

Isaiah 44: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 December 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 44. But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen. Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb, and will help you. Fear not, O Jacob my servant, jeshuren whom I have chosen, for I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground. I will pour my spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.

They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. This one will say, I am the Lord's. Another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, the Lord's, and name himself by the name of Israel. Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts, I am the first, and I am the last. Besides me there is no God.

Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen. Fear not, nor be afraid. Have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses. Is there a God besides me? There is no rock. I know not any. All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a God, or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble. Let them stand forth. They shall be terrified. They shall be put to shame together. The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers, and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails. He drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line. He marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes, and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree, or an oak, and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar, and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it, and warms himself. He kindles a fire, and bakes bread. Also he makes a God, and worships it. He makes it an idol, and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat, he roasts it, and is satisfied.

Also he warms himself, and says, Aha, I am warm. I have seen the fire. And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it, and worships it. He prays to it, and says, Deliver me, for you are my God. They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, Half of it I burned in the fire. I also baked bread on its coals. I roasted meat, and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination?

[3 : 04] Shall I fall down before a block of wood? He feeds on ashes. A deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself, or say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?

Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant. I formed you. You are my servant, O Israel. You will not be forgotten by me. I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you. Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it. Shout, O depths of the earth. Break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest and every tree in it. For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel. Thus says the Lord, your redeemer, who formed you from the womb. I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who frustrates the signs of liars, and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back, and makes their knowledge foolish, who confirms the word of his servant, and fulfills the counsel of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, She shall be inhabited, and of the cities of Judah, they shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins, who says to the deep, Be dry, I will dry up your rivers, who says of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose, saying of Jerusalem, She shall be built, and of the temple, Your foundation shall be laid. In Isaiah chapter 41, the Lord began a trial and debate with the idolatrous

nations and their false gods. In chapter 44, this trial of the gods continues to provide the backdrop for the prophecy. The Lord is demonstrating that he alone of all of the gods is the true one. He is the creator of all, the master of history, and over all of the nations. Just as in the preceding chapter, this chapter opens with a but now. In both instances, the sorry state into which the nation has fallen through its sins is contrasted with the loving commitment of the Lord to them, and his coming redeeming action for them.

Chapter 43 ended with the terrible sentence that fell upon Israel on account of its sins. Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary, and deliver Jacob to utter destruction, and Israel to reviling. Chapter 44 opens by addressing Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen, accentuating the contrast that is being drawn by the repetition of the double name from the prior verse. Verse 2 recalls the great song of Moses from Deuteronomy chapter 32, and his blessing of the tribes in the passage that follows in chapter 33, the only other places in which the term joshoran is found. Joshoran is an unusual term for Israel, and perhaps the intention is to evoke the larger context of those passages in Deuteronomy, passages which certainly invite intertextual comparisons with this passage in Isaiah. For instance, in Deuteronomy chapter 32, verses 15 to 18, But joshoran grew fat and kicked. You grew fat, stout, and sleek. Then he forsook God who made him, and scoffed at the rock of his salvation. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods. With abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth. As in Isaiah chapter 44, this passage in Deuteronomy speaks of the birth of the nation. And in verse 8 of our passage in Isaiah, the Lord will speak of himself as the true rock over against the false gods of the nations, an important theme in Deuteronomy chapter 32. The song of Moses foretells the way that the Lord will prove his supremacy over the false gods of the nations, and how he will redeem his people. This great prophetic statement of divine intent given through Moses is being fulfilled in the events declared here in Isaiah, so perhaps we should recognize some allusions here. The spirit will be poured out upon their descendants, like rain upon the heights of a parched land, descending in streams through the wilderness, with the new life of a restored people springing up on its banks. The motif of the pouring out of the spirit, most particularly seen in connection with Pentecost, occurs in several places in the

Old Testament prophets, perhaps most notably in the book of Joel. Imagery of the Lord's watering of the land has already been used by the prophet Isaiah at many points in his book. Here the watering is explicitly connected with the Lord's gift of his life-giving spirit. When the nation was so blessed with the vivifying presence of the Lord's spirit, people, whether Israelites or Gentile proselytes, would be eager to identify themselves with a nation that so displayed the glory of its maker.

