

Reading I, 5th Sunday of Lent, C

[Is 43:16-21](#)

Thus says the LORD,
who opens a way in the sea
and a path in the mighty waters,
who leads out chariots and horsemen,
a powerful army,
till they lie prostrate together, never to rise,
snuffed out and quenched like a wick.
Remember not the events of the past,
the things of long ago consider not;
see, I am doing something new!
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
In the desert I make a way,
in the wasteland, rivers.
Wild beasts honor me,
jackals and ostriches,
for I put water in the desert
and rivers in the wasteland
for my chosen people to drink,
the people whom I formed for myself,
that they might announce my praise.

Jerome Biblical Commentary

14-21. The Prophet continues a favorite theme, the new exodus. Yahweh is to be known as the one at work “redeeming you” (the Hebrew uses the ptc. form) and as such is “the Holy One” (cf. 40:25). In other words, nothing is so mysterious and “beyond” about God—as the word “holy” connotes—as the extent of his redeeming love.**15-17.** A series of participles answers the question: Who is Yahweh?—He is the one: “creating Israel...opening a way...leading out chariots.” The words portray the Exodus out of Egypt, ending in the final scene where the Egyptians are “lying prostrate, never to be rising” (impf. verb connotes continuous act), “snuffed out and quenched” (pf. form connotes completed action).**18.** No one was more devoted to the redemptive acts of the past than Dt-Is; however, here he warns against a glorying in the past that has no time for application in the present. What is to be remembered as a continuous redemptive act is the new exodus; that great deed will constitute the *anamn sis* of the eschatological age (cf. Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24-26).**19.** This verse seems to remonstrate: Must you be so blind?**21.** *the*

people whom I formed: The LXX reads, "people whom I purchased"; that phrase recurs in Acts 20:28; 1 Pt 2:9¹

Haydock's Catholic Commentary

Ver. 14. *Bars.* Septuagint, "fugitives." Theodotion, "strong ones." --- *Glorying.* Septuagint, "shall be bound in ships," to be sent beyond the Caspian Sea. (Calmet) --- Cyrus was victorious for the sake of God's people; for he will not neglect his Church. (Worthington)

Ver. 16. *Waters.* of the Jordan and the Red Sea, in the latter of which Pharaoh perished, ver. 17.

Ver. 19. *New.* I shall work the like miracles as were seen in the wilderness.

Ver. 20. *Chosen.* We know not that rivers were found in Arabia. But the people were equally favoured. Christ facilitates the road to heaven by his example and graces, while the most savage tempers are changed in baptism.

Daily Study Bible Series, Isaiah - Volume 1

The short prophecy on the fall of Babylon in verses 14–15, introduced by a characteristic formula (compare it with 42:5 and 43:1), contains an unusually colourful scene, so unusual that modern commentators and translators (including RSV, NEB) modify it by emending the text. In addition to the surprise appearance of a besieging army ("I will send to Babylon"), the Hebrew text seems to describe the panicking Babylonians (or Chaldeans, as they are often called) fleeing in ships. It reads literally (cf. AV):

For your sake I sent to Babylon,
and I defeated them all as they fled,
the Chaldeans shouting in the ships.

No doubt details in the original description of an event as yet in the future, were modified by what actually happened. According to Herodotus, during the siege of Babylon Cyrus diverted the Euphrates so that his troops could enter the city along the river bed. There may be allusions to this tradition in Jeremiah's spectacular taunt-song about Babylon (chs. 50–51):

O you who dwell by many waters,

LXX Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT)

¹Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. 1968]; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (electronic ed.). Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ

rich in treasures,
your end has come,
the thread of your life is cut

(51:13)

A drought upon her waters,
that they may be dried up!

(50:38)

...his city is taken on every side;
the fords have been seized,
the bulwarks are burned with fire,
and the soldiers are in panic

(51:31–32)

We must remember that we are not dealing with history, but with prophecy; and that being so, perhaps the most illuminating texts for comparison are the story of Balshazzar's feast in Daniel 5, and the vision of St John in Revelation 18:

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!

...

And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints,
and of all who have been slain on the earth.

(Rev. 18:2, 24)

Babylon came to be a symbol of all that is godless and materialist—(see Ps. 137) and its downfall became a symbol of victory for the faithful. Hence the more conventional parts of this short prophecy—“for your sake” (v. 14)—removes the event from the context of ancient history and applies it to the experience of the living community. It is a demonstration of God's creative power, and so he is hailed as “your King” (v. 15), as in the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15) and the Enthronement psalms (*eg* Ps. 93).

Verses 15–21 break new ground in Biblical tradition. Instead of celebrating or reliving the Passover, as is done by Jews every spring-time to this day, the prophet calls upon them to forget the old story of the Red Sea miracle (v. 16) and the defeat of Pharaoh's horses and chariots (v.

17). A New Exodus through the wilderness is about to happen, and rivers are going to appear in the desert “to give drink to my chosen people” (vv. 18–20). Coupled with verses 14–15, this refers to an exodus from the Babylonian captivity (48:20–21 is another example), but it can also express the hopes of the “Church of the Poor” in parts of Latin America, and of Jews in the Soviet Union, today. For commentary on the contrast between the old Exodus and the new, see also 41:17–20.

The next section (vv. 22–28) suggests that an exodus from the slavery of sin and punishment is also included in these prophecies. The God who brings back his people from exile in Babylon, brings them back also from the captivity of sin (v. 25). Sin is defined, as in earlier prophetic tradition (*eg* Isa. 1; Amos 4) in ritual terms. With extreme irony the prophet charges his people with having failed to satisfy God with the elaborate rituals of the Temple: “burnt-offerings”, in which the whole beast is ritually burnt; “sacrifices”, in which part of the beast is burnt, but most of it eaten in a communion meal (see Lev. 7:15–18); “offerings”, which are of grain or wine or anything else apart from beasts (Lev. 2); and “frankincense” and “sweet cane”, luxury imports used in the making of incense (for which the recipe is given in Exod. 30:34–38). Jeremiah uses the same argument, without the irony (Jer. 6:20):

To what purpose does frankincense come to me from Sheba,

or sweet cane from a distant land?

Your burnt offerings are not acceptable,

nor your sacrifices pleasing to me.

The author’s purpose is made clear in verses 27–28, where the destruction of the Temple establishment is attributed to a more fundamental cause; the sin of “your first father”. The most natural way of taking this is as a reference to what happened in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3), a universal phenomenon as in Job (4:17–19):

Can mortal man be righteous before God?

Can a man be pure before his Maker?

Even in his servants he puts no trust,

and his angels he charges with error;

how much more those who dwell in houses of clay...

But probably we are intended to think rather of Israel’s own tragic history, and therefore of Jacob, who from the beginning was a cheat, just as from the beginning, God’s people, the twelve sons of Jacob, were dishonest and faithless. Hosea makes a similar point, alluding to the story of how Jacob “supplanted” Esau his elder brother (Gen. 25:21–34; Hos. 12:2–4). With such a father, it would have been hard for Israel to be anything other than sinful.

The “mediators” probably include, *first*, the prophets, who with a few notable exceptions, led Israel astray. There is a tale of how, in the days of Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, four hundred prophets prophesied lies, and only one the truth (1 Kings 22). The same could be said, *second* and *third*, of Israel’s kings and priests as well. However, this is not brought up here primarily as a rebuke, but as an explanation of why Jerusalem was lying in ruins, an explanation that gave hope, since the punishment was now over and a New Exodus about to begin.

2

²Sawyer, J. F. A. 2001, c1986. *Isaiah : Volume 2*. The Daily study Bible series. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville