

## ISAIAH 40–55: WHICH AUDIENCE WAS ADDRESSED?

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Although there are many issues where conservatives and critical scholars disagree, a good percentage of commentators in both camps agree that the prophecies in Isaiah 40–55 were written to a group of Hebrew exiles living in Babylon about 150 years after the time of the prophet Isaiah. Ronald Clements is so sure of this setting that he proclaims that “the sixth-century Babylonian background to chapters 40–55 is so explicit that to deny its relevance for an understanding of their contents is to ask for a totally different understanding of prophecy from that which pertains elsewhere in the Old Testament prophetic books.”<sup>1</sup> Although Roger Whybray maintains that no “commentator has succeeded in giving a convincing interpretation of the book against any other historical background than that of the exile,”<sup>2</sup> the texts examined in this article will suggest that another approach is hinted at in several verses. In fact, a couple critical commentators have already recognized that a few passages do not fit well in an exilic context. Therefore, in order to move toward a resolution of this issue, this study will wrestle first with the exilic assumptions about the location of the audience in Isaiah 40–55 and then will reassess the interpretation of seven passages that do not seem to address Hebrew exiles in Babylon.<sup>3</sup>

### EXILIC ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE AUDIENCE IN ISAIAH 40–55

Anyone who reads widely in the field of Isaiah will notice that commentators have quite different opinions about what qualifies as evidence that points to an exilic background for its audience. For example, Whybray is so convinced of the exilic setting of the audience that he tends to read it (assume it) into almost any passage. Whybray refers to the exiles nine times in his explanation of Isa 40:1–11. He suggests that 40:1–2 are words “to comfort the Jewish exiles that the time of their suffering is at an end,” believes these verses announce “God’s forgiveness to the exiles,” and maintains that the term Jerusalem refers to “the exiles.”<sup>4</sup> He believes those moving through the wilderness in verse 3

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald E. Clements, “Beyond Tradition-History: Deutero-Isaianic Development of First Isaiah’s Themes,” *JSOT* 31 (1985) 95–113.

<sup>2</sup> Roger N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 38.J703

<sup>3</sup> This is the conclusion suggested in Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* (NAC; Nashville: B & H, 2009) 41–48, 103–5. This conclusion is based on several additional factors that are not discussed in this article.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 48–49.

are “the exiles returning from Babylon,” that the good news in verse 9 is that God is “bringing the exiles with him,” that God’s rewards that he brings with him in verse 10 “are the rescued exiles,” and that the shepherd’s activity in verse 11 is “associated with the gathering of the scattered exiles.”<sup>5</sup> But is this the best interpretation of these verses or has his assumption of an exilic setting caused him to impose on the text more than what the text says? In stark contrast, James A. Motyer’s interpretation of 40:1–11 makes only one reference to the exiles in 40:1–11.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Joseph Blenkinsopp does not believe this oracle is about the return of the exiles from Babylon, the preparing of a route for the exiles to travel on from Babylon, or a herald on the hill calling to the Babylonian diaspora.<sup>7</sup> In a similar manner, John Oswalt explicitly states that the one coming through the wilderness in 40:3 is God, not the exiles, that the glory of the Lord in verse 5 is “not merely the return from exile,” and he rejects the connection between God’s reward and the return of the exiles in verse 10.<sup>8</sup> After comparing these different interpretations of 40:1–11, it seems best to conclude that this proclamation of salvation points to an eschatological fulfillment, not one that is exilic or post-exilic fulfillment. From the words in this text, nothing is known about the setting of the prophet at the time he spoke or wrote this oracle, plus nothing is revealed about the setting of the audience who was addressed. Whybray’s insistence on an exilic setting illustrates just how much an interpreter’s subjective imagination and broad assumptions can impose an exilic setting on a passage that says nothing about the exiles.

On the other hand, there are other scholars who suggest that the historical situation in Isaiah 40–55 is largely omitted or has been hidden. Brevard Childs claims that “the original historical context of Second Isaiah—whatever it was exactly—has been almost totally disregarded. . . . Even though the message was once addressed to real people in a particular historical situation . . . the canonical editors of this tradition employed the material in such a way as to eliminate almost entirely those concrete features.”<sup>9</sup> He goes on to say that the message of these chapters “no longer can be understood as a specific commentary on the needs of exiled Israel.”<sup>10</sup> The one exception to this principle is when there are concrete references to the coming of Cyrus (Isa 41:25; 44:28–45:1).<sup>11</sup> In spite of these strong statements about the paucity of historical information in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*,

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 50–53.

<sup>6</sup> James A. Motyer, *Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993) 299, takes the “time of duress” in 40:1–2 as a reference to the Babylonian captivity.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* (AB 19A; New York: Doubleday, 2002) 180–82. He believes this refers to God’s return to Zion. Viewed in light of the whole book, Blenkinsopp finds this promise to have an eschatological significance.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 51–55.

<sup>9</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 325, claims that “these chapters have no historical context.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 326. Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66* 4, supports Childs’s view, but in spite of this initial statement that the text is almost devoid of historical markers, Childs repeatedly claims that individual oracles were intended for the exiles.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 326, 329.

in his commentary on Isaiah Childs vacillates far away from this position, for he repeatedly interprets passage after passage in light of the audience's exilic setting even when there are no historical markers in the text.<sup>12</sup>

One of those concrete passages about Cyrus has had a very significant impact on the discussion of the setting of the author and his audience in Isaiah 40–55. Childs believes this argument made long ago by Andrew Davidson and George Smith still stands as the strongest case for an exilic setting for the author and audience of Isaiah 40–48.<sup>13</sup> This argument claims that 41:2–3, 25 present the initial work of Cyrus as already completed (implying a date after 550 BC). Therefore, the text is arguing that the Israelite audience can trust God's words about the future work of Cyrus in 44:24–45:7 because God's earlier words about Cyrus have already been fulfilled.<sup>14</sup> But it should be noted first that there is only one perfect verb (העיר) "aroused," implying a complete past time event) and five imperfect verbs (implying incomplete future action) in 41:2–3, so technically only the vague "aroused" one from the east is presented in past time.<sup>15</sup> It is also significant that 41:2–3, 25 never mentions Cyrus by name, so other interpretations are at least possible. The Aramaic

<sup>12</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2001) 298, 307, 308, 309, 310, 317, 320, 325, 322, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, etc., where Childs repeatedly refers to messages being given to the exiles or the Diaspora in Babylon.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew B. Davidson, "The Book of Isaiah xl–lxvi," *ExpT* II/6 (1883) 81–98, 186–203; George A. Smith, *The Book of Isaiah* (London, 1884) 1–26. Although there is good reason to reject the view that Cyrus is mentioned here in Isa 41:2, his work is described in Isa 44:24–45:7 and he is mentioned by name in Isa 44:28 and 45:1. Some would claim that the very mention of his name proves that these chapters must be exilic in origin. Others, like Ronald K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 794–95; Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah* 223; and Charles C. Torrey, *Second Isaiah* 41, resolve this problem by suggesting that the name "Koresh" was a scribal gloss added years later after the prophecy was fulfilled. Motyer, *Isaiah* 355, refuses to accept this approach because he does not believe it is possible to set limits on how far ahead a prophecy can predict. He notes that 1 Kgs 13:2 names Josiah and predicts what he will do long before he was born. If predictive prophecy cannot be specific about distant future events, this will also raise serious problems with specific messianic prophecies in Mic 5:2; Isa 7:14; 9:1–7; 53:1–12. Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66* 196, maintains that in a section of Isaiah that emphasizes God's knowledge of the future, it should not be odd to find God predicting many things about the future. Of course, it is important to remember that when these verses were spoken (or written) and the audience became aware of the name "Koresh," they had no idea when this prophecy would be fulfilled, so it would not have seemed odd or unusual to them. In addition, a general hermeneutical rule of interpretation is not to date a prophecy based on when it was fulfilled. Genesis 12:1–3 fits the context of Abram, but its fulfillment would not happen for years. Genesis 15:8–21 gives detailed information and explicitly says that this prophecy would not be fulfilled for 400 years. If Isaiah's "song of the vineyard" about the destruction of Judah in 5:1–7 was spoken in the reign of Uzziah (note 6:1), then this prophecy was given at least 150 years before it was fulfilled, so it is not as unusual as some suggest for prophets to give prophecies long before their fulfillment. Of course, the eschatological prophecies (Isa 2:1–5; 4:2–6; 9:1–7; 11:1–9; 34:1–15; 35:1–10) have still not been fulfilled.

<sup>14</sup> Childs, *Isaiah* 290, 322. Hugh G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 2–3 also points to this line of thinking as being the "strongest argument" for dating the material in Isaiah 40–55.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, one could also hypothetically argue that the perfect verb is a perfect of certainty that is common in prophetic texts about the future (GKC §106m-n). It is also hard to pinpoint when God might have "aroused" Cyrus to action. Was it when he became co-regent of Ashan with his father, when he became the sole king, after his defeat of Media in 546 BC, or his after his conquest of Babylon in 539 BC?

