

ISRAEL'S MISSION TO THE NATIONS IN ISAIAH 40–55: AN UPDATE

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In describing Israel's relationship to the nations, Isaiah 40–55 represents three loci of tension: either divine blessings for Israel alone or for the entire world also, Israel as either an active witness or a passive one, and either the nations as subject to Israel or as coequal with Israel in their standing before God. Israel's mission to the world is either centripetal (inward moving) or centrifugal (outward moving). Biblical scholars have debated which it is. Attempts to explain fluctuation in the prophet's message between the two possibilities have included elimination of certain passages, consideration of redactional layers, redefinition of terms, and pointing out external circumstances in the prophet's time. A correct understanding does not consist in explaining away one side of the tension, but in recognizing God's future restoration of the nation as a means of extending redemptive benefits to the nations, His blessing of the nations after their judgment, and His use of Israel to rule the nations at the same time that His chosen people are a vehicle to bless the nations.

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Both the beginning and end of Scripture emphasize a concern for people of “every nation and tribe and tongue and people” (Rev 14:6), forming a grand envelope structure framing the entire story of Scripture. Genesis 1–11 provides an overview of the origins and early history of all humankind, and Revelation ends the canon with a book in which God's purposes are equally related to the whole created order.¹

Then a new development takes place at Genesis 12 with the call of Abraham. Clearly related to God's dealings with the nations and placed specifically in the context of the disintegration of human society and dispersion of the nations in Genesis 11, the call of Abraham shifts the focus of attention from the entire created order to God's election of and dealings with a chosen people.² Yahweh establishes

¹Charles H. H. Scobie, “Israel and the Nations,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 43 (1992):285.

²*Ibid.*

a covenant with the nation of Abraham (Israel). By means of this unilateral agreement, the Lord details the way in which He will bless all peoples.

In the remainder of the Old Testament, a degree of tension exists between Israel and the nations, that is, between the fact of Israel's election and the concept of world mission. Throughout her history Israel had to grapple with the reality that she was related to all the nations through creation and that God had also called her to be separate from them.³ The Abrahamic Covenant, which gives Israel an exalted place in God's program for the world, promises that Israel will be a channel of blessing to "all peoples on earth" (Gen 12:3). In His choice of Israel to be His elect people, Yahweh bestows on them both blessings and responsibilities. He promises to give His elect people a position of power and prominence in the world. Yahweh intends to utilize Israel as His servant nation to carry out His plan for all humanity.

In Exod 19:4-6, Yahweh presents Israel with a unique and sobering challenge (before revealing to them the Law, i.e., the Mosaic Covenant). Doubtless, their conformity to the Law would have caused them to be a distinct nation among the pagan nations of the world. However, that distinctiveness was not an end in itself. From the very outset, this divinely-intended distinctiveness carried with it worldwide implications. By conducting their lives in conformity with the demands of the Law, the nation of Israel would have been able to function as God's servant nation, representing God and His character before the surrounding nations of the world.

Various aspects of her national existence also contributed to Israel's consciousness of her distinctiveness. Jacob and his descendants enjoyed a separate existence in Egypt (in the land of Goshen—Gen 46:31-34) for a number of years. By means of the Law, Yahweh clearly demonstrated that Israel's relationship with Him demanded a moral and ritual distinctiveness (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2). Prior to their entrance into Canaan, Yahweh instructed His chosen people to exterminate all the inhabitants and to avoid every pagan custom in order to maintain their uniqueness. As the nation of Israel developed, certain Gentiles enjoyed divine redemptive benefits only by virtue of their access to Israel.

This tension between Israel's election and her worldwide witness reached a climax in Isaiah 40–55. In the years leading up to Isaiah's prophetic ministry, the nation of Israel often failed to live in accordance with her God-given function, i.e., serving as Yahweh's servant nation. As a nation she became characterized by covenant rebellion. The northern ten tribes (also called Israel) were soon to go into Assyrian exile, and the southern two tribes (Judah) would be left alone in the land. In Isaiah 1–39 Yahweh delivered His stinging indictment against the nation Israel (focusing on the southern kingdom): divine judgment is coming because of your covenant treachery! As with any nation that refused to submit to Yahweh's sovereignty (cf. Isaiah 13–23), Israel's covenant Lord promised to punish her

³R. Bryan Widbin, "Salvation for People Outside Israel's Covenant?," *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, W. V. Crockett and J. G. Sigountos, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 74.

arrogance. However, Israel's disobedient conduct was especially reprehensible. As God's covenant partner, God's chosen nation had become like an adulterous wife.

