

Literary Prophecy: Perspectives on the Exile (Ezekiel and 2nd Isaiah)

Lecture 19 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-19>

Overview

The destruction of Jerusalem challenged the faith of the nation. What was the meaning of this event and how could such tremendous evil and suffering be reconciled with the nature of God himself? Professor Hayes shows how Israel's prophets attempted to answer this question, turning the nation's defeat and despair into an occasion for renewing faith in Israel's God. The lecture continues with an in-depth study of the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel's denunciations of Jerusalem are among the most lurid and violent in the Bible and he concludes that destruction is the only possible remedy. Ezekiel's visions include God's withdrawal from Jerusalem to be with his people in exile, and his ultimate return. Ezekiel's use of dramatic prophetic signs, his rejection of collective divine punishment and assertion of individual responsibility are discussed. The last part of the lecture turns to Second Isaiah and the famous "servant songs" that find a universal significance in Israel's suffering.

1. Structure and Tone of the Book of Ezekiel

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* I'm going to go ahead now and get started with some sixth-century material which — prophetic literature — which confronts the issues that were raised by the final destruction of Jerusalem.

[2] What was the meaning of this event and how could it be reconciled with the concept of Israel as God's elect? How could such tremendous evil and suffering be reconciled with the nature of God himself? This is going to be a question that will return in the next lecture when we look at the wisdom literature and the Book of Job, and some other texts as well as we proceed through the rest of the course.

[3] In classical terms, if God is God, then he's not good if all these terrible things happened, and if God is good then he mustn't be all powerful because he failed to prevent this evil. That tends to be the dilemma, the way it's phrased.

[4] Now, Ezekiel was a priest and he was deported in the first deportation. You remember there was a deportation of exiles in 597, and then the final siege and destruction and deportation of exiles in 587. Ezekiel was among the deportees of 597. He was therefore, in exile in Babylon during the final destruction and the fall of Jerusalem in 587, but his priestly background

and his priestly interests are clearly reflected in his prophecies. He accuses the Israelites of failing to observe cultic laws, ritual laws, and his promises for the future and his vision of a restoration, we will see, center around a new temple and a restored Jerusalem and temple complex.

[5] There's a striking correspondence between Ezekiel and the priestly sources in terms of language and theme, particularly H, the Holiness code. Now, the prophecies in Ezekiel, conveniently and unlike many of the other prophetic books, actually follow a fairly chronological order. So the first section of the book consists of prophecies that were before the final destruction, between 597 and 587, and then beginning in 33, it seems we have prophecies that followed the destruction. He gets the report of the destruction, and then we see how his tone and his message changes.

[6] So in those first 24 chapters where you have prophecies that are delivered in Babylon, before the destruction, we have three chapters that are devoted to his call and his commission as a prophet. We see his inaugural vision. I'll come back and talk about that in a minute as well as many other visions and symbols. Then you have, from chapters 4 to 24, oracles that are condemning Judah and Israel.

- [7] There are some interesting elements within this. We have the depiction of the *kavod* (which represents God) departing. We'll talk about that text in a minute. We also have, in chapter 18, a very interesting emphasis on individual responsibility for sin. We'll come back and touch on that as well.
- [8] Chapters 25 to 32 contain oracles against foreign nations just as we have in Jeremiah and Isaiah. Throughout, Ezekiel refers to these nations as the uncircumcised. The tone here is vengeful and very gloating, and these oracles have exerted a very strong influence on the New Testament, particularly the Book of Revelation.
- [9] After 587, Ezekiel prophesied and those prophecies are contained in the latter part of his book from chapters 33 to 48. So in 33 we hear of the fall of Jerusalem, and then after that, oracles of promise and hope for the future. The last chapters, from chapter 40 to 48 are visions: Ezekiel's visions of the restoration, his vision of a rebuilt Temple and a rebuilt Jerusalem.
- [10] So the book opens with a narrative account of Ezekiel's call in about 593 or so in a Jewish community that's on the River Chebar, which is a large irrigation canal off of the Euphrates in Babylon. And this is the first time that we hear of a call of a prophet outside the land of Israel.
- [11] It's a remarkable vision. Like many of the visions in the Book of Ezekiel it has a sort of surrealistic, almost hallucinatory quality. The vision itself is very reminiscent of descriptions of Baal, the Canaanite storm god. So there's a stormy wind and a huge cloud, and a flashing fire. God is riding on a kind of throne chariot. He's enthroned above four magnificent creatures. Each of these has a human body and then four faces: the face of a human, the face of a lion, the face of an ox, and the face of an eagle. There are four huge wheels under this throned-chariot, and they are said to gleam like beryl beneath a vast and awe-inspiring expanse or dome, which gleams like crystal. Above that is the semblance of a throne that is like sapphire, and on the throne was the semblance of a human form that's gleaming like amber, and its fire encased in a frame, which is radiant all about.
- [12] So this *kavod*, this cloud that contains or hides the fire that is Yahweh's presence — That is also the term that's used in the Torah, [i.e.,] in Exodus and the priestly sources to describe the presence of God among His people, this fire that's encased in a cloud, the *kavod*.
- [13] In Exodus 24 we read that this *kavod* had settled on Mount Sinai representing God's presence. In Exodus 40, this cloud covers the tent of meeting; it fills the tabernacle, so when Ezekiel sees it now he says, that it "was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the Lord. When I beheld it, I flung myself down on my face and I heard the voice of someone speaking." Notice this language; it was the "semblance of the appearance of the Presence." Ezekiel wants to emphasize the transcendent nature of the deity. He's having a vision of something which cannot in fact be seen or perceived, which is a kind of paradox of all of his visions.
- [14] The prophet's humanity is emphasized in contrast to this transcendent divinity, and that's something that happens throughout Ezekiel. He emphasizes his humanity with this phrase "Son of Man," *ben adam*. Son of Man; it simply is the Hebrew term for a mortal being as opposed to divine being. Son of Man simply means a human, *a morta*. *Ben adam*, one who is like Adam.
- [15] Now, the call of Ezekiel is reminiscent of the call of Jeremiah and Isaiah. He is sent to a nation of rebels, rebels who will not be listening to him. His commission is symbolized by a scroll that's handed to him, and we hear at the end of chapter 2 that inscribed on this scroll are lamentations and dirges and woes, and he's commanded to eat of this scroll and then go to speak to the House of Israel.
- [16] So he swallows this scroll and all of its dreadful contents. It tastes to him as sweet as honey and then his task is spelled out in chapter 3. He is to be a watchman, one who gives warning of danger, and people will either heed him or not, but each one of them is ultimately responsible for his or her own fate.
- [17] In a vision, in chapter 8, an angel transports Ezekiel to Jerusalem and into the temple courts, and there he sees and gives a very vivid description of the shocking abominations. These are represented as justifying or

explaining the destruction of the city and these descriptions are characterized by more than the usual amount of prophetic hyperbole. As he watches the slaughter and the destruction that's going on there, Ezekiel sees the *kavod*, that is the presence of Yahweh, arise from the Temple and move to the east.

[18] Chapter 10:18-19:

...the Presence of the LORD left the platform of the House and stopped above the cherubs. And I saw the cherubs lift their wings and rise from the earth, with the wheels beside them as they departed; and they stopped at the entrance of the eastern gate of the House of the Lord, with the Presence of the God of Israel above them.

[19] In chapter 11:23-25:

...The Presence of the LORD ascended from the midst of the city and stood on the hill east of the city. A spirit carried me away and brought me in a vision by the spirit of God to the exiled community in Chaldea. [So now he's back to Babylon.] Then the vision that I had seen left me, and I told the exiles all the things that the Lord had shown me.

[20] So this image draws on Ancient Near Eastern traditions of gods abandoning their cities in anger, leaving them to destruction by another god. The primary difference here is that God, rather than another god, is himself also bringing the destruction.

[21] Moreover, God doesn't retire to the heavens. He doesn't abandon his people. He doesn't remain behind with those left in Judah, but he moves into exile. In the book of Ezekiel those left behind are guilty. God does not stay with them; God moves east with the righteous exiles.

[22] Then at the end of the Book of Ezekiel, we're going to see a vision of a restored Temple, this happens in Ezekiel 43, and here Ezekiel will see the *kavod* returning from the east and back to the temple,

...And there, coming from the east with a roar like the roar of mighty waters, was the

Presence of the God of Israel, and the earth was lit up by His presence.

...

The Presence of the LORD entered the temple by the gate that faced eastward.

...

...and lo, the Presence of the LORD filled the Temple.

[23] That was [from] 43:1-6. So just as the presence, the Divine presence, went eastward with the exiles so it will return with the re-establishment of Israel in her home. What is significant here is the idea that God is not linked to a particular place but to a particular people. And the implication then is that God is with His people, even when they are in exile.