In the debate with the nations and their false gods, the Lord had presented Israel as his witnesses. Even in their sinful rebellion, in its history Israel had witnessed the faithfulness, the might, and the holiness of the Lord, and could bear witness to it and to him. The Lord is unique and supreme, and there are no gods that can threaten him, nor any other like him. Besides substantiating the Lord's case against the idols and their worshippers, the demonstration of the Lord's uniqueness and sovereignty is a source of assurance to his people, who are once again told not to fear. The Lord is the first, and he is the last. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He, as the creator of all things, is before all other powers, and as the judge of all, he will stand unrivaled when they have all returned to the dust. He has formed his people Israel as his witnesses, who can testify to the fact that the Lord has spoken concerning his future actions, which he has brought to pass. Can any other god produce such witnesses? In this is demonstrated the fact that no other god exists, no other rock, using the terminology of the Song of Moses, looking for other peoples to bear witness to the faithfulness and goodness and greatness of their gods, in comparison to the witness that Israel can bear concerning the Lord, none are to be found. In one of the most powerful polemics against idolatry in the whole of the scripture, the Lord skewers the futility and stupidity of idol-making. Idolaters clearly had sophisticated accounts of what idols meant, and how, when they were worshipping them, they were really worshipping the god behind them. All of this, however, is mystification of what is actually taking place, to demystify the process. The Lord goes back to the construction of the idols in the first place.

[9 : 39] Robert Paul Wolfe tells the old Jewish joke of Mrs. Feinschmeck and her son Reuben with his irrational fear of blintzes. For some reason, her son had a deep fear of this delicacy, and so she

was advised by a child psychologist to go through the process of making the blintzes in front of him, so that he could see what they were made of. Wolfe writes, Mrs. Feinschmeck dutifully gathered up the ingredients, set Reuben on a kitchen chair in full view of the work table and stove, and began to make blintzes. At each stage, she turned to Reuben to see whether he was becoming frightened. She mixed up the filling. Is it all right, Reuben?

It's all right, Mama. She made the batter. Is it all right, Reuben? It's all right, Mama. She made the first paper-thin pancake, laid it on the table, and placed a big spoonful of filling in the middle of the pancake. Is it all right, Reuben? It's all right, Mama. She folded over the first corner. I'm all right, Mama. She folded the second corner. I'm all right, Mama. She folded the third corner. I'm still all right, Mama. Finally, she folded over the last corner. And there it is, Reuben.

Help! Blintzes! In Isaiah chapter 44, the Lord is making the blintzes for Israel, helping his son to get over an irrational view of idols. Whatever sophisticated mystification pagan theologians might give for the idols, when it all comes down to it, they are constructed by human beings out of inanimate pieces of wood and stone and metal. There's no great virtue conferred by those that make them. There's no power inherent in the materials that are used, and the process of their construction is mundane. By breaking down the process of forming an idol, step by step, the Lord shows his people just how irrational idol worship is. People are prostrating themselves before pieces of wood, taken from trees, parts of which were used as fuel for fire, fashioned by human craftsmen who are but flesh. He becomes hungry and his strength fails. He drinks no water and is faint. The image that they bear upon them is nothing but the image of a man. What renders such an object fitting to receive the worship belonging to God? If they truly knew what they were doing, they would realise the abomination that the idol is.

An idol is such an abomination because of what it claims for itself. It claims the worship of the Lord when it is but a piece of wood. The more hollow and vain the mockery of the true, the more grievous the offence. In contrast to the idols formed by men, the Lord formed Israel. Israel has been established by the Lord as a witness to his deity. And as John Oswald observes, they can take comfort in the fact that their task has not yet been finished. The Lord has not forgotten them and has not finished with them.

