV

^{10 15} He blessed Joseph, and said,
“The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked,
the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day,
¹⁶ the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys;
and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the earth.” NRSV

^{11 10} Do not remove an ancient landmark
or encroach on the fields of orphans,
¹¹ for their redeemer is strong;
he will plead their cause against you. NRSV

^{12 21} Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends,
for the hand of God has touched me!
²² Why do you, like God, pursue me,
never satisfied with my flesh?

²³ “O that my words were written down!
O that they were inscribed in a book!
²⁴ O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock forever!
²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; NRSV

God has a reason to redeem them, he is their *go'el*.¹³ They are his family.

There is in this imagery powerful impetus to believe that Yahweh would go to whatever lengths were necessary in order to redeem Israel. The worthiness of the recipient of the redemption is not really in view when this type of redemption is in view, it is based upon the responsibility and power of the kinsman redeemer. Here in Isaiah 43 Yahweh is named as the kinsman redeemer for his family member Israel. The basis for Israel not being afraid is rooted in the fact that Yahweh has redeemed them. The honor of Yahweh is at stake. Yahweh has called them by their name, specifically singled them out, they are his possession. In this there is absolute security and no one, or nothing can steal from Yahweh. As we move to verse 2, there appears to be a sense in which the Exodus crossing of the Red Sea is being recalled though the imagery here may be more generic in nature. They will not pass through the dangers of the waters alone, Yahweh will be with them and they will not be overwhelmed by the dangers of the waters. It is at least possible that

¹³ Michael J. Graetz, "Redemption," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Volume 14 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd., 1972), pp. 1-9.

the primordial waters of creation are in view here. The imagery then shifts to that of walking through fire. The fiery presence of Yahweh that once inspired terror on the part of Israel when he descended onto the mountain now is perhaps intended to inspire Israel with confidence. Jacob/Israel that was plundered and robbed is now redeemed. Israel is the focus of Yahweh's redemptive attention.¹⁴ He acts as their kinsman redeemer and honors his name through the redemption of Israel.

At verse 3 there is the indication that a high price has been paid for the redemption of Israel. The imagery here expresses something like an exchange of prisoners, or perhaps even an exchange of slaves. Yahweh is prepared to exchange those from other nations in order to redeem those of Israel that are lost. Such imagery may seem crass and hard, but Yahweh does not shrink from using this imagery, perhaps in answer to a charge made against him elsewhere (Psalm 44:12¹⁵) of selling Israel for too cheap a price.¹⁶ At the time portrayed here, God had summoned Cyrus to facilitate

¹⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 334.


¹⁵ **You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them.** NRSV

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 53-54.

Israel's access to her homeland in Canaan and Jerusalem. Cyrus was busy consolidating his gains in Asia Minor as far west as the Aegean Sea and as far east as India. He had bypassed Babylon because it was too weak under Nabunaid to be a problem. Palestine itself had very little attraction for Cyrus. One thing could lure Cyrus into Palestine: the prospect of conquering Egypt, Ethiopia and Sheba (North Africa). This verse indicates that Yahweh promised these to Cyrus.¹⁷ In light of this Cyrus comes and Israel is redeemed.

At verse 4 we are told that this happened because Israel is precious in the sight of Yahweh, honored and that he loves (אֶהְבֶּה) them. The love of Yahweh is so powerful that no matter how far they are scattered they will be retrieved. From all four directions, from the four winds they will be gathered. Verse 7, everyone who is called by the name of Yahweh will be redeemed, retrieved and brought back to him. Even those who are blind and deaf will be gathered (verse 8). The gathering of Israel serves as a message that Yahweh is faithful to his word and they serve as a witness of his veracity. Here it is as if Yahweh is on trial and Israel stands as a witness called to give


¹⁷ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, p. 675.



