

## NOTES ON ISAIAH 44:6-8

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Critical to understanding this passage, is our understanding of the situation of the prophet who speaks these lines and of the audience who hears them. "Second Isaiah," as scholars have named the prophet responsible for Isaiah 40-55, was an anonymous prophet living in Babylonia near the end of the Babylonian Empire, probably 545-540 B.C.E. This prophet preached among the communities of Judaeans who were descended from those Nebuchadnezzar had deported to Babylon in 597 and 587 B.C.E. Thus he or she (prophets were both men and women) preached not to the original deportees, but to their children and probably their grandchildren. These were people who had not experienced the violence of Jerusalem's destruction and its inhabitants' deportation. Instead they had grown up in a more stable environment in Babylonia, and in that context they had discovered that Babylonia society needed their skills and their labor, and that in fact they could make their way in that society and gain increasing prosperity.

Second Isaiah's audience had grown up cherishing stories of the Jerusalem that once existed and of life in the independent kingdom of Judah under the Davidic king. They had also grown up cherishing prophecies such as those of Jeremiah who said they would remain in Babylonia for seventy years or three generations, and then God would restore them to Jerusalem (Jer 27:7; 29:10-14). The thinking was that, just as the kings of Babylon had been God's servant in destroying Jerusalem and deporting their parents and grandparents, and in ruling the world for this period of time, so also the kings of Babylon would be God's servant in restoring them and Jerusalem. Only now, before the allotted time was up, the headlines bore news of a threat to all of that represented by the rise of Cyrus the Persian and his victories over the Medes, Lydians and other kingdoms around Babylon. Babylon was clearly his ultimate target, and equally clearly he would probably defeat Babylon and ruin God's plans and the audience's hopes.

Cyrus the Persian would have been seen as a threat to the hopes of deportees' descendants because of the underlying religious framework of the ancient world. Unlike Christians today, the basic religious assumption of the ancients was that there was more than one god in the world. Even ancient Israel, before the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of its inhabitants, would have made this assumption. Their loyalty and allegiance was given to Yahweh alone, but they didn't spend a lot of energy trying to deny the reality of other gods. In a world of many gods, gods have "turf" and job descriptions. Marduk is the national god of Babylonians. Ahura-Mazda is the national god of the Persians. Baal is the god of the storms that bring rain. Mot is the god of death. And so on. When one nation triumphs over another, it was also seen as the triumph of one god over another. When a person changed countries or changed circumstances, she or he needed to find out which god was responsible for their new situation and make peace with that god. A polytheistic world is a fragmented world, with as many fragments as there are gods, and all of them in some sense competing with or in conflict with the others. The religious threat represented by the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem was overcome by Jeremiah's theological insight that Israel's God, rather than Marduk, was at work in the king of Babylon, but if Cyrus defeated the king of Babylon, then implicitly Israel's God was defeated too, and God's people were alone in a hostile and warring world without an adequate divine patron.

Here is where our passage comes in. It is one of a number of passages in Second Isaiah that assert that Israel's God is not merely the only god that Israel should worship, but is the ONLY God that exists, the ONE God for the entire world (vv 6 and 8). If there is only one God, then there is only a single, coherent world, not competing fragments ruled by competing gods. If there is only one God, then there is only

one human race whose differences enrich each other, not a world in which differences turn all those not of our group into dangerous “others” of whom we should be afraid. If there is only one God, that God provides for all and that some have more than they need and others not enough are a result of human inequities, not that one group’s god is more powerful than another’s. If there is only one God, then God works in everything, all change serves God’s purposes, and the new that arises is no threat to God’s purposes merely because it threatens the old established order.