**Bible-study: 2020/01/26 (St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Isaiah 49:1-7**

I think it might be helpful to “re-fresh” our understanding of the events which constitute the history of God’s people around the time of “The Exile.” (Dates are approximates.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Southern Prophets</th>
<th>Kgs. of Jdh.:</th>
<th>Year (B.C.)</th>
<th>Event:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rehoboam</td>
<td>922</td>
<td>David’s kingdom divided by civil war: “Israel” in the N., “Judah” in the S.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>913</td>
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<td>767</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Uzziah</td>
<td>751</td>
<td>Uzziah struck with “leprosy.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jotham</td>
<td>735</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>Ahaz</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>Assyria destroys “Israel,” wiping it from the map.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>716</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hezekiah</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>Assyria besieges Jerusalem. God intervenes, sending a plague.</td>
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<td>687</td>
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<td>Manasseh</td>
<td>643</td>
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<td>Amon</td>
<td>641</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
<td>Josiah</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>Battle of Megiddo: Assyrians defeated but Josiah killed.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jehovah</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>Battle of Carchemish. Babylon absorbs “Judah” into “sphr. of infl.”¹</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
<td>Jehoiakim</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>Babylon removes + blinds Jehoiakim.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jehoiachin</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>Siege of Jerusalem + exile #1 by Nebuchadnezzar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zedekiah</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>Siege of Jerusalem + exile #2 by Nebuchadnezzar. “End of Judah.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

¹ 2 Kings 24:2 – ‘The Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldeans, bands of the Arameans, bands of the Moabites, and bands of the Ammonites; he sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by his servants the prophets.’
Who is this person; this “me” who was ‘called…before [they were even] born’?! Was the prophet Isaiah speaking in the third-person? That is, about himself? You might think so, right? After all, this person describes their ‘mouth like a sharp sword’, and isn’t that the very characteristic we imagine about the prophets? That they were gloomy, thundering curmudgeons? Finger-pointers? Harsh critics of their countrymen and culture? Isn’t that the very raison d’être (the fundamental purpose) of such messengers? To expose that the emperor with no clothes is naked? To be the “black sheep” paddling vociferously against those strong currents of immorality – the “madness of crowds” – that sweep over nations? (Excuse me for mixing my metaphors just here.)

Furthermore, hearing this claim, one does find themselves thinking about Jesus’ self-presentation as one who came “not to bring peace, but a sword; to set a man against father, and a daughter against her mother.” [Mt.10:34-35] And also, naturally, of John’s corroborative; accompanying vision in the Book of Revelation, of Christ heralding the Final Judgment, from whose ‘mouth comes a sharp sword from which to strike down the nations’: [19:15]. That Isaiah might have been referring to himself is suggested too by the declaration that that “me” is one who had ‘labored in vain’, and, ‘spent my strength for nothing’: [Is. 49:4]. This “strikes” me – Ben Randall – as an admission by the prophet that his initial calling – as recorded in chapter one – which was to inveigh the people of Judah – the remaining Jewish kingdom, now being threatened by the Babylonian Empire – to ‘repent’[1:27] had not succeeded. That’s, presumably, years of thankless labor that went nowhere; years of exhorting and exclaiming, praying and imploring, reflected in the earliest chapters of the book.

All that effort, predicated on an understanding given him that his countrymen really could avert the coming catastrophe that God had revealed, must have seemed pointless when the Babylonians transformed their “soft power” of intimidation and threats from afar into the hard power of actually seizing Jerusalem by their armies and removing and blinding the king. That must have been a deeply depressing day for Isaiah. But notice how the speaker actually calls themselves “Israel” in verse 3. And how that is then called ‘a light to the nations’: [v.6]. So, is the nation God’s ‘servant’? Because I thought the nation was in “big trouble”?! And how can they all be the Messiah? To themselves? [Pause.] The closer we scrutinize the passage before us, the more complexity we see. The “Servant” is sometimes an individual; sometimes a plural. Sometimes he seems to be eschatological; sometimes he seems very close in time to the prophet: in chapter fifty-one, we’re told ‘I will bring my deliverance swiftly’; [v.5].

