



“To Whom Then Will You Compare Me?” Agency in Second Isaiah

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“**T**O WHOM THEN WILL YOU COMPARE ME?” DOES YAHWEH’S QUESTION (Isa 40:25) admit of no positive answer? God himself makes a powerful case for divine incomparability, especially in Second Isaiah:

“Is there any god besides me? There is no rock; I know not one.” (44:8)

“I am the Lord, and there is no other.” (45:18)

“I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me.” (46:9)

“I am He; I am the first, and I am the last.” (48:12)

One could multiply the references almost at will. This fact has led interpreters to stress not only the uniqueness of Yahweh, who, according to Second Isaiah, alone

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Yahweh, incomparable to other deities, is also incomparable in his willingness to use a wide variety of pictures, likenesses, and comparisons to make himself known to the hearer or reader of Isaiah 40-55. Yahweh, the ultimate agent, is incomparable as well in his willingness to allow the penultimate agency of others in a real world.

wields creative and redemptive power, but also sometimes the insignificance of other agency.¹ After all, when God says,

“I am the Lord, and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the Lord do all these things” (45:6-7),

little room seems to be left for the work of others. God even taunts the gods in this regard:

“Tell us what is to come hereafter,
that we may know that you are gods;
do good, or do harm,
that we may be afraid and terrified.” (41:23)

But the gods cannot. Their “work is nothing at all” (41:24). Yahweh, on the other hand, does do good and does do harm (45:7). Like it or not, case closed. Yahweh is incomparable.²

I. NO OTHER GODS

The argument in Second Isaiah that there is room for no other gods alongside Yahweh is clear. Though the God question for Israel in exile is anything but theoretical, here is where the Old Testament comes closest to a systematic statement of monotheism. In the familiar trial speeches, the gods are tried and found wanting—and finally non-existent.

Indeed, God’s beef with Babylon is precisely that Babylon attempts to put itself in the place of God. Babylon had claimed, “I shall be mistress forever....I am, and there is no one besides me” (47:7-8; cf. v. 10). Only God is Lord (or “mistress,” for that matter—the title, though not used, is not altogether inappropriate for a prophet who emphasizes female images of the deity as much as Second Isaiah); only God can take on his lips these ultimate claims.

To the observer, powerful Babylon was far more likely to prove “mistress of kingdoms” (47:5) than Yahweh, the God of a now insignificant people. But the

¹See, e.g., Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 77: “None of these [other agents] count: Babylonian gods have no voice in the future of Babylon. Cyrus has no clout in the rise of his empire. Israel has no vote on its destiny. Everything is settled on Yahweh’s terms, for Yahweh is without rival, adviser, competitor, or aide.” Brueggemann and others are right, of course, in affirming the ultimate agency of Yahweh for Second Isaiah. The emphasis on this point, however, has tended to negate or minimize an investigation into the real, if penultimate, agency of others.

²The commentators understand this well. And although generally they make the point that the issue in the questions of 40:18 and 25 is Yahweh’s incomparability to other claimants to deity, they frequently become incautious. Yahweh becomes incomparable, period. Conrad, for example, goes beyond the argument of the text when he asserts that Yahweh is incomparable to both “heavenly things” and “earthly things”: Edgar W. Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 69. In his thorough and valuable investigation, C. J. Labuschagne (*The Incomparability of Yahweh in the Old Testament* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966]) asserts correctly that “none can be compared to [Yahweh], that no one and no thing can be placed on a level with Him” (145). What is missing, though, and one thing my essay wants to examine is what comparisons are possible when God places himself on a level with humans.

world had also looked that way centuries before when Yahweh took on the rulers and gods of Egypt.³ If neither Egypt nor Babylon can contend against Yahweh, then surely “all the nations are as nothing before him” (40:17). Evidence to the contrary aside, it is not Babylon who is “mistress of kingdoms” (47:5); it is Yahweh who is Lord of nations. Brueggemann is right in his assertion that, with the absurdity of his claim, the poet of the exile “anticipates Paul: ‘God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are’ (1 Cor. 1:28).”⁴ That observation already makes clear, however, that power images alone will not suffice to describe the unique God of Second Isaiah. The prophet will require a wealth of images to do justice to the wonder of the God he proclaims.

