

Conversion as Revival of Faith

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A surface reading of Second Isaiah, especially of the first part (Isa 40-48), conveys the impression that the overall message of this exilic prophet comprises primarily, if not solely, in the liberation of the Judean exiles from Babylonian captivity, understood as return to the homeland, restoration of Jerusalem, and rebuilding of the Temple. On closer reading, however, liberation, return and restoration are not the only concerns of Second Isaiah, even if they were of great importance in view of the historical situation behind the prophet's proclamation.¹ There are other urgent concerns that the prophet has to address.

The present study hopes to show that Second Isaiah's proclamation of liberation involves the call to religious renewal, which required on the part of the exiles their conversion.² The prologue

¹ H.E. von Waldow, "The Message of Second Isaiah," *Interpretation* 22 (1968) 259-87; B. Chiesa, "Ritorno dall'esilio e conversione a Dio," *Bibbia e Oriente* 14 (1972) 167-80; A.S. Kapelrud, "The Main Concern of Second Isaiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982) 50-58. These studies, among numerous others, hold that the message of Second Isaiah goes beyond the theme of return and restoration. The significant occurrence of the terms *sedeq-sedaqah* in conjunction with the soteriological term *ysh* broadens the idea of salvation to include, not only the theme of return and restoration, but that of Israel's righteousness before God that leads to peace, harmony and prosperity. Cf. R. Cajot, "Second Isaiah's Terminology of Salvation," *Vinculum* 14/1 (October 1997) 3.

² See B. Chiesa, "Ritorno," 167-80. His comment on ch. 55 speaks of the need for conversion: "Praticamente si può concludere che il ritorno dall'esilio e

(40:1-11) already announces this call to conversion. The command to prepare the way of the Lord (v. 3), is interpreted in this study metaphorically as a call to conversion. It has, therefore, a moral or ethical significance referring to the attitude of faithfulness and obedience to God and to his precepts.³

For Second Isaiah, conversion requires, on the part of the exiles, the revival of faith in their God Yahweh. In the Babylonian exile, despair, skepticism and apostasy threaten, weaken, and even abrogate this faith. There are a number of indications that the exiles are suffering a so-called *crisis of faith*. Some of them imagine, or even believe, that God has abandoned them to languish in a strange land away from their homeland. Others allege that he has no power to save them from their miserable condition, especially in the face of the mighty gods of Babylon. It is highly probable that in this situation not a few of them replenish the seeming absence of Yahweh by seeking refuge in the cult of the Babylonian gods. Faith in Yahweh, therefore, is facing a present and real threat. It is to this predicament that Second Isaiah addresses his words of consolation and his proclamations of salvation. With clarity and persuasiveness, with reason and artistry, he refutes the perceived arguments and complaints of the exiles, with the aim of reviving and strengthening their faith and trust in Yahweh and in his power to save.

How does Second Isaiah address this critical situation among the exiles? The present study suggests that trial speeches and disputations are employed by the prophet as literary devices to respond to this religious crisis.

la prosperità promessa a Israele si realizzeranno pienamente nel solo caso che ritorno in patria significhi anche ritorno a Dio, conversione vera e fede profonda nella sua misericordia" (171).

³ J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-45* (Anchor Bible 19A; New York: Doubleday, 2002) 181-2; A. Bonora, *Isaia 40-66. Israele: servo di Dio, popolo liberato* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1988) 31; and H. Simian-Yofre, "Exodo en Deuteroisaiás," *Biblica* 61 (1988) 531-37.

Trial Speeches

The most prominent literary device that Second Isaiah uses to address the exiles' faith-crisis, is the trial speech (41:1-5, 21-29; 43:8-15; 44:6-8; 45:20-25).⁴ In all five speeches, Yahweh is clearly the speaker. Through these speeches, the prophet argues persuasively that Yahweh is the only God against the claim to divinity of other gods.