Will we now turn away? And pretend otherwise? If we truly wish to honor the Scriptures as “God breathed” [2 Tim. 3:16] – His sacred disclosure, we mustn’t gloss over what is actually said by Him, even if opaque, in favour of what we wish to hear. And, as Mark Gignilliat says, when we look closely at Isaiah: we find that his longed-for “Servant” – that superhuman intercessor sent by the Lord, is ‘that most slippery of entities’.2

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In fact, according to Christopher North, ‘...the names of some fifteen historical individuals have been suggested for the title of [the “Servant”]. They are [deep breath –] Isaiah, Uzziah, Hezekiah, Josiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Job, Moses, Jehoiachin, Cyrus, Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Meshullam, Nehemiah, and Eleazar.’ Did you realize that there were so many interpretations? I confess that I didn’t. I assumed that Isaiah was speaking unambiguously of Jesus, of course, and that what the prophet saw clearly concerned a singular distant-future figure such as Him. I was wrong. Let’s examine some of the proposals:

In the early 1900s, Ernst Sellin proposed that Isaiah had “pinned his hopes” on Jehoiachin. The teenage Jehoiachin was installed as king of Judah to be Nebuchadnezzar’s “puppet,” but the arrangement almost instantly soured: [2 Kgs. 24:6-12]. The theory wasn’t especially popular. Then, suddenly, this idea had new life “breathed” into it in 2002 by the British biblical scholar Michael Goulder, at the University of Birmingham. Goulder, noting one that, as we saw last week, the textual evidence suggests very strongly that Isaiah was never himself in Babylon; and, two – something rather curious – that the author or 2 Kings records that Jehoiachin, though a foolish, double-dealing youth, was taken captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar [24:24:12], he is also described as, later, being released by one of Nebuchadnezzar’s successors, Amel-Marduk, and enjoying some mid-life splendour and status at the imperial court: I quote – ‘So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes. And every day of his life he dined regularly in the king’s presence.’ [25:29]

Combining these two details, Goulder volunteered that if Isaiah, blessed with remarkable longevity (as we previously found), thus survived ‘to hear this glad news’ (about the humiliated monarch), he would have had ‘wonder[ed] at its significance’, and likely been prompted to speculate at what might follow from such a ‘hopeful change of fortune’. (And we know that Jehoiachin did indeed come to enjoy favour in exile: there’s archaeological evidence indicating as much. Specifically, a number of ‘stamped [that is, personalized] jar handles’ showing that he sent exports – souvenirs! – of wine home from “prison.”)

Perhaps Jehoiachin, then, had become “B.F.F.s” with the (Babylonian) emperor? Perhaps Jehoiachin had converted him to Judaism? Perhaps Jehoiachin would convince Amel-Marduk to allow him home, and he would arrive in Jerusalem any day at the head of a great retinue, with loud triumphal trumpets and a proud bodyguard of warriors, ‘to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel’[49:6] as we hear this morning?

Of course, the hero that Isaiah has in mind – as every Christian should know, especially this close to Christmas – was supposed to be ‘of the house of David’[22:22], and here Jehoiachin neatly “fits the bill.” (He was David’s great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson.) To Isaiah, therefore – or, to be precise, according to Goulder, Deutero-Isaiah, a protégé, for the original had been killed as I said before (last week), by Manasseh, who preceded Jehoiachin on the throne of

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Judah by a few of decades – Jehoiachin seemed “on the cusp” of being, as he seemed to prophesy, ‘exalted and lifted up, and…very high.’ The trajectory, after all, was so unexpected that it was anyone’s guess – at that time – where it might lead. Heaven on earth? No. As Christopher North observes: ‘The obvious objection to all this is that Jehoiachin was not put to death.’ And the person – the man – that Isaiah envisioned was, and he is pretty explicit on this, ‘cut off from the land of the living… They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich’: [Isa. 53:8b-9].

Now, for a believer, like me, I hear those words and immediately think of Jesus, the Savior: A “tomb with the rich”? Well, wasn’t Christ’s body taken from the Cross and placed in Joseph of Arimathea’s family mausoleum? He was ‘a respected member of the [Sanhedrin] council’: [Mk. 15:43]. A noble, in other words. An aristocrat. A rich man.

On the other hand, in the late 1700s, Johann Augusti speculated that the leprous king Uzziah might be the “Servant” that Isaiah hoped would restore the fortunes of God’s languishing people in Canaan, the ‘Promised Land.’ Why? Well, Uzziah was both an effective and pious king until he developed some frightening skin-disease that led to him being removed from office and locked away like Quasimodo in the legend of the hunchback of Notre Dame. And ‘Uzziah’s punishment[, which is how his affliction was seen by his subjects] was too severe [it is easily imagined] for one small offence – personally making a sacrifice in the Temple and not waiting for a priest to assist – and people must have looked for some other explanation of the great suffering inflicted by Jehovah upon so excellent a prince. They came to the conclusion’, reasons Augusti, ‘that he suffered not so much for his own offence, as for that of the whole people, whose representative he was.’

It has also been suggested that the “Servant” could have been the emperor Nebuchadnezzar – who you might have thought was one of the biggest villains in the “Good Book,” but, interestingly – and this should give you “pause,” is actually called, tenderly, ‘my servant’ in Jeremiah: ‘I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him.’ Says God through His chosen messenger: [Jer. 27:7]. Although a violent aggressor, he – Nebuchadnezzar – faithfully does the will of God by bringing the divine punishment that the people of Judah deserve.