evidence, to tell the truth on his behalf. The counterpoint to verses 8 and 10 is given in verse 9 with the nations coming to trial with their gods. The nations are called to testify on behalf of their gods and Israel is called to testify on behalf of Yahweh here. The verdict is that there is only one God (verse 10). The witnesses for the other gods are called to testify and to give evidence of their claims, but they are “false witnesses.” They are false not because they lie, but because they testify about something that is fraudulent and unreliable. This stands in contrast to Yahweh who is reliable and true.¹⁸

The verdict comes in verse 11 that Yahweh is unique and like no other and there is no savior, no deliverer apart from him. What Yahweh has declared (verse 12) has happened and he calls upon Israel to be his witness. At verse 13 he is declared to be “God.” What he declares becomes reality and no one can stop, or hinder his declaration from coming to pass. What Yahweh does is to persuade the watching nations of his power and truth. He will rescue Israel from the hand of Babylon and in turn make Babylon fugitives and turn their shouts of joy to mourning (verse 14). At verse 14 he

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 56-57.



declares once again that he created Israel and then here draws upon an ancient claim that he is the king of Israel. Despite their rejection and their desire to be like the other nations and to have an earthly king, Yahweh declares that he is their king (verse 15.). In verse 16 we revert to even older things grounded deep in the memory of Israel as Yahweh, who subdued the forces of chaos in creation, is brought to the forefront. The faith of Israel is rooted deeply in the great miracles performed by Yahweh in the past and reciting them reminds them of the basis of their faith.¹⁹ Recalling the great acts of Yahweh is not dwelling in past glories it is a call to an active and living faith rooted in an active and living God.

At verse 18 we are diverted away from remembering the former things and challenged to turn to something new. Exile had been practiced among the Assyrians and the Babylonians for eight hundred years. In all that time there is not one single report of an exiled people ever returning home. In the midst of this daunting statistic of doom and gloom we are told at verse 19 that something


¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 57-58.

new and unexpected is about to happen at the hand of Yahweh.²⁰

God will bring Israel back to their land and break eight hundred years of tradition. Even the wild animals will recognize the greatness and the power of the hand of God in making this happen and they will honor him. The faith of Israel had grown stale and dank with them thinking they knew what to expect, but Yahweh would shake them to their core and do something new and surprising to raise them out of the slumber and stupor of their expectations. He calls upon his people to praise him (verse 21). They are to declare the praise of Yahweh in their existence and in their return to the land that had been promised to them. All of this should bring honor to the name of God.

At verse 22, there is a shift in the tone of the oracle as Yahweh challenges Israel. The initial onslaught of these verses is to rebuke Israel for their lack of faith. They did not call upon Yahweh in their captivity and they did not bring sacrifices to him. During the time of their captivity all the things that would have normally been a part of their worship of Yahweh were not taking place. Israel was dormant in

²⁰ John N. Oswalt, "The God of Newness: A Sermon on Isaiah 43:14-21," *Calvin Theological Journal* 39 (2004), pp. 386-390.



their worship of Yahweh and yet the demand of their sinfulness continued to burden Yahweh. The roles have, in some sense, been reversed here and Yahweh has played the role of the servant of Israel instead of the other way around. Yahweh takes on the role that is put before him and he blots out their sins and serves Israel during the time of their captivity. He serves in a way unheard of, and that is totally unique here. Despite the fact that they continued to weary him with their sins and evil deeds he continues to serve them and to blot out their sins. He does this for the sake of his name and as a testament to his nature. He becomes their servant because of their need.

God chooses to not remember their sins (verse 25) and then there is once again a shift as if God is once again answering their accusations against him. Their grumbling and their accusing has reached the ears of Yahweh and now he challenges them to debate with him. At verse 17 he then reminds them that their first ancestor (Abraham) sinned. Their spokesmen (likely a reference to their prophets and priests) have all rebelled against Yahweh. It is likely the case that Israel has expressed sentiments of feeling sorry for

themselves in their exile as if they have been mistreated and abused. Here Yahweh challenges them to defend such accusations. Here he reminds them of why they were sent into captivity and why they had been subjected to humiliating abuse. Whereas Israel had abandoned proper worship of Yahweh and keeping of the covenant with him he remains faithful and even their punishment is a mark of the faithfulness of God and not due to any merit of Israel. He continues to pursue their hearts and souls even as they rebel and sin shamefully against him.

