

Exegetical Notes on Isaiah 42:1-7

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1. Behold My Servant whom I shall uphold,
My Chosen One with whom My soul will be satisfied.

I will give My Spirit upon Him.

He will bring forth judgment to the nations.

2. He will not cry forth,

Nay, He will not He lift up

Nor make His voice heard on the outside.

3. A bruised reed He will not break,

Nay, a dim wick -- He will not quench it.

He will bring forth judgment to truth.

4. He will not become dim,

Nay, He will not be broken,

Until He will establish judgment in the earth,

Even as coastlands will wait for His teaching.

5. Thus has the True God said, the LORD,

The one creating the heavens

and stretching them out,

Spreading forth the earth

and those things coming forth from it,

Giving breath to the people upon it,

yea, a spirit to those who walk in it.

6. "I am the LORD:

I have called Thee in righteousness,

And I shall hold Thee by the hand,

Yea, I shall keep Thee;

And I shall give Thee to be the testament of the people,

to be the light of the nations,

7. To open blind eyes,

To bring forth a prisoner from a dungeon,

men who lie in darkness from a house of prison.

8. I am the LORD -- that is My name,

Even as My glory I shall not give to another,

Nor My praise to any hewn idols.

9. The former things, behold, will have come,

Even as I am making new things known;

Before they sprout forth I shall make you hear."

The reading from the Old Testament which is assigned to the First Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany of our Lord in Series C of Lutheran Worship (as also in Series A and B) consists in the first seven verses of the forty-second chapter of the Book of Isaiah. (The exegesis of these verses below is, assuredly, in no way designed to promote the use in the main service of the week of any such modern selection of gospels and epistles as those suggested in Lutheran Worship. This exegete, on the contrary, would continue to urge, on various grounds, fidelity to the pericopal tradition inherited from the ancient church by the church of the reformation and modified only slightly by the Blessed Reformer of the Church, if one is speaking specifically of the gospels and epistles to be read in the main (eucharistic) service of the week. No comparable series of readings, on the other hand, from the Old Testament was either handed down from the ancient church or bestowed on us by the Blessed Reformer; nor, indeed, is there such a program of readings from the New Testament to be used in all the possible additional offices of any given week. In such cases, therefore, even such a traditionalist as this exegete is able, with consistency, to make use of any pericope drawn from the region of Holy Scripture desired.)

The Greek word *epiphaneia* means "manifestation"; the Feast of the Epiphany and its season celebrate the manifestation of God in human flesh. Indeed, the central aspect of Epiphany was originally the celebration of the birth of Christ Jesus. In the fourth century, however, the observance of this event shifted to December 25, leaving the Festival of the Epiphany to commemorate two major events in which the deity of Christ was particularly evident -- His adoration already in infancy by the magi and His baptism at the beginning of His public ministry as the Messiah. In the Eastern Church Epiphany became the major baptismal occasion of the year, and Slavic Christians of the Greek rite call the day "Feast of Baptism" or "Feast of Light" (referring to the spiritual enlightening worked by baptism). Unfortunately, in the Western Church the connection of Epiphany with the baptism of our Lord has often receded so far from view that some have been left without any commemoration of one of the most fundamental events in the whole history of salvation. It is, therefore, more than desirable that some day in the Octave of the Epiphany be especially dedicated to the Baptism of our Lord. The First Servant-Song of Isaiah (42: 1-9) is the logical passage of the Old Testament to be read and expounded in such a commemoration by virtue of the use which God Himself makes of it on the occasion of the baptism of Christ Jesus. The First Servant-Song, indeed, represents, prophetically, the commissioning of God the Son to His messianic ministry which He subsequently received in a public (observable) way in connection with His baptism.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SETTING

The historical and literary observations which follow assume the auctorial integrity of the Book of Isaiah which this exegete has defended elsewhere (especially in *An Introduction to the Book of Isaiah*). Isaiah ben-Amoz began his lengthy prophetic ministry of some six decades already in 739 B.C. in the final year of the reign of Uzziah as King of Judah. He then uttered the various prophecies contained in the first main unit of the Book of Isaiah (chapters 1-35 as we have come to call them since medieval times) on various occasions in the years leading up to 701 B.C. In the course of these years Isaiah prophesied again and again the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrians which finally occurred in 701 B.C. in the midst of the reign of Hezekiah -- as recounted in the "historical bridge" constituting chapters 36-39 of his magnum opus.

