

# The Nations in Isaiah 40-55

## A response to Gordon Wenham's *The Nations in the Psalms*



Author: Revd Dr David Spriggs is Bible and Church Consultant at Bible Society.

We are grateful to Gordon for opening up an understanding of the various ways in which 'the nations' function in the Psalms, particularly read through the lens of Psalms 1 and especially 2, from the assumed perspective of the post exilic editors. He highlights 5 themes which he finds in Psalm 2 and then traces how these recur throughout the Psalter. These five themes are

1. The divine choice of David as king. See v. 7
2. The choice of Jerusalem or Zion as God's dwelling place. v. 6
3. The attack of the nations on the Davidic king in Jerusalem. vv. 1-3
4. The defeat of the nations. vv. 8-9
5. The invitation to the nations to serve the LORD. vv. 11-12

This paper looks (very briefly!) at the treatment of 'The Nations' in Isaiah 40-55. The reason for doing this [1] is to compare and contrast this with the views reflected in the psalms, not least because the context for these chapters is usually considered to be that of Israel *before* the return from Babylon. So they give us an insight as to how these themes were being utilised prior to the psalms editors' work. Equally important, however, these chapters, embedded in the Isaiah manuscript, indicate both an awareness of the 'Jerusalem' theology as outlined in the five points above and also a keen awareness of psalm-like materials more generally. So both with respect to theological motifs and also liturgical resources there is much similarity between Isaiah 40-55 and the psalms. Yet there is a key historical contextual difference from within the exile or beyond exile.

As the five points centre around the David king, our entry point will be Isaiah 55:4-5

See, I made him [that is David] a witness to the peoples,  
A leader and commander for the peoples.  
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,  
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,  
because of the Lord you God, the Holy One of Israel,  
for he has glorified you. (All quotations are from the NRSV)

Although this does not apparently make reference to points 2-4 above, 4 may well be included in the concept 'he has glorified you'. This relates to God restoring the exiles, which involves the defeat of Babylon by Cyrus, and of course, before this, the defeat of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. 52:3-6 refer to the oppression of Israel by Egypt and Assyria (interestingly not Babylon!) and the following verses talk about the restoration of Jerusalem (i.e. point 2). Such restoration, and also the deliverance from Babylon with the permission to return to Jerusalem by Cyrus, could well be understood as the historical ways in which Israel was 'glorified' by God.

There are many fascinating points we could make about these verses, but two must suffice. First we note that Israel is not directly involved in the destruction of the nations – David does

not rule over them but for them (does this reflect the historical process of Cyrus defeating Babylon?) and Israel does not even withstand them from Jerusalem let alone defeat them militarily but 'calls to them' – invites them. Secondly this call goes to 'nations they do not know' – so does this mean that their national enemies are not included in this generous offer? Perhaps it should be read more along the lines of 'even nations you do not know' (see for the inclusion of Egypt and Assyria in Isaiah 19:18-24. This is an amazing passage but one which does follow the defeat of Egypt. Note also references to the ends of the earth/coastlands – Isaiah 42:10-13; 43:6; 45:22; 48:20; 49:6.

This approach of 'calling to the nations' concurs with the mission given to the servant in Isaiah 49. Here the servant (Israel) calls to the nations (verses 1-2). Here too is recounted the Servant's mission

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant

To raise up the tribes of Jacob...

I will give you as a light to the nations,

that my salvation may reach the end of the earth. (Verse 6; see also 42:6)

There is a reference to Kings and princes humbling themselves, but also the lament of Zion that God hasn't bothered with her! (Verses 7, 14). The response to this is that the nations will be involved in this restoration process.

It seems as though these chapters are dealing with a double focus (Babylonian exiles and Jerusalem) and seeking to show how God's historical actions integrate them.

One of the strong and recurring emphases in the psalms is the attack on the king or Jerusalem and the defeat of these nations. There are remnants of these motifs in say Isaiah 45:14-16, 20-21) but the military attack/defeat motif appears to be transferred from the nations themselves to their idols, as in Isaiah 46, and rather than military force, irony becomes the main weapon (see also 44:9-20). The main exception to this though is chapter 47 where Babylon is described in her defeated, abject state and this is God taking vengeance (see verses 3-4 and compare 48:14). This was required by the historical events of Babylon being defeated by Cyrus.

## Conclusion

Gordon's paper showed us that the psalms, while they may relate to the five point thematic structure of psalm 2, rarely include all the elements and certainly when read as a whole in their canonical order do not reflect a linear picture. Inherent in them is an apparent contradiction that the nations are both the focus of God's destructive anger and also are allowed, invited, called to join Israel in worshipping him.

Looking briefly into Isaiah chapters 40-55 offers perhaps three further insights. Before the return of the exiles the prophet needed to address two foci at once. In addition to Jerusalem there was Babylon, for as Ezekiel indicates God's locus for salvation had moved to Babylon. Although Jerusalem could never be forgotten.

Secondly, elements of the complex pattern witnessed within the psalms can be glimpsed within these chapters, but, apart from Babylon itself, the emphasis has shifted to the redemptive opportunities for the nations.

Thirdly, the animosity against 'the nations' seems now to have been deflected towards their idols.

This suggests that in post-exilic times, while the psalm editors could include or keep those materials which indicated military aggression against Jerusalem and then by God against those who had carried out the attacks, in reality their emphasis is likely to have been the inclusive one, the nations are invited (or even commanded) to join the covenant or at least worship God.

All of this material may well reflect the historic experiences of Israel (sometime particular nations were the cause of her misery, sometimes those nations shared in her misery and sometimes (as in David's times) Israel may have 'ruled' some of the nations). So her changing historical experiences are reflected in the different aspects of the psalms' themes, as they are more specifically in Isaiah 40-55 with the defeat of Babylon by Cyrus and the freedom to return to Israel. But equally, and in the end more importantly, it is the dynamic of Israel's God to bless the nations through Israel (see Genesis 12:1-3), that is the guiding motif. It is this 'eschatological confidence' which frees Israel to welcome the nations into the worship of her God.

## Notes

[1] There is an insightful over-view of the nations in Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Fortress Press 1997, pages 492 – 527, but remarkably little attention is given to these Isaianic chapters.

---

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/encounters) website ([www.redcliffe.org/encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/encounters)). You may prefer to email your response to [mission@redcliffe.org](mailto:mission@redcliffe.org), in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/encounters) discussion board.