

Haftarat Bereshit בראשית

Torah: Genesis 1:1–6:8

Haftarah: Isaiah 42:5–43:11

The Servant of the Lord

General Overview

The Haftarah for Parashat Bereshit is Isaiah 42:5–43:11. This passage, like the next two haftarot are from the section of the Prophecy of Israel which was intended, among other things to bring comfort to the remnant of God's people who would be taken into exile into Babylon. Chapters 42–43 are part of a section extending from chapters 40 to 53. This is the part of Isaiah that is often called the "Book of the Servant" in that the main subject is the "Servant of the Lord."

The theme of the Servant is first introduced in chapter 41. Here, in 41:8–9. This theme gradually unfolds like a beautiful flower throughout this section of Isaiah until it is fully in bloom in chapter 53. As the theme of the Servant develops, the identity of the Servant becomes at times rather confusing. At first, it seems clear that Israel was God's Servant. But then, Israel is portrayed by the prophet as a nation who was deeply ill with sin, unable to fulfill the task of being God's righteous Servant and ministering the truth about God to the nations.

Throughout Isaiah 42–53 we are continually asking the question, "Who is God's Servant?" Is it Israel? Or, is it a special individual about whom God is speaking? "At first sight the two statements would seem to contradict each other, so that if one were true the other would have to be false. Yet, on closer examination we find that both can be considered true, since the idea may be viewed from two different sides, that of responsibility and that of accomplishment.¹ From the viewpoint of responsibility, the Servant of the Lord is the entire nation of Israel. Yet, because the nation as a whole has not been faithful to the Covenant of Torah, it seems that, "when it comes to accomplishment, the term ["Servant of the Lord"] describes a remarkable individual; he is himself an Israelite, so that he can represent Israel in fulfilling its responsibility, yet he possesses characteristics that could not conceivably describe an entire nation."² Ultimately, we will find that the righteous Servant is Yeshua, the Messiah. Not only does He represent the nation Israel, but, through individual personal trust in Him every Israelite would be enabled to fulfill their God-given calling.

The Haftarah portion is couched right in the midst of the Servant passages. In it we get a glimpse of the calling that God gave Israel, how the nation had difficulty in fulfilling that calling, and finally, how the servant would come to accomplish that which the nation could not do — be the light of God to the nations.

¹ Alan A. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah*, 61.

² *Ibid.*, 62.

Connection to the Parasha

It is not always easy to determine the line of thinking of those sages who selected the prophetic readings. However, there are some clear connections in the text which may explain its association to Parashat Bereshit. Parashat Bereshit concerns itself with the creation of the universe, the earth, and man. Moreover, after relating about the creation, the Torah portion explains how sin came in to the world. In doing so, it discusses some of the immediate and far-reaching effects of sin upon mankind.

Accordingly, Isaiah 42:5 opens by referring to God as the one “Who created the universe ... [and] ... gives breath to the people on it.” Again, in 43:1, Isaiah quotes the Lord, “your Creator, O Jacob, and he who formed you, O Israel.” Then, after citations to God as the Creator, Isaiah describes how Israel failed to follow Him and went into sin by being people “who trust in idols, which say to molten images, ‘You are our gods’ ” (42:17). Moreover, just as Bereshit describes some of the horrible results of sin, so does Haftarat Bereshit. Isaiah depicts sinful Israel as those who are “a people plundered and despoiled ... a prey with none to deliver them” (42:22).

Finally, Bereshit contains the first Messianic prophecy, a prediction of One who would come and defeat mankind’s arch enemy, the powers of darkness. Haftarat Bereshit does the same. Isaiah tells us of one who would come to deliver. He is Israel’s “Savior” (43:3). It is He who would cause the exiles of Israel to come back (43:5–7) and enable them to fulfill God’s call on their lives by testifying about God’s greatness to the nations of the world (43:10 ff).

Exposition

As we travel through this haftarah passage we will utilize this outline:

- I. God is the Creator and Lord 42:5–9
- II. God is the Receiver of Praise 42:10–17
- III. God is Israel’s Discipliner 42:18–25
- IV. God is Israel’s Deliverer 43:1–11

In this excerpt from Haftarat Bereshit, we will focus on the section I, God is the Creator.

I. God is the Creator 42:5–9

Beginning in verse 5, God is reminding Israel that He and He alone is the Creator of all that exists. The purpose for this reminder seems to be to assure Israel that He, indeed, has all of the power necessary to fulfill the magnificent promises made in the first four verses, namely, that God’s Servant will accomplish God’s purposes — to establish justice in the earth (42:4). Thus, God is pictured as the One who created the entire universe, including giving “breath to the people on it” (v.5).

A. The Maker and Keeper of Promises

It is interesting that verse 5 mentions the two most common and significant names for God, *El* אל (a shortened version of *Elohim*, אלהים) and the Lord, יהוה, the Tetragrammaton. The name *Elohim* stresses the sovereignty, strength and especially the justice of God. This is the God who *makes* promises. Whereas the name יהוה “denoted the Divine trait of mercy or clemency.”³ In addition — and more importantly — it is the name of God, which stresses the fact that God is the One Who, *fulfills* the promises He makes. Hence, Isaiah was assuring Israel that not only did God make such a startling and unbelievable promise as He did in verses 1–4 (a promise to send His Servant who would cause God’s justice to prevail on planet earth), but He would also keep that promise as well.