Isaiah then proceeded to compose in the course of the ensuing two decades the tightly integrated third unit of his book consisting in the chapters which we now enumerate as 40-66. The prophet had, indeed, evidently finished these chapters by the time that King Hezekiah died in 686 B.C. in view of the absence of any succeeding king from the superscription to the volume as a whole (1:1). Isaiah subsequently published the final edition of his book in its entirety circa 680 B.C., shortly before his martyrdom in the bloody persecution of the true faith sponsored by King Manasseh.

An additional presupposition in the exegesis here is the elaborate nature of the triadic structure which characterizes the whole third unit of Isaiah (chapters 40-66), as has, again, been delineated in detail elsewhere (*ibid.*). Chapters 40-48 of Isaiah constitute the first of the three main divisions of this third unit of Isaiah and, so also, the fifth of the seven distinct cantos of the volume in toto. Each of these cantos provides, in its own individual way, the rationale of the thesis of Isaiah as a whole, namely, that the Lord is the only reasonable object of faith.

Canto 5, then, of the Book of Isaiah argues that the Lord is the only reasonable object of faith because, in addition to all the points presented elsewhere, He proves to be the One True God as opposed to any of the gods of men. The unique deity of the One True God is asserted in these nine chapters in opposition (1.) in opposition to all the idols of men in general (chapters 40-42), (2.) in opposition to the idols of Israel in particular (chapters 43-45) and (3.) in opposition to the idols of Babylon in particular (chapters 46-48).

Within the initial sub-canto (chapters 40-42) of Canto 5 of Isaiah, the third and final section, which is coterminous with chapter 42, clearly commences with the dramatic interjection *hineni* (verse 1) which introduces the Divine "Servant of the Lord" for the first time in this specific way (here called "My Servant" by the Lord Himself). This Divine Servant of the Lord then becomes, in fact, the central figure of the whole third division of Isaiah (chapters 40-66). He is, however, none other than the Messiah who appears already as the Shepherd-Lord in Isaiah 40 (which serves as the introduction to all the following chapters of Isaiah) and who, indeed, appears already, with many other designations, as the central figure of all the earlier cantos of Isaiah.

Verses 1-9, then, of Isaiah 49 constitute the First Servant-Song of Isaiah. Here God the Father introduces the Messiah as His Divine Servant, who then, accepting the pious paeon of His people (verses 10-13), addresses friends and foes directly (verses 14-25). The Second Servant-Song in chapter 49 and the Third Servant-Song in chapter 50 both issue, in consequence, from the mouth of the Messiah Himself. The Fourth Servant-Song reflects, finally, the awe of Isaiah himself, as the inspired representative of the church, in beholding the ministry of the Messiah -- before concluding, as the songs began, with the authentication of God the Father Himself.

Notwithstanding the many theories of modern critical scholars, there can be no reasonable question of the messianic identity of the Servant of the Lord speaking or described in the Servant-Songs of Isaiah. Others, whether individuals or Israel or the church, may, to be sure, be called the servant of the Lord, but the things which are predicated of the subject of the Servant-Songs can be no other than the Messiah who is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Such, certainly, was His own understanding (Luke 22:37) as well as that of His inspired disciples (Acts 8:35). The First Servant-Song, specifically, is quoted or used at least fifteen times in the New Testament and always with a messianic understanding. The first four verses of Isaiah 42 are quoted at length in Matthew 12 (verses 18-21) with the introductory formula "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet" (verse 17).

The prophetic sub-canto which is conterminous with chapter 49 of Isaiah as we have come to divide the book since medieval times is clearly to be divided into three stanzas on the basis of the progression in the speakers of the words concerned. For while the initial stanza issues from God the Father (in verses 1-9), the second represents the grateful response of the church (in verses 10-13) before the Messiah Himself takes up His discourse in the final stanza (verse 14-25). The following outline thus emerges of the Fifth Canto of Isaiah (chapters 40-48) with special emphasis on chapter 42 of the book:

The Lord's Manifestation of Himself as the One True God

Words Describing the Remainder of the Old Testament Era, Especially the Rise of Cyrus to Imperial Power circa 550 B.C.

