

Isaiah 45: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 45. Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed. I will go before you and level the exalted places. I will break in pieces the doors of bronze, and cut through the bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, and the hordes in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name. I name you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. Besides me, there is no God. I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness. I make well-being and create calamity. I am the Lord, who does all these things. Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness. Let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit. Let the earth cause them both to sprout.

I, the Lord, have created it. Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots. Does the clay say to him who forms it, What are you making? Or, Your work has no handles. Woe to him who says to a father, What are you begetting? Or to a woman, With what are you in labour? Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and the one who formed him, Ask me of things to come. Will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands? I made the earth and created man on it.

It was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level. He shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts. Thus says the Lord, The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush and the Sabaeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours. They shall follow you. They shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will plead with you, saying, Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no God besides him. Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour. All of them are put to shame and confounded. The makers of idols go in confusion together. But Israel is saved by the Lord with everlasting salvation. You shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity. For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens. He is God, who formed the earth and made it. He established it. He did not create it empty. He formed it to be inhabited. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness.

I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, Seek me in vain. I, the Lord, speak the truth. I declare what is right. Assemble yourselves and come. Draw near together, you survivors of the nations. They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a God that cannot save. Declare and present your case. Let them take counsel together. Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour. There is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return. To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance. Only in the Lord it shall be said of me, O righteousness and strength. To him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the Lord, all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.

[4 : 0 5] These chapters of Isaiah are an extended challenge to the gods of the idolatrous nations, a trial in which the claims of the gods to be gods are being tested. The Lord declares himself to be unique and supreme, the sole creator, the Lord of history, and the redeemer of his people. His people are witnesses of his mastery of history, as they can testify to the way in which he has declared future events long before, and that his word and purpose have stood firm. None of the

so-called gods of the nations can do this. As part of the argument of the preceding chapter, the Lord demystified the idols, unveiling them to be mere creations of frail mortals, made of just wood, stone, and metal, utterly unworthy of the worship that they were being given. Indeed, to worship such idols of man's fashioning as if they were gods, is a gross abomination, rendering to such objects what only truly belongs to God himself, and implying that the eternal, immortal, and glorious creator and Lord of all could be fittingly represented by mean mockeries of men's hands. Chapter 44 ended with a statement of the Lord's manifest sovereignty in history through the work of Koresh, Cyrus, whom the Lord appointed to deliver his people from exile and return them to Jerusalem, which Cyrus would order to be rebuilt along with its temple. As we discussed in chapter 44, the reference to Cyrus in this context is one of the reasons why many commentators dispute the claim that chapters 40 to 66 should be dated to the time of Isaiah the son of Amoz. While for some this has been on account of their refusal to believe in predictive prophecy, others doubt that such a prophecy, mentioning the name of Cyrus in such a manner, makes good sense well over a century before his birth.

And 160 years before the prophecy was fulfilled. No one would know who this Cyrus was. Typically, prophecies of figures and events so far in the future are delivered in less specific language.

Some respond to this problem by arguing that the name of Cyrus might have been added to the prophecy of Isaiah later, when it became clear that he was the man in which the prophecy would be fulfilled. While others suggest that such prophecies were given through someone other than Isaiah, likely sometime in the 540s BC, in the years leading up to Cyrus' invasion of Babylon.

Perhaps the most surprising features of Cyrus as described at the end of chapter 44 and beginning of chapter 45 are the terms applied to him. Chapter 44 verse 28 speaks of him as the Lord's appointed shepherd, language typically associated with the king, who would fulfil his purpose. Here in chapter 45, Cyrus is arrestingly spoken of in language that we would associate with the awaited Davidic king, as the Lord's anointed, literally as the Messiah. The Lord has expressly appointed Cyrus for the purpose of releasing his people and re-establishing Jerusalem and its temple.