In chapters 40–66 the prophet Isaiah looked to Israel's more distant future. What will happen after God's judgment on His covenant nation is completed? Is God through with His obstinate and stiff-necked people? Will He allow them to remain forever in exile, cut off from any enjoyment of promised covenantal blessings? The prophet Isaiah answered these (and other) fateful questions in chapters 40–55. In these chapters he envisioned the nation of Israel in the midst of the Babylonian exile. He introduced this section by telling God's exiled people that their punishment for covenant treachery had satisfied the demands of God's wrath. The prophet comforted God's people by promising them that God would bring them back to their beloved land of promise. In the face of Israel's skepticism, Isaiah described Yahweh as the one and only true God who is willing and able to bring to pass this promise. Unlike the "do-nothing" pagan gods, Yahweh alone is able to predict and bring to pass events, a case in point being His call of Cyrus several decades before his birth. As the prophet addressed God's people who are depicted as being in the midst of exile, Isaiah had to deal with the other nations of the world. How will Yahweh treat those nations that resist the accomplishment of His intentions? How will the restoration of Israel to national and international prominence affect the Gentiles? Is there any potential for Gentile participation in any of God's abundant blessings on Israel?

More specifically, does the prophet Isaiah give God's chosen people a new and unique commission to be missionaries to the Gentiles? Or is he an ardent nationalist who only has Israel's welfare in view? A clear understanding of Isaiah's depiction of Israel's relationship with the nations depends on asking the right questions. What are the primary issues in this discussion? What terms accurately describe the potential interpretive options? In order to understand better the tension between "nationalism" and "universalism" in Isaiah 40–55, this article seeks to provide a summary and a historical survey of this debate.

A SUMMARY OF THE DEBATE

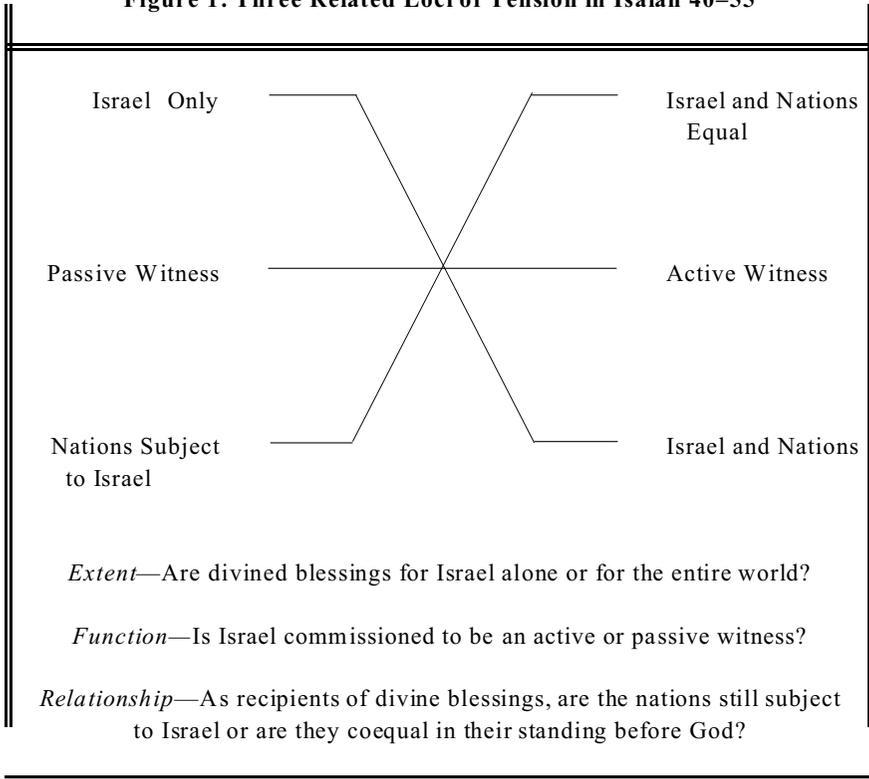
Only a clear presentation of the constitutive issues and a comprehension of the terminology common to this debate will produce a precise and accurate understanding of this realm of theological discussion.

Foundational Issues: Potential Points of Tension

Certain passages in Isaiah 40–55 affirm that the nations who fight against Israel will be defeated (41:11-13; 49:25; 51:22-23; 54:15-17), are expendable as a ransom for Israel's sake (43:3-4), will come before Israel in chains, lick the dust off Israel's feet, and even eat their own flesh (45:14; 49:23, 26a), while Yahweh addresses Israel in intimate terms. On the other hand, Yahweh calls upon the nations to turn and be saved (45:22-23), appoints the servant as "a light of the nations"

(42:6; 49:6), and declares that His salvation will reach to all peoples who wait to receive His instruction and deliverance (42:4, 23; 49:6; 51:4-6). The nations will be amazed at the salvation which the Lord has accomplished for Israel (41:5; 42:10-12; 45:6; 52:10), and recognizing Yahweh as God, they will run of their own accord to serve Israel, God's witness people. In light of this tension scholars have repeatedly asked a probing question concerning this section of Isaiah: "What relationship does Israel have with the nations of the world and what does God have in store for these two entities?" Isaiah 40–55 brings to the fore at least three related loci of tension with regard to Israel and the nations as represented in Figure 1: extent, function, and relationship.