1. I. As Opposed to the Idols of Men in General (40-42)

1. His Salvation (40)

1. Its future accomplishment (verses 1-11)
2. Its credibility: the Lord's power to create (verses 12-26)
3. Its implications: the folly of despair (verses 27-31)

2. His Control of the Future (41)

1. The victories of Cyrus (proclaimed to the heathen) (verses 1-7)
2. The victories of Israel (proclaimed to the faithful) (verses 8-20)
3. The victories of Cyrus (proclaimed to the idols themselves) (verses 21-29)

3. His Righteousness (42)

1. Which He imputes to men: the words of God the Father (verses 1-9)

1. God the Father speaking to His people concerning the Messiah (verses 1-4)

1. His relation to the Father (verse)
2. His relation to the Holy Spirit (verse)
3. His goal: justification (verse)
4. His humility (verse)
5. His goal: justification (verse)
6. His dedication (verse)
7. His goal: justification (verse)

1. Objective justification (verse)

2. Subjective justification (verse)

2. God the Father speaking to the Messiah (verses 5-7)

(verse)

1. The introduction, stressing the unique omnipotence of the One True God

1. Shown in His creation of all things (verse)

2. Shown in His preservation of all things (verse)

2. The Commission of the Messiah (verse)

1. His call and righteousness (verse)

2. His assistance by the Father (verse)

3. His goal (verse)

1. To provide a testamentary berith (verse)

2. To provide thereby its testamentary benefits (verse)

1. Symbolized by light (verse)

2. Symbolized by sight (verse)

3. Symbolized by liberation from a dark dungeon (verse)

4. God the Father speaking to His people, stressing the uniqueness of the One True God (verses 8-9)

1. His unique deity (verse)

2. His resulting omniscience (verse)

1. Its demonstrability (verse)

2. Its reliability (verse)

5. Which He proclaims to men: the words of the church (verses 10-13)

6. Which is foreign to men: the words of the Messiah (verses 14-25)

3. II. As Opposed to the Idols of Israel in Particular (the Words of Messiah) (43-45)

1. His Power to Preserve Her (43)

1. From worldly attacks (verses 1-13)

1. The thesis (verses 1-2)
 2. The historical evidence: the exodus (verses 3-4)
 3. The goal (verses 5-13)
2. From worldly alliances (verses 14-15)
 3. From her own sinfulness (verses 16-28)
2. His Power to Save Her (44: 1-23)
 1. Stated directly (verses 1-8)
 2. Stated indirectly (by contrast with her idols) (verses 9-20)
 3. Stated directly (verses 21-23)
 3. His Control of Her Future (44:24-45:25)
 1. The evidence: Israel's physical restoration by Cyrus (44:24-45:7)
 1. God's use of such evidence in general (44: 21-27)
 2. God's identification of Cyrus (44:28)
 3. God's use of Cyrus in particular (expressed in the form of an address to Cyrus) (45: 1-7)
 2. The general idea (45: 8-13)
 1. The goal (introducing the idea of 45: 14-25) (verse 8)
 2. The fact: God's control of Israel's future (verses 9-12)
 3. The evidence (reiterating the idea of 44:24-45:7) (verse 13)
 3. The goal: Israel's proclamation of the gospel to the world (verses 14-25)
4. III. As Opposed to the Idols of Babylon in Particular (the Word of Messiah) (46-48)
 1. Who Cannot Save the Jewish Allies of Babylon (46)
 1. Since the Babylonian idols cannot save themselves (verses 1-2)

- 2. Since the Babylonian idols are inanimate (verses 3-7)
- 3. Since the true God alone can control history (the future) (verses 8-13)
- 2. Who Cannot Save Babylon Herself from Destruction (47)
 - 1. Its occurrence (verses 1-3)
 - 2. Its rationale (verses 4-7)
 - 3. Its inevitability (despite sorcery) (verses 8-15)
- 3. Who Cannot Save the Jewish Allies of Babylon (48)
 - 1. Since the true God condemns them (verses 1-11)
 - 2. Since the true God alone can control history (the future) (verses 12-16)
 - 3. Since the true God alone can save people (verses 17-22)

In the First Servant-Song, therefore, God the Father addresses firstly His people (in verses 1-4) and then His Son (in verses 6-7, following His own re-introduction in verse 5), and then again His people (in verses 8-9). Verses 1-7, then, of Isaiah 42 constitute the initial two-thirds of the First Servant-Song of Isaiah (42: 1-9). The verses before us, specifically, embrace the two easily distinguishable paragraphs comprising verses 1-4 and 5-7 respectively.