[7 : 01] The Lord is going to use Cyrus in a remarkable way, grasping his right hand to empower him and subduing nations before him. Loosening the loins of kings might perhaps refer to the disarming involved in removing the belts bearing the king's weapons from around their waists. Another possibility is that it refers to the kings soiling themselves in fear. Strong cities would not be able to withstand Cyrus. Their gates would be opened before him or broken through. The Lord would use Cyrus for the sake of his people, even though Cyrus did not know the Lord. While Cyrus does refer to the Lord in his decree for the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple, there is no evidence that he was a believer in the Lord. Presumably he regarded the Lord as one of the many gods of the nations. However, whatever Cyrus' understanding, the Lord is using him to accomplish his purpose, to demonstrate his concern for his people and his supremacy over all of the false gods of the nations. Cyrus is named and set apart for a divine purpose, much as Israel is. But Cyrus is not aware of how the Lord is using him. The king's heart is in the hands of the Lord and the Lord moves it in whatever way he wants. This all serves to display the glory and uniqueness of the Lord to the watching world. Verse 7 declares the Lord's power both in the world of nature and in the events of history. The Lord is behind and over all of these things, whether the light and darkness of the first day of creation or the corresponding well-being and calamity of the events of human history. The Lord summons the reign of righteousness from the heaven and the answering fruitfulness of the earth, all revealing his sovereign and gracious work. The sovereignty of the Lord in fashioning his people and enacting his purposes is illustrated on several occasions in scripture by the image of the potter, the pot, and the clay of which he forms it. As in Romans chapter 9 or Jeremiah chapter 18, the Lord's message concerns the futility and the presumption of the people fashioned by his hand, objecting to the one that's fashioning them. In addition to being the maker of heaven and earth, the Lord is also the maker of his people, with his own purpose for them. The Lord has both the prerogative and the power to order all things. He will declare what is to come to pass and what shall become of the people that he has fashioned, and no one is in any position to command him otherwise. The stirring up of Cyrus is the great potter fashioning clay for his purposes, using the unpromising material of a pagan king as the deliverer of his people. This purpose will be achieved in the most surprising of ways, without the payment of either ransom or tribute. Cyrus would act in this way simply because the Lord stirred him up to do so. Such language

of the Lord stirring up Cyrus is found elsewhere. In chapter 41 verse 2, for instance, Who stirred up one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot. He makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. It's also used of Cyrus in Ezra and elsewhere. The work that the Lord would accomplish through Cyrus was a demonstration of his own righteousness, his faithfulness to his covenant, his inaction of his justice, and his setting of the world to rights. The Lord is going to demonstrate his supremacy over all of the idols and false gods. When he does so, the nations will see and be put to shame in their idolatry. However, it will also be a moment of redemption, as people of all the nations humbled themselves before and sought to come under the rule of Israel, recognizing that the Lord was in Israel's midst. This is clearly not something that occurred in any full sense in the years following the return from Babylon. Rather, we can probably see here something of the greater awaited horizon of salvation, one foretold at several points in the book of Isaiah, which often has what some call telescopic prophecies, which can collapse future events at several different distances of time, into a single projected future. The uniqueness of the Lord would be a publicly manifest fact, not a secret, but the incontrovertible reality evidenced by history. Former idolaters would recognize the transcendence of the Lord, that he is a God who hides himself, but also his nearness to those who fear him. He is the God of Israel, the saviour. In the revelation of the Lord's truth and glory, the idols of the nations would also be exposed in their emptiness. The continuing trial motif is particularly prominent at the end of the chapter. The survivors of the judge nations are summoned to come together in an assembly. Even as refugees from their former lands, they are still going around carrying their wooden idols. It should already be amply manifest that they cannot save them. The Lord challenges the idolaters. Who declared long in advance the events that have come to pass in their recent history? There is no God like the Lord, the unrivalled master of history. But he is not merely the master of the destinies of the nations. He presents himself as their saviour too. If they will but turn to him, whether they be at the very ends of the earth, he will save them too. The demonstration of the uniqueness of the Lord will come as every human being recognises that he is the Lord. Whether they bow unwillingly as defeated foes or as loving subjects, all will bow. Every tongue will swear allegiance to him. The Lord is the one true source of justice and of might, the one who will establish his righteous rule in the earth. He will vindicate his servants and put to shame all of his foes. righteousness and strength are the key qualities that mark someone out for rule. And the Lord himself is the source of these things, the source of all true sovereignty and rule. It is to him that Israel and the converted of the nations shall look, finding in him, corresponding with his righteousness and strength, justification and true glory. A question to consider. In Philippians chapter 2, Paul alludes to verse 23 of this chapter, referring it to Christ. How does Paul's use of Isaiah's expression develop the themes of this chapter and show their surprising fulfilment?