2. Ezekiel's Denunciations of Jerusalem and Rejection of Collective Punishment

[24] So Ezekiel preached a message of doom and judgment like his prophetic predecessors and his contemporaries, but his condemnations tend to emphasize the people's idolatry and their moral impurity and this of course makes sense of his priestly heritage. His denunciations of Jerusalem are among the most lurid and violent that you'll find in the Bible. Again, these prophesies were likely delivered between the two deportations, between 597 and then the final destruction and deportation in 587, 586. And Ezekiel warns that Jerusalem will fall deservedly. He says that rebellion against Babylon would be treason against God. He employs all kinds of very vivid metaphors to describe Israel's situation. Jerusalem, he says, is Sodom's sister except even more vile. Jerusalem is a "vine" but a wild one or a burned one. She produces nothing of use. Purity language is employed metaphorically throughout Ezekiel. Jerusalem has been utterly defiled and there are all sorts of images that inspire revulsion in these chapters. So destruction is the only possible remedy. There are metaphors of sexual promiscuity throughout the book. God's destruction of Israel is figured as the abuse doled out by an insanely jealous husband who is violent, and the images are disturbing, they're haunting, they're quite nightmarish.

- [25] Ezekiel also engages in various dramatic signs — prophetic signs or actions — to convey his message. It's something that we've seen in some of the other prophets, but his are so bizarre and so extreme sometimes, that he was accused of insanity. He cooks his food over a fire of human excrement as a symbol of the fact that those besieged by Nebuchadnezzar will be forced to eat unclean food. He doesn't mourn when his wife dies in order to illustrate the fact that Yahweh will not mourn the loss of His temple.
- [26] He binds himself in ropes; he lies on his left side 390 days to symbolize the 390 years of exile of Israel, and then he lies on his right side for 40 days to symbolize the length of Judah's captivity, which he says will be 40 years. Neither of these terms of captivity turn out to be correct. Finally, he shaves his beard and his hair, and he burns a third of it, he strikes a third of it with his sword, and he scatters a third of it to the winds. He just keeps a few hairs bound up in his robe. This is to symbolize the destruction of a third of the people by pestilence and famine, a third of the people by violence, and the exile of a third to Babylon; only a few will God allow to escape.
- [27] Ezekiel makes it clear that those who ignore the warnings are doomed. Those who heed will be spared, and in this, he sounds the theme of individual responsibility that is so characteristic of Ezekiel. I want you to listen to the following passage and compare it to, or think about, other verses or terms in the Torah that you've studied that may relate to the same topic. How is he modifying those earlier ideas?
- [28] This is all from chapter 18, various verses throughout:
- The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by quoting this proverb upon the soil of Israel, "Parents eat sour grapes and their children's teeth are blunted"? As I live — declares the Lord GOD — this proverb shall no longer be current among you in Israel. Consider, all lives are Mine; the life of the parent and the life of the child are both Mine. The person who sins, only he shall die. ... A child shall not share the burden of a parent's guilt, nor shall a parent share the burden of a child's guilt; the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to him alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be account to him alone.
- [29] Moreover, if the wicked one repents of all the sins that he committed and keeps all My laws and does what is just and right, he shall live; he shall not die. ... Is it My desire that a wicked person shall die? — says the Lord GOD. It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live.
- [30] So, too, if a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does wrong, practicing the very abominations that the wicked person practiced, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds that he did shall be remembered; because of the treachery he has practiced and the sins he has committed — because of these, he shall die. ... Be assured, O House of Israel, I will judge each one of you according to his ways — declares the LORD GOD. Repent and turn back from all your transgressions; let them not be a stumbling block of guilt for you. Cast away all the transgressions by which you have offended, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, that you may not die, O House of Israel. For it is not My desire that anyone shall die — declares the Lord GOD. Repent, therefore, and live!"
- [31] It's an important Torah idea that Ezekiel is rejecting or contradicting here. And that's the Torah principle of collective or even intergenerational punishment. It's found most famously in the Second Commandment, the declaration that God punishes children for the sins of their fathers unto the fourth generation.
- [32] Now, we need to note that we're talking about divine justice here and not human justice. As we saw in our study of biblical law in the sphere of human justice, only the guilty are punished in Israelite law. You don't have literal punishment. Someone kills someone's son, then their son is put to death — that idea is rejected in biblical law. But God operates according to a different principle — the principle of collective responsibility. And that principle is understood in the early sources quite positively.
- [33] That the sins of the father's are visited upon the children is an expression of God's mercy. Exodus 34:6 and 7 describe God as merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness and thus

tolerating sin, though not completely clearing the guilty. As a mercy he spreads out the punishment over three or four generations. So this notion is tied up with the aspect of God's mercy.

[34] But evidently there are some who found this idea unjust and other biblical passages try to bring a different sense of justice to this picture, and they emphasize that the third and fourth generations themselves must be wicked. That seems to be the case in Exodus 20:5.

[35] The Book of Chronicles, which is a rewrite of the historical material, the historical narrative in the Book of Kings, rewrites that material in a manner that never explains a catastrophe on the basis of guilt incurred by someone other than the one experiencing the catastrophe. In other words, it rejects the Deuteronomistic historian's device of delayed punishment which you'll remember we discussed. It changes the narrative account so that no one suffers for a crime committed by someone else. It isn't the sin of an earlier generation that's finally visited upon a grandson or a king of a later generation.