B. The Identity of The Servant

There is a slight difference of opinion about the interpretation of verses 6–9 of chapter 42. On the one hand there are those who say that these verses only refer to the nation of Israel, God’s designated Servant in chapter 41. It is difficult to dispute this interpretation. Indeed, Israel was called to be God’s Servant. However, sticking to this understanding makes it quite difficult to adequately interpret the phrase in verse 6, “I will appoint You as a covenant to the people.” Understood in this light, the phrase might mean what the classical Jewish biblical commentator, Abarbanel, suggests, “The communication of the ideals entrusted to Israel will lead to a bond of unity or a covenant of peace among the peoples of the earth.”⁴

In my opinion there is a better way to explain this section. It seems that most likely the Servant is still the person in view here. Only the Servant in this case is not primarily the nation Israel. They had a difficult time fulfilling their calling as God’s Servant. Moreover, verse 7 depicts Israel as if they were like prisoners sitting in the darkness of a prison. In addition, how can Israel open its own blind eyes, as the beginning of verse 7 says will be done? Thus, we agree with such commentators who say that the Servant in view here is, indeed, an Israelite, but a single individual who is able to perform for Israel that which Israel was unable to do for itself. Accordingly, the phrase “covenant to the people” may possibly be understood “as a general statement that the Servant will represent God’s covenant to each of the various nations.”⁵

In both interpretations, Israel is the Servant. However, in the second one, Israel is seen represented by the Messiah Servant blessing both Israel and the nations. Whatever the case, in verses 6–8 is a restatement of God’s original purposes for Israel. The first purpose was to bring people from the nations of the world into Israel’s covenant. The second purpose was to be a light to those nations. The third purpose was to release the captivity of those peoples. When the Messiah returns to earth, this third blessing will literally be fulfilled. The Messiah will set free all who are unjustly imprisoned because of a lack of fair justice on earth.

³ A.J. Rosenberg, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 2, 338.

⁴ I. W. Slotki, *Isaiah* (Soncino Commentaries), 200.

⁵ MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah*, 68.

However, it is also possible to understand these words, “to bring prisoners out of darkness, etc. as a figurative statement. Keil and Delitzsch also see it this way and remark,

But the Servant of Jehovah opens blind eyes; and therefore the deliverance which He brings is not only redemption from bodily captivity, but from spiritual bondage also. He leads His people [Israel], and the Gentiles also out of night into light; He is the Redeemer of all that need redemption and desire salvation.⁶

Although most Jewish commentators do not say that the Servant in this section is the Messiah, there are, nevertheless, some who do. One such example is the eminent commentator of old, Abarbanel. A. J. Rosenberg summarizes Abarbanel’s viewpoint by saying that “Abarbanel connects the two mentioned in the preceding verse [verse 6], the people, meaning Israel, and the nations, meaning the nations of the world. I call you (the Messiah) to open the blind eyes of both of them.”⁷

C. The Assurance

Verses 9–10 round out this first main section of our Haftarah. Here, God is simply asserting that He will accomplish what He said He would do. Why? It is because there is simply no one who is equal to the task. Therefore, God declares that He would not let anyone or anything else in the entire universe share His glory. He would accomplish His purposes. He would accomplish His purposes through Israel. First, it would be through the Servant, representing Israel and then because the Servant would enable them, it would be through the righteous remnant of Israel themselves that His will would be carried out on earth. In this whole process, there would be no nation or force on earth which would be able to thwart God’s purpose from being carried out. Hence, when He says that He would not give His glory to another, one of the things He had in mind might be as one commentator stated, “I will not allow the heathens to rule over My children, lest they claim that their god is powerful (Rashi).”⁸

If Rashi is correct, and we think he is at this point, than this verse would have given the faithful remnant of Israel and Judah much encouragement. If they were in exile, it would assure them that it would not last forever. It would have comforted them to know that although the nations of the earth may seem to have victory over Israel, that victory is only temporary. It cannot last because God is the One who is always in control and in the end, He will remain faithful to His covenants and keep Israel, bring them back to their Land, and send the Servant Messiah to be their King forever.

One more point before we go into the next section. God testifies in verse 8 that He would not give His glory to another. If that is true, then how do we explain the passages in the Brit Hadasha where Yeshua is glorified in a supernatural manner? One such place is the famous transfiguration passage in Matthew 17.

⁶ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 7, *Isaiah*, 180.

⁷ Rosenberg, *The Book of Isaiah*, 339.

⁸ Slotki, *Isaiah*, p. 201.

Here the text states that “His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as snow.” It appears that in this incident, Yeshua, the Son, was sharing the same glory as His Father in heaven. Moreover, listen to the description of the Lamb of God, Yeshua, as John writes it in Revelation 21. Here we receive a glimpse into the distant future to a time when God, as promised by Isaiah, would make a new heaven and a new earth. He would also build a new Jerusalem. In this new glorified city we see that it would be “a city [which] has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Revelation 21:23).

It appears from at least these two passages, that God indeed has shared His glory with another — the Messiah! It is a clear testimony to the fact that in some way, shape, or form, the Messiah shares divinity with the Creator of the universe.