Targum thought this referred to Abraham who traveled from the east (from Ur of the Chaldea) and conquered several ancient kings to rescue Lot (Genesis 14),<sup>16</sup> while Norman H. Snaith concludes that this refers to the exiled Israelites who would conquer many enemies, as 41:11 and 15–16 suggest.<sup>17</sup> Some identify this person as Cyrus because both are pictured as mighty conquerors and God “calls” both of them (Isa 41:2; 45:3b).<sup>18</sup> Problems with this interpretation begin to arise when one brings in information in Isa 41:25 for it says that this one whom God will call from the east “will call on my name” which is directly contradictory to what God says about Cyrus. In the description of Cyrus in Isa 45:4b, 5b, God states two times that Cyrus “did not know me.”<sup>19</sup> If Isa 45:4b, 5b are true, how could Cyrus be the one who calls on God’s name in Isa 41:25? The obvious conclusion seems to be that Cyrus is not the king in Isa 41:25, so he is probably not the one from the east in Isa 41:2–3 either. A second problem arises with the identification of this person with Cyrus if this one from the east who “subdues kings” in Isa 41:2–3, 25 is connected to the war mentioned in Isa 41:11–12. In this context, some enemy is attacking the Hebrew people, but in the end this enemy will become nothing. History records no incident of wars against the Hebrews in exile, no situation where Cyrus attacked the Hebrews, and no war against the Hebrews where Cyrus’s army became nothing.<sup>20</sup> Thus there are serious problems with implying or assuming that Isa 41:2, 11–12, 25 refers to a past war of Cyrus that demonstrates that God’s past prophetic predictions have already shown themselves to be true. There were several great conquering kings that God brought from the east who might match the statements in Isa 41:2, 25, but there were very few enemies who became nothing after a war with the Hebrews (Isa 41:11–12). Thus rather than approaching the text with the assumption that the author is addressing an exilic group of Israelites based on a strained interpretation of Isa 41:2–3, 11–12, 25, it is important to carefully analyze all historical references in Isaiah 40–55 to determine if they reflect a pre-exilic or exilic setting for the audience.

## II. PASSAGES THAT SEEM TO POINT TO A PRE-EXILIC SETTING

The following seven texts refer to situations that do not fit into an exilic setting. This study will explain why these texts do not seem to apply to an audience in an exilic setting and will attempt to discover a more likely historical setting in the pre-exilic era.

<sup>16</sup> John Calvin and Martin Luther accepted this interpretation.

<sup>17</sup> Norman H. Snaith, “The Servant of the Lord in Deutero-Isaiah,” *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy* (ed. H. H. Rowley; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957) 187–200 (see 192).

<sup>18</sup> Jan L. Koole, *Isaiah III. Isaiah 40–48* (HCOT; Kampen: Pharos, 1997) 137, indicates that several commentators prefer to interpret the verb קרא “he called” root I as being a form of root II קרה “he met.”

<sup>19</sup> Some rationalize this inconsistency by hypothesizing that Cyrus did not know God at the beginning of his rise to power but later did know him (Ezra 1:1–4). Isaiah 45:4b, 5b do not qualify the statement that “he did not know me” by a phrase like “at the beginning of his reign.”

<sup>20</sup> In the next section an attempt will be made to identify this war mentioned in Isa 41:11–12.

1. *The war in Isa 41:8–16.* In this text, the prophet demonstrates the foolishness of the distant nations who depend on man-made idols that cannot speak (Isa 41:1–7, 21–28) and then turns to offer words of hope to the Hebrew audience in Isa 41:8–16. The setting of the audience in this section reveals that they feel weak and as insignificant as a worm (Isa 41:14); they are fearful, anxious, and in need of strengthening (Isa 41:10, 13, 14). They are facing those who oppose them; “men making war against you” (Isa 42:12 אֲנָשֵׁי מִלְחָמָתְךָ). In this oracle, God encourages his chosen servant Israel not to fear this oppressor, for God will strengthen them (Isa 41:8–13) and defeat their enemy (Isa 41:11–16). This prophecy follows most of the characteristics of a salvation oracle. It begins with a direct address to the audience (but “you”), encourages the audience not to fear three times (Isa 41:10, 13, 14), gives reasons for not fearing (“I am with you, . . . I am your God, I will strengthen you”; Isa 41:10), and then states the consequences of God’s salvation—those who make war against God’s people will become nothing (Isa 41:11–12).<sup>21</sup> Edger Conrad believes these salvation oracles in Isaiah imitate God’s earlier positive promises of victory in times of war,<sup>22</sup> thus providing a hint about the historical setting. Jean Vincent calls this a pre-exilic royal promise proclaimed in Jerusalem, while John Goldingay and David Payne suggest that these verses are taking up themes of a legal conflict and a military conflict similar to what is found in Isaiah 7 and 37.<sup>23</sup> Christopher North believes the vocabulary in Isa 41:11–12 point to “the violence of Israel’s enemies . . . there is open war.”<sup>24</sup>

Since there are no references to a nation conducting a war against the Hebrew exiles in Jeremiah or the exilic books of Ezekiel or Daniel, it is hard to see how this paragraph can be connected to the situation of an exilic audience in Babylon. If an exilic audience is in view one must ask, who is this enemy that is at war with them in exile? Numerous commentaries avoid this problem by denying that this text refers to a present war (“those who are at war with you”), which will result in the coming defeat of Israel’s enemy (“they will be as nothing”). John Watts states that those who oppose God’s people in Isa 41:11–12 are “Israel’s opponents in all the conflicts of the past” and that the people are “now in Babylonian exile, no longer a nation and scarcely a people.”<sup>25</sup> But the three verbs in Isa 41:12 are all imperfect verbs that do not

<sup>21</sup> Discussion of the salvation oracle can be found in Edger W. Conrad, “Second Isaiah and the Priestly Oracle of Salvation,” *ZAW* 93 (1981) 234–46; and Paul Harner, “The Salvation Oracle in Second Isaiah,” *JBL* 88 (1969) 418–34. Claus Westermann, *Prophetic Oracles of Salvation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991) 16–17, finds four different groups of salvation oracles in the prophets, the first being those in Isaiah 40–55. He places these in the context of Cyrus’s deliverance of Israel from Babylonian exile.

