



Redemption and the “New Exodus” in Isaiah: Reflections on Mikhail Gorbachev and Cyrus of Persia

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The ancient memory of the exodus is important for understanding the vision set forth in the prophetic book of Isaiah. Drawing on memories of the exodus, those who wrote and shaped Isaiah speak of a new exodus, confident that the God of Israel has the power to liberate people who are once again in bondage. The author of Isa 40–48 was convinced that Cyrus, the emperor of Persia, was the agent through whom God would bring about a new “exodus event” in the world. In this paper, I suggest that when thinking about Cyrus, it can be helpful to think also about Mikhail Gorbachev (General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 until 1991 and President of the Soviet Union from 1988 until its dissolution in 1991). Many people have looked upon Gorbachev as a liberator or source of redemption in much the same way that Cyrus of Persia is remembered in Isaiah. The comparison of these leaders can help us think in a new way about the book of Isaiah as a theological interpretation of history. More specifically, the com-

According to Isaiah, God can use even those who do not know him in the divine work of freedom and liberation. Thus, it is fitting to compare Cyrus, the Persian emperor who allowed the return to Jerusalem of God’s people exiled in Babylon, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union who was hailed by many as a liberator of Eastern Europe.

parison illuminates the themes of exodus and redemption in both the Isaiah scroll and in our contemporary world.

THE LEGACY OF MIKHAIL GORBACHEV

Two events speak to the historical importance of Mikhail Gorbachev. Both events happened at Alexanderplatz in the center of Berlin. The first took place on October 7, 1989, following a summer of unrest, with protest marches in Leipzig, Dresden, and Berlin, and most frightening, the flight of some 250,000 young people from East Germany to Hungary, where they crossed the “iron curtain” to Austria and then found their way to West Germany. The Berlin event on October 7, 1989, was not a protest gathering. Rather, it was a patriotic event planned and orchestrated by the East German government of Erik Honecker to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the DDR, the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (1949–1989). Communist party officials gathered from all over East Germany to mark the anniversary. The guests of honor included leaders of other Eastern bloc countries and, as the leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. A highlight of the evening program was a torchlight procession by thousands of young people from across East Germany, the brightest and best of the leaders of the patriotic FDJ, the Freie Deutsche Jugend (the “Free German Youth”). It was much like a gathering of outstanding Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in the United States.

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As the evening torchlight parade concluded, something quite unexpected happened. Unplanned and unscripted, the youth leaders from across East Germany began spontaneously to chant, “Gorbi! Gorbi! Gorbi!” They were not cheering for Eric Honecker or the East German officials. They were expressing support for Mikhail Gorbachev and his newly stated foreign policies of *glasnost* (openness or transparency) and *perestroika* (the right of each Eastern bloc country to determine the specifics of their own development). Some historians have contended that this unexpected response by youth leaders hastened the fall of the East German government that came only a few weeks later. Their unplanned expression of support for Gorbachev demonstrated that the government no longer had the support of its brightest and best youth leaders.

The second event also occurred at Alexanderplatz. The time was October 2009. The event was held to mark the twentieth anniversary of that earlier gathering. At this second event, almost 500,000 people gathered and, once again, the guest of honor was Mikhail Gorbachev. When he appeared, the crowd broke out in

the chant from 1989: “Gorbi! Gorbi! Gorbi!” Twenty years after the initial event, Mikhail Gorbachev was still being remembered as the world leader who made possible a new era of hope for former East German residents and for many others throughout Eastern Europe.

MEMORIES OF CYRUS OF PERSIA

Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire (539–333 B.C.E.), rose to power during the last years of the Babylonian Empire. Babylon, the dominant world power following the fall of Assyria in 612 B.C.E., had been ruthless in punishing a series of small nations for acts of rebellion. Judah was among them. Jerusalem was attacked and punished first in 598 B.C.E. with a deportation of people, including the young king, Jehoiachin, and other members of the royal family. Eleven years later, in 587 B.C.E., following new acts of rebellion, Babylon once again sent an army that almost totally destroyed Jerusalem. Again, numbers of people were deported to exile in Babylon. Only much later, after the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562, did Babylonian power began to wane.

Cyrus was born at about 590 B.C.E. in Parsa. We know virtually nothing of his early life, but scholars believe that he assumed the throne of Persia by about 559 B.C.E. If the ancient Greek historian Herodotus is correct, Cyrus won a decisive victory over Astyages and the Medes in about 550, and followed that victory with campaigns against Lydia in 547, and then against Ionia and Sardis. He took control of the northern plateau of Iran by 546–540 B.C.E.

Cyrus seems to have worked diligently to put in place new administrative controls to command the vast territory he had conquered. He constructed a new capital city, Pasargadae, in his home province of Parsa. Before conquering the city of Babylon, he apparently mounted a major propaganda campaign against the reigning Babylonian king, Nabonidus, who had lost favor with many in Babylon, especially with members of the established priesthood, the priests of Marduk.¹ We do not know exactly how Cyrus conquered Babylon but the transition from Nabonidus to Cyrus seems to have happened rather quickly and without massive destruction. What we have are the positive memories about Cyrus preserved in the Babylonian Chronicle, in the Cyrus cylinder, in the reports of Herodotus, and in the glowing accounts preserved in Ezra, Chronicles, and Isaiah.²

Cyrus gained a reputation as a benevolent ruler, one who was generous and respectful of people from diverse religious traditions. In some reports, we are told that when the Persian army arrived in 539 B.C.E., the priests within the city of Babylon arranged for the city gates to be opened, allowing the conquering army to enter without resistance. Cyrus reaffirmed Marduk as the city god of Babylon and left lo-

¹See Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Cosmological and Protological Language in Deutero-Isaiah,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73/3 (2011) 493–510.

²See David Vanderhooft, “Cyrus II, Liberator or Conqueror? Ancient Historiography concerning Cyrus in Babylon,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006) 351–372.

cal cultural and religious customs largely undisturbed. His famous decree, preserved both at the end of Chronicles (2 Chr 36:22–23) and at the beginning of Ezra (Ezra 1:1–4), permitted exiles from Judah to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their temple, bringing an end to that era that has been called the “Babylonian Captivity,” Judah’s era of exile (587–539 B.C.E.).³

In fact, that edict probably was a further demonstration of Cyrus’s shrewd grasp of foreign policy. He was, above all, a conqueror and a man of war. But he allowed people who had been forcibly sent into exile to return to their original homes, provided that they continued to swear loyalty to him. Herodotus reports that some nine years later Cyrus died in battle in 530 B.C.E., in the midst of a new campaign against the tribe of the Massagetai on Iran’s northeastern border.⁴

REDEMPTION RHETORIC IN ISAIAH

In Isaiah, the Hebrew verbs *padhah* and *ga’al* are the primary Hebrew terms that convey the understanding of redemption. In 50:2, *padhah* is used to declare the impending redemption of exiles:

Why was no one there when I came?
 Why did no one answer when I called?
 Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem (*padhah*)?
 Or have I no power to deliver?
 By my rebuke I dry up the sea,
 I make the rivers a desert;
 their fish stink for lack of water,
 and die of thirst.

In Isa 51:10–11, *padhah* is used in parallel with *ga’al* in the text:

Was it not you who dried up the sea,
 the waters of the great deep;
 who made the depths of the sea a way
 for the redeemed (*ga’al*) to cross over?
 So the ransomed (*padhah*) of the LORD shall return,
 and come to Zion with singing....

Here the author combines memories of the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the sea with the expectation of a return to Zion; the memory of the exodus provides the foundation for declarations about a new event of redemption in the Isaiah scroll.

Ga’al is the primary term used to express the notion of redemption in Isaiah and appears in four texts in Isaiah 40–48:

But now thus says the LORD,
 he who created you, O Jacob,

³Interestingly, neither Chronicles nor Ezra makes reference to Isaiah. Instead both texts refer to the prophetic words attributed to the prophet Jeremiah who is remembered warning of a generation or lifespan (seventy years) of captivity and then spoke of a return to the land (Jer 25:11 and 29:10).

⁴See T. Cuyler Young, Jr., “Cyrus,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1:1231–1232.

he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed (*ga'al*) you;
I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isa 43:1)

I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud,
and your sins like mist;
return to me, for I have redeemed (*ga'al*) you.
Sing, O heavens, for the LORD has done it;
shout, O depths of the earth;
break forth into singing, O mountains,
O forest, and every tree in it!
For the LORD has redeemed (*ga'al*) Jacob,
and will be glorified in Israel. (Isa 44:22–23)

In Isaiah 48:20, the reference to a new exodus becomes quite specific:

Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,
declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it,
send it forth to the end of the earth;
say, “The LORD has redeemed (*ga'al*) his servant Jacob!”

Also:

Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed (*ga'al*) Jerusalem. (Isa 52:9)

In all four passages, the prophetic writer is declaring that the God of Israel is at work in the world to bring redemption and liberation for captive exiled people.⁵

CYRUS OF PERSIA AS THE AGENT OF REDEMPTION

One of the most striking features of the Isaiah scroll is that in three particular texts the author cites a specific foreign emperor, Cyrus, as the agent through whom redemption for exiled people will come. In Isa 44:24–28, in 45:1–8, and in 45: 9–17, the author uses divine speech to declare the word of the Lord:

Isaiah 44: 21–28: Has God Forgotten His People?

Remember these things, O Jacob,
and Israel, for you are my servant;
I formed you, you are my servant;
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me. (Isa 44:21)

This was, of course, the fundamental question of the exile: Has God forgotten his people? Is God powerless amid the ruthless course of world empires and emperors? The poet speaks first of creation and of the One who has created and formed all things. It is God who has created and stretched out the heavens, who

⁵See further, Dale Patrick, “Redeem, Redeemer,” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 4:753–754.

frustrates the omens of liars and makes fools of diviners. It is God who is the source of human energy who can be trusted to bring redemption and restoration.

In 44:26–28, the author continues,
who confirms the word of his servant,
and fulfills the prediction of his messengers;
who says of Jerusalem, “It shall be inhabited,”
and of the cities of Judah, “They shall be rebuilt,
and I will raise up their ruins”;
who says to the deep, “Be dry—
I will dry up your rivers.”

Then the poet becomes specific and declares,

who says of Cyrus, “He is my shepherd,
and he shall carry out all my purpose.”

Isaiah 45:1–8: The Lord’s Word to Cyrus

The second lyric poem that follows directly is even more startling. Again using divine speech, the author declares:

Thus says the LORD to his anointed (*mashiakh*), to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him
and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him—
and the gates shall not be closed:
I will go before you
and level the mountains,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron,
I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
For the sake of my servant Jacob
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by name,
I surname you, though you do not know me.

The last line is particularly instructive. The author clearly knows who Cyrus is. He knows what he is doing or what he has done. The fact that Cyrus knows nothing of Yahweh makes no difference at all. The focus is on the humane policy of Cyrus; it is that policy that made possible the hope of restoration for exiled peoples. Thus Cyrus can be declared to be an instrument of God and the source of new redemptive activity in the world.

Isaiah 45:9–17: “He Shall Build My City”

In Isa 45:9–17, the poet continues to give theological reflection on what is happening in the world: God, who made the earth and all nations, is the One who

stretched out the heavens and commands the hosts of heaven, so again the author can declare with divine speech:

I have aroused Cyrus [Hebrew: him] in righteousness,
and I will make all his paths straight;
he shall build my city
and set my exiles free,
not for price or reward,
says the LORD of hosts. (Isa 45:13)

The conviction that a new era of hope is emerging dominates the entire center section of the Isaiah scroll (chaps. 40–55). We hear the mood of hope already in the opening lines: “Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God” (Isa 40:1).

Why comfort? The author answers: Because “she (Jerusalem) has served her term” and has “received from the LORD’s hand double for her sins” (v. 2). So the poet can declare: “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (v. 3). The possibility for people to return to their homeland is coming!

THE REDEMPTION MOTIF: “I AM ABOUT TO DO A NEW THING”

In Isaiah, God’s redemptive activity is directly related to the actions of a particular foreign king at a particular time in history. The hope focused on Cyrus led the author to encourage people to turn away from sadness and despair concerning the past. In Isaiah, people are to take their orientation for faith not from the past alone, but now also from the conviction of what the future will bring. In a profound way, this prophetic writing articulates what we have come to call eschatological thinking, shifting the basis for faith from the past to future hope.

Throughout the Isaiah scroll and, indeed, throughout prophetic literature, there is a common conviction that tyrants do not last forever. Sooner or later, tyrant kings and arrogant leaders fall.

Later generations in Judah clearly recalled the events related to Cyrus and understood that the words of Isaiah had come to pass. Cyrus brought a new era for Jerusalem. The groups who returned to Jerusalem may at first have been quite small in number, and the era of various returns probably stretched out over the following century. But those who did return managed to reestablish Jerusalem and they remembered the actions of Cyrus in a very special way as part of their history. With the edict of Cyrus, a new era in the history of Israel had begun.

Throughout the Isaiah scroll and, indeed, throughout prophetic literature, there is a common conviction that tyrants do not last forever. Tyrant kings may cause great terror and devastation in the world. Worst of all, such kings bring the horrors of war. But sooner or later, tyrant kings and arrogant leaders fall. That was

the expectation for the Assyrian empire (Isa 10:5–34) and for Babylon as well (Isa 13–14; 47:1–15).⁶ By their actions, kings can be understood either as instruments of destruction or as agents of redemption in the world.

The themes of redemption in prophetic literature are clearly rooted in earlier biblical traditions that speak of the activity of God as both creator and redeemer. The promise of a rainbow, the sign to Noah of God’s steadfast love, is implied in Isa 54:9. Abraham and Sarah are cited in Isaiah 51:1–2. But most of all, the memories of Moses and the exodus from Egypt provided the foundation for the prophetic belief that God would continue to act in a similar way (Isa 48:20–21 and 51:9–11). The God of Israel did not create the world for chaos; rather, God’s intention is for order and for the welfare of all humanity (Isa 46:18); the Lord God intends that the covenant established with Moses should be renewed in each generation.⁷ Thus, the author can speak to captive people of a new exodus, consistent with the ancient promises of God.

The author is declaring that those ancient promises were not made null and void by the tragedy of Jerusalem or by the exile of the people.⁸ In Isa 43:16–17, the author draws specifically from the exodus tradition, declaring:

Thus says the Lord,
 who makes a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters,
 who brings out chariot and horse,
 army and warrior;
 they lie down, they cannot rise,
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.

Drawing from that memory, the author continues:

Do not remember the former things,
 or consider the things of old.
 I am about to do a new thing;

⁶In Isa 10:5–11, Assyria is understood as an instrument of judgment; there the poet declares the word of the Lord who announces that Assyria is to be “the rod of my anger.” Yet that same author goes on to speak of the arrogance and excessive violence of Assyrian leaders who have no understanding of what they are doing other than seeking to dominate others (vv. 7–12); then in vv. 12–19, the author makes it clear that judgment will eventually also come for the arrogant empire. In a similar way, the author of Isa 47:1–15 announces a word of judgment on arrogant Babylon. See also Jer 25:8–14, where, in a word of judgment, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is still called “God’s servant.”

⁷It appears that the author also had Cyrus of Persia in mind with the words of Isa 46:8–11: “Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention, calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my purpose from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it.’”

⁸James Sanders, drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, uses the phrase “Integrity of Reality” to speak of the vision of the author in this text concerning the nature of God in the exilic chapters in the Isaiah scroll. See his essays “Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon” and “From Sacred Story to Sacred Text,” in *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 9–39 and 175–191. He writes, “It is the faith of the Bible that God can take whatever evil we do or is done to us and redeem it. He can signify power flows and even the awful destruction that one people can wreck on another. There is no claim that we can signify such. The claim is, rather, that the Integrity of Reality can reach in and through the worst we do to each other precisely because God is universal Creator as well as Redeemer. Suffering and death do not stump God, even the crucifixion of the best you have known....God is the God of death as well as of life” (189).

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert. (Isa 43:18–19)

THINKING ABOUT CYRUS AND MIKHAIL GORBACHEV

There are some obvious limitations in the attempt to compare an ancient emperor from the fifth century BCE with a twentieth-century world leader, but there are also some interesting parallels. Both Cyrus of Persia and Mikhail Gorbachev held positions of great power over vast stretches of land and great numbers of people. Cyrus presided over the formation and the beginning of a huge world empire. Gorbachev presided at a time when a world empire was breaking apart into smaller separate countries.

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An interesting perspective comes into focus from the drama of recent history. Many people in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia do not remember Mikhail Gorbachev as a liberator. Rather, they remember him as the brutal Soviet leader who sent tanks to put down uprisings in Vilnius in 1991. People in those countries had attempted to bring the same kind of changes that had come two years earlier in Poland, Hungary, and East Germany. But they were told that they were not separate nations. They were declared to be integral parts of the Soviet Union with no claims for home rule. Like others within the former Soviet Union, they remember Mikhail Gorbachev today with considerable scorn. Some remember him as a tyrant. Others think of him as a Marxist idealist, one who did not understand the importance of order and stability. Still others see him as the one whose reckless policies brought economic chaos, widespread suffering, and the breakup of the Soviet Union.⁹

But for many other people in Eastern Europe in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and most clearly in Germany, Mikhail Gorbachev, like Cyrus, is remembered as a world leader whose actions made possible a new era of history. By his humane policies of openness, Gorbachev allowed people throughout Eastern Europe to gain a new sense of hope for the future, hope for greater human freedom, and hope for dignity after years of oppression under totalitarian rule.

We should probably think about Cyrus with the same caution. He was first and foremost a military strongman, one who conquered a number of different tribes, nations, and peoples. In some places in the ancient world, Cyrus was un-

⁹Leaders in Vilnius and Lithuania tried to declare independence from the Soviet Union on March 1, 1990. In the spring of 1991, Soviet troops occupied Vilnius, taking control of the radio and television headquarters, with violence that resulted in civilian casualties of fifteen dead and hundreds wounded. But Lithuania gained independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991. For an interesting summary of the collapse of the Soviet Union, see Philip Longworth, *Russia: The Once and Future Empire from Pre-History to Putin* (New York: St. Martin's, 2006).

doubtedly also viewed as a brutal and oppressive ruler. His place of power and wealth was made possible by his command over massive military forces. Nevertheless, in Isaiah, he is remembered as a positive instrument of the Lord God. His policy of allowing captives to return to their homelands was understood to be in keeping with God's intentions for Israel and for all who suffer oppression in the world.¹⁰

Poetic language can vary from age to age. In our modern world, it is interesting to reflect on the parallel between the exuberance of a crowd that shouts "Gorbi! Gorbi! Gorbi!" in cheering for a foreign leader, and the exuberance of an ancient writer who could declare Cyrus of Persia to be "anointed" of the Lord "whose right hand I have grasped!" (Isa 45:1). In both cases, we hear expressions of hope for greater freedom and for the well-being of humanity. The religious orientation or the nationality of the world leader makes no difference. As with Moses, what matters are the specific actions of that leader.

A POSTSCRIPT: A WORD OF PRAISE FROM THE PSALTER

The author of Ps 126 demonstrates how a historical memory can be turned into a doxological word of praise. In the psalm, we sense how the memories of the exodus and of the end of the exilic era were combined and remembered in later generations:¹¹

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced. (Ps 126:1–3)

In the New Testament, the conviction that God is the redeemer of the world undergirds all that is written about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Redemptive memories can also help us think about events in today's world. We are invited to reflect on the actions of world leaders that seem humane and liberating for people and for the earth, actions that enhance the dignity and well-being of the human community. As we are able, we are invited to comment on such events, celebrating all that is good and just. We are also called to contribute in whatever ways possible for us to build up the human community in our time. In so doing, we share in God's ongoing redemptive work in the world. ⊕

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¹⁰See Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

¹¹See Bob Becking, "'We All Returned as One!': Critical Notes on the Myth of the Mass Return," in Lipschits and Oeming, *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, 3–18.