1. The first trial speech (41:1-5) is easily understood when read against its historical background and setting. It obviously refers to the lightning victories of Cyrus, who had conquered kingdoms to the north and west of Mesopotamia, and now is poised for the conquest of Babylon itself. It must be recalled that after taking control of Media in 553, Cyrus attacked and defeated Croesus, king of Lydia in Asia Minor in 546. Then around the year 540, his increasing military power posed a threat to Babylon. Finally, in 539 he took over the Babylonian Empire intact from Nabonidus, after defeating his army at the Tigris.

The speech opens with Yahweh's summons to the nations⁵ of the world for a solemn assembly in order to judge for themselves who is responsible for the sweeping victories of Cyrus (vv. 1-2):

Listen to me in silence, O coastlands,
let the peoples renew their strength;
let them approach, then let them speak;
let us together draw near for judgment.
Who has roused a victor from the east,

⁴ In addition to these five passages, Stuhlmüller [*Creative Redemption in Second Isaiah*. Analecta Biblica 43 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970)] includes 48:1-11, 12-19; 50:1-2 and calls them as judgment speech (*Gerichtsrede*); cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1969) 15-17; A. Schoors, *I Am God Your Saviour* (Vetus Testamentum Supplement 24; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973) 189-244.

⁵ The NRSV uses "coastlands", a vague term for distant lands along the Mediterranean (e.g., Syria and Phoenicia). Here it means all the peoples even to the utmost limits of the world. See A.S. Herbert, *Isaiah 40-66* (Cambridge Bible Commentary; New York: Cambridge Press 1975), 29-30; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 197. It is also interesting to note that *iyym* (in the plural) can also mean "howling" (cf. Isa 13:22; 34:14). Thus, the command to "listen in silence" becomes clear in this double meaning, coastlands = howlers.

summoned him to his service?
 He delivers up nations to him,
 and tramples kings under foot;
 he makes them like dust with his sword,
 like driven stubble with his bow.

The focus of the speech is not Cyrus or his victories. The question at issue can be summarized as: "Who is responsible for the victories of Cyrus?" An answer is immediately given in v. 4b: "I, the Lord, am first, and will be with the last." It is Yahweh who is responsible for these events, not the gods of Babylon nor any other god. Yahweh is the only God; there is no other. Being the one who "calls the generations from the beginning", being "the first and the last", Yahweh embraces the totality of universal history.

In this instance, the expression, "I am the first and the last," refers to the eternity of God. It points to God's contemporaneity with all history, from its *Urzeit* to its *eschaton*. Westermann rightly points out that this eternity is "not an abstract quality, but a permanent active presence. It is Yahweh's eternal *gegenüber*, his lasting creative presence in history."⁶ Therefore, the rousing of the victorious Cyrus is only "the latest of a series of initiatives which go back to the beginning of the world" (cf. Prov. 8:23). The Old Testament idea of history is not cyclical, as found in the ancient Near East. It is linear and irreversible, a unified process with a beginning, a middle and an end. The series of events that takes place in this process is unified by the will and purpose of God. For Israel, its history is directed by the divine plan and the fulfillment of this is conditioned by neither human success nor failure.⁷

2. The second trial speech (41:21-29) is addressed directly to the gods. It is a challenge to them to substantiate their claim to divinity. It comprises two stages. The first stage (vv. 21-24) implies that the real test of divinity is the ability to control history, which means "a

⁶ *Isaiah* 40-66, 65, so Blenkinsopp, 197. For other meanings of the expression, see C. Stuhlmüller, "First and Last," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 29 (1967) 495-511; *Creative Redemption*, 135-68 and R.J. Clifford, *Fair Spoken and Persuading* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 41-45.

⁷ C.R. North, *The Second Isaiah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) 94; cf. Westermann, *Isaiah* 40-66, 65.

complete mastery of it as proved by giving an account of the past, or by predicting future events that can be verified in their fulfillment.”⁸ Westermann calls this the “operational arc connecting his word and its effects. God’s deity is shown to be such by the continuity of his action in history.”⁹ The gods are asked to “set forth your case, bring your proofs” (v. 21). They are asked to explain the meaning of history, to interpret the significance of past events and to predict future events in order to know their fulfillment. This corresponds to the thrice repeated “tell” in the pericope. The first (v. 22a) refers to history in general; the second (v. 22b), to the past; and the third (v. 23a), to the future. However, the gods are unable to produce proofs for their claim to divinity. They cannot explain the past nor foretell the future; they are reduced to silence. Therefore, they are nothing: “You, indeed, are nothing and your work is nothing at all; whoever chooses you is an abomination” (v. 24).

In the second stage (vv. 25-29), Yahweh offers an example of his ability to control history – the victorious conquests of Cyrus. He is able to predict this concrete historical event, about which no one has the ability to know in advance. It is only Yahweh who is able to foretell the victories of Cyrus because he is the lord of history; he is the one responsible for the rise and sweeping victories of Cyrus (cf. 41:1-5). It is he who proclaims this event of good tidings to Jerusalem. Through this example, Second Isaiah points out the reliable connection between Yahweh’s word and his deeds, because he is the first and the only one who spoke of it before it happened (vv. 26-27):

Who declared it from the beginning, so that we might know,
and beforehand, so that we might say, “He is right”?
There was no one who declared it, none who proclaimed,
none who heard your words.
I first have declared it to Zion,
and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good tidings.

Since the gods cannot foretell the victories of Cyrus, “they are a delusion; their works are nothing; their images are empty wind” (v.

⁸ Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66* (New Century Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 68. Blenkinsopp refers to it as the “prediction-fulfillment pattern in history” (*Isaiah 40-55*, 206).

⁹ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 85.

29). The two sections of this trial speech end with the same conclusion: the gods are nothing; Yahweh is the only God, who is lord of history.

In the second speech, therefore, the gods are denied of their claim to divinity through a simple argumentation, succinctly described by A.S. Herbert:¹⁰

It is not an abstract argument; the test is quite practical. Has any of the gods, even Nabu the god of prophecy, given any warning of the victorious career of Cyrus and the imminent collapse of the Babylonian Empire which should be very much the concern of the gods of Babylon? ... This is not a philosophical argument for monotheism, but a religious and practical argument for the sole sovereignty of Yahweh, who is the lord of history.

3. The third trial speech (43:8-15) has the same theme as the two previously discussed speeches. In the same manner as the preceding speeches, it starts with the assembly of the nations. The gods are asked to produce witnesses to justify themselves, to testify before the assembly of foreign nations (*goyim*) and peoples (*ammim*) to their ability to foretell the "former things". But, since the gods cannot present any witness to testify in their favor, Yahweh summons the Judean people into the assembly for them to act as his own witnesses, even if they are a "blind and deaf" people, "spiritually obtuse" (cf. 42:7, 16, 18).¹¹ In the very act of testifying, the Judean people themselves will strengthen their faith and their "eyes that are blinded" by doubts and despair, their "ears that are deafened" by skepticism (v. 8), will be opened to what is obvious – Yahweh is the only God and Savior (vv. 10-13):

You are my witnesses, says the Lord,
and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed,
nor shall there be any after me.
I, I am the Lord,
and besides me there is no savior.

¹⁰ A.S. Herbert, *Isaiah 40-66*, 37; cf. M.C. Lind, "Monotheism, Power, and Justice: A Study in Isaiah 40-55," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984) 433-35.

¹¹ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 223.

I declared and saved and proclaimed,
 when there was no strange god among you;
 and you are my witnesses, says the Lord.
 I am God, and also henceforth I am He;
 there is no one who can deliver from my hand;
 I work and who can hinder it?

The testimony of the Judean people is not theoretical; it is based on their actual experience of God's saving interventions in their history as a people. In the course of their relationship with Yahweh, they have had the sufficient opportunity to experience his dealings with them. Although in the past they have failed to comprehend the meaning of Yahweh's actions due to their blindness and deafness, they still have eyes and ears.¹² This qualifies them as witnesses in favor of Yahweh's claim.¹³ Their qualification as witnesses is rooted in their special relationship with Yahweh, as expressed by the terms *bhr* (choose) and *ebed* (servant). "By its election, Israel is made capable of witnessing for it has been chosen precisely in order to know and believe that 'he is he'."¹⁴

Therefore, on the one hand, the speech nullifies the gods' claim to divinity due to their inability to summon witnesses to justify their claim. On the other hand, it affirms that Yahweh alone is God, and that he will liberate his people from the Babylonian exile because he is the Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel (vv. 14-15):

Thus says the Lord,
 your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
 For your sake I will send to Babylon
 and break down all the bars,
 and the shouting of the Chaldeans
 will be turned to lamentation.
 I am the Lord, your Holy One,
 the Creator of Israel, your King.

¹² K. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 163.

¹³ Schoors, *I Am God Your Saviour*, 223-24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

4. The fourth trial speech (44:6-8), consisting only of three verses, is the shortest of the five. However, it retains the same theme: Yahweh is the only God; besides him there is no god (v. 8d). The proof of his unique divinity rests on the fact that he is able to announce beforehand what he performs, as indicated in the question: "Who has announced from of old the things to come?" (v. 7b). As in the preceding speech, the gods are challenged to make their own predictions, "Let them tell us what is yet to be" (v. 7c), so that the people may see that there is continuity between their word and deed. As witnesses, the Judean people can tell from their history that God performs what he has announced beforehand. In the past, Yahweh has made predictions that were fulfilled. This is an assurance of the reliability of his words and deeds. The Judean people have nothing to fear.

5. The last trial speech (45:20-25) is addressed to the "survivors of the nations". In the context of the preceding section (45:1-7), the survivors can particularly refer to the Babylonians who have escaped their city following its downfall to Cyrus.¹⁵ Here is a clear proof of Yahweh's divinity. The mere fact that what he announced has just taken place is an evidence of the continuity between his words and deeds. No one, not even the gods of Babylon, was able to predict the downfall of Babylon, but Yahweh, who alone is God (v. 21):

Declare and present your case;
let them take counsel together!
Who told this long ago?
Who declared it of old?
Was is not I, the Lord?
There is no other god besides me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
there is no one besides me.

A new direction in the prophet's preaching can be seen in this last speech. Instead of being repudiated or jeered at due to the defeat of their gods, the survivors of the nations are invited

¹⁵ Either the prophet composed this trial speech after the defeat of the Babylonians by Cyrus in 539 BC, or "the prophet has placed himself in imagination in the time following the capture of Babylon by Cyrus," as Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, 111, puts it.

to participate in the salvation that can be found in Yahweh alone (vv. 22, 24).¹⁶

Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other ...
Only in the Lord, it shall be said of me,
are righteousness and strength.
all who were incensed against him
shall come to him and be ashamed.

In summary, the five trial speeches are cogent and persuasive arguments which prove the unique divinity of Yahweh. He is the lord of history. For Second Isaiah, however, the proof of Yahweh's divinity is not based on his military might which wins victories for his people, although Yahweh is responsible for the rapid victories of the pagan king Cyrus. For in view of the contemporary historical reality when his people are exiles in Babylon, how can the prophet convincingly prove to them God's superiority to the gods of Babylon? His argument, therefore, rests on the creative power of God's word that brings to fulfillment whatever he has spoken, and on God's saving interventions in the history of his people. The prophet, therefore, moves the proof of divinity from the arena of the battlefield, as commonly held in ancient Near East, to the arena of prophetic proclamation and fulfillment.¹⁷ In addition, Second Isaiah proposes a significant doctrinal innovation by opening salvation to all the nations, mentioned in the last trial speech. He extends the concept of Israel as God's people to include the nations. For him, its membership is based on the voluntary commitment of the total person who has discovered that Yahweh alone is God.¹⁸