Figure 1: Three Related Loci of Tension in Isaiah 40–55



How *comprehensive* are Yahweh's redemptive promises (extent), what is Israel's *role* in any provision of divine blessings to non-Jews (function), and what is the *relationship* of Israel to the nations which become the beneficiaries of those promises (relationship)? In other words, does the prophet offer salvation to the entire

world, and if so, will those non-Jewish peoples still be subject to God's chosen people? And what role does Israel play with regard to this extension of salvation to the Gentile world? Does Isaiah regard Israel as commissioned to bring salvation to the nations as an active participant, or does he view Israel simply as a passive witness? Finally, is the nation of Israel the primary beneficiary of divine blessings or has God promised to bless equally all peoples, whether Jew or Gentile? Do God's chosen people occupy an exalted position in a yet future period of God's domain, or will they share equally their blessedness and prominence with the nations?

Terminology

Scholars who have wrestled over the years with Isaiah's depiction of Israel's relationship with the nations have sought for descriptive terms that represent the key issues in this debate. Certain terms are necessary to provide objective boundaries for this discussion, whether or not one agrees that the chosen terms satisfy the breadth of the discussion.

Two positions form the outer parameters for the debate concerning Israel and the nations in Isaiah 40–55. Did the prophet possess a missionary spirit according to which he exhorted God's chosen people to become "a nation of world-traversing missionaries" (referred to as universalism in the context of this debate)?⁴ Or was Isaiah an intensely nationalistic prophet⁵ who sought to preserve the faith and integrity of the Israelites scattered among the nations and to encourage them with the hope of their restoration at the nations' expense (referred to as

⁴T. K. Cheyne, *Introduction to the Book of Isaiah* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1895) 244. This use of "universalism" predates the theological discussion that deals with the question, "Are the heathen really lost?" For further comment on the problems caused by disparate uses of the term "universalism," see n. 6.

Herbert G. May defines "theological universalism" as "belief in one God who is to be worshipped by all peoples, Jew and Gentile alike. It comprehends a single world religion and a common religious culture; it implies a single cultus" ("Theological Universalism in the Old Testament," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 16 [1948]:100). Against the OT backdrop of divine blessings promised to Israel, this term concerns itself with the question of whether the nations of the world will also share in those privileges. Two kinds of universalism are considered below: centripetal universalism (movement toward the center—the nations attracted to Yahweh by means of Israel's devotion to Yahweh) and centrifugal universalism (movement away from the center—the outward movement by Israel to confront the nations with Yahweh's expectations).

⁵Nationalism or particularism can be defined as that "tendency in religion according to which a certain group enjoys a special privilege in relation to God which sets it apart from the rest of humanity" (Julian Morgenstern, "Universalism and Particularism," *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, I. Landman, ed. [New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopedia Company, 1943] 10:357). "Nationalism" defies a fixed definition, but draws its nuance from its historical and cultural setting (Deryck C. T. Sheriffs, "'A Tale of Two Cities'—Nationalism in Zion and Babylon," *Tyndale Bulletin* 39 [1988]:19). Sheriffs suggests that in a general sense "nationalism" is an "ideology, that is, a set of ideas used to express a nation's aspirations by an influential group within it" (*ibid.*). It is an ideology that unifies the smaller elements (clans, tribes, villages, cities) in a greater whole, the nation-state.

nationalism/particularism/exclusivism)?⁶

In their purest forms, the terms “universalism” (God’s redemptive blessings available for all peoples regardless of ethnicity) and “nationalism” (God’s redemptive blessings reserved for Israel alone) contribute to the issue of extent. In other words, to whom are divine redemptive blessings given? As was stated earlier, the matter of extent is only one of the significant issues at stake in the prophet’s message concerning Israel and the nations. If the nations will receive redemptive blessings akin to those originally promised to Israel, by what means does this take place (function)?⁷ Once the nations become recipients of these blessings, is there a total merging of Israel with the nations or will the Gentiles be subject to God’s chosen people for a time (relationship)?

Vogels categorizes Israel’s role and mission with regard to the world as either centripetal (inward moving) or centrifugal (outward moving) universalism.⁸ Centripetal universalism is found in biblical texts that attribute to Israel the role of being a sign and witness, of attracting others. The attracted nations come to the “center,” to Israel (Zion, Jerusalem), to receive instruction and revelation (e.g., Psalm 87; Isa 2:2-3; 25:6 ff.; 55:3b-5; Mic 4:1-2.). Centrifugal universalism describes Israel’s active involvement in bringing God’s redemptive message to the world. This latter set of terms concerns the questions of extent and function, but does not directly contribute to the issue of relationship. Does this “centrifugal universalism” result in total equality for Israel and the nations, or will there still exist some manner of Jewish priority and distinctiveness of identity?

Since the common bipolar descriptive terms only partially delineate the issues relevant to the debate, the interpreter must ask additional questions concerning

⁶This debate surrounding nationalism and universalism is complicated by the disparate use of these terms. This is especially true for universalism. Does “universalism” signify Israel’s active participation in the preaching of the gospel to the world, the nations’ free acceptance of divine blessings, or simply the nations’ recognition of Yahweh’s sovereignty? Regardless, this is not the meaning of the universalism so frequently referred to in contemporary discussions. The universalism in recent discussion, in one way or another, denies that the “heathen” are really lost. For a survey of this debate, see Millard Erickson, “The State of the Question,” *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, W. V. Crockett and J. G. Sigountos, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 23-33. In the present work “universalism” does not refer to the spiritual lostness of the nations, but rather to the extent of the offer of divine salvation. At issue is the question, “Is redemption only for Israel or does Isaiah teach that it is for all nations?”

⁷It is not the purpose of this article to delineate the blessings that Israel and the nations will share equally and those that have a more direct impact on Israel. In light of OT references to a restored national presence for Israel, the millennial restoration of the Jerusalem Temple, and indications of an Israelite functional priority during the millennium, it appears that Israel will directly participate in certain blessings, blessings which will less directly impact the nations. For example, the fulfillment of land promises to Israel will impact Gentiles also during the millennium.

⁸Walter Vogels, “Covenant and Universalism: Guide for a Missionary Reading of the Old Testament,” *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 57 (1973):31. For a fuller explanation of his approach to this issue, see his *God’s Universal Covenant: A Biblical Study* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 1979).

the issues of extent, role, and relationship.

A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE DEBATE

Several works delineate the history of scholarship with regard to this discussion (nationalism versus universalism in Isaiah 40–55, see below).⁹ For the sake of completeness, this article will survey the earlier stages of discussion, albeit briefly. It will devote more attention to the last half of the twentieth century in order to highlight the more recent developments with regard to this issue.

The following description frames the debate with the two polar positions (nationalism and universalism) only to provide structure. Divergent answers to the issues of extent, role, and relationship will make apparent a certain degree of diversity within each general position. This survey of interpretive options considers two issues: Isaiah's depiction of Israel's relationship to the nations and several attempts made to explain the fluctuation between universalism/nationalism and blessing/subjugation in the prophet's message.

Isaiah's Depiction of Israel's Relationship to the Nations

Isaiah as a Missionary Prophet (Centrifugal Universalism)

Prior to 1950, most biblical scholars agreed that in Isaiah 40–55 the prophet envisioned the extension of salvation to the nations. The New Testament (Acts 13:47),¹⁰ certain Reformation writers,¹¹ and several scholars from the critical era (nineteenth-twentieth centuries)¹² perpetuated this view. According to them, the

⁹It is noteworthy that the debate concerning nationalism-universalism also rages outside Isaiah 40–55. H. Wheeler Robinson (*The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*, Studies in Theology [London: Duckworth, 1913] 206) and T. W. Manson (*The Teaching of Jesus: Studies of Its Form and Content*, 2d ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1948] 181) identify a great contrast between the message of Isaiah and that of Ezekiel. They contend that Isaiah teaches nationalism and presents the concept of a *saved* remnant while Ezekiel conveys universalism and sets forth a *saving* remnant.

¹⁰Paul quotes Isa 49:6b in an attempt to convince the Jews of Antioch Pisidia that God was indeed behind the extension of redemptive blessings to the Gentiles (apart from any process of proselytism).

¹¹Martin Luther, "Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40–66," *Luther's Works*, H. T. A. Bowman, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1954-75) 17:135; John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, W. Pringle, trans. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1850-54) 3:424-25.

¹²Gustav Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, G. E. Day, rev. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1873; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978) 516-21; Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja: übersetzt und erklärt* [*The Book of Isaiah: Translated and Explained*], 4th ed., Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922) 345, 376; J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Chapters XL–LXVI*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1917) lxiii; Georg Fohrer, *Das Buch Jesaja* [*The Book of Isaiah*], Zürcher Bibel Kommentare (Zürich: Verlag Zwingli, 1964) 3:96; James Muilenburg, "Introduction to and Exegesis of the Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66," *IB*, G. A. Buttrick, ed. (New York: Abingdon, 1955) 5:532; Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, D. M. G. Stalker, trans., OTL

prophet teaches that Israel will become a missionary to the nations of the world. Isaiah is regarded as the father of Jewish missionary activity¹³ and is called the “missionary prophet of the Old Testament.”¹⁴

Isaiah's introduction of centrifugal universalism. In the early part of this century, Volz argued that the prophet demonstrates a peculiar advancement in the biblical presentation of God's plan for the world.¹⁵ After describing Israel's function as a passive witness to the nations, Isaiah looks forward to “the eschatological turning point” at which time “the propagation of God's kingdom should be carried out in an intentional and active fashion by Israel.”¹⁶ Volz titles his treatment of the first three servant songs with the heading “the founder of mission,” and identifies the missionary outreach of Israel as the central concern of these songs.¹⁷ In a later volume, Volz asserts that the readers of the first servant song stand “at the origin of mission, at the source of world missionary activity.”¹⁸ In general, the prophet presents “. . . the divine missionary intention and the God-ordained missionary duty of Israel.”¹⁹

The theological foundation for centrifugal universalism. Monotheism and God's election of Israel serve as the theological foundation for this view of the prophet Isaiah.²⁰ From the belief that Yahweh is the only God, the prophet implies that all nations must know Him and that Israel's duty is to make His name known to the ends of the earth.²¹

(Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 100-101.