In this oracle, the power of the love of Yahweh is expressed in awe inspiring terms such that none can be in doubt at the great love of Yahweh that compels him to pursue the object of his love and even endure being made Israel's servant in the process. This oracle is a powerful proclamation of the Gospel to Israel in the midst of their rebellion and lack of faith. Israel is humiliated in an effort to get them to see how much God loves them, but then they are redeemed because of the great love that he has for them and because of his name. He redeems them because of his honor and because they are called by his name. In a shame based society redeeming one's name

is a mark of greatness. Israel is blessed through no merit that they possess, they are redeemed because of who Yahweh is and because of what he is, he is God.

Synopsis

In this oracle of Isaiah we have one of the most powerful expressions of love given in the Old Testament. There is a tremendous amount that will be found in the ministry of Jesus and the early church that is reflected in this oracle and it came hundreds of years before the coming of Christ. In these verses, Israel is promised the protection of God and his deliverance. They are also given some indication of the price that this cost in the ransom of other nations for Israel's redemption. This likely refers to the promise made to Cyrus regarding his conquest of these nations which provides impetus for Persia to move south through Judea in order to make that conquest a reality and to pay attention to the people of Judea.

In this section of Scripture we are given an indication of the way Yahweh sees Israel. He views them as precious, honored, and dearly loved. These words represent a great expression of love on the part of Yahweh that depart markedly from the normal Near Eastern way that gods expressed themselves. At verse 5, we have a

powerful phrase tenderly calling to Israel, to not be afraid, and then this powerful affirmation of the lengths to which God is willing to go in order to collect the people of his devotion from the four winds.

At verse 7, there is the association of the name of Yahweh with the people of Israel and an indication of a powerful creative act that very much sounds reminiscent of the creation account when God formed mankind from the dust of the ground. In the midst of this, comes this almost courtroom like defense from Yahweh defending his actions. This apparently is in answer to accusations on the part of Israel that God had sold them into captivity too cheaply. In the midst of this scene there is an indication of the redemption of Israel from Babylon, but also a recounting of the greatness of Yahweh who sets a path in the sea, who destroys armies and then a recounting of the previous miracles of God on behalf of his people.

Once again the theme of a highway in the desert is brought up; this time the creatures of the field honor God for his miraculous acts . In all of this Yahweh has not only not asked for the service of Israel to him, he has even acted as Israel's servant in a dramatic reversal of roles. This was done because this is what was needed in order for

Israel to be redeemed. God is willing to do what is necessary in order to redeem his people. Yahweh then calls upon Israel to justify their complaints against him and reminds them that even their first father sinned and it is because of their rebellion against him that their holy princes have been pierced and Israel was subjected to reproach. In this oracle God beautifully recounts his love and concern for Israel and defends his actions with power and grace in a way that challenges the people of his heart to faith.

Questions

1. Why do you think God calls on Israel to not be afraid?
2. What does it mean for God to call Israel by their name and to declare that they are his?
3. Why do you think there is so much effort at the beginning of this oracle to provide assurance to Israel?
4. Why do you think there is so often a need for Yahweh to remind Israel of who he is?
5. How do you think Israel was meant to feel knowing that other nations were sacrificed for their redemption?
6. What is your perception of verse 4?
7. What affect do you think it should have on a person to be called by God?
8. Why do you think in places such as at verse 9, God defends himself?
9. Why might God need to defend his name?
10. To what lengths do you think God is willing to go in order to redeem his people?
11. Why do you think God chooses to redeem Israel?
12. What does it mean for Yahweh to be holy?
13. Why do you think the great deeds of God are so often recited?
14. What do you think the reciting of the deeds of God should look like today in the church?
15. What do you think it means that God is willing to become the servant of his people?
16. Why does God blot out the transgressions of Israel?
17. Why do you think God blots out our transgressions today?
18. Why would people choose to argue with God?
19. Why do you think there are times when God punishes people?