[36] So it seems that after 586, or certainly in Ezekiel's case, some accepted the idea that the nation was suffering because of the accumulated guilt of previous generations, notably the Deuteronomist. But for others like Ezekiel, the idea of accumulated guilt and intergenerational punishment seemed to lose some of its explanatory power, perhaps because the destruction and the exile seemed devastatingly severe punishments that didn't fit the individual crimes.

[37] So Ezekiel is one who rejects the doctrine of collective responsibility in the operation of divine justice. In chapter 18, he responds to the idea of suffering for the sins of one's ancestors by declaring that God isn't going to work that way anymore. God will no longer punish people collectively. Each one will be judged individually. Only the sinner will be punished — and that's a major departure from Exodus 34 and even from the contemporaneous Deuteronomistic view.

3. The Sometimes Contradictory Nature of the Biblical Text

[38] At this point, I think, we would do well to remind ourselves of the nature of the biblical text. In the opening lecture, I asked you to set aside certain presuppositions about the biblical text. One of them is that it is a uniform or unified text with a single doctrine or theology. I asked you to remember that the Bible isn't a book; it's a library. It's a library of works that originate in vastly differently historical periods, vastly different historical situations. It responds to a variety of shifting needs and events, and reflects a range of perceptions about God and his relation to creation and to Israel. It isn't a book of theology, that is to say, rational argumentation in support of certain doctrines about God. And it most certainly doesn't speak with a single voice on points of theology or matters that are of traditional concern to the discipline of theology. Doctrine isn't its concern. Understanding and making sense of the historical odyssey of the nation of Israel in covenant with God — that is its concern.

[39] So we're going to find many different interpretations of the meaning of that history, the nature of that God, and the meaning of that covenant. And certainly there are some basic points of agreement, but even some of the most basic points of agreement do not pass without some contestation.

[40] So for example, the basic point that humans are free moral agents. This seems to be clearly assumed throughout most of the books of this little library. But there are some isolated episodes that would appear to contradict even that most basic assumption. God hardens Pharaoh's heart. God seals the people's ears sometimes so that they will not hear the message of the prophets, or will not understand them until a later day.

[41] To be sure, there are only a few of these contradictory passages, but they do exist. And so here we find also a major shift in the exilic period, away from the tendency to see divine justice working through collective or intergenerational punishment to the idea of the individual's culpability before God. I shouldn't say a shift away; we see arising a dialectic. This isn't a linear progression. These are different ideas coming out at different times and

receiving emphasis at different times. But this kind of polyphony didn't impinge upon the authority of the Hebrew Bible for the nation of Israel, because the Bible's authority doesn't arise from some supposed consistency or univocality. That's a modern notion and it's based on Hellenistic ideals of truth as singular. Western culture, influenced by Greek philosophical traditions, defines truth in monistic terms. Only that which contains no contradiction is true and only that which is true is authoritative. Those notions are somewhat alien to the ancient non-Hellenized world. The Bible doesn't strive to present philosophical truth. It presents the best efforts of sages and prophets, and scribes and visionaries, to respond to and to explain the crises of the nation over a period of centuries. And its authority derives from the explanatory power of its insights into and understanding of God's governance of the world and his plans for Israel.

[42] So those insights and those understandings may shift, and even stand in contradiction with one another, but they are not mutually exclusive and their contradictions don't affect their authority, their ability to explain, to console — their ability to nourish the faith of a people convinced that God would never desert them no matter how difficult it may be to understand his interactions with them.

4. Ezekiel's Interpretation of the Final Destruction of Jerusalem

[43] Back to Ezekiel now; and in chapter 33 we learn that a fugitive from Jerusalem brings news of the fall of Jerusalem. So it's about 587, 586; and when he hears this, Ezekiel exchanges his message of doom for a message of hope.

[44] Before the fall of the city, his task had been to shatter the people's illusions. He wanted to shake them out of their complacency, but now the people are reduced to despair and remorse, and his task is to offer reassurance and hope. God is going to initiate a new beginning.

[45] Though Israel's punishment was deserved, it was not, according to Ezekiel, a sign of the end of the relationship between Yahweh and his people, and a new Israel would rise from the remnant of Judah and Israel. He expresses this restoration by means of many metaphors and visions.

[46] So chapter 34 condemns the shepherds. This is a very common Ancient Near Eastern metaphor for the leadership of a people; a king is always a shepherd and so on. So chapter 34 condemns the shepherds of the people and promises to set up in the future one shepherd of the House of David to be prince among the people.

[47] Chapter 36 uses metaphors of purity and cleansing. Israel will be cleansed from the impurities of the past. She'll be given a new covenant of the heart. This is in verses 24 and 25 in chapter 36.

I will take you from among the nations and gather you from all the countries and I will bring you back to your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you [pure water upon you], and you shall be clean: [Pure.] I will cleanse you from all your uncleanness and from all your fetishes. And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh; and I will put My spirit into you. Thus I will cause you to follow My laws and faithfully to observe My rules. [There are echoes here of Jeremiah also.] Then you shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people and I will be your God.

[48] So we have again this almost utopian redesign of human nature that we heard in Jeremiah. One in which the problems that are associated with the exercise of free will may be obviated.

[49] Another metaphor that's used for the restoration of a new Israel out of the remnant of the old, is the metaphor of revival from death and this is found in chapter 37 — a very, very famous passage: Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones:

The hand of the Lord came upon me. He took me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the valley. It was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "O mortal, can these bones live again?" I replied, "O Lord GOD, only you know." [Very diplomatic answer.] And He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! Thus said the Lord

GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again. I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you, and you shall live again, and you shall know that I am the LORD!”

I prophesied as I had been commanded. And while I was prophesying, suddenly there was a sound of rattling, and the bones came together, bone to matching bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them. ... The breath entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude.

And He said to me, “O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, our house is gone; we are doomed.’ Prophecy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said the LORD GOD: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel. You shall know, O My people, that I am the Lord when I have opened your graves and lifted you out of your graves. I will put my breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil. Then you shall know that I the LORD have spoken and have acted — declares the LORD.

center is a rebuilt temple. And it is described in great detail in the last nine chapters of the book.

[50] In the interpretation that follows the vision, we are told that the bones symbolize Israel now, in this state, in exile. In their despair they’re crying: our bones are dried up, we’re dead, now our hope is lost. And God promises to raise Israel from the grave, which is a metaphor for exile, and restore her to her own land as one people, north and south, with one prince to rule over her.

[51] This text has often been de-contextualized and cited as an Old Testament or Hebrew Bible source for the doctrine of literal resurrection after death, as if it’s speaking about literal resurrection. But I think in its context it’s quite clear that it is one of many metaphors that Ezekiel uses throughout this section for the redemption of the community from exile, the restoration of the people back in their own land.

[52] At the center of the restored community that Ezekiel envisions is a new Jerusalem, and at its

[53] In Ezekiel’s utopian vision, the land is equally allotted, it’s divided up and equally allotted among all 12 tribes now, who will be brought back. And Jerusalem lies in the center with 12 great gates, one for each tribe, surrounding it. This temple is the source of a never-ending river that gushes forth from it, a river that will make the Dead Sea flow with fresh water again. Ezekiel sees Zadokite priests presiding in the Temple, they are assisted by Levites who are just menials (they are sort of demoted in his vision). And he insists no foreigners will be permitted entry. We’re going to see that that’s a view that wasn’t shared by others in the post-destruction era.

[54] While Ezekiel believed that God would restore a purified Israel to its land under a Davidic monarchy, and he prophesied to this effect, he, like Jeremiah, also maintained that a relationship with God was possible, in the meantime — a relationship outside the chosen land. And the Jewish diaspora (“diaspora” refers to a community living outside of its homeland) — the Jewish diaspora was a new thing; it was a religious-national body of a type that had not been seen before. You had a people remaining loyal to their God, while in exile from their own land (and what was believed to be that God’s land) without worshipping him cultically, or by means of sacrifice. Remember the only legitimate site for an altar or for sacrifice to God is Jerusalem. And in time, slowly, a new worship will be fashioned; one without sacrifice, one that consists of prayer and confession, and fasts, and other kinds of ritual observances. Three times a day Jews will pray and they’ll pray in the direction of Jerusalem. Worship in synagogues eventually will come into being, and the importance of the Sabbath will grow — the Sabbath as a memorial of the covenant and the symbol of Jewish faith. And so you also find, beginning shortly after this period, for the first time, non-Jews are joining themselves to Yahweh, adopting this religion of Israel out of religious conviction, not simply because they may be residing in the land and have to follow God’s laws. This is outside the land. You have people choosing to opt into this community. So again, we see that as the history of the nation of Israel came to an end, the history of Judaism, the “religion” Judaism, begins.

[55] So in Ezekiel we've seen one response to the national disaster and the exile: the idea that while suffering and punishment are fully deserved, a relationship with God remains possible. God is with his people even in exile.

[56] A second response to the destruction and exile can be found in the anonymous writings that are appended to the Book of Isaiah. I mentioned these writings briefly. We'll be able to look now at what's been called Second Isaiah.

