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Engl. 316; Paper 3

27 November 2018

Isaiah’s Prophecy for a Rebuilt Israel

When observing the Prophets and crisis texts in the Hebrew Bible, each hold a different way to present the history. In the Book of Isaiah, the Babylonian crisis occurs. Looking at the Second Isaiah within the text, Chapters 40 through 66, we see somewhat of an addition to the originally standing Isaiah text. While deconstructing the language within Second Isaiah, one can see a message hope of a reconstructed Israel as he prophesizes, which differs from the Deuteronomistic History telling of crisis texts which do not offer such encouragement. Second Isaiah characterizes Israel’s future as promising using pathos and natural imagery.

Discussing Yahweh’s concerns of his people, Second Isaiah uses the pathos of burdens and wearies to characterize the current negative standing between Yahweh and the Israelites. Yahweh says to the Israelites: “But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities” (Isaiah 43.24). By using emotional language through the words of Yahweh, the Book of Isaiah has the capability to use pathos upon the Israelites. The concept of burdening someone can be a personal offence to some. If someone is a burden, they are unwanted and an annoyance. As well, wearying also signifies a wearing down of appreciation and acceptance. To put these emotionally-connotated verbs upon the Israelites, Isaiah characterizes them as a problematic and troublesome people for themselves and for Yahweh The Israelites are not doing what is righteous under Yahweh, and through the use of pathos, the Book of Isaiah is able to place their impure, unholy ways bluntly and effectively pull the Israelites’ emotions, especially coming from the Word of Yahweh.

Second Isaiah continues to add to this emotional scolding of the Israelites through the imagery of fire. In a confusing collection of images of idols and burning, the Book of Isaiah states, “He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, ‘Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?’” (Isaiah 44.20). Using smoky, fiery imagery, the Book of Isaiah illustrates the blindness of the Israelites. When using a fire, one may not wish to stand too close. Fire can be nurturing, warming, and a great tool, but standing too close can cause one to receive burns or for smoke to enter the eyes. When smoke enters the eyes, one can have momentary blindness and make it hard to see. In this situation, the ashes, which tends to create a lot of smoke, are being digested. Not only is the smoke blinding the Israelites from righteousness and Yahweh’s, but also the ashes and smoke are entering the body, which ends up impurifying the eyes and the soul and ‘mind.’ This directly characterizes to the Israelites and their current position with Yahweh by intertwining the smoky imagery with a restless and confused Israelite. They are unrighteous and are blind to the correct path both physically and mentally and by placing an unsure Israelite in a mixture of multiple disorientating fiery images, Isaiah is inventing a metaphor of a lost and impure Israelite people.

Although the Israelites have been blinded, Yahweh uses weather imagery to fashion the movement back to the correct path. Reassuring that the Israelites will come back to Yahweh’s path, Yahweh says, “I have swept away your transgressions / like a cloud, / and your sins like mist; / return to me, for I have redeemed you” (Isaiah 44.22). The sweeping away of transgressions illustrates this concept of forgiveness and clearing a way for the Israelites to return. This image of sweeping clouds as well signifies the sweeping away of the dust, ash, and smoke from the eyes and minds of the Israelites. Sweeping away is a somewhat effortless action, especially if it’s sweeping away ‘like a cloud’. This effortlessness characterizes Yahweh as a loving God for the Israelites and is offering forgiveness. A cloud sweeping transgressions and sins in an effort to guide the Israelites back to Yahweh displays the loving nature. To place such an image here, Isaiah fashions the Israelite people as troubled but not hopeless or a lost cause. Not only do they have an open invitation to come back, but they are forgiven and redeemed, and Yahweh will place them back on the correct path. Isaiah also places poetics here to further symbolize a more openness from Yahweh. In these verses, the style of writing goes from blocked prose in the dense fire imagery to a light poetic form. This is another way Isaiah signifies a lightening of punishment and a brining of ease to a once blinded and confused Israel.

Even though Isaiah places this humbling image of sweeping of clouds, the Book of Isaiah does not let the reader or the Israelites forget that they can still be punished by Yahweh by using mighty natural imagery though disaster. Yahweh, speaking through Cyrus, speaks, “I will go before you / and level the mountains, / I will break in pieces the doors of bronze / and cut through the bars of iron” (Isaiah 45.2). The ability to level mountains, break bronze, and cut iron, takes a lot of strength and power. These three natural resources take power to destroy, break, and cut; only god-like force could do this with no problem. By Yahweh reassuring the Israelites of his immense power, Isaiah characterizes the position the Israelites are in. Isaiah indicates in the text that the Israelites are redeemed and saved but they cannot take it for granted because Yahweh will punish them again. This characterizes Israel as coming to a safe place to rebuild but they must also be cautious going forward as they could revert back to a place of punishment.

Further using the natural imagery, Isaiah fashions a clearing of past transgressions with the Israelites within their relationship with Yahweh. Clearing mountains, doors, and iron bars, this symbolizes a clean start with Yahweh and with a new foundation for Israel. This great fueled connotated words of ‘level, break, and cut’ also provokes pathos. By emitting these grand powers of Yahweh, the reader is supposed to be swayed by the immense might of Yahweh. Using this crushing, passionate language, Isaiah characterizes the Israelites as saved and respected by Yahweh, yet they are reminded of his power.

With a brief message of hope, the Book of Isaiah provides a promise from Yahweh. Through emotional pathos and positively-connotated language, Isaiah characterizes the continuous future for the Israelites to be forever cared for and protected. Yahweh promises, “But Israel is saved by the Lord / with everlasting salvation; / you shall not be put to shame or / confounded / to all eternity” (Isaiah 45.17). Using encouraging words, Yahweh promises a hopeful and protected future, which conversely correlates to the characterization of the Israelites. The use of ‘everlasting salvation’ characterizes the Israelites as being protected and being eternally saved within their relationship with Yahweh. Although things may, and will, get rough again, the Israelites will continue to have Yahweh’s presence at hand. With the phrasing of ‘you shall not be… for all eternity,’ the language acknowledges that there will be toughness and roughness, but the suffering will not continue through all eternity. This is what Isaiah uses to characterize the future of the Israelite people. This, as well, characterizes the Israelite people as protected and sacred people under Yahweh’s leadership and guidance. This pathos of warm, promising language encourages the Israelites to maintain a prosperous and loyal obedience to Yahweh. Because the language is caring of the Israelite people, so should the Israelite people be in return.

Through emotional pathos and the use of natural imagery, the Book of Isaiah offers a complete and just characterization of the Israelite people in the time of a crisis. Utilizing different formats of text layout and differently connotated words that Yahweh and the Hebrew Bible uses to convey Yahweh’s emotions and the Israelite’s position with their relationship with Yahweh, the Book of Isaiah characterize the Israelites in an orderly way through the process or the crisis. Coming from a painful strife to rescue to redemption to salvation, Second Isaiah purposefully uses emotionally charged language and natural images to not only move the reader but describe the Israelite people in a meaningful manner with a lasting impression.

Works Cited

“Isaiah 43-45.” The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Standard Version with the Apocrypha: an Ecumenical Study Bible, by Michael David. Coogan et al., Oxford University Press, 2010.