

The New (Old) Idea

Isaiah 49:1-7

John 1:

Approximately 2,700 years ago a new leader emerged among the Medes, a west-central Asian people. He proved a remarkably effective administrator and military strategist, and one of the most gifted politicians known to history. Under his rule, the Medes merged with the Babylonians and the Syrians, thus absorbing two great empires into his own. Ethnically and tribally, Cyrus was a Persian. Today we call his people Iranian. If you want to start a street fight in Iran—something I emphatically would argue against, as the Iranians regularly produce the world's best wrestlers—call an Iranian an Arab. They speak Farsi, not Arabic. They remember as if it were yesterday that Cyrus utterly defeated the Arabs. They despise the Arabic Saudis, their only real rival for power in the region. They are proud.

They have the right to be. Cyrus rarely appears in historical writings without two words after his name: the Great. Cyrus the Great initiated a reign of peace that covered most of today's Iran and Iraq, eastern Turkey, Afghanistan and much of the “Stans”, the independent republics of Central Asia that used to belong to the Soviet Union. He commissioned great building projects. He championed education—including relatively progressive opportunities for girls. Long after his death, armies built according to his precepts were the only fighting force able to deflect the massive

armies of Alexander, another the Great. And once Alexander's army stumbled past Persia the Persians participated in the annihilation of his men in western India.

For we Christians, probably the most important thing Cyrus the Great did was freeing his Jewish slaves and sending them home. He did not do it out of altruism. Some sixty years earlier the Babylonians had overrun Judah, the southern half of Israel. As was their custom, they marched men and women aged about 12 to about 35 back to the homeland. There they did two things of value to their captors: they had children, and they did the scut work. They labored in the oppressively hot sun to produce crops. They built buildings for government and the insider classes. They cleaned out the remarkably advanced sewer systems of the major cities. But they also refused to become assimilated into Persian society. They resisted learning the language. They refused to convert to the cult religions—religions which for complicated reasons would appeal to Adolph Hitler some 2,000 years later. To put it bluntly, the Jews became a liability. So Cyrus allowed them to walk. Literally. Thousands of Jews walked along the river courses through modern-day Iran, Iraq and Syria to return home to what we call Israel.

When these ancient migrants reached home, they found a nearly hopeless situation. The children and older people the Babylonians had left to their own devices had failed to do much more than survive. Many of them died. Most of them had no memory of having lived free to worship their God, Yahweh. They had forfeited. They had allowed themselves to become assimilated by the ancient Canaanite culture

native to the place. Now here came younger, more vital, Israelites who had fiercely kept their grip on the old stories and habits. They had not inhabited Israel for years. Many of them had never lived there. But they remembered the covenants Yahweh had made with their ancestors. And among them rose a man or men who spoke in the name of Isaiah, easily their greatest prophet. Today, we read words this man or men wrote. Isaiah himself had lived approximately 150 years before. But without question he would have approved of their messaging.

When the exiles returned to Israel they brought with them a renewed commitment to Judaism, their religious inheritance. They brought a stubborn refusal to compromise on theology and on what their God's law required of them. In short, they brought what Judaism has characteristically taken any place it has gone. I have personally experienced this in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Kansas, three states where my family lived during my youth. (We lived in others, too, but those were the ones where we lived among large numbers of Jews.) The Jews remain one of the most distinct slices of humanity wherever they go. I actually respect this. I admire ethnic pride. I have truly enjoyed experiencing it among our Afghan guests—especially when it came to eating what they put in front of me! Most scholars believe the man or men who wrote our verses today from Isaiah had gone into exile in Babylon and then walked home with the others once Cyrus the Great freed them. And he and/or they would have treasured their traditions.

The author(s) of our passage represent a rock-ribbed dedication to the old ways

and the old promises. God has known God's people since before their births. God has committed to blessing God's people. God will never go back on those promises, despite their faithlessness, despite the need to punish them from time to time. But one new element creeps into this prophecy. The man Isaiah himself dictated chapters 1-39. This new element appears in his visions, especially in chapters 6 and 9. But men writing *in his name* wrote the rest. And that new element just saturates their messages. The new element? God would send a Servant, who would suffer to redeem the all the world's people.

To a world in which power seemed the only true and viable method of achieving victory, the Isaiahs predicted that a Suffering Servant would prevail. He would prevail even over armies using the newest technology from China: gunpowder. He would prevail even over the conniving and skilled political machinations of the likes of Cyrus the Great. He would prevail over death itself. Even more, this Suffering Servant would work on behalf not just of the Jews, but of all the nations. Isaiah 49:6: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." This is Good News indeed, as to my knowledge not a single person hearing these words has a Jewish mother.

My eighth grade basketball team had a great season. We won the league, beating a team from where Max Payne was the high school football coach at the time. We won all but one game that season, and traveled from suburban Kansas City to

Wichita, where we beat three other teams in a theoretical state championship. To this day, the trophies from that season are the only ones I cannot get rid of. They sit way up high on top of cabinets in our back room. Some of you have seen them. Our coach, his son and another team member were Jewish. Byron and Rob, my Jewish teammates, did not play a lot. Mr. Jacob Ginsburg, the coach and Rob's father, liked to say he had one rule and one rule only: win the right way. He was the man who broke me of my habit, which I had developed a couple of years earlier, of talking trash to my opponents under my breath. Mr. Ginsburg enforced his rules in the one way that mattered to me, with playing time. I was the starting center. I was important to that team and I knew it. Mr. Ginsburg knew it, too, and used it against me. Or for me, depending on how you look at it. Sometimes I had to cool my bottom on the bench.

I will tell you how I look at it. I think my 8th grade basketball coach, not normally a likely candidate for lifelong influence, became an important man in my life. Some years ago I wrote him a thank-you letter. He wrote me back almost immediately. He thanked me. For letting him coach me. I thought, "Did I have a choice?" But he meant something a little deeper. He meant that I let him dig into me. I listened, whether I liked it or not. I changed. He said I'd always had good basketball instincts. But as a person thirty years my elder he had seen that I needed to work on my attitude. My father had tried telling me the same thing. But we tend not to want to listen to our fathers. Or our mothers. That's why people like Max Payne matter. I happen to know one of his teams went a long way to recognize his influence on them as men years and years after they parted. Well done, Max.

We let our pride, our fears, our insecurities rule us. We need to let the Word of God take control. I attended Rob Ginsburg's Bar Mitzvah, as I did several other Bar- and Bat Mitzvahs for my male and female classmates. In those synagogues the only thing in the service that happened in English was the announcements. All the chanting and speaking happened in Hebrew. The only word I knew was Amen. Well, and the odd Shalom. But I remember the happiness, even the joy, of their parents' generation at seeing a Goyim boy—me--in their places of worship. They may have thought I was trying to make some kind of inclusive statement. I was not. These were my friends. I wanted to be there for them. Okay, the food was pretty great and in the dancing afterwards sometimes Julie Stram, the Jewish girl on whom I had a massive crush and whose father was Hank Stram, the Kansas City Chief's coach, would dance in the same group. It did not get any better than that.

Except it does. The written record tells us God has planned our redemption for centuries. God has known we cannot earn it through our own merit. God knows we are captives to our weakness. But God has entered into a radical identification with our weakness. God has become the Suffering Servant, Jesus, who has in turn become the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. It may seem unfair, even barbaric. Why should anybody have to die for the sins of others? In truth it is a great blessing. God loves the world so much that God has chosen to pay for our sins. We are sinners. Thank God therefore that we can trust in God. God started telling us this long before Isaiah himself. The message has never changed. Nor have we. Thank God we can hope for redemption.