[57] So there are two discrete units of material that are appended to Isaiah. Chapters 40 to 55 are referred to as Second Isaiah, and chapters 56 to 66 are referred to as 3 Isaiah. And these chapters differ from Isaiah proper, from the eighth-century prophet, in several ways. It's clear, first of all, that these parts of Isaiah were written after the Exile. Parts of Third Isaiah were written after the Exile, [and] all of second Isaiah, (and Isaiah proper was clearly written in the eighth century on into the early seventh century). Jerusalem is referred to as destroyed. The audience that's addressed is living in exile. Babylon is the oppressor, not Assyria. Assyria was the oppressor in the time of Isaiah proper. The appended materials even seem to know of the overthrow of the Babylonians. That's going to happen in about 539 when Cyrus of Persia will conquer the Babylonians. We have passages that express some euphoria over this, because Cyrus, of course, authorized the Jews to return from Babylon to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple.

[58] There are also all kinds of stylistic differences between First Isaiah and Second and Third Isaiah. Second and Third Isaiah, for example, have no biographical data and First Isaiah has quite a bit. These materials also have a different theology of history, a different understanding of history, a different attitude towards foreign nations and a very strong and renewed emphasis on monotheism. These [features] also mark it as different.

[59] Among the scrolls that were found in the caves at Qumran near the Dead Sea, we have a very large and very famous Isaiah scroll, which is now in a museum in Jerusalem. On the scroll there is a gap after Isaiah 39, and a new column starts with Isaiah 40. So it seems to signal some sort of implicit recognition that there's a difference between these two sections. They

are not the same unit, not the same author perhaps.

5. *Major Themes in Second Isaiah*

[60] So we're going to talk right now about Second Isaiah because this is a wholly post destruction work. The opening or inaugural oracle that occurs in chapter 40 is an oracle of consolation. It's an oracle of comfort, and the prophet sees a straight and level highway prepared in the wilderness for a dramatic procession of Yahweh the shepherd who will lead his people back to Jerusalem. It's very, very famous — made very famous by Handel's Messiah actually. So chapter 40 (taking from various verses in this chapter):

Comfort, oh comfort My people,
Says Your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
And declare to her
That her term of service is over,
That iniquity is expiated;
For she has received at the hand of the
LORD
Double for all her sins.
A voice rings out:
"Clear in the desert
A road for the Lord!
Level in the wilderness
A highway for our God!
Let every valley be raised,
Every hill and mount made low.
Let the rugged ground become level
And the ridges become a plain.
The Presence of the LORD shall appear,
And all flesh, as one, shall behold —
For the LORD Himself has spoken." A
voice rings out: "Proclaim!"
Another asks, "What shall I proclaim?"
All flesh is grass,
All its goodness like flowers of the field:
... But the word of our God is always
fulfilled!" ... Behold, the Lord GOD

comes in might, ... Like a shepherd He
pastures His flock:

He gathers the lambs in His arms

And carries them in His bosom;

Gently he drives the mother sheep.

[61] So this highway will appear leading the exiles
straight to Jerusalem. All of the topography
will be flattened and God will lead them as a
shepherd leads the lamb.

[62] Why? Because the word of the Lord is always
fulfilled. So what this voice is proclaiming is a
literal return from exile. God is opening a
highway, he's leading His flock home like a
shepherd in a new exodus. And this is an idea
that's so important that it recurs at the end of
the unit as well in chapter 55: the idea of a new
exodus.

[63] A second key theme that's sounded at the
beginning and end of the unit again (so it
happens in chapter 40 and again in chapter 55)
is this idea that the word of our God is always
fulfilled. Or in some translations, the word of
our God "stands forever." This idea is the
essence of the Israelites' hope during the period
of captivity and exile, and it appears in the first
oracle. It's beautifully restated in the last
oracle, in chapter 55, verses 10 through 12:

For as the rain or snow drops from heaven

And returns not there,

But soaks the earth

And makes it bring forth vegetation,

Yielding seed for sowing and bread for
eating,

So is the word that issues from my mouth:

It does not come back to Me unfulfilled,

But performs what I purpose,

Achieves what I sent it to do.

Yea, you shall leave in joy and be led
home

secure.

Before you, mount and hill shall shout
aloud,

And all the trees of the field shall clap their
hands.

[64] So the everlasting word of the Lord — it's
guaranteed fulfillment (specifically — to bring
his people home in a new exodus) — these are
ideas [that] form an envelope or an *inclusio*,
that kind of literary structure where something
is mentioned at the beginning and again at the
end to form an *inclusio* or an envelope around
the entire unit of Second Isaiah.