¹³E. Sellin, “Der Missionsgedanke im Alten Testament” [“The Concept of Missions in the Old Testament”], *Neue Allgemeine Missionszeitschrift* 2 (1925):68 ff.

¹⁴Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) 220.

¹⁵Paul Volz, *Jesaja II, übersetzt und erklärt* [*Second Isaiah: Translated and Explained*], KAT (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung D. Wemer Scholl, 1932) 24.

¹⁶*Ibid.* All English translations of foreign articles are by the author of this article.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁸Paul Volz, *Prophetengestalten des Alten Testament: Sendung und Botschaft der alttestamentlichen Gotteszeugen* [*Prophetic Forms of the Old Testament: The Program and Message of the Old Testament Divine Witnesses*] (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1949) 316.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰H. H. Rowley (*The Faith of Israel: Aspects of Old Testament Thought* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957] 185) argues that for the prophet “universalism was the corollary of monotheism, and the world-wide mission of Israel the corollary of her election.”

²¹Rowley (*The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* [London: Carey, 1944] 50) cites Isa 45:21 ff. as one of several passages where the appeal to the world rests firmly upon the truth of monotheism.

Jacob asserts that God's election of Israel (in Abraham) leads of necessity to a missionary duty.²² Israel's commission to be holy (distinct from other nations), as well as the regular presence of external military threats, hindered the outworking of this responsibility. The concern to be unique and the need to defend herself against invading armies forced Israel to have an inwardly focused perspective. From the time of the conquest of Canaan until the sixth century B.C. (the time of "Deutero-Isaiah" [according to the critics]), this missionary duty was only centripetal.²³ Though Jacob understands that the final triumph of Yahweh over all the peoples belongs to the eschaton,²⁴ he argues that Isaiah once again brings to the forefront Israel's compelling missionary duty. In addition to Israel's power of attraction (Isa 54:1-3), the elect nation will exercise a more active mission by means of her role as the light of the nations and, less directly, through the Servant's ministry.²⁵ In fact, by sacrifice and death, the Servant rediscovers the election and its indispensable corollary, the mission.²⁶

Others echo that understanding of the prophet's explanation of the transition from passive to active witness. Torrey asserts that Isaiah's new truth involves the inclusion of the whole Gentile world, side by side with Israel, in the family of the one God.²⁷ Manson writes that the prophet exhorts Israel "to conquer the world . . . by spiritual power . . . to bring men under the sway of Jehovah . . . to attract individual men and women to voluntary acceptance of Israel's King as their king."²⁸

Debate concerning terminology. In the last several decades of this century, certain scholars have preferred the terms "centripetal-centrifugal" rather than "nationalism-universalism" to describe the development of Israel's function in God's program. Besides the works by Vogels cited above, Dussel takes that position, contending that in contrast to the centripetal preaching common in the OT (with

²²Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* 217.

²³Ibid., 219.

²⁴Jacob contends that Israel, for the most part, was unable to attain the prophet's ideal because of the practical limitations of the postexilic community and the consequent reworking of the prophet's material to give it a more nationalistic emphasis (ibid., 220).

²⁵Rowley (*Missionary Message* 51) states that just as Yahweh sent Moses to call Israel to Himself, He sends Israel to call the world to Himself. He goes on to assert that "the fundamental purpose of Israel's election was that she should mediate the revelation of God to men."

²⁶Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* 220.

²⁷C. C. Torrey, *The Second Isaiah: A New Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928) 118.

²⁸Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus: Studies of Its Form and Content* 180. After his comparison of Isaiah 40–55 and cuneiform royal inscriptions, Shalom M. Paul argues that Israel's mission is "not one of world conquest as in the Mesopotamian inscriptions . . . but rather one of world salvation" ("Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 [1968]:186).

Jerusalem as center), the servant songs preach centrifugal universalism that knows no boundaries. All nations and islands are worthy of God's mercy.²⁹ In more recent times Wodecki finds biblical legitimation for worldwide missions throughout the book of Isaiah.³⁰ Not only is Isaiah, to use Martin-Achard's description, "the outstanding missionary prophet,"³¹ but Wodecki contends that the motif of universalism is central to the entire book of Isaiah.³² There is a gradual deepening of this motif as one moves from the first to the second half of the book. According to Wodecki, in the first half of Isaiah (chaps. 1–39) the majority of passages speak generally of the acceptance of belief in Yahweh by the foreign peoples and of their pilgrimage to Zion. In the second part (chaps. 40–55) the servant (whom Wodecki identifies as the Messiah) will bring God's law and teaching to the most distant peoples, and God's people will function as His witnesses before those nations.³³ Looking forward to the New Testament, Wodecki argues, "[T]he book of Isaiah constitutes an extremely important means for realizing God's plan of salvation. It appears as a prepared prelude to the missionary instructions of Christ . . . and its realization in the missionary activity of the universal Church."³⁴