<sup>22</sup> Edger W. Conrad, “The ‘Fear not’ Oracles in Second Isaiah,” *VT* 34 (1984) 129–52, finds two war oracles in Isa 41:8–13 and 41:14–14 that have the structure of: (a) address; (b) assurances; (c) basis of assurance; (d) results.

<sup>23</sup> Jean M. Vincent, *Studien zur literarischen Eigenart und zur geistigen Heimat von Jesaja, Kap. 40–55* (Frankfurt: Bern, 1977); John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, I (ICC. London: T & T Clark, 2006) 123, 167.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher R. North, *The Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Commentary to Chapter XL–LV* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964) 98.

<sup>25</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66* (WBC 25; Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 94.

point to past events. Klaus Baltzer suggests this passage is about the installation of the servant and proposes that Isa 41:11–12 are describing a legal dispute (based on the use of ריב “he disputes, contends,” in Isa 41:11) on an innocent individual (collective Israel), not a war situation.<sup>26</sup> Antoon Schoors hypothesizes that these verses are describing Nabonidus’s opposition and persecution of Jewish people in exile, thus it does not describe a war.<sup>27</sup> These approaches refuse to take the war terminology seriously because the Israelites were not at war during the exile. Initially, Jan Koole identifies these enemies who contend with the Israelites (Isa 42:11) and the “men at war with you” (Isa 42:12 *אנשי מלחמתך*), with their Babylonian oppressors, the neighboring countries that gloated over their defeat (the Edomites), and those who turned against God’s people in the events surrounding Cyrus’s conquest.<sup>28</sup> He suggests that these enemies are people “who not only hate the exiles (11a) but also express their hate in words, either in quarreling and abuse or in a trial,” but then he goes on to say that, “At the same time *מלחמה* means a real war and the climax in vv. 11f. must at least refer to some kind of police action.”<sup>29</sup> At another point, he confuses the reader by saying that this statement about war is so general that it “transcends the historical circumstances.”<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to these interpretations, the evidence in the preceding paragraph suggests that a great king will conquer many nations and cause great fear (Isa 41:2–3). One path to finding a solution to the problem of identifying those who were warring against God’s people is available if one can pinpoint those who “will be as nothing and will perish” (Isa 41:11 *יהיו כאין ויאבדו*) and “they will be as nothing” (Isa 41:12 *יהיו כאין*). This enemy must be identified with a nation that God will shame and humiliate. This strong attacking enemy will perish and will not be found by those who search for them (Isa 41:12). One military setting where the Hebrew nation was opposed in war was at the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC (Koole’s initial suggestion) when God sent Nebuchadnezzar to conquer Judah (Jer 22:3–12; 25:8–11; 39:1–10; 52:1–27; Dan 1:1–3). This would fit the military setting of a great conquering king from the east in Isa 41:2–3 and an enemy warring against God’s people in Isa 41:11–12. The major problem with identifying this as the context for chapter 41 is the statement that God will defeat Judah’s enemies and make them as nothing, help and strengthen his people, and work on their behalf so that they need not fear (Isa 41:10–16). These factors do not fit what happened to the people of Judah at the fall of Jerusalem. God opposed his sinful people in 587 BC and did not defeat their enemy Nebuchadnezzar or make his army “as nothing.” The Hebrews had reason to fear when Jerusalem fell and there is no evidence that God strengthened or saved them at that time.

<sup>26</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah* 98. William A. M. Beuken, *Jesaja, Deel II.A (POT 21/1)*; Nijkerk: Calenbach, 1979) 18, also takes this as a legal dispute.

<sup>27</sup> Antoon Schoors, *I Am God Your Savior: A Form Critical Study of the Main Genres of Is. XL–LV* (VTSup XXIV; Leiden: Brill, 1973) 57–58.

<sup>28</sup> Koole, *Isaiah III. Isaiah 40–48* 160; John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (AB 20. Garden City: Doubleday, 1968) 160–61.

<sup>29</sup> McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* 162–63.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 161.

Another possible war setting would be the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem in 701 BC when Sennacherib came to defeat Judah (Isa 22:1–14; 29:1–8; 36:1–37:38). In this context, God promised that “your many enemies will become like fine dust . . . like the chaff which the wind blows away” (Isa 29:5). When the Assyrians attack Jerusalem, God will cause this enemy to be cut off (Isa 29:20); you will no longer see a fierce people (Isa 33:18–19). In the end, God rescued his people by killing 185,000 Assyrian troops in one night (Isa 37:36). If this was the situation that Isaiah 41 reflects, one can understand who the king was that God aroused from the east to subdue other kings (Sennacherib), why the people of God had such fear in the hearts (all of Judah was already conquered except Jerusalem), as well as the immediate relevance of Isaiah’s message that God would be present with them and make their enemies nothing (his angel destroyed most of the Assyrian troops in Isa 37:36).