[65] We see also in Second Isaiah an extreme
monotheism. The monotheism is explicit of
course in Isaiah — implicit, I'm sorry, implicit
in Isaiah, but it becomes quite explicit in
Second Isaiah. As we've seen, to come to terms
with the destruction of 587 entails the
acceptance of the idea that Israel's punishment
was deserved, and Yahweh's control of history
means he controls not only Israel but all other
nations as well and can use them for his
purpose, including punishing Israel.

[66] There's no power other than Yahweh. So
referring then to the rise and fall of nations,
Isaiah 41:4 states,

Who has wrought and achieved this?

He who announced the generations from
the
start —

I, the LORD, who was first

And will be with the last as well.

[67] The first and the last — which is a way of
saying everything, all inclusive. There is
nothing but me. And Isaiah 44 satirizes those
nations who make and worship idols, and
ridicules the folly and stupidity of ascribing
divinity to that which one has created with
one's own hands.

[68] In Isaiah 41, God states his case against these
vain and useless idols. He summons them to
answer for themselves, show that they are gods
by announcing something that will occur,
announcing what will occur and seeing if it
comes true. Chapter 41:22-24:

Let them approach and tell us what will
happen.

Tell us what has occurred,

And we will take note of it;

Or announce to us what will occur,

That we may know the outcome.
 Foretell what is yet to happen,
 That we may know that you are gods!
 Do anything, good or bad,
 That we may be awed and see.
 Why, you are less than nothing.
 Your effect is less than nullity;
 One who chooses you is an abomination.

[69] But this is only half the picture because not only are the gods of the nations no gods, but Yahweh is the true God of all of these other nations. So who raised Cyrus of Persia from the north to sweep through the Ancient Near East and conquer the Babylonians? No one but Yahweh. Isaiah 41:

“I have roused Him from the north, and he has come
 ...And He has trampled rulers like mud,
 Like a potter treading clay
 ...The things once predicted to Zion —
 Behold, here they are!” [from vv 25-29].

[70] So in these passages, the author of Second Isaiah is drawing the logical conclusion, perhaps, towards which Israelite religion has tended from its inception. Yahweh, once a Canaanite deity, then the God of Israel’s patriarchs, then the national God of Israel, is here the Lord of universal history. The only real God, Second Isaiah is claiming, is the God of Israel.

6. *Second Isaiah’s Servant Songs*

[71] Second Isaiah is also quite well known for the Servant Songs that it contains, the famous servant songs. These occur scattered in chapter 42, chapter 49, chapter 50, and then most extensively 52:13 to 53:12, so much of 52 and 53. The identity of this servant — I’ll read some of these passages in a minute, but it refers to this servant, God’s servant, and the identity of the servant has been a puzzle to biblical interpreters for centuries. Sometimes the servant is referred to as a collective figure, sometimes the servant is referred to as an individual figure.

[72] In chapter 49 the servant is referred to or described as a prophet with a universal message rather than a message for the Israelites alone, but then there’s some ambiguity here. The servant is first identified, or the prophet — the servant or prophet — is first identified as Israel herself. So in chapter 49:1-3:

...The Lord appointed me before I was born,
 He named me while I was in my mother’s womb.
 He made my mouth like a sharpened blade,
 He hid me in the shadow of His hand,
 And He made me like a polished arrow;
 He concealed me in His quiver
 And He said to me, “You are My servant,
 Israel in whom I glory.”

[73] Yet, in verse 5 it would seem that this prophet/servant has a mission to Israel to bring her back to Yahweh, and that would imply that the servant or prophet is not Israel. Verse 5:

And now the LORD has resolved —
 He who formed me in the womb to be His servant —
 To bring back Jacob to Himself,
 That Israel may be restored to Him.

[74] [Then the mission is expanded a little bit in verse 6:]

For He has said:

“It is too little that you should be My servant
 In that I raise up the tribes of Jacob
 And restore the survivors of Israel:
 I will also make you a light of nations,
 That My salvation may reach the ends of the earth.”

[75] Chapter 50 quite famously refers to the servant as rebellious and as persecuted. Verse 6:

I offered my back to the floggers,

And my cheeks to those who tore out my hair.

I did not hide my face

From insult and spittle.

[76] But it's the famous and difficult passage in Isaiah 53 that most movingly describes the suffering and sorrow of God's servant. 53:3-11:

...He was despised, we held him of no account.

Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing,

Our suffering that he endured.

We accounted him plagued,

Smitten and afflicted by God

But he was wounded because of our sins,

Crushed because of our iniquities.

He bore the chastisement that made us whole,

And by his bruises we were healed.

We all went astray like sheep,

Each going his own way;

And the LORD visited upon him

The guilt of all of us."

He was maltreated, yet he was submissive,

He did not open his mouth;

Like a sheep being led to slaughter,

Like a ewe, dumb before those who shear her,

He did not open his mouth.