Feuillet, Gélin, and Regodón contend that the servant songs delineate a decentralized universalism which constitutes a departure from the customary royal mediation found in antecedent Scriptures (e.g., Psalm 72).³⁵ These scholars prefer the descriptive term "decentralized universalism" over the customary pair, centripetal-centrifugal universalism, in order to avoid any connotations of

²⁹ Enrique Dussel, "Universalismo y Misión en los Poemas del Siervo de Jahveh [Universalism and Mission in the Poems of the Servant of Yahweh]," *Ciencia y Fe* 20 (1964):419-64.

³⁰ Bernard Wodecki, "Heilsuniversalismus im Buch des Propheten Jesaja" ["Universal Salvation in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah,"] *Dein Wort Beachten: Alttestamentliche Aufsätze*, J. Reindl and G. Hentschel, eds. (Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag, 1981) 76-101. Wodecki's viewpoint concerning the entire book is an outgrowth of his 1977 dissertation which dealt with universal salvation in First Isaiah, "Der Heilsuniversalismus beim Propheten Proto-Jesaja," [the German title of the Polish dissertation; Eng., "Universal Salvation According to the Prophet Proto-Isaiah"] (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Warsaw, 1977).

³¹ Robert Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations: A Study of the Old Testament Conception of Israel's Mission to the World*, J. P. Smith, trans. (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962) 6.

³² Wodecki, "Heilsuniversalismus im Buch des Propheten Jesaja" ["Universal Salvation in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah"] 99. He writes, "[T]he spirit of universal salvation permeates the entire book of Isaiah."

³³ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 101 [emphasis added].

³⁵ *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*, s.v. "Isaïe (le livre d')" ["The Book of Isaiah"], by A. Feuillet, 4 (1949):706-11; A. Gélin, "The Latter Prophets," *Introduction to the Old Testament*, P. Skehan, et al., trans. (New York: Desclee, 1968) 341-42; Jacinto Núñez Regodón, "El Universalismo de Los Cantos del Siervo" ["The Universalism of the Songs of the Servant"], *Palabra Y Vida: Homenaje a José Alonso Díaz en su 70 cumpleaños*, A. Vargas-Machuca and G. Ruiz, eds. (Madrid: UPCM, 1984) 75-76.

proselytism in this anticipated mission of Israel.³⁶ Regodón maintains that the prophet did not explicitly intend to discuss universalism, but that this perspective is a consequence of his announcement of deliverance for Israel. He places the emphasis on mediation rather than centrality. He explains, “In this sense it is a universalism of mediation: the salvation of Israel will be such that it will reach the nations one way or another.”³⁷ Consequently, he suggests that Israel’s mission consists of being a passive witness for its own existence and thereby, the greatness of Yahweh. According to Feuillet, this decentralized universalism is one “where the Temple no longer plays any role,”³⁸ and “where the Davidic Messiah has no place and where the chosen people have only the role of a passive witness to God, the eschatological Savior.”³⁹ Feuillet highlights the differences between the message of Isaiah 40–55 and that of the servant songs, primarily seen in the transition from emphasis on Israel’s mediation to the ministry of the messianic servant figure.⁴⁰ Although somewhat limited by the nationalistic aims of Isaiah 40–55, Feuillet argues that decentralized universalism “truly attains *its most perfect expression* with the songs of the Servant.”⁴¹ He argues that Israel is not without connection to the extension of divine redemption in the eschaton nor do they mediate that redemption. According to Feuillet, Yahweh will make Israel to be a *bêrît ‘am* (cf. Isa 42:6; 49:8), “that is to say, the point of departure of a new union or alliance with humanity, simply by restoring the chosen people.”⁴² Isaiah 44:3-5 describes this new unity of Jews and Gentiles where pagans join themselves to the chosen people.⁴³ Feuillet asserts that in this description “[w]e have there quite simply the realization of the universal

³⁶Regodón, “El Universalismo de Los Cantos del Siervo” [“The Universalism of the Songs of the Servant”] 75.

³⁷Ibid., 75. Vogels (*God’s Universal Covenant* 131) also affirms that “all nations will share in [Yahweh’s salvation] through the mediation of the servant.”

³⁸*Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*, s.v. “Isaïe (le livre d’)” [“The Book of Isaiah”], by A. Feuillet, 4 (1949):706.

³⁹Ibid., 709.

⁴⁰Ibid., 710. The following points highlight a few of those differences:

<i>Isaiah 40-55</i>	<i>Servant Songs</i>
1. The iniquity of God’s people is expiated.	1. Expiation for Israel’s sin yet awaits.
2. Political and religious salvation are connected.	2. Political and religious salvation are unrelated.
3. Literal captivity and liberation	3. Spiritual captivity and liberation
4. Israel’s salvation occasions the conversion of the Gentiles.	4. The servant’s ministry occasions the conversion of the Gentiles.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 709.