II. INCOMPARABLE YAHWEH?

Indeed, the images and comparisons abound. “To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?” (40:18). Though the prophet immediately answers his own question negatively—in the sense that there is nothing or no one in the *divine* realm with which Yahweh can be compared (certainly not the idols, 40:19-20; certainly not the stars, 40:26)—God goes on throughout the book to make his own comparisons, using a variety of images to bear witness to his person and work. Fittingly, these comparisons come from the realm of creation and human life—fittingly, because the prophet’s question about a “likeness” (דְּמוּת) for Yahweh uses the same term used for the human in Genesis, created in the “likeness” of God (Gen 1:26).⁵

It is simply not the case that the Yahweh of Second Isaiah is “incomparable.” True, there is no comparison in the *heavenly* realm; but in the realm of *creation*, all kinds of images will work. Among other things, God is portrayed as redeemer⁶ (41:14), savior (43:3), maker or potter⁷ (45:9-10), rock (44:8), warrior (42:13),

³For one account of Second Isaiah’s reliance on the exodus tradition, see Erich Zenger, “The God of Exodus in the Message of the Prophets as Seen in Isaiah,” in *Exodus—A Lasting Paradigm*, ed. B. van Iersel and A. Weiler (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987) 22-33.

⁴Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 25.

⁵For Moshe Weinfeld, the Hebrew usage is deliberate, but rather than suggesting similarity between the thought of Second Isaiah and the Priestly writer of Genesis, he maintains that it conveys opposition. In Weinfeld’s reading of this passage, *nothing* (and especially not the human) is in the “likeness” of God (Moshe Weinfeld, “God the Creator in Gen. 1 and in the Prophecy of Second Isaiah,” Hebrew, *Tarbiz* 37 [1968] 122; cited by Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988] 124, note 16). Levenson doubts that the language of Isaiah 40 deliberately counters Genesis 1, but he agrees that “Weinfeld is right to speak of Second Isaiah’s polemical attitude toward the kind of anthropomorphic language that appears in P” (125-126). Given the comparisons placed in God’s own mouth, however, it seems odd to dispute Second Isaiah’s use of anthropomorphisms.

⁶Though it might be argued that “Redeemer” has simply become a title for Yahweh in Second Isaiah (following perhaps Exod 6:6; 15:13), the office itself is first a human one (e.g., Lev 25:25; Ruth 4:4). When Second Isaiah claims that “your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel” (41:14) or that Yahweh gives “Egypt as your ransom” (43:3), it clearly refers back to the familiar human office.

⁷The “potter” image (כֹּרֵךְ) is, of course, another anthropomorphic term familiar to the reader of Genesis (2:7). Whereas Second Isaiah might use “Maker” (like Redeemer) as a virtual title (45:11), it also clearly means to describe the human vocation behind the term (45:9).

woman in labor (42:14), shepherd (40:11), friend (41:8), helper⁸ (41:10), lover (43:4; cf. 49:16⁹), rear guard (52:12), mother (45:10), father (45:10),¹⁰ nurse (49:15), husband, hawker (55:1).¹¹

Not only do these images work, they are apparently necessary—and precisely in their abundance. Surely, Israel in exile is happy to hear that God retains the strength of the divine warrior portrayed in Exodus 15 (cf. v. 3); but the image of “comforter” is at least equally important to this prophet. Thus the poetic play in Isa 40:10-11 is not only esthetically beautiful, it is theologically magnificent. The prophet follows the announcement, “Here is your God!” (40:9), with this description:

See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep. (40:10-11)

Yahweh is both warrior (10) and shepherd (11). The mighty arm that can strike down the foe (10) is the same arm that clutches lambs to the bosom (11). The images are both two and one. Despite the differing pictures, they portray one God. It is not that sometimes God is strong and sometimes God is tender; God’s strength is also God’s tenderness, God’s tenderness is also God’s strength. In bringing these images together, the warrior image especially is sharply redefined. As Zenger notes, Yahweh moves now in “a new direction intended to wean Israel away from all ideas of a strong God who destroys the others; he wants Israel to discover that he is a loving God who wants to bestow new life.”¹²