...

And his grave was set among the wicked,

And with the rich, in his death —

Though he had done no injustice

And had spoken no falsehood.

But the LORD chose to crush him by disease,

That, if he made himself an offering for guilt,

He might see offspring and have long life,

And that through him the LORD's purpose might prosper.

[77] There have been many attempts to equate this man of sorrows with all kinds of figures. Early on, Jesus' followers saw Jesus as the suffering servant of God in Isaiah. The New Testament writers specifically borrowed passages from Isaiah, particularly this chapter, chapter 53, when constructing their narratives of Jesus, taking those verses and using them in describing his story. So he is depicted as the innocent and righteous servant who suffered for the sins of others. In the teachings of Paul, however, you have a different use of these verses. Christians, generally, are identified as the servant who suffers with and for Jesus.

[78] Despite these later theological interpretations, the anonymous writer of Second Isaiah wasn't writing about a remote Nazarean teacher and charismatic healer who would live more than five centuries later. Examined in its original context, it appears most likely that the servant is Israel herself described metaphorically as an individual whose present suffering and humiliation is due to the sins of other nations, but whose future restoration and exultation will cause astonishment among those nations who will then be humbled to Yahweh.

[79] But there are problems with even this interpretation, and you should be aware of that. This has never been solved satisfactorily. The main problem with interpreting Israel as the servant is the verse that describes the servant as having a mission to Israel. It seems a little odd to say that Israel bears a mission to Israel. But this problem can be solved, if we remember that Israel was often divided in prophetic rhetoric. So perhaps the writer envisions a mission of one part, the righteous part, to the other, the part that has gone astray.

[80] Leaving aside this difficulty, the more prominent motif in the servant song of Isaiah is that the servant has a mission to the world. That's the more prominent motif, and that is a role that would suit Israel quite well. Furthermore, you have the phrase, "Israel, My servant," appearing in Second Isaiah about eight times. So the idea of Israel as God's servant to the nations is clearly a part of Isaiah's conceptual world, and since we're dealing with poetry rather than a rigorously consistent metaphysical treatise, it shouldn't be

too surprising that sometimes the servant is spoken of as a group collectively, sometimes as an individual. The same holds true of Israel in general, by the way, throughout much of the literature. Sometimes Israel is spoken of in plural terms and sometimes as a single individual.

[81] So in its original context it's likely that the servant refers to Israel herself. If the servant is Israel, then we can see how Second Isaiah is another response to the events of 587. And it's ultimately a positive interpretation, a positive response. The punishment that Israel suffered even if excessive (remember Isaiah 40 claims that Israel has suffered double for her sins, so it's been an excessive punishment) — that punishment isn't meaningless. It will lead to redemption. Israel will be healed by her wounds. God's word will not be returned unfulfilled. In addition, suffering leads to a new role for Israel among the nations. Second Isaiah expresses a new self-awareness that is taking hold in the exile. Israel saw itself as the faithful servant of Yahweh, a servant whose loyalty to God in this dark time would serve to broadcast the knowledge of God throughout the nations.

[82] So Israel was chosen from the womb to serve God's universal purpose. Israel suffered unobserved by others, but eventually this would make possible the recognition of God by those others. Where once God covenanted with David to lead his people, Israel, he now covenants with Israel to lead the nations of the world in God's way. It's an expansion of God's purpose, and this is an idea that appears in Isaiah 55:3-5:

Incline your ear and come to Me;

Harken, and you shall be revived.

And I will make with you an everlasting covenant,

The enduring loyalty promised to David.
[The covenant and loyalty that was promised to David I'm now transferring to you.]

As I made him a leader of peoples,

A prince and commander of peoples,

So you shall summon a nation who you did not know,

And a nation that did not know you,

Shall come running to you —

For the sake of the LORD your God,

The Holy One of Israel who has glorified you.

[83] So God makes an eternal covenant with Israel, like that he once concluded with David. And the function of the institutions of the old order are transferred to the nation as a whole. What kings and priests, and prophets did for Israel, Israel will now do for the whole world. As the mediator between the only God and the nations of the world she is a light unto them, and all will ascend to her because from her will come Torah, instruction in the divine will and salvation. This is the idea of universal mission that comes out of Second Isaiah.

[84] When we come back on Wednesday, we're going to take a look at what I think is probably the single most profound book in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Job. And again, I'll remind you that final paper information will be available on the Classes server tonight. I want you to have it in time to be able to ask questions of your TF or myself about the assignment. It's pretty detailed so sit and read through it carefully; it'll be there later tonight.

[85] [end of transcript]

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[86] References

[87] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from "Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text." Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. Single copies of the JPS biblical citations cited within the transcripts can be reproduced for personal and non-commercial uses only.