Similarly, Cyrus “the Great,” whose Persian soldiers “swept” the Babylonians “into the dust-bin of history,” is called “the Anointed One[,]” in chapter forty-five (of Isaiah), ‘which’, observes James Smart, ‘definitely suggests a Messianic office’. He goes on: ‘Attempts have been made to whittle down the function of Cyrus to more reasonable and historical dimensions and to allow him only a political task, but it cannot be done without ignoring the plain meaning of the text or tearing the text apart. … Cyrus as Messiah, if the present text of Isaiah chapters 44 and 45, is valid, has an unlimited task, ushering in nothing less than the great day of divine salvation for the whole earth (chapter 45:8). …

Must we then follow those who say that the prophet began by fixing his hopes on Cyrus and then, when Cyrus failed him, developed his doctrine of The

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7 North (2005), 51.
8 Ibid., 41.
[idealized] Servant? Or shall we suppose him to have been confused and careless in his thinking and terminology, so that in his enthusiasm for Cyrus he attributed to him functions that actually he expected only of The Servant? On either count the stature of the prophet is seriously diminished. Frankly, who can take seriously a prophet who in God's name proclaimed the impending salvation of humanity through the agency of a pagan conqueror?

The question must be faced whether this contradiction was present in the prophet's thought or has been introduced into his writings by the clumsy though well-meaning activity of a later editor. In the Judean community in the fifth century [among returned Israelites] the name of Cyrus would be [, after all,] held in high honor as the liberator of exiles and the instigator of the restoration of Jerusalem.10

Alternatively, the Finnish theologian Antti Laato has argued that the “Servant” is King Hezekiah,11 whose rule of Judah was far better than many others in the royal family: ‘He did what was right in the sight of the Lord just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan. He trusted in the Lord the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to the Lord; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses. The Lord was with him; wherever he went, [and] he prospered.’[2 Kgs. 18:3-7a] Additionally, Hezekiah does suffer as we Christians would expect: Isaiah himself tells us that ‘Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. … And…wept bitterly.’[38:1,3]

Now, I haven’t seen the dissertation itself where Laato presents the case for Hezekiah as the “Servant,” and I should add that ‘[s]everal rabbinic passages [i.e. in Late Antiquity (not the Bronze Age) do] claim that the Immanuel of Isa. 7:14 [sic.] …refers to Hezekiah’,12 but ‘[t]he basic problem [such a theory faces] is why Isaiah’s prophecies would have been retained and even cherished if they had actually failed.’13 That is to say, if Isaiah’s audience understood that he was referring to Hezekiah, why, when Hezekiah, despite some tangible and impressive successes, died having not established a utopia, did they then not discard the record of the prophet’s words? Why keep them when they had been discredited? At the end of the day: “Only Jesus meets the characteristics of the Servant of the Lord.”14 Furthermore, and importantly, “only” Jesus as the living star-maker, has the capacity – possesses the supernatural ability – to carry out the plan for the “Servant” that Isaiah lays out if we take him – the prophet – at his word, as opposed to dismissing the vision as mere hyperbole, intended to inspire and give hope but not as a picture of a reality that would really come to pass.

Finally: There is no doubt that the Christian Church early interpreted

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13 Wegner (1992), 56.
Isa. Liii [53] as a prophecy of Christ. This conviction, which is sufficiently evidenced in the New Testament, was derived from the consciousness of Jesus Himself, and [the author, James] Moffatt’s view [as expressed in The Theology of the Gospels,] ‘that the suffering Servant conception was organic to the consciousness of Jesus, and that He often regarded His vocation in the light of this supremely suggestive prophecy’, is generally accepted.  

But we must be cautious about “glossing” over the fact that there remain ‘major problems of interpretation’.

In Disney’s Cinderella story, Charming searches for and identifies his dance partner from the palace ball by trying a stray glass “slipper” on her foot, eventually finding a perfect fit. And it would be an exaggeration to say that this is a good illustration for Isaiah’s “Servant” superman vis-à-vis Christ. And He, mind, appears both cognisant and unperturbed by this fact: just consider how he uses Isaiah to “kick-off” His Galilean ministry, quoting, supposedly, about Himself that He was to ‘release..captives...to let the oppressed go free’[Lk. 4:18], but never, in a literalistic sense, actually performs said action. (This becomes true only (for those who “repent”) spiritually speaking.) But, He alone, out of all the “candidates” considered in the vast literature on this subject, has the potential, if the Church’s claims about Him are to be believed, to ultimately live up to the prophet’s full, out-of-this-world expectations when they are taken as read.

(Please be aware that the Randalls are on vacation next week, and so Sunday School on February 2nd has been cancelled.)

15 North (2005), 23.