The juxtaposition in 42:13-14 is also deliberate and necessary. Yahweh is “like a man of war” (13 Heb.); but Yahweh is also “like a woman in labor” (14). One image is incomplete without the other. Here, despite the gender difference, both are images of strength. The mighty warrior and the mighty woman both give birth to release for God’s people. Unlike the gentle servant earlier in the chapter, who does

⁸Here is another term or role borrowed from Genesis, in which the anthropomorphism is extreme. When God notes that “it is not good that the [human] should be alone,” God’s proposed solution is a “helper” or “partner” (Gen 2:18)—a human “other.” Here, Yahweh plays the role of the “helper” (same term: עֹזֵר, i.e., the (human) “significant other” without whom the human is incomplete.

⁹Whether inscribing the other’s name on one’s own hand is meant as a talisman or an act of adoration is uncertain; the fact, however, that both Yahweh (49:16) and Israel (44:5) inscribe the name of the other on their own hands—indeed, probably contrary to Levitical law (Lev 19:28)!—surely signifies a deep and significant relationship.

¹⁰The father and mother images are both developed and amplified in the material of Isaiah 56-66 (see especially 63:16, 17; 64:8; 66:13).

¹¹Neither this list itself nor the particular references are meant to be exhaustive.

¹²Zenger, “The God of Exodus,” 27. Zenger’s comments, relating to Isa 51:9-16, fit equally well in relation to 40:10-11.

not cry or lift his voice (42:3), the warrior "cries out" and "shouts aloud" (13), while the woman will "cry out" and "gasp and pant" (14).¹³ Strength is needed here, but two kinds of strength are depicted, both integral to Israel's God: the strength of the one who battles against the foe and the strength of the one who gives birth to new possibility.

Again, in 45:10, the prophet brings together the roles of father and mother to describe God's own work. Neither begetting nor birthing will alone portray God's creative activity—whether in producing children or moving history. Begetting is a foundational act, an active effort, a planting of the seed of that which is to come; birthing follows through, faithfully endures, brings the creative act to fruition. Both describe God, says the prophet.

There can scarcely be more anthropomorphic images than those of human reproduction and human relationships. Second Isaiah uses them profligately to "bring home" the God of awesome power he so passionately presents, the God who stretches out the heavens, who stirs up Cyrus, who levels the mountains. Third Isaiah will represent well the twin concerns of his forebear when he reports:

For thus says the high and lofty one
 who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
I dwell in the high and holy place,
 and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the humble,
 and to revive the heart of the contrite. (57:15)

Precisely because God is "high and lofty"—and must be so in order to achieve what is required at this moment in Israel's history—it seems that only strikingly anthropomorphic images will do to "comfort" God's people, "to speak to the heart of Jerusalem" (40:1-2 Heb.).¹⁴ A strong God on the warpath might serve to inspire only terror—as indeed Babylon seeks to do (47:12)—but Yahweh, though incomparable in strength, does not seek to terrify his people; on the contrary, this God calls Israel repeatedly to "fear not" (40:9; 41:10, 13-14; and often). Theologically, the prophet's move in all of this is toward incarnation—or at least toward "Immanuel." The awesome Creator Yahweh becomes the loving Redeemer Yahweh. God's holiness becomes defined by God's compassion:

But now thus says the Lord,
 He who created you, O Jacob,
 He who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you....

¹³Although the vocabulary for "cry out" is different in each of the three verses, the connections seem deliberate.

¹⁴Rainer Albertz has pointed out that the historical and communal crisis precipitated by the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile required Second Isaiah to employ a different tradition to reach the people, namely, the tradition of individual creation and familial care: R. Albertz, *Weltschöpfung und Menschenschöpfung: Untersucht bei Deuteronesaja, Hiob, und in den Psalmen* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1974) 7-54, esp. 51.

For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior....
Do not fear, for I am with you. (43:1-5)

Another portrayal of God in this material, perhaps stronger rhetorically (and theologically) precisely because explicit language of comparison is lacking, proclaims a God involved in what Luther would elsewhere call the “happy exchange,” God becoming like us in order that we might be made like God: “Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I” (52:6).

We will not properly hear the radicality of the “Here am I” in the mouth of Yahweh (picked up also in Isa 58:9 and 65:1) unless we hear it first in the mouths of others, people of God responding to a call from God in what is apparently the only appropriate language: “Here I am!” (הִנְנִי)—that is, “Yes, Lord, I am at your disposal; I can do no other.” Mary, perhaps, said it best, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). But she stood toward the end of a long line of people, extending through the Bible, astonished to be addressed by the living God: Abraham (Gen 22:1), Jacob (31:11; 46:2), Moses (Exod 3:4), Samuel (1 Sam 3:4-8), Isaiah (Isa 6:8), Ananias (Acts 9:10).

Now, in Second and Third Isaiah (and only there), the same words are found in the mouth of God. God becomes the dutiful servant, responding in the language most appropriately used in answering the call of a superior (either God, as we have seen, or an earthly father or master as in Gen 27:1, 18; 37:13; 1 Sam 3:4). God humbles himself, “ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,” holding out his hands “all day long to a rebellious people,” saying “Here I am” even before his people call (Isa 65:1-2). God places himself at human disposal—indeed, precisely during their rebellion. In this view, it is not threat that will subdue rebellion but compassion. The Christian reader is reminded of Paul’s surprise that “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

In the canonical context of the book of Isaiah, we must, of course, hear God’s “Here I am” as an echo of the eighth-century prophet’s answer to God’s own query: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’” (Isa 6:8). The book has come full circle: the God who summoned has become the God responding to summons. God now stands in for the prophet, announcing to Israel, “Here am I; send me!” Only God will be able to overcome the destruction announced by Isaiah of old (6:9-13)—and that only through compassion. Only God—but precisely a God taking up the human role of the redeemer (לְאֵלֵינוּ)—can redeem “without money” a people “sold for nothing” (52:3). Theologically, this move is now quite legitimately called incarnational: God has taken a human voice.

III. A MULTITUDE OF AGENTS

The insistence that God alone is Creator and Redeemer, strong as it is in this book, does not exclude the reality of other agency. God is surely the ultimate agent,

but other agents are many: Israel, Cyrus, the servant, the prophet, the unnamed heralds, Jerusalem, creation, Babylon, the nations—all have real and active work in the theological vision of Second Isaiah. Sometimes it is easy to distinguish among these agents; sometimes it is not.

Babylon, for example, is easy. By the time we meet Babylon here, its work is seen only as destructive. Still, the prophet remembers that this hated enemy was, in fact, God’s chosen tool to punish God’s chosen people (47:6; cf., e.g., Jer 20:4-6). Is Babylon, then, simply an unwilling actor in a bleak tragedy, called to its dark role and then condemned for performing it? Where is meaningful agency in that? But this is not the prophet’s view. The problem for Second Isaiah is not that Babylon performed its assigned role, but that it enjoyed it altogether too much.

- A I was angry with my people, I profaned my heritage;
A I gave them into your hand,
B you showed them no mercy;
B on the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy. (47:6)

In the eyes of the prophet, Babylon had a real choice and took it. It went beyond the assigned role, one of meting out justice (i.e., punishment fitting the crime), and became instead despot and torturer—particularly of those least guilty and most vulnerable, lacking fully the compassion of the judge who assigned the role in the first place. The accountability of Babylon shows that God’s announced creation of “evil” in Second Isaiah (45:7) does not make God the author of moral evil.¹⁵ Babylon’s agency, limited though it is, remains—and it matters, certainly to the fate of Israel and of Babylon, but also to God, who is now moved to intervene against Babylon with a judgment that is fierce, precisely because Babylon failed to contemplate the consequences of its actions (47:7, 10), and to act for Israel with a compassion that is unprecedented, precisely because Israel has been made to pay “double for all her sins” (40:2).

Similarly, Israel, too, is responsible for its own failures. Israel had brought judgment upon itself (42:24-25; 43:27-28), and, even now, makes matters worse through its recalcitrance. In refusing to acknowledge Yahweh’s admittedly surprising choice of Cyrus as God’s own shepherd (44:28) and anointed one (“messiah”!)—45:1), Israel limits its own possibility of salvation (45:9-13). Israel, even while being offered redemption, thus becomes “stubborn of heart” and “far from deliverance” (46:12). To be sure, God will continue to bring deliverance near (46:13), for it is God’s purpose that Jerusalem be rebuilt (44:28), but Israel’s rebellion threatens to stand in the way of God’s being God.¹⁶

¹⁵J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992) 7, is correct that “the association of good and evil within the divine provides fertile ground for tragic awareness to grow.” The reality of other agency in Second Isaiah, however, prevents that prophet from embracing full blown the tragic vision’s emphasis on inescapable fate.

¹⁶For a more detailed analysis of God’s judgment of a despairing Israel in 46:3-13, see Frederick Gaiser, “Remember the Former Things of Old’: A New Look at Isaiah 46:3-13,” in *All Things New: Essays in Honor of Roy A. Harrisville*, ed. A. Hultgren, D. Juel, J. Kingsbury, Word & World Supplement Series 1 (St. Paul, MN: Word & World, 1992) 53-64.

Agency in this book is not limited to negative acts, however. Others can do more than merely say no to divine grace. Creation cooperates in deliverance at every stage, singing Yahweh's praises and responding with fecundity (e.g., 55:12-13). The heralds, human and divine, announce God's coming (40:3, 9) and God's rule (52:7) and call the prophet to action (40:6). Israel functions as Yahweh's threshing sledge (41:15), crushing the mountains and apparently thereby playing its own role in preparing the way of the Lord in fulfilment of the promise of the prologue (40:4). The nations, unlike the gods (41:23), *can* do both good and harm: they carry and nurture Israel (49:22-23), but they might also "stir up strife," even apart from Yahweh's will (54:15). Though the prophet sees that such striving will fail, it is real intermediate agency. Cyrus, obviously, has a major role, delivering nations and trampling kings (41:2, 25), opening doors that shall not be closed (45:1), building Jerusalem and liberating God's people (45:13).¹⁷

The prophet himself proclaims a word that accomplishes God's purpose, the restoration of Israel (49:6); but, more, in the power of his preaching and the beauty of his poetry he becomes "a light to the nations" (49:6).¹⁸ Nowhere else in Holy Scripture is the power and efficacy of God's word described so fully as in Second Isaiah (especially 40:1-11; 55:10-11). To be sure, the creative and redemptive power of God's word lies in the fact that it is *God's* word. The prophet has no delusions of grandeur: human efforts are finite ("the grass withers, the flower fades"); it is only the word of our God that "will stand forever" (40:8). But the finite efforts of the prophet are not without their own merit. No discussion of agency in Second Isaiah would be complete without mention of the poetic brilliance of the prophet's material. This poetry and the prophet who composed it are surely numbered among the "crown[s] of beauty in the hand of the Lord" (62:3). Although the efficacy of the word comes from God, formulating and delivering the word remains a creative human task. Failed agency here would have disastrous and real—even if, for this prophet, perhaps not ultimate—consequence for the purpose God's word is meant to fulfill (55:11).¹⁹

The servant of God, as portrayed in these chapters, has a unique and overwhelming task: the servant brings forth "justice to the nations" (42:1); the

¹⁷As my colleague Terry Fretheim has pointed out, Cyrus's active role in the judgment of Babylon and the redemption of Israel means that even the strong assertion that Yahweh creates weal and woe, light and darkness (Isa 45:7) does not mean, contrary to Westermann, that "every event that happens" is "attributable to him, and to him alone" (so Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969] 161-162). Fretheim argues that Cyrus is more than a "divine puppet, whose will and power count for nothing.... Though it is not possible to factor out the divine and human powers at work in the situation, Isaiah 45:7 asserts that God's action is the decisive reality. Yet, no claims are made that God is the all-determinative actor in this (or any other) situation": Terence E. Fretheim, "Divine Dependence upon the Human: An Old Testament Perspective," *Ex Auditu* 13 (1997) 1-13, especially 6-7.

¹⁸Among others, Manfred Weippert makes a convincing case that especially the second and third "servant songs" (49:1-6; 50:4-9) reflect the experience of the prophet himself. See M. Weippert, "Die 'Konfessionen' Deuterocesajas," in *Schöpfung und Befreiung: Für Claus Westermann zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. R. Albertz, F. Golka, J. Kehler (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1989) 104-115.

¹⁹On the complex interrelatedness of the work of the prophet and the work of God, see, e.g., Abraham Heschel, "Prophecy and Poetic Inspiration," in *The Prophets*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 147-169.

coastlands “wait for his teaching” (42:4); the servant is sent to “bring Jacob back to [God], and that Israel might be gathered to him,” but is then re-commissioned “as a light to the nations, that [God’s] salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:5-6); the servant knows “how to sustain the weary with a word” (50:4); amazingly, he “bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (53:12).²⁰

Who is it, then, that does God’s own creative and liberating work as described in Isaiah 40-55? Is it the servant? Israel? The prophet? Cyrus? God himself? Interestingly, the distinctions are not always easy. The relationship (even identity) between Israel and the servant has been observed and argued throughout the history of the interpretation of these texts. In recent years, the identity of the servant has come to be understood not as “a puzzle to be solved”; rather, the “force of the poem [Isa 52:13-53:12]...lies in its very unforthcomingness, its refusal to be precise.”²¹ This literary observation has profound theological significance. It implies that the work of God is the work of the many is the work of one, which is, in turn, the work of the many and the work of God. The irreducible complexity is not only a literary reality, it is a theological reality. The work of God is so closely associated with the work of the servant and, in turn, with the work of Israel that the book’s promise of God to be *with* us is extended to the reality of God’s being *in* us.²²

There are many places where the various agencies, though properly different in themselves, cannot be cleanly distinguished. In 45:10-11, God opens doors through the agency of Cyrus; God breaks the “doors of bronze” and cuts through the “bars of iron.” But whose work is it in 42:7 to “bring out the prisoners from the dungeon”? Is the “you” of this text the servant introduced in 42:1-4? Is it Israel? Is it Cyrus again? Is it the prophet (the “light to the nations” reference might suggest that—cf. 49:6)? The text is simply unclear. The work is God’s work. The work is done through “you.”

Yahweh’s “purpose” is to rebuild Jerusalem. Is the purpose carried out by Cyrus (44:28)? Or the prophet, as proclaimer of the word (55:11)? Or the servant, precisely in his suffering (53:10)? In each verse, God’s purpose is described by the same

²⁰Despite recent scholarship’s proper refusal to read the four “classical” servant songs apart from the context of the entire corpus, there remains a difference between those passages in which Israel, as servant, is the recipient of Yahweh’s gracious compassion (e.g., 41:8-10) and those in which the servant is enlisted for a task (e.g., 42:1-4). The obvious structural relatedness of these two examples—one, (the second) a so-called “servant song,” the other not—is used by Mettinger (among others) as a key element in his call to bid “farewell to the servant songs” once and for all. To be sure, the literary connections require that the two texts be read and interpreted together, but not that they be seen as identical. There remains a legitimate distinction between *Gabe* and *Aufgabe* (gift and task). Cf. Trygve Mettinger, *A Farewell to the Servant Songs: A Critical Examination of an Exegetical Axiom* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1983).

²¹David J. A. Clines, *I, He, We, and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 1 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1973) 25; cf. also Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 93: “The veiled manner of speaking [in every one of the servant songs] is intentional.”

²²Prescott Williams, “The Poems about Incomparable Yahweh’s Servant in Isaiah 40-55,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 11 (1968) 73-87, is misleading, then, in relating Yahweh’s incomparability to the servant poems. Though Yahweh identifies with the work of the servant, Yahweh, especially in these poems, is precisely *not* “the sole Actor in and Shaper of the world....the sole and only Mover and shaper of men and history” (74-75).

root (יָצַק), though the agency and the agent are different. The work of God is complex, and inseparably linked with the work of those whom God chooses to carry it out.

Who needs to wake up in order that God's work might be done? God (51:9)? Or Israel (51:17; 52:1)? Or both?