⁴³Contra Feuillet, the present author concludes in another work (Michael A. Grisanti, “The Relationship of Israel and the Nations in Isaiah 40–55” [PhD dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1993] 78-90) that only Israelites are in view in Isaiah 44:1-5.

promises which have to do with the numerous descendants of the patriarchs and the participation of the nations in the privileges of the chosen people (Gen 12:2-3; cf. Isa 51:2-3).⁴⁴ Decentralized universalism contends that the ministry of the servant figure replaces Israel in her mediatorial role.

Isaiah as a Nationalistic Prophet (Centripetal Universalism)

In the 1950's the tide of scholarly consensus began to turn away from a universalistic understanding of the Isaiah 40–55. The other primary alternative for depicting Israel's relationship to the nations describes Isaiah as a strident prophet of nationalism, only preaching of Israel's glorious future. As with the preceding alternative (Isaiah as a missionary prophet), a spectrum of views exists among those who contend that Isaiah primarily addressed Israel's redemptive destiny. In general, all those who argue that Israel's national future is the primary agenda of Isaiah 40–55 affirm (to varying degrees) that any "universalistic" emphases are secondary or peripheral. Regardless, they all make a careful distinction between the terms "proselytism,"⁴⁵ "universalism,"⁴⁶ and "mission."⁴⁷ Beyond that, proponents of a more nationalistic perspective fall into two categories: those who affirm that Isaiah offers no salvation for the Gentiles and those who maintain that the prophet Isaiah picks up a motif from earlier biblical material (e.g., Exod 19:4-6) and reminds the nation of her divine commission to be a passive witness to the pagan nations of the world.

⁴⁴*Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*, s.v. "Isaïe (le livre d')" ["The Book of Isaiah"], by A. Feuillet, 4 (1949):707.

⁴⁵They are careful not to confuse proselytism (the incorporation of individual Gentiles into the community of Israel) that always existed in Israel's religious traditions with some kind of a missionary commission. Martin-Achard (*A Light to the Nations* 5) writes, "In a certain sense Jewish proselytism is a private enterprise undertaken by individuals and concerned with particular persons, while the concept of mission involves the belief that the whole community has a task to fulfill on behalf of all mankind."

⁴⁶In defining universalism, Martin-Achard (*A Light to the Nations* 3) "asserts that the God of Israel is the Lord of all the earth, but does not propose that the Chosen People should take any particular action towards converting the nations to Him." Universalism merely refers to the extent of God's program, not to the actual extension of redemptive blessings to anyone outside of Israel.

⁴⁷Albert Gélin (*The Religion of Israel*, J. R. Foster, trans. [New York: Hawthorn, 1959] 79) concludes that the Bible sets forth a concept of universalism that does not precisely develop into a missionary attitude, that is, human participation in converting the races of the world. An earlier passage from the same volume clouds his attempt to distinguish between these terms (universalism versus mission). There he writes, "The call to proselytize is the particular message of the Second Isaias (Isaias 45.22-4; 44.5)" (ibid., 72). As a result of Isaiah's prophetic ministry, Israel moves from a *witness function* (drawing a few into the Jewish fold by their testimony to God's character) to a *missionary focus* (active proselytizing). Israel's role was to cause the Gentiles to recognize Yahweh's glory (by their restoration to the land). This would serve as the starting-point for a *massive conversion of Gentiles to Yahweh* (ibid., 83-84).

Any "Universalistic" Tendencies Are Merely Peripheral

Unlike those who regard monotheism and universalism as Isaiah's primary themes, Martin-Achard maintains that the "heart of the prophet's message is by no means the declaration that there is only one God and that He is the God of the Jews; it is the proclamation that God's People will be restored to its own land thanks to the merciful intervention of Yahweh."⁴⁸ He also argues that the prophet's chief concern "is not the salvation of the Gentiles but the liberation of his own people and its triumphant return to Jerusalem; the heathen are scarcely more than an instrument in the hands of Israel's God."⁴⁹ Stuhlmüller affirms that the prophet "did not announce the conversion of the Gentiles to Yahweh, only their admiration for the way that Yahweh was bringing his elect people out of their midst."⁵⁰ Further on he argues that any universalistic tendencies derive from the fact that the prophet "was addressing himself to Israel and exclusively to their salvation. . . . He saw the *world implications* of what Yahweh would be doing for his chosen people."⁵¹ Sheriffs suggests that the prophet presents a Zion-centered form of nationalism deliberately composed as a polemic against the competing Babylon-centered nationalism enveloping the Judean exiles. Consequently, the polemic slant of the prophet's ideology of nationalism is intended to *convince* the Israelites rather than *convert* Babylonians. Isaiah intends to catch the attention of God's chosen people and support positive affirmations of a return to the Judean cult-center and its worship.⁵²

Certain scholars who view Isaiah as a prophet of nationalism suggest that the various universalistic terms employed by the prophet⁵³ simply function much like a hymnic style of utterance.⁵⁴ For example, the psalmist urges "all the earth" (Ps 96:1) and the "families of nations" to sing to Yahweh and to ascribe Him glory (cf. Psalm 98). De Boer contends that all the references to distant regions or peoples by Isaiah (cf. 41:1-5; 42:4, 10-12; 43:9, 20; 45:22; 48:14; 49:1; 51:5) are rhetorical expressions for totality.⁵⁵ All nations are invited to the court of judgment to witness Yahweh's victory. However, these nations are only offered the opportunity to view God's redemption, not the chance to participate in it. These universal terms in no

⁴⁸Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations* 12.