¹⁶ Whether this passage (45:22-25) refers to an offer of universal salvation is still a debated issue. J. Blenkinsopp specifies the universalism in question here as "the claim of universal jurisdiction and dominion advanced on behalf of Yahweh and based on his creation of the world and direction of the course of history" (*Isaiah* 40-55, 262). If this is the case, then the idea is not unique to Second Isaiah. See Jer 16:19 and Ps 22:26.

¹⁷ C. Westermann, *Isaiah* 40-66, 84-85. For a critical review of Westermann's conclusion, see M.C. Lind, "Monotheism, Power and Justice," 434-438.

¹⁸ Several commentators and authors deny this passage its universalistic outlook. See Schoors, *I Am God Your Saviour*, 235-36; for bibliography, refer to Whybray, *Isaiah* 40-66, 111-12.

Second Isaiah's purpose in affirming Yahweh's unique divinity and in refuting the claims of foreign gods is to strengthen the exiles' faith and trust in Yahweh. The traumatic experience of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, which is supposed to be the permanent dwelling place of Yahweh; and the people's subsequent deportation to Babylon, have cast doubts in Yahweh's divinity. How can he be the true God if the gods of Babylon are superior to him, as shown by their victory and supremacy over the nations? But, through the trial speeches, Second Isaiah establishes persuasively that Yahweh's divinity is not measured by military might, but by the creative power of his word. Through the speeches, the prophet affirms that Yahweh is the only God because there is continuity between his words and deeds. In fact, he predicts and brings to fulfillment the victories of Cyrus, whom he has summoned, even without the pagan king's knowledge, to be his instrument for the liberation of his people and the restoration of Jerusalem. For Yahweh alone is God; he controls the events of human history.

Disputations

The prophets generally used the genre disputation (*Streitgespräch*) in order to defend their message and to convince their hearers (cf. Amos 3:3-6, 7-8; 9:7; Isa 10:8-11; 28:23-29; Micah 2:6-11; Jer 8:8). The aim is to convince and to refute objections.¹⁹ Thus, confronted with questions and complaints from doubters and skeptics among the exiles, Second Isaiah displays his relentless effort in overturning them through disputations and in moving the exiles to revitalize their faith and trust in the saving power of God that never fails.

1. In 40:12-31, Second Isaiah appeals to the power of Yahweh as exhibited in creation. Commentators generally admit the unity of this passage. However, they identify different sections that are introduced by the rhetorical questions, namely: Who has measured the waters? (vv. 12-17); To whom then will you liken God? (vv. 18-24); To whom then will you compare me? (vv. 25-26); and Why do you say, O Jacob (vv. 27-31). Each section relates to a specific challenge confronting Israel in her present experience.

¹⁹ Schoors, *I Am God Your Saviour*, 188. See C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Louisville: WJK Press, 1991) 201.

The first section (vv. 12-17) reflects the challenge of foreign nations' political and military power. It is possible to see behind the series of rhetorical questions in this section doubt about Yahweh's omnipotence and/or fear in the face of foreign nations. Such doubt/fear could have been the outcome of the exiles' experience of helplessness in the presence of Babylonian might. In response to this, Second Isaiah appeals to Yahweh's creative power, before which all nations and all men are accounted as nothing. Even the entire visible universe is not sufficient to render a worthy act of worship to Yahweh, the creator (vv. 15-17):

Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as dust on the scales;
see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.
Lebanon would not provide fuel enough,
nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering.
All the nations are as nothing before him;
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.

The aim of the first section is to contrast Yahweh's immensity and absolute sovereignty with the nothingness of the nations.²⁰ In comparison to Yahweh, no nation is to be reckoned as important. The basis of this argument must be a theology of creation recognized as different from the creation myths of Mesopotamia.²¹

The second section (vv. 18-24)²² presents the challenge of the princes of the nations in their power. But, compared to Yahweh, creator and lord of history, no powerful prince or ruler can outlive even the visible structure of the universe, which is God's handiwork and over which he rules as a king. Viewed against this universe, even the mighty princes and rulers are nothing. Therefore, all creatures are at the mercy of Yahweh, the king of the universe (vv. 22-23):

²⁰ Schoors, 250; Blenkinsopp, 190.

²¹ McKenzie, *The Second Isaiah* (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1968) 23. See ANET, 60-72; Blenkinsopp: "The language and the metaphors of the Isaian text draw overwhelmingly on the didactic-sapiential tradition and have little in common with the Priestly version of creation in Gen 1:1-2:4a. The imagery is predominantly architectural" (191). Cf. Ps 75:4; Job 38:4-7; Prov 8:22-31.

²² Vv. 19-20 is a gloss by several commentators, such as Westermann, Elliger and Beuken.

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
 and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
 who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
 and spreads them like a tent to live in;
 who brings princes to naught,
 and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

The third section (vv. 25-26) affirms that the heavenly bodies are part of the created order as a response to the challenge presented by the astral gods of Babylon. "The statement about Yahweh's creation and control of the celestial bodies serves to wrap up the polemic against idolatry, appropriately in view of the important of astral worship and autonomy in the intellectual and religious life of Babylon."²³ Yahweh, the creator, is the lord of the stars and to them he assigns their proper and limited functions (Cf. Gen 19:23; Neh 4:15; Job 38:32). The fact that Yahweh calls this innumerable army by name, illustrates his absolute sovereignty over these so-called gods (v. 26):²⁴

Lift up your eyes on high and see:
 Who created these?
 He who brings out their host and numbers them,
 calling them all by name;
 because he is great in strength,
 mighty in power, not one is missing.

After reversing of the challenges presented through the rhetorical questions, Second Isaiah concludes with the last section (vv. 27-31), a response directed to the exiles' complaint that Yahweh does not attend to their plight. The complaint is couched in the language of communal psalms of lament (Pss 13:2; 35:23; 44:25; 88:15; 140:13). They doubt the saving will of Yahweh and even his power to save. At the root of this doubt is their failure to recognize the hand of Yahweh at work in the world of history and experience. Second Isaiah's response to this doubt and blindness is the affirmation that Yahweh is the everlasting God who does not weaken with age or fatigue and who controls world events – past,

²³ Blenkinsopp, 193.

²⁴ Schoors, *I Am God Your Saviour*, 256.

present, and future. He is the creator, and thus, every creature is under his power. His ways are beyond the comprehension of the human mind. However, to those who trust in him, he communicates his unfailing strength (vv. 28-29):

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

Therefore, in his alleged inactivity or incapacity, Yahweh, creator and lord of history, does not yield his sovereignty to another. Contrary to the imagination or belief of the doubters and skeptics among the exiles, he is not unmindful of his people, for Yahweh is always active in human history. They need only to open their eyes, recognize his deeds in history, and trust in his power to save them. "The hope for Yahweh will never be disappointed,"²⁵ as v. 31 explicitly declares:

But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.

2. In another disputation (43:22-28), it is not difficult to infer a particular complaint. The exiles claim that they do not deserve their punishment (i.e., defeat and exile), since in the past they have faithfully performed their cultic obligations (cf. Ps 44). The complaint can be formulated, thus: "How could you, Yahweh, deliver us to destruction when we served you faithfully?" In reply to this accusation, Yahweh declares that the worship of Israel had been insincere.²⁶

²⁵ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 84.

²⁶ Baltzer introduces another level of meaning to this cultic issue, considering the passage as a commentary on the Jacob story (179-82).

In the Old Testament, the prophets are notable for their criticism of all types of cultic abuses, such as syncretistic practices and cultic formalism. Many passages can be cited that form a thread that even finds its way into the New Testament, namely: Amos 4:4-5; 5:4-7; Hos 6:6; Mic 6:7-8; Isa 1:10-20; 58:6-7; Jer 7:21-23. The prophets are not reformers of the cult; their concern is theological, that is, to maintain the true image of Israel's God that is disfigured and degraded by cultic abuses.

The catastrophe that befell the nation was the proper and inevitable consequence of their sin (vv. 27-28):²⁷

Your first ancestor sinned,
and your interpreters transgressed against me.
Therefore I profaned the princes of the sanctuary,
I delivered Jacob to utter destruction,
and Israel to reviling.

However, in spite of the people's complaint and guilt, Yahweh now unconditionally forgives and forgets Israel's sins out of his steadfast love for his people. The past judgment upon his people due to their sins is described as *ban*, a total and irremediable destruction. Yahweh's forgiveness, therefore, does more than the obliteration of Israel's transgressions. It creates Israel anew as his people. Israel's sins annihilated him as God's people; but God's unconditional forgiveness restores him as a new creation. This doctrine surpasses the pre-exilic preaching of Hosea and Isaiah.

3. In a long poem (49:14-50:3),²⁸ Second Isaiah affirms the unbroken union between Yahweh and his people. It is a response to the dispirited exiles' complaints that Yahweh has abandoned them, and that he is not able to save them from the power of Babylon.

²⁷ A work that can be placed contemporaneously with Second Isaiah's prophetic words is the Deuteronomistic History (Dtr). It has a similar outlook in the acknowledgment of the divine judgment upon the kingdoms of Israel and Judah as the right outcome that resulted from the rebelliousness and sin of kings and people. See P.R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 62-83.

²⁸ The literary genre of this text is disputed. Some authors identify it as a disputation (e.g. L. Köhler); others, as a proclamation of salvation (e.g. Begrich, Westermann and Schoors).

To counter the first complaint, Second Isaiah compares Yahweh's love for his people to a mother's love for her child. In the past, Yahweh had chosen Zion as his dwelling place; but this election did not spare the city from his judgment, as announced by the prophets (e.g., Mic 3:12; Jer 7:1-15).²⁹ Yet, in his fidelity to his covenant and his promises, Yahweh has not forsaken his people. In fact, he will restore Jerusalem and the ingathering of the people will be sudden and great. And nothing can now stop the working of God's plan (v. 22).

The second complaint betrays the exiles' doubt and skepticism about the power of God to effect this plan. Is Yahweh powerful enough to rescue the exiles from their Babylonian captors? To this question, Second Isaiah declares that Yahweh, the Savior, the Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob, will not only save his people from their oppressors, but he will even destroy them (v. 25-26):

But thus says the Lord:
 Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken,
 and the prey of the tyrant be rescued;
 for I will contend with those who contend with you,
 and I will save your children.
 I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh,
 and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine.
 Then all flesh shall know
 that I am the Lord your Savior,
 and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

4. Finally, in 50:1-3 Yahweh is confronted by Israel with the accusation that he has disowned his people, in spite of the covenant

²⁹ Jerusalem/Zion has been chosen by Yahweh (1 Kgs 11:13; Ps 132:12) to be the dwelling place of his name forever (2 Kgs 21:4; 23:27). This is a theme that is typically deuteronomic (Deut 12:5, 21; 14:21; 16:2, 6, 11; 20:2), connected with the religious reformation initiated by King Josiah, who in 621 BC promulgated the centralization of the cult in the Temple of Jerusalem. Because of this, the city has become the city of God, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel, the city of the great King (Ps 48:31). Nevertheless, her unfaithfulness to God has made her the personification of apostasy (Jer 3:6); she has abandoned Yahweh and preferred the idols of the nations around her, thus disgraced the glory of the Lord (Jer 3:11). For this, Yahweh has judged her to the point that she has become a desolation (Jer 6:2, 8). However, in Second Isaiah, God has announced that her time of service is over for she has paid double for her sins (Isa 40:2).

that binds him to them. This is expressed in two metaphors: divorce and transfer of ownership. But Yahweh replies that his action, the rejection of Israel as a nation, is justified because of the nation's sins. "No, because of your sins you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was put away" (v. 1c). Another charge against Yahweh is that he no longer has the power to help his people. "Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver" (v. 2b). As a rebuttal, Second Isaiah confirms God's all-embracing power as creator by allusions to his mighty deeds that effect spectacular, and even violent, transformations in the created order (vv. 2c-3):

By my rebuke I dry up the sea,
I make the rivers a desert;
their fish stink for lack of water,
and die of thirst.
I clothe the heavens with blackness,
and make sackcloth their covering.

A God with such power can certainly rescue his people from captivity. The exiles must rest assured that Yahweh, creator and lord of history, is their Savior and Redeemer. Yahweh's response to the accusation can be paraphrased, as follows: "Do you think I am not able to deliver you? I proved in Egypt that I am able to. If I have not yet done it, then it must have been for another reason".³⁰

Through the preceding disputations, Second Isaiah successfully responds to the various complaints and accusations hurled by the exiles against Yahweh. The prophet recognizes the doubt and skepticism that lie at the bottom of these complaints and accusations. He, therefore, had to appeal to Yahweh's creative power that does not weaken nor gets tired. It is a power that is constantly active in human history. For as God is the creator, he has dominion over all his creation and controls all the events in history – past, present, and future. For as God is everlasting, he does not fail in his promises, nor abandons the people he has chosen as his own. Therefore, there should be no reason for the exiles to doubt his unfailing concern for his people, or his power to deliver them from their captors and to lead them home to a restored Jerusalem.

³⁰ Schoors, *I Am God Your Saviour*, 200.

Conclusion

The two groups of passages examined above are a persuasive and cogent argumentation employed by Second Isaiah to convince the doubting and despairing exiles of Yahweh's power and willingness to save them. They can all be gathered under the heading of *via negationis*, if the term may be permissible, in the sense that their appeal is to nullify the exiles' allegations, opinions or false beliefs that inspire their doubts. Consequently, these arguments affirm the contrary – that Yahweh has the power and is willing to liberate the exiles and bring them back to their homeland. Second Isaiah, however, has a more positive approach than this negative argumentation. His oracles of salvation directly announce the coming salvation of God. These oracles are an assurance to the exiles of the imminent divine intervention that will liberate them from exile. To the doubters and skeptics, the message is direct and clear: "Here is your God! See the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him" (cf. 40:9-10). However, this is another subject for further research.

For Second Isaiah, the liberation of God's people is not magical, even if his descriptions tended to be sensational.³¹ It demands a response on the part of the people. Before ending his proclamations, the prophet issued a final challenge to the people to respond to God's word of salvation (55:6-7):

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord,
that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Second Isaiah's trial speeches and disputations were aimed to rouse and move the exiles not only to leave Babylon, the city of

³¹ See especially his allusions to the Exodus event. Cf. R. Cajot, "Return from Exile as New Exodus," *Philippiniana Sacra* (January-April 2001): 43-56.

oppression, and to return to Jerusalem, the city of freedom. More than this, they were designed to stir and persuade their minds and hearts to a decision and action towards conversion, namely: to reject the emptiness of Babylonian cult and to revive their faith in God's sovereign power to save. God's word demands that the people "forsake their wicked ways and unrighteous thoughts" (55:7). It challenges them to listen and to be taught constantly and humbly (cf. 50:4) in the *torah* of the Lord and in his *sedeq*. For Second Isaiah, therefore, restoration starts with the people's conversion of heart and mind through attentive and submissive listening to and instruction in the word of God that makes possible the return to the Lord, to his way and righteousness. □