Among the many other possible examples, particularly interesting are the direct connections (and distinctions) between the work of Yahweh and the work of the servant. On the one hand, as we have seen, the servant does not cry out (42:2), while Yahweh (as warrior and as woman) does (42:13-14). There is a clear distinction between the gentle justice of the servant and the fierce retribution of the divine warrior (cf. also 42:3 and 43:17). This will not, however, permit us to deny to Yahweh the attributes of the servant, for he takes them unto himself. In 51:4-5, the justice and the teaching for which the coastlands wait (using the same language as 42:1-4) comes directly from Yahweh. Here, Yahweh's justice is perceived as "a light to the peoples"; for his arm "[the nations] hope." This does not seem to describe the justice of retaliation or the arm of the conquering warrior; now, Yahweh's justice and Yahweh's light reach out to the nations, not against them, just as they had done through the servant (42:1-4) and the prophet (49:6).

Finally, then, the texts do not allow us to separate a powerful God from a suffering servant, a gentle shepherd from a conquering Cyrus, an otherworldly servant from a this-worldly prophet. God's work includes both justice and love; God's work of justice and love is incarnate in the prophet and in the servant, in Cyrus and in Israel.

IV. YAHWEH AND THE SERVANT

What will we make now of the question posed above: Does the prophet deliberately toy with the language of Genesis 1 when he asks with what "likeness" we can compare Yahweh (40:18)? Given the anthropomorphisms that riddle the following chapters, it seems difficult to rule out the possibility. The preceding argument in 40:12-17 uses familiar creation vocabulary from Genesis 1—the "waters," "the heavens," "the earth," the "spirit" of the Lord, the "animals." In a reverse of Genesis 1, creation does not *spring* from "a formless void" (רֵבְבוֹתָיִם הַתְהוֹמֹת Gen 1:1); it *returns* to it: "All the nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness [תְהוֹמֹתַיִם]" (40:17). In the face of such emptiness, produced paradoxically by the Creator himself,²³ the prophet finds it necessary to raise the God question, apparently employing again the language of the Priestly creation narrative: "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?" (18).

Will Second Isaiah be able to follow his apparent source and speak of the human as the "likeness" of God, the one to whom God might properly be compared?

²³The use of the same vocabulary of creation and chaos in Isa 45:18-19, in a text obviously speaking of creation (probably through the word), tends to confirm the intended use of the language of Genesis 1 here in Isaiah 40.

Would that not compromise the prophet’s need for a “big God”? Perhaps not. The “big” alternatives must surely be rejected, and they are. No idols, no stars, no gods can maintain their claim to divinity alongside Yahweh. But the God of Second Isaiah embraces the “small”—renewing the “faint” and the “powerless” (40:29), proclaiming solidarity with the “worm Jacob” (41:14), regarding Israel as “precious” (43:4), welcoming the acclaim of jackals and ostriches (43:20), caring for the remnant of Israel (46:3), carrying the children and the aged (46:4), allotting the despised servant “a portion with the great” (53:12), comforting the barren (54:1), extending to all the covenant with David (55:3). Though Yahweh is surely the author of creation and not a part thereof, he finds no need to distance himself from his creation. Being found comparable with the creation that is his own will not disturb such a God.

So where does the prophet’s argument regarding Yahweh’s likeness go? Having ruled out the big alternatives, he introduces Cyrus to do God’s “heavy-handed” work (41:2), once again dismisses the idols (41:7),²⁴ encourages Israel (41:8-20), and again refutes the gods (41:21-29). Having done all this, he is, at the end of chapter 41, precisely where he was just before he raised the comparability question in 40:18—at chaos, *תִּהְיֶה*, nothing at all: “No, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their images are empty wind (*תִּהְיֶה*)” (41:29). This return to *תִּהְיֶה* may well trigger in the mind of the reader the question of Yahweh’s likeness, precipitated the last time around (40:18) by similar thoughts of emptiness (40:17). If so, we are set up for the surprising response of 42:1: “Here is my servant.” Whether or not this is a deliberate literary connection, i.e.,

emptiness of the nations	40:17	emptiness of the nations’ gods	41:29
who is Yahweh’s likeness?	40:18	Here is my servant	42:1,

the course of the argument and the common vocabulary make it at least possible for the reader to hear Yahweh’s introduction of the servant as God’s own answer to the question of a comparable likeness. Can this be intended? The argument itself, the possible structural and linguistic connections, the attribution to Yahweh in 51:4-5 of the work ascribed to the servant in 42:1-4,²⁵ and the prophet’s propensity to audacity (Cyrus as Yahweh’s “messiah”?) won’t allow the reader to rule out the possibility.²⁶

Eventually, the New Testament will see Jesus in the role of the servant of Isaiah 42 (Matt 12:18). If the prophet has already hinted at Yahweh’s assuming this

²⁴This seems to employ another play on Genesis 1. Mimicking God’s pronouncement of his creation as “good” (Gen 1:9, etc.), the idol makers try to say the same thing about the work of their hands, their gods (41:7). The satire is rich and typical: “goodness” is attempted to be imposed from beneath, rather than given from above.

²⁵See above, p. 150.

²⁶The prophet returns to the theme of emptiness in the lengthy satirical judgment of the idols in 44:9-20: “All who make idols are nothing (*תִּהְיֶה*)” (44:9). Interestingly, this passage is itself surrounded by two servant poems (44:1-8; 44:21-22)—servant, nothingness, servant. Is there a pattern developing that juxtaposes servant language and *תִּהְיֶה*? It happens again in a different way in 49:4 where the despairing servant fears that his own labor has been “for nothing” (*תִּהְיֶה*). God, in response to this renewed threat of chaos, says in effect: “Let there be light!” i.e., “I will give you as a light to the nations” (49:6).

role, Matthew's assertion may not be as surprising as it has usually appeared. But is it conceivable to see Yahweh in this role already in Isaiah? Clearly, it is a role that he would have to choose himself. In what might be termed something of a mirror-image servant song, God condemns Israel for attempting to enslave or "en-servant" him (43:22-24).²⁷ Yahweh has not "burdened" (hiphil of עָבַד—to cause to be slave, to enslave, to "en-servant")²⁸ Israel (43:23); Israel has "burdened" or "en-servanted" Yahweh (43:24). Yahweh, then, cannot and will not allow himself to remain "en-servanted"; but he will, in the next passage, reaffirm his choice of Israel as "servant" (44:1). In the mirror-image song itself, Yahweh responds to Israel's burdening not with renewed judgment, but with forgiveness (43:25). Judgment belonged to the past (43:28). Now is the time for forgiveness: Yahweh performs for Israel the same "service" of forgiveness that is later performed by the servant (53:12). While Yahweh cannot be enslaved, Yahweh can and does serve.²⁹

Incomparable Yahweh? Yes! Incomparable to other deities, of course, but also incomparable in his willingness to be comparable, to use a wide variety of pictures and likenesses to make himself known to the hearer or reader of these profound poems. Incomparable as well in his willingness to allow the penultimate agency of others in a real world. Though certainly incomparable in the divine realm—no one else need apply!—Yahweh seems to have little need to assert his divine prerogatives for their own sake. Yes, he will come on strong when strength is required; but he will come tenderly when tenderness is required. Indeed, if necessary, *he* will come as *she*. Second Isaiah proclaims a strong and unique God, his praises sung by all creation, but a God fully willing to humble himself and come to his people as helper, lover, and friend, fully willing to employ human agency in fulfilling his purpose. Perhaps the early church composed its own christological hymn, consciously or not, in response to the message of this remarkable theologian:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5-11) ⊕

²⁷Form-critically, Westermann calls this passage a trial speech against Israel (*Isaiah* 40-66, 130), which it is. In content, however, it functions as a negative servant poem.

²⁸This is the only use of the verb עָבַד in these chapters.

²⁹See the discussion of this passage in Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 140: In bearing the sins of the others, "the servant of God thus assumes the role which God himself has played. Just as it entailed suffering for the servant, it must have entailed suffering for God. By bearing the sins of the people over a period of time, God suffers in some sense on their behalf."