[12:15] Indeed, he had dealt with the great obstacle, their sins and their transgressions which had been removed from his sight. They are called to respond accordingly, returning to him as he has restored them.

Heavens and earth are called to join together in song to praise the Lord for what he has done. The Lord's glory would be seen in his redemption of Israel. Jacob himself would be a demonstration of the Lord's deity. The Lord, Israel's redeemer, who first formed them from the womb, perhaps in the redemption from Egypt, is also the creator of all things. As the creator of all things, he is sovereign over all things. He is the one who rules at the first as the one who created, and he is the one who will rule at the last as the judge. And his purposes will be effective over all others in between. He brings to nothing the words of counsellors, wise men and diviners of the nations, but the words of his prophetic witnesses, the words of Israel his servant, will be fulfilled, more particularly in the restoration of Jerusalem and Judah. In the drying up of the deep, we probably have an allusion back to the crossing of the Red Sea as the Lord led his people out of Egypt. In redeeming his people from Babylon, the Lord would be accomplishing a new exodus. The final verse of this chapter is the most startling, and is one of several reasons why many commentators argue that the book of Isaiah should be split into different parts, chapters after chapter 40 being attributed to some prophet from the middle of the 6th century at the very earliest. The last prophecies that we can clearly date within the book of Isaiah come from 701 BC, at the time of the attack of the Assyrians upon Jerusalem. Yet the man who is being spoken of here did not perform the prophesied actions until 539 BC, over 160 years later. The nearest analogy that we have to such a prophecy of a person's name many years before their birth is in 1 Kings chapter 13 verse 2. And the man cried against the altar by the word of the Lord and said,

O altar, altar! Thus says the Lord, Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you. Part of the strangeness of verse 28 here is that the name Cyrus is not presented as a prediction, it's just used as if the readers already knew what the name Koresh or Cyrus meant. It is important to recognise that many of the people who do not believe that this was written by the prophet Isaiah do not on that account automatically deny that this is a

predictive prophecy. Many see this as something that's given in the years running up to 539 BC, speaking of a known figure, but declaring something remarkable that he's about to perform. Some commentators have suggested that the name might have been added in later in recognition of a fulfillment of Isaiah the son of Amoz's prophecy 160 years earlier. Verses 3 and 4 of the following chapter might give a bit more weight to those who see the name Koresh as part of an original prophecy from Isaiah the son of Amoz. Those verses read, I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hordes and 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. Cyrus has already been predicted within this part of Isaiah, most notably in chapter 41 verse 25. I stirred up one from the north and he has come from the rising of the sun and he shall call upon my name. He shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay. Remarkably, Cyrus is here spoken of as the Lord's appointed shepherd for his people. The shepherd is the king-like figure and this shepherd Cyrus is going to be the one through whom the Lord will achieve his purpose. That purpose being the restoration of Jerusalem and Judah. In 539 BC Cyrus took Babylon and shortly after he made a decree by which many of the Jewish exiles started to return to Jerusalem. We read of all of this in Ezra chapter 1 verses 1 to 4.

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing. Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides free will offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

[17:01] When we consider the place of this prophecy concerning Cyrus here, it is also important that we keep in mind the larger context. The Lord is disputing with the idols and gods of the nations, showing that they cannot foretell the future. This prophecy is part of the Lord's proof that he is sovereign in history, and perhaps the remarkable character of a prophecy delivered 160 years beforehand was to serve more fully to underline that fact. Wherever we fall on the particular question of when this is to be dated, it is important that we do not thereby evacuate the argument that surrounds it of its proper force. A question to consider. In the remarkable satirical section of this chapter, where the Lord demystifies the idols and reveals them for what they are, the Lord helps to free his people's imagination from something that might have kept them captive.

The images of the nations are no gods at all. What comparable processes of demystification might be applied to certain of the idols of our own time, such as money for example?