2. *The war in Isa 42:22–25.* This text describes the Israelites as robbed of belongings, plundered, trapped in caves, and hidden away in pits with no one to deliver them. In 2 Kgs 21:14, these verbs describe what happens when God delivered people into the hands of their enemies, and in 1 Sam 14:11 they describe the practice of hiding in holes or caves to escape from an enemy who might try to plunder goods or kill someone. Because Judah rejected God’s law, he poured out his anger on them through fierce “war” (מלחמה) Isa 42:25). Whybray believes this exaggerated language describes the wretched state of the exiles, but Claus Westermann recognized that if this verse is understood literally, it cannot refer to conditions in Babylon, because there is no evidence that the Israelites were kept in prisons in Babylon.<sup>31</sup> Klaus Baltzer hypothesized that this scenic language of “holy war” depicts people in Babylon who were in prison because of their large debts, while John McKenzie simply refuses to take the verses at face value and treats these statements as gross exaggerations.<sup>32</sup> John Oswalt recognized Westermann’s point about the pre-exilic setting described in Isa 42:22, but in the rest of his discussion of this paragraph he maintains his focus on the issues the exiles would be addressing.<sup>33</sup> Although some take this reference to plunder allegorically, Koole understands this literally as a reference to the pre-exilic period when the Babylonians were conquering Jerusalem in 587 BC.<sup>34</sup> Although it may not be possible to identify which exact war the prophet is describing, it certainly appears that the audience is presently at war, with people hiding in caves from an enemy army and not living in exile in Babylon.<sup>35</sup> If one looks at the larger context, Isa 42:14–17 points to a time when God was silent, allowing

<sup>31</sup> Whybray, *Isaiah 40–55* 81, but Claus Westerman, *Isaiah 40–66* 112, finds it very difficult to give this verse a metaphorical meaning. Even B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja* (4th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922) 293, stated that “even if we recognize this as extreme hyperbole, it is proof the DtIs did not live in Babylon.”

<sup>32</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah* 153; McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* 47.

<sup>33</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66* 133–34. In note 79, Oswalt seems to question Westermann’s approach because he thinks it is a “strained” interpretation.

<sup>34</sup> Koole, *Isaiah III. Isaiah 40–48* 275.

<sup>35</sup> Moyter, *Isaiah* 329, agrees that these verses do not describe “the experience of Israel living in Babylon.”

his people to be defeated (Isa 42:14). Nevertheless, Isa 42:15 promises victory over Judah's enemies (the mountains and hills) and that their darkness will turn to light (Isa 43:16) when their enemies who trust in idols are "turned back and utterly put to shame" (Isa 42:17). The only major war during this period where God provided victory over an enemy fighting against Judah was God's divine intervention that brought victory over the Assyrian troops at Jerusalem in 701 BC.

3. *Giving Egypt, Seba, and Cush as a ransom for Israel in Isa 43:3.* In this unusual passage, God promises to redeem his people (Isa 43:1, 3) by giving Egypt, Cush, and Seba as a ransom in exchange for his own people. Whybray believes the passing through the waters and fire in Isa 43:2 are "allusions to the journey through the desert which the exiles are shortly to undertake."<sup>36</sup> Although Whybray admits that these African nations were never actually conquered or given to Cyrus (his son Cambyses did conquer them 17 years later), he still comes to the strange conclusion that Isa 43:3 refers to God giving Cyrus temporal rule over Egypt, Cush, and Seba in exchange for giving the Hebrews freedom from Babylonian exile.<sup>37</sup> This interpretation directly contradicts Isa 45:13, which says that the one who will build God's city and let the exiles go will not take any payment or reward. To avoid this problem, Goldingay and Motyer propose that Isa 43:3 refers to God's making a payment of a ransom when the Egyptian army forfeited their lives in the Red Sea at the time of the exodus, so that the Israelites could be delivered and set free.<sup>38</sup> One problem with this interpretation is that there is no evidence that Seba and Cush were involved with exodus events. Oswalt rejects Whybray's interpretation because these African nations were not brought under Persian control until 17 years later in the reign of Cambyses.<sup>39</sup> This information should exclude any exilic interpretation related to Cyrus, but it may open the door for seriously reconsidering Joseph Kimchi and John Calvin's proposal. Calvin concluded that this passage refers to Sennacherib "turning his forces against Egypt, Ethiopia, and other nations. . . . The Lord spared you and directed the attack of your enemies to other quarters"<sup>40</sup> when the Egyptian ruler Tirhakah (Isa 37:9) threatened Assyria's rear flank. This pre-exilic setting seems to fit the requirements of this passage remarkably well and it avoids the problems of attributing this conquest to Cyrus.

<sup>36</sup> Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* 82.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 82–83. It appears that Franz Delitzsch, "The Book of Isaiah," *Commentary on the Old Testament*, VII (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 190–91, knows about the temporal problem, but still accepts the theory that God gave Cyrus African nations so Israel could be set free.

<sup>38</sup> John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55* (London: T & T Clark, 2005) 193.

<sup>39</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66* 139–40. He believes "the author is speaking generally and establishing a principle that would apply to all such circumstances, not just one." This rather metaphorical approach seems to downplay clear historical data in favor of broad theological concepts. Later in note 17 (p. 140), Oswalt speaks positively of Calvin's suggestion that this refers to Sennacherib's defeat of the Egyptians.

<sup>40</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah* (CC, VIII; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 321.

4. *An attack on Babylon in Isa 43:14.* This text is very enigmatic and full of difficult translation problems that cannot be dealt with in detail,<sup>41</sup> but it appears to refer to Babylon being brought down by an unidentified army sent by God. Whybray, Baltzer, and Westermann believe that this refers to God sending Cyrus to destroy Babylon based on Isa 45:1–2,<sup>42</sup> but this violent description of the fall of Babylon does not match Cyrus's claim of a peaceful occupation of Babylon in the Cyrus Cylinder?<sup>43</sup> Consequently, both Goldingay and Blenkinsopp have problems with this interpretation, for this verse depicts the violent fall of Babylon that is "inconsistent with the account of a nonviolent occupation in Cyrus' propagandistic Cylinder inscription."<sup>44</sup> It would seem to be much more reasonable to connect this prophecy to historical events when Babylon actually was violently defeated. This could be referring to the same violent defeat of Babylon that was mentioned in Isaiah 13–14 or 21:1–10, prophecies that were probably filled in 689 BC when Sennacherib violently wiped Babylon off the map.<sup>45</sup>

5. *The future destruction of the temple in Isa 43:28.* A fifth passage describes God's future destruction of the temple and its officials in Jerusalem using imperfect verbs that are preceded by *vav* conjunctives (לְאָחֲזֵל "and I will pollute" וְנָתַתִּי "and I will give") that point to God's future plans of judgment on his people in Jerusalem. The future sense of these verbs clearly indicate that this verse was written before the future destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, thus it was before the beginning of the Babylonian exile. But Whybray and other critical commentators<sup>46</sup> change the vocalization of these two verbs to be *vav* consecutives,<sup>47</sup> thus making them refer to past events.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, Blenkinsopp correctly keeps the future reading in the MT.<sup>49</sup> Supporting this pre-exilic orientation is the announcement the people are giving unacceptable sacrifices, they lack honor for God, and are burdening God

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* 205–6, struggles with some of these textual and semantic issues.

<sup>42</sup> Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* 87; Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah* 169; Westerman, *Isaiah 40–66* 125.

<sup>43</sup> James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) 315–16, indicates that he entered the city unopposed and with great rejoicing by the people of Babylon.

<sup>44</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* 227, believes there may have been a deliberate suppression or omission of the facts, so in spite of the problems here he still thinks it could apply to Cyrus's conquest of Babylon. Goldingay, *Message of Isaiah 40–55* 207, also struggles to explain this information. In spite of the contradictions with what Cyrus actually did, Goldingay believes this refers to Cyrus's peaceful occupation. He explains this inconsistency as a situation in which the "prophet's imaginative portrayal of the future event was not to give a literal anticipatory account of it." One has to wonder, though, should not the prophet's divinely inspired imagination be consistent with, rather than contrary to, the actual fulfillment of this prophecy?

<sup>45</sup> Daniel D. Luchenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005) 83–84. S. Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 13:2–14:23* (Lund: Gleerup, 1970) 91 also quotes from Sennacherib's account of his total devastation of the city of Babylon in 689 BC.

<sup>46</sup> Westerman, *Isaiah 40–66* 130, simply drops the first line "Therefore I will desecrate the temple officials and I will give" and makes the rest of the verse past tense.

<sup>47</sup> The Old Greek and Vulgate have past tense verbs but the Targum has future verbs. Either is hypothetically possible, but the Masoretic *vav* conjunctive is the more difficult reading.

<sup>48</sup> Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* 93.

<sup>49</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* 229–30, says the MT "should be retained."

with their sins (Isa 43:22–24). Thus God’s judgment of his people for these sins and the destruction of the temple in Isa 43:28 refer to pre-exilic events.

6. *The fall of Babylon in Isaiah 46–47.* The sixth passage describes the fall of Babylon and her gods. Whybray thinks this “describes in imagination what will happen to them when Cyrus attacks Babylon”<sup>50</sup> in 539 BC. But he goes on to conclude that this is a false prophecy because “this is a further example of a prophecy which was not fulfilled; in the event Cyrus proclaimed himself a follower of Marduk and actively promoted the worship of the Babylonian gods.”<sup>51</sup> Goldingay also recognized how the prophecy does not correspond with Cyrus’s account of his occupation of Babylon, but he attributes this inconsistency to the imaginative portrayal of events in prophetic texts.<sup>52</sup> Blenkinsopp believes this chapter could possibly refer to Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon in 539 BC, but he takes this position only because he does not believe the exaggerated propaganda in the Cyrus Cylinder. Later Blenkinsopp suggests that these chapters might be describing either: (a) Darius’s twenty month siege of Babylon in 520 BC (Herodotus, 3:150–160) or (b) the later defeat of Babylon by Xerxes (Herodotus, 1:181–83).<sup>53</sup> These alternative events are surely a much better option than the distasteful conclusion that this chapter is a false prophecy that was never fulfilled. Ironically, Whybray recognized that the things described here did happen when Sennacherib attacked Babylon, but he does not suggest that this earlier event is what the prophet was predicting. This option is a possible pre-exilic reference for this prophecy, for these words could well be a warning to Hezekiah that he should not trust or make a treaty with Babylon because soon God will destroy Babylon and her gods. Oswalt rejects the false prophecy charge of the critics and then turns this prophecy into a general statement about the uselessness of idols rather than a prophecy about the fall of Babylon. He concluded that “we have little reason to think that this was intended to be a specific prophecy.”<sup>54</sup> But since Babylon and its gods are specifically mentioned, what stands in the way of taking a literal interpretation and concluding that chapters 46–47 refers to the total defeat of Babylon? This did not happen when Cyrus came to Babylon in 539 BC but in 689 BC Sennacherib violently wiped it off the map.<sup>55</sup> Concerning the city of Babylon he claims:

I destroyed, I devastated, I burned with fire. The wall and the outer wall, temples and gods, temple-tower of brick and earth, as many as there were. I raised and dumped them into the Arahtu canal. Through the midst of the city I dug a canal. I flooded its site with water, and the very foundations I destroyed. I made its destruction more complete than that of a flood. That in the days to come, the site

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 113.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 114.

<sup>52</sup> Goldingay, *Message of Isaiah 40–55* 303.

<sup>53</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* 267–68.

<sup>54</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66* 229; on p. 237, he discusses Cyrus as the conqueror of Babylon.

<sup>55</sup> Luckenbill, *Annals of Sennacherib* 83–84.

of that city, and its temples and its gods, might not be remembered, I completely blotted out with (floods) of water and made it like a meadow.<sup>56</sup>

Sennacherib also refers to moving the gods of Elallate back to their original shrines and the smashing of other gods (cf. Isa 46:1–2).

7. *Oppression by Egypt and Assyria mentioned, but no oppression by Babylon in 52:3–5.* There are very few historical references to known historical events in Isaiah 49–55. The messages in chapters 49–55 include a series of poems about God’s specially chosen Servant (Isa 49:1–13; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12) and an alternating series of proclamations of salvation about Israel’s future hope (Isa 49:14–50:3; 51:1–52:12; 54:1–17). The Servant poems do not say anything about what was happening at the time these words were spoken and they provide no hints about the location of the prophet’s audience. The proclamations of salvation in this section are dedicated almost exclusively to the eschatological restoration of God’s people in his future kingdom where he will reign as king (Isa 52:7–10); therefore, they should not be considered to be wonderful prophecies about the peace and joy in the post-exilic era as some commentators suggest.<sup>57</sup> In fact, these prophecies seldom refer to the location of the prophet or his present audience.

Nevertheless, in the midst of the proclamation of salvation in Isa 52:1–11 there is a brief historical look back at past times when the nation suffered and was redeemed from oppression (Isa 52:4–5), but there is no explicit reference about being defeated and taken into Babylonian captivity. John Calvin came to the astonishing conclusion that “[b]y ‘Assyria,’ he means the Babylonians,”<sup>58</sup> but there is no basis for this kind of random substitution for the name Assyria. Modern critical commentaries often question the authenticity of Isa 52:3–6<sup>59</sup> because these verses have a more prosaic quality. It is also not uncommon for commentators to find a reference to a Babylonian oppression by interpreting the first clause in Isa 52:5 “and now what do I have here” as an implied reference to, what do I have here “in Babylon”?<sup>60</sup> Of course, this is just as illegitimate as the suggestion that one should read, what do I have here “in Jerusalem”? “Here” is not defined as a specific location. A second problem is the meaning of ספס. Some commentators interpret ספס as meaning “without cause, for no reason” matching the use of this word in Isa 52:3 (“you were sold for no reason”). But as Whybray accurately states,<sup>61</sup> it is almost impossible to suggest that God had no reason to sell the sinful Israelites into the hand of the Assyrians. Another good option is to translate ספס “at the end” as

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Those who take these prophecies as referring to God’s promise of a wonderful post-exilic era must struggle with the historical reality that the post-exilic era was not like this. Was Isaiah a false prophet who deceived his audience? Maybe it is wiser to conclude that these salvation oracles were not about life in the post-exilic period.

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *Book of the Prophet Isaiah* 96.

<sup>59</sup> Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* 248, calls 52:4–6 “a marginal gloss.”

<sup>60</sup> Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* 166.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 166.

J. Oswalt does,<sup>62</sup> thus contrasting what happened to Israel “at the beginning” of her history in Egypt and what happened “at the end” in the Assyrian era. But if the Assyrian oppression was “at the end” of their present experience, there is no room to suggest a Babylonian exilic oppression in the next verse. In this interpretation the phrase “now, what have I here” in Isa 52:5 does not explicitly refer to a Babylonian exile of the Israelites. It inquires about the present implications of these two earlier oppressions. After all these divine punishments, the people are still oppressed and the rulers of Judah are still wailing in anguish and defeat, plus God’s glorious name is still held in contempt. In contrast to these past failures in pre-exilic times, God in Isa 52:6–12 will cause his people to know his name and his salvation when he comes to reign over his kingdom.

This conclusion fits the other small hints of background information in Isa 49:14–52:12. In this section, God promises that he “will look with compassion on all their ruins” (Isa 51:3) because “the wrath of the oppressor is bent on destruction” (Isa 51:13). Soon Zion’s “prisoners will be set free” (Isa 51:14) and God will remove his cup of wrath and put it in the hands of their oppressors (Isa 51:17, 23), for the Lord will bare his arm in the sight of the nations (Isa 52:10). This information indicates that his people are in a war situation, not in exile. The opponents in this war are not identified, but God promises that “those who laid you waste, will depart from you” (Isa 49:17) and “those who devoured you will be far off” (Isa 49:19). This does not fit the 587 BC war against Jerusalem or the peaceful exilic period, because the Babylonians were not defeated at Jerusalem and they were not far off, but they were all around the exiled Israelites. These statements do match what happened in 701 BC, for after God destroyed the Assyrian troops at Jerusalem, the remaining regiment quickly ran back to Assyria (Isa 37:37).

### III. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study concludes that it is inappropriate merely to assume an exilic setting for the audience in Isaiah 40–55. This conclusion is supported by seven texts that do not fit an exilic situation. Some of these texts include enough historical hints (war, future destruction of the temple) to demonstrate that a pre-exilic setting is not just possible, but a likely understanding of the audience’s setting in Isaiah 40–55. It is also interesting that a couple places suggest a location in Judah (which was not the central focus of this study). For example, (a) the repeated reference to Palestinian trees rather than Babylonian trees (Isa 41:19);<sup>63</sup> (b) the statement that the location of Ur was “at the far ends of the earth” (Isa 41:9) and not just right next door, suggesting that the Israelites were not a few miles away in Babylon; and (c) the repeated condemnation of making and worshipping idols which was a pre-exilic problem in Judah, but not a problem for the exiles in Babylon.

<sup>62</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66* 362–64.

<sup>63</sup> S. I. Sherwin, “In Search of Trees: Isaiah XLIV 14 and its Implications,” *VT* 53 (2003) 514–29.

If this pre-exilic perspective is accepted as a working hypothesis, new windows of understanding are opened up when one reads Isaiah 40–48. The statement that the nations are nothing in Isa 40:15, 17 would be a strong word of assurance that would counter Rabshakah's claims of superiority in Isa 36:13–20 and 37:10–13, for these Assyrian armies are nothing in God's eyes. The complaint that God has hidden himself in Isa 40:27 makes sense if the people are wondering why God has allowed the Assyrian army to conquer city after city in Judah. The fear that grips the people in a war situation in Isa 41:10–14 does not fit the peaceful exilic situation in Babylon, but it would match the reaction of the people of Jerusalem when the Assyrian army stood around Jerusalem preparing to attack. The spoil, plunder, and fierce battle in Isa 42:24–25 would refer to what happened when the Assyrian attacked Judah and the ransom in Isa 43:3 fits the Assyrian battle with a Cushite king Tirhakah (Isa 37:9). Isaiah 43:23 mentions the unacceptable sacrifices presented at the temple, pointing to a time before the temple was destroyed, which Isa 43:28 confirms. The nation should not trust in Babylon for help (Isa 39:1–6), for in the coming days God will totally destroy Babylon (689 BC) and shame her gods (Isa 46:1–47:15). But at the present time the Hebrew audience is still blind (Isa 42:18; 43:8), sinful (Isa 42:24; 43:22–24; 46:8), quarrelsome (Isa 45:9–10), stubborn and obstinate (Isa 46:12; 48:4), and some still worship idols (Isa 48:5). Nevertheless, God has delayed his full wrath and not completely cut them off by destroying the nation (Isa 48:9). His present actions were meant to refine and test his people (Isa 48:10). Thus this audience needs to see God as their redeemer, flee from accepting Babylonian assistance (Isa 48:20), and trust in God. At some point in the future the nation and its temple will be destroyed and the people will go into exile (Isa 39:6; 43:28; 45:13), but eventually God will send a strong king Koresh who will allow the people to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple (Isa 44:26–28).