⁴⁹Ibid., 13. He also affirms that "it is not a matter of conversion but of the homage due by the whole of creation to Yahweh for what He has wrought on His people's behalf" (ibid., 16).

⁵⁰Carroll Stuhlmüller, "Israel's Election and World Salvation," *The Biblical Function for Mission*, D. Senior and C. Stuhlmüller, eds. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983) 101.

⁵¹Ibid., 102.

⁵²Sheriffs, "'A Tale of Two Cities'—Nationalism in Zion and Babylon" 54.

⁵³These scholars refer, for example, to the prophet's use of "isles" (41:1), the "ends of the earth" (42:10), the "distant people" (49:1), and so on, calling the nations to give heed to Yahweh's purposes and to praise the God who has redeemed Israel.

⁵⁴Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations* 16.

⁵⁵P. A. H. De Boer, *Second Isaiah's Message*, OTS, no. 11 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1956) 88 ff.

way indicate Israel's function as a missionary nation.

The Basic Argumentation

N. H. Snaith was one of the first to argue that the prophet is

essentially nationalistic in attitude. He is actually responsible for the narrow and exclusive attitude of post-exilic days. . . . The whole prophecy is concerned with the restoration and exaltation of Jacob-Israel, the Servant of the Lord, the Righteous Remnant, and any place which the heathen have in the new order is entirely and debasingly subservient.⁵⁶

De Boer also firmly contends that

Second-Isaiah's only purpose is to proclaim deliverance for the Judean people. . . . Foreign nations are but mentioned as peoples to be conquered, in whose hands the cup of wrath will be put, li 23; or as the instrument of Yhwh to deliver his people; or, in rhetorical manner of speaking, to be witness of Yhwh's glory. Yhwh's glory will be shown only in his elected people, raised up from their humiliation.⁵⁷

According to Orlinsky, the nations are either Yahweh's instrument of punishment for His erring people or helpless witnesses to God's exclusive love and protection of His people, just like the heavens and the earth and the mountains.⁵⁸

No Salvation for the Gentiles

Schoors contends that there is no offer of Gentile salvation in Isaiah 40–55 when he writes, "There is some universalism in them [Isaiah's prophecies], in this sense that Yahwe is considered the creator of the universe, of all nations and kings, of the ends of the earth. But there is no expectation of salvation on behalf of the Gentiles. The salvation announced in the genre of salvation words *is meant only for Israel*."⁵⁹ More recently, Whybray concludes that "the general context of Deutero-Isaiah's otherwise extremely consistent line of thought makes it most probable that nothing more than a submission of the nations to Yahweh's universal

⁵⁶Norman H. Snaith, "The Servant of the Lord in Deutero-Isaiah," *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, H. H. Rowley, ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1950) 191. Another significant essay by Snaith is "Isaiah 40–66: A Study of the Teaching of the Second Isaiah and Its Consequences," in *Studies on the Second Part of the Book of Isaiah*, VTSup, no. 14 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967) 135-264.

⁵⁷De Boer, *Second Isaiah's Message* 90.

⁵⁸Harry M. Orlinsky, "The So-Called 'Servant of the Lord' and 'Suffering Servant' in Second Isaiah," *Studies on the Second Part of the Book of Isaiah*, VTSup, no. 14 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967) 116. Orlinsky has been especially prolific on this issue of nationalism versus universalism (particularly in Isaiah 40–55).

⁵⁹Antoon Schoors, *I Am God Your Saviour: A Form-Critical Study of the Main Genres in Is. XL–LV*, VTSup, no. 24 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973) 302 [emphasis added].

sovereignty is envisaged.”⁶⁰

Israel Is a Passive Witness to the Nations

Several posit that Isaiah 40–55 contains a commission for Israel to be a passive witness. In other words, Israel is not commanded to do missionary work, but to serve as a sign of God’s glory among the nations.⁶¹ Israel has no other mission to the heathen than to be the chosen people. Martin-Achard argues that “it is by means of the *life* of His people that the God of Israel produces the light of the world” (i.e., Gentiles—Isa 49:6).⁶² By its very existence in the world, Israel will assume its mediatorial function of representing Yahweh to the world. Gottwald explains that the ministry of the Servant is

hardly the evangelizing, missionary commission which has traditionally been assigned to the prophet. Israel does not proselytize. Rather she capitalