

Concordia Journal

Volume 40 | Number 3

Article 17

2014

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William Carr Jr.

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, carrw@csel.edu

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Recommended Citation

Carr, William Jr. (2014) "Proper 24 • Isaiah 45:1–7 • October 19, 2014," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 40: No. 3, Article 17.

Available at: <http://scholar.csel.edu/cj/vol40/iss3/17>

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Proper 24 • Carr: Proper 24 • Isaiah 45:1-7 • October 19, 2014

I struggle with the notion that some part of Isaiah, mainly Isaiah 40 and following, is “addressed to the sixth century,” an idea that conservative commentators also endorse. I know Isaiah is directed to “bind up the testimony, seal the teaching” (8:16), until people wonder of whom they should inquire (8:19), at which time the call will go out “To the teaching and to the testimony!” (8:20). Perhaps it is true that, in addition to “hearing and hearing” and “seeing and seeing” (6:9), the people of Judah would read and read, and not understand. And yet there already was a faithful remnant in Isaiah’s

day, people who “got it” and believed what the prophet was saying, beginning with chapter 1. So, there already was something for them to “get” from Isaiah 45 too.

I’m also not going to say much about Cyrus. He isn’t all that necessary to the prophet’s proclamation here. What’s more important are the self-attestations of the Lord, e.g., the closing “I, Yahweh, am doing all these (things)” (45:7).

For grammatical details, see Reed Lessing. He reads verse 8 as a concluding doxology, though the MT marks verse 7 as the end of a “closed paragraph” (setumah, ס).¹

The noun *messiah* (מָשִׁיחַ) does not occur as often in the Old Testament as we might think (thirty-eight times). It appears most often in 1 and 2 Samuel (seventeen times) and refers mainly to Saul or David. The psalms (ten times) echo the designation of the king as “the Lord’s anointed.” After these, it’s “here and there.” In the writing prophets, it occurs only in the present text and in Habakkuk 3. The verb (seventy times) exhibits similar distribution: twenty-nine times in Torah (re: tabernacle and priesthood); thirty-one times in the monarchical narratives (1 and 2 Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles); and the rest are scattered. Isaiah uses it twice: 21:5 and 61:1. The anointedness of the one who will rule well and serve well, even in suffering, and do completely what Yahweh sends him to do, seems to be a recessive trait.

The phrase “in whose right hand I put strength,” or “whose right hand I grasp” (45:1; the Hiphil of קָח) is striking. One of the cultural and religious requirements for anyone who aspired to be king in Babylon was to “take the hand of Bel” (aka Marduk). This was a sign of homage, and yet any would-be king performed the ritual act. The annals of Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II, kings of Assyria in Isaiah’s time, each of whom called himself at some point king not only of Assyria but also of Babylon, report their participation in this festival. So also did Cyrus’s son, Cambyses, in the first year after Persian conquest. By contrast, no king “takes” Yahweh’s hand; he takes theirs. The Lord alone subdues nations, disarms kings, and opens doors which no one else can shut.

In verse 2 the language shifts: Yahweh speaks, “I” to “you.” It is a gift to God’s people to “overhear” what Yahweh says to “his anointed,” but one who does not know (or acknowledge) Yahweh. Isaiah’s hearers and, now, readers are to understand that the Lord governs the affairs of all nations, even of those which do not acknowledge him—and in 2014 what nation is there that truly acknowledges the God of the Bible?

Yahweh declares either his intention (“I will go,” etc.) or his present activity (“I am going,” etc.); both are proper for the imperfect verb forms in verses 2 and 3. Emblems of pride (“exalted places”), of power (“doors of bronze” and “bars of iron”), and of wealth (secreted treasures) are not secure.

All happens “that you may know” (v. 3) and “that they may know” (v. 6) that Yahweh alone is God, and there is no other. Both purposes clauses evoke Exodus language: The Lord told Moses that when he went into action his people would know and the Egyptians would know that “I am Yahweh” (Ex 6:7; 7:5).

It may seem odd that the Lord declares he creates darkness” (v. 7). But since there was nothing before God began his creating activity, he “had to” create both. Perhaps even more striking is his (God’s) declaration that he “does peace” (עָשָׂה שְׁלוֹמִים) and also “creates calamity” (ESV; וַיִּבְרָא רָע). The word-pair we expect is טוֹב and רָע. The

pair שלום and רע supersedes our ordinary moral categories of “good and evil” by introducing the orderliness and harmony of שלום in contrast to the disarray of רע.

The clear point is that “God is God, and we are not,” nor is any human government. When we look at the world around us, watch or listen to the news, it is hard to find any truly righteous government at work, not even our own. The reign of Yahweh is Gospel for those who trust his devotion and mercy. He is superintending all that goes on in the world, even what disconcerts us. Above all, he is the God who, in OT terms, will send not just any messiah, but the One who knows him from before the foundation of the world. We have seen him: Jesus, whom God made both Lord and Christ (χριστος, מְשִׁיחַ; Acts 2:36).

William Carr