

Notes on Isaiah 42:18–43:21

By [David H. Linden](#)

Isaiah wrote in chapter 40 of the comfort of the Lord coming in power to save His people. Their sin was pardoned. In this section (42:18 – 43:21) God's message becomes more specific in what He will do. The exile in Babylon has been the background, but now Babylon is named in 43:14. This section will also explain reasons for Israel's captivity and return. Under the Lord's hand, they had suffered for their sin, yet He never gave them up to total destruction. He always had in mind to bring them back to Himself and to their land. Later, 43:22 – 44:23 will focus on redemption from sin, but this section will deal with national redemption, one aspect of the Lord being the Savior of His people.

42:18, 19 – Earlier in chapter 42 the blind are Gentiles who do not know the God of Israel. The Gentiles now see how blind God's people are! Israel was to be God's servant and a messenger to the world. In this calling they failed. With this opening, the Lord explains the trouble His people sank into. Poor Israel was as blind as the Gentiles, and so deaf they could not hear and carry a message to the world. Committed" in v.19 probably means 'reconciled' – a way to express that Israel belonged to the Lord.

42:20-22 – God's people had received God's Word, yet had ignored it. They had the riches of God's law and divine revelation. If heeded, that law would have brought them great understanding (Deuteronomy 4:5-8) and made them as His holy people an attraction to the nations. The Lord was the glory of Israel, but by their sin, they became just another ugly nation without purity. God was pleased to display the beauty of His holy ways through them. Instead they came under His wrath, plundered by other nations, enslaved, and even carried into exile with no one to rescue them.

42:23-24 – The situation they were in was easy to observe, but why were they in it, when they had such a heritage? People once delivered from Egypt by God's mighty hand found themselves a defeated people in a foreign land. They were in great danger of being assimilated by them, and thus not a people any more. The question why this is so is delayed till Isaiah tells Who has done this to them. It was the Lord Who handed them over to the power of another nation. Their situation was not due to the power of Babylon. The Lord had delivered from Assyria; He could do the same with Babylon. The one explanation for the Babylonian Captivity was sin against the Lord.

42:23 – Isaiah adds "in time to come" – words that show he was writing from an

earlier day. Only in time to come, i.e., a later day, would they pay attention to what God would say about their exile and rescue. (A second Isaiah in Babylon did not write this; Isaiah in Jerusalem was speaking of a future situation.)

42:24,25 – The explanation is very personal. It was His ways and His law violated, and His anger against them. They were covenant breakers who actively refused the authority of their God, the one they had promised to obey. In rejecting His Word, they were unable to understand the punishments their own Scriptures foretold as early as the time of Moses (Deuteronomy 28 & 31:14-18). With the flames of God's judgment burning against them, they did not understand what was happening and did not repent. It is a very serious thing to have the Word of God and disobey it. The Bible does not teach that people repent simply when sinners experience the consequences of sin. Repentance is a very kind gift of God whenever He chooses to bestow it (Acts 11:18); it comes not by punishment but by grace.

Isaiah includes himself when he said, "We have sinned" (v.24) but he refers to "them" when he tells what happened to them (v.25), another indication he wrote all this early, but was not living when the Babylonian captivity occurred.

43:1-7 – Isaiah just said what God did to chasten His wayward people; now what has God done for them?

43:1 – Before telling them of His preserving activity, He reminds them of Who He is, a very important emphasis in this book. He is the creator of Israel, a people He made for Himself, just as freely as He sovereignly decided to create the universe. It is one thing to create; it is another to redeem! The people He formed for Himself, strayed from Him, but God had redeemed them. Redemption means He went to seek them and bring them back. God hates the idea of any purpose of His being derailed. He decided to have a people, Israel, and even their sin would not stop Him from having them as His people. He will not give up His claim on them – "You are mine!"

43:2 – Passing through water and fire does not describe a return home under His provision. The waters are waters of affliction and the fire is the fire of judgment imposed upon them by the Lord Himself. The Lord speaks here of mercy while exercising wrath (Habakkuk 3:2). The consuming fire did not wipe out the nation; a remnant would return (Isaiah 10:20-22). The same early texts in the Books of Moses that foretell exile, speak of God's restoration (Leviticus 26:40-45). God fulfilled His covenant warnings and kept His covenant promises. Thus the fire would envelope them according to 42:25, but would not destroy them according to 43:2.

For those who would presume upon such grace, let them be warned that it was only the remnant that returned, not the entire nation. A multitude perished under God's wrath in the wilderness in Psalm 95. Covenant-breakers will be dealt with

severely; “The Lord will judge His people. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:26-31).

43:3 – The Lord gives a reason for his continuing care of a people blind, deaf and unresponsive to Him (42:19). God does not change in His character or His commitments. Using the language of redemption from Egypt (Exodus 20:2), He calls Himself again “the Lord your God”. By “Holy One of Israel” He reaffirms both His character and His relationship with them. It is always puzzling how the holy Lord can be so committed to a sinful people like Israel. The answer includes that He makes covenant with the full knowledge of what He will need to do to produce holiness in His own.

V.3 speaks of the past, so it is better to translate this verse as “I gave” rather than “I give”. In setting Israel free from Egypt, God was willing to pay a price for them. Thus He refers not only to Egypt but adds in Cush, a place to the south of Egypt. This is a way of saying, “I would give up Africa for you!”

It is a serious error to look on redemption as only liberation. It means to set free by payment of a price, and so in this verse the ransom is what is paid. It was a large price; God paid Egypt and would pay more if needed. It will be needed; He will send His Son, the real “My Servant” who will give His life in a sacrificial death to ransom His people (Mark 10:45; 1 Corinthians 5:7). The doctrine of redemption in vv.1,5 is fortified by the words, “in your stead”, the same words used in Genesis 22:13, where the offering takes the place of the person. This truth will be clearer in Isaiah 53. Our Lord’s death was substitutionary.

43:4 – V.3 looked into their past. V.4 speaks of their present. God will give men in exchange for them. That is, God will do what is necessary, including the destruction of the Babylonian empire, to loosen its grip and set His people free. This is an example of giving over opponents so Israel could be redeemed. The gospel in its fullness is that God “did not spare His own Son, but freely gave Him up for us all...” Romans 8:32. The Lord Jesus was given (on the cross) in exchange for His people. The action of God proves affirmations of love for them (Romans 5:6-8).

43:5-7 – In v.2, Isaiah was looking ahead to the coming exile, and gave the Lord’s I will be with them. Now in v.5, the present tense indicates that He is with them in what is currently unfolding. God is with them in the return from exile. The Lord of the Exodus from Egypt is the Lord of the return from Babylon. However, this language of bringing and gathering, far exceeds the Babylonian situation. They were called from one direction for that, not from the four corners of the earth. The language here fits better a person in the land of Israel thinking of a return to *his* location – again showing that the notion of some other “Isaiah” in Babylon as the writer of these words is fiction.

The key to this gathering from the ends of the earth (43:6), is to see the Exodus

as a redemptive act (Deuteronomy 7:8), and the return from Babylon as well (48:20). Yet neither redemption gives the full picture. There is still the worldwide redemption of all God's elect from every tribe and nation to come home to Him (35:9 and Revelation 7:9-17). 43:5-7 is not limited to the gathering of Jews in ancient times; rather it speaks into the distant future of "everyone who is called by my Name" (v.7) in a worldwide salvation. All who believe in Christ are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:26-29). They will come from east and west and take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matthew 8:10,11).

43:8-13 – The Lord again uses a courtroom scene. He calls His blind and deaf people to come as witnesses. The gods of the nations are summoned also. None of them could foretell the former things (i.e., the Exodus), and they have no witnesses to show that they did. The Lord then turns to His witnesses, but people without understanding (42:25) do not make good witnesses. So the Lord speaks for Himself, even though they were supposed to be His witnesses. Before witnesses can speak for the Lord, they must first know, believe and understand. (In our day, some suggest knowing the truth of God is not very important. This text teaches the opposite of such bad advice.)

The court scene reveals that there is no other god, no god to tell of the former things, and there will be no god to reveal anything future. Everyone reading Isaiah should see how much emphasis the Lord puts on making and fulfilling prediction as evidence of the genuineness of His assertion of being God (vv.11-13). In v.11, the Lord uses I AM language (Exodus 3:14). When people read the I AM's of Jesus in the Gospel of John, they should see that such language from Jesus' lips is related to God as Savior (v.11). The Lord Jesus with the Father and the Spirit, is the Lord God of Israel. When He was here, He spoke that way (John 8:58).

An important sequence is found in v.12: God declared, saved, & **proclaimed** = made to hear, or made to understand. In other words, God speaks, acts and explains! This is the opposite of men figuring out what the truth of God is. We know because He speaks, and this includes His speaking of His acts *before* they happen. And God acts in accord with what He has said beforehand. He follows His own script. Then He interprets His previous acts and words, especially through His apostles.

This is the general flow of the entire Bible. God spoke to certain men like Abraham and Moses. He acted in major interventions to save His people, such as the Exodus and the return from Babylon. He spoke early of the coming of Christ, then acted in His atoning death, with the bulk of explanation for it coming afterwards in the New Testament epistles, only through men authorized to speak for Him (His apostles), thereby giving divine explanations to divine action. God is His own interpreter.

Of course, no foreign god can determine history. V.13 stresses the acts of God,

so sovereign and decisive that all He decides is what will happen, and nothing else can happen. No one can stop Him; no one can reverse His decision. God is God.

43:14,15 – The Names of the Lord are again tied to His action, so that we never forget Who acts for His people and not merely what He says. The word ‘King’ is added to other names. As King, He is Father of His people (9:6,7). The throne of David would appear to be in great jeopardy, but the coming Son of David is the Lord watching over His people even before His birth in Bethlehem. By His Names and titles the Lord keeps before His people Who He is, a necessity for us in beholding our God (40:9).

V.14 is the first mention of Babylon. The prophet foretells its overthrow, since it will have fugitives fleeing on ships to get away from it. God speaks like God; He will simply send to Babylon and what He orders will be! As Redeemer He acts for His own – “for your sake”. He takes on their trouble, and in order to save them assumes burdens and costs for them that they cannot bear.

43:15-20 – The Lord reminds them yet again of the Exodus, with Israel saved and Egypt’s army snuffed out. He has not changed; He can handle Babylon! He drew the Egyptians into the trap. Yet this is not to be their preoccupation, for He is doing new things and there will be more (Jesus is coming!). This is not the last good thing God will do for His people. The chief new thing here mentioned is springing up; if they look, they will soon see it. It has already germinated and will soon be visible. This is the homeward call to Jerusalem, attached again to the provision of water in the desert (35:6,7). It is the opposite of going through dangerous waters; the water in this passage is provision, not trouble.

43:20,21 – All salvation of men has a personal goal. Israel is not a device for God to show power, but a people He calls to be His people, and also His chosen to show it is His will that they are His. In the end, a people redeemed and knowing this are a people for His praise.

Jehovah’s Witnesses

It is apparent that this group, spread over the world, derive their name from this part of Isaiah. Isaiah actually refutes their doctrine. They teach that only the Father is Jehovah God and that Jesus is Michael, the archangel, a created god. They know that Jesus is called a Savior in the New Testament (Titus 2:13,14). Look how Isaiah refutes them. He says, there is no other Savior (v.11) and Jehovah alone is the Savior (v.3). So when the New Testament calls Jesus ‘Savior’ that is an affirmation that He is the Lord God of Israel. In Isaiah 43 Jesus too was speaking, just as it was the glory of Jesus in the Temple that Isaiah saw in Isaiah 6 (John 12:41). A further correction of Jehovah Witness error is that apart from the ‘Jehovah’, there is no god (44:6-8), a truth that shows their version of John 1:1 is false.

Servant vs. servant

Israel is called a servant in 41:8; there is also reference to a servant in 42:1. Then 42:19 speaks of the Lord's servant as blind, referring to Israel. One servant is to bring back Jacob in 49:5, so Isaiah cannot be saying Israel was assigned to bring Israel back, or that Israel in 53:8 died for the transgressions of Israel. Two servants are in view. Israel was called to be a servant, but was spiritually defective and a failure in the world. God sent another Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ, to save His blind servant Israel from sin, and all the rest of His people as well.

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