A LITERAL TRANSLATION WITH COMMENTS

- 1. Behold My Servant whom I shall uphold,
My Chosen One with whom My soul will be satisfied.
I will give My Spirit upon Him.
He will bring forth judgment to the nations.
- 2. He will not cry forth,
Nay, He will not He lift up
Nor make His voice heard on the outside.
- 3. A bruised reed He will not break,
Nay, a dim wick -- He will not quench it.

He will bring forth judgment to truth.

4. He will not become dim,

Nay, He will not be broken,

Until He will establish judgment in the earth,

Even as coastlands will wait for His teaching.

5. Thus has the True God said, the LORD,

The one creating the heavens

and stretching them out,

Spreading forth the earth

and those things coming forth from it,

Giving breath to the people upon it,

yea, a spirit to those who walk in it.

6. "I am the LORD:

I have called Thee in righteousness,

And I shall hold Thee by the hand,

Yea, I shall keep Thee;

And I shall give Thee to be the testament of the people,

to be the light of the nations,

7. To open blind eyes,

To bring forth a prisoner from a dungeon,

men who lie in darkness from a house of prison.

8. I am the LORD -- that is My name,

Even as My glory I shall not give to another,

Nor My praise to any hewn idols.

9. The former things, behold, will have come,

Even as I am making new things known;

Before they sprout forth I shall make you hear."

The speaker being quoted by Isaiah in verses 1-4 and 6-9 is God the Father, the leading person of the Godhead with regard to the work of creation and preservation (verse 5). The "Servant" (1a) of whom God the Father speaks in the first four verses is the Messiah, who, according to His human nature, was to become a humble servant (as is emphasized in Philippians 2: 7-8). It is this same servant to whom the Father turns to address in verses 6 to 9. The Messiah would, indeed, be the only completely faithful servant of God, obeying Him impeccably "in righteousness" (verse 6) and fulfilling perfectly the redemptive role for which He was "chosen" (verse 1b) and "called" (verse 6) by God (verse 4). It is for this reason that God would be "satisfied" with Him (verse 1b).

When God the Father says, "I have given My Spirit upon Him" (verse 1), He uses the prophetic perfect to describe the future anointing of the Messiah, according to His human nature, with the Holy Spirit in a unique way (Acts 10:38; Isaiah 11:2; 61:1; Luke 4: 16-21). Thus, all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned in one verse ("Servant...I [as indicated by the first person verbal forms] ...Spirit"); each is distinguished from the others, but all cooperate in the accomplishment of the salvation of men.

It follows, therefore, that God puts His Spirit upon the Messiah, not in the usual measured manner, but "without measure" so that "the entire fulness of the Spirit...is communicated to Christ according to the flesh that is personally united with the Son of God" (Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, VIII: 72-75, considering therewith the whole section). This limitless possession of the Holy Spirit receives emphasis, above all, at the time of Christ's baptism, which was His official induction into His public ministry (as appears from the several accounts of His baptism in the gospels, Matthew 3: 13-17; Mark 1: 9-11; Luke 3: 21-22; John 1: 29-34). The events connected with the baptism of Christ likewise stress the delight of God the Father in the Son and the cooperation of all three persons of the Trinity in the work of redemption.

According to Isaiah 42, the point of the Messiah's investiture with the Holy Spirit would be to "uphold Him" (verse 1), to "hold" Him "by the hand" (verse 6), and to "keep" Him (verse 6) with regard to His messianic service. The purpose of His labors would be to "bring forth judgment to the nations" (verse 1), "to truth" -- as an objective reality (verse 3) -- "in the earth" (verse 4), the prominence of this theme appearing from its triple occurrence in the passage before us. This mishpat is not the condemnation of sinners (which was already present on account of God's very nature as a just monarch). It is the judgment which only the Messiah could produce -- a verdict of innocence by virtue of God's imputation of all human sins to Christ and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to all "nations" (verse 1) on the face of "the earth" (verse 4).,

[The announcement of this universal justification is the messianic torah for which the Gentiles were inwardly yearning (verse 4). The word torah is usually translated "law," but its basic meaning is really "instruction," and here the object of human longing is obviously not the law but the gospel.]

Through the proclamation of the gospel (whether directly or through His representatives) the Messiah was to strengthen the weak (verse 3). Verse 3 pictures a weak faith (1.) as a reed (water plant) already "cracked" and so almost broken and (2.) as the wick (of an oil lamp) which is burning feebly and so on the point of extinction. The point is that the Messiah's proper work would be to save, not to destroy. Through the gospel He would also enlighten the spiritually blind and free those imprisoned in sin -- in other words, create saving faith in unbelievers (verses 7-8; comparing Isaiah 61:1 and Luke 4: 16-21).

The justification conveyed by this gospel would proceed from the Messiah's flawless "righteousness" (verse 6), the humility of His ministry (verse 2; comparing Matthew 12: 15-22), and His vicarious death ("the testament of the people," verse 6). The last event is implied by the word berith, which is usually but not aptly translated as "covenant." A berith is basically a guarantee, an oath-bound obligation undertaken by someone to do something. Sometimes this obligation is made on condition of reciprocal action by a second party; in such cases the berith is to some extent, at least, a covenant. Here, however, the reference is to the oft-repeated unconditional promise of God to bestow righteousness upon the world through the death of His Son -- in other words, the new testament (Matthew 26:28; Mark 13:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 9: 15-22). Here the Messiah is equated with the new "testament," since not only is He the testator (who dies to put His will into effect), but His righteousness is also the inheritance bequeathed to the will's beneficiaries.

A POSSIBLE HOMILETICAL OUTLINE

Servant or Sovereign?

Introduction: In various tales of yore a monarch disguises himself as a servant in order to escape attention for one reason or another. In many of these stories, however, the servant's speech or bearing makes somebody aware that he is, in actuality, a king. As we read the first part of Isaiah 42, we have the same experience. We immediately ask this question concerning the one of whom God speaks and whom He then addresses: Are we in the presence of servant or sovereign?

I. He is, in actuality, a sovereign.

A. According to His divine nature, Christ is Lord of the universe.

1. Who has participated from all eternity in the interrelationships of the persons of the Triune God.

a. Begotten by the Father (Nicene Creed, Article 2), as the Father testifies at His baptism (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; John 1:30, 34).

b. Participating with the Father in the spiration of the Holy Spirit (Nicene Creed, Article 3: "who proceedeth from the Father and the Son").

2. Who has participated with the Father in His work (verse 5) of creation and preservation.

a. Creation (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16) and

b. Preservation (Colossians 1:17).

3. Against whom (with the Father and the Holy Spirit) we have rebelled.

a. As a race almost from the time of creation.

b. Individually.

i. From the time of conception.

ii. In thought, word, and deed.

4. Whose wrath (being one with the wrath of the Father and the Holy Spirit) we have necessarily aroused by our rebellion.

a. Because of His holiness.

b. Because of His justice.

B. Even according to His human nature, He is Lord of the universe.

1. By virtue of a necessary communication of divine attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) to His human nature.

a. Occurring at the time of His incarnation (conception).

b. Being attested by various events commemorated during the Season of the Epiphany (adoration by the magi, miraculous events connected with His baptism, transmutation of water into wine, stilling of storms, transfiguration, etc.).

2. By virtue of His reception of the Holy Spirit (verse 1).

a. With all His gifts in a measureless manner (Isaiah 11:2; 61:1; Luke 4: 16-21).

b. As attested by the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at the baptism of Christ (and initiation into His public ministry; Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1: 32-33).

II. Yet He did truly become a servant.

A. Denying to Himself during His state of humiliation the full and constant use of the divine characteristics penetrating His human nature.

1. Coming into the world as an infant born in humble circumstances.

2. Conducting His public ministry in as humble a manner as possible (verse 2; Matthew 12: 15-21).

B. Desiring to effect the justification of mankind (verses 1, 3, and 4).

1. A justification consisting in a verdict of innocence in the sight of God (Romans 5: 18-19).

2. A justification accomplished by the Messiah's redemptive role.

a. By means of His perfect obedience to the will of God (verses 3b, 4, 6a).

b. By means of His vicarious suffering and death (verse 6b).

3. A justification conveyed to people through the gospel (verse 4).

a. A gospel designed to save sinners by creating and strengthening faith in Christ (verses 3, 6, and 7).

b. A gospel connected with water in the sacrament of baptism (Ephesians 5: 25-26; Small Catechism, IV).

i. Baptism was instituted by Christ Himself in the name of those same three persons of the Trinity (Matthew 28:19) whose cooperation in the accomplishment of salvation is so manifest in the account of the baptism of Christ Jesus.

ii. The power of baptism is based upon the baptism of Christ Jesus and the public ministry which it initiated. The relationship between His baptism and ours may be compared to that between a negative and the prints made from it in photography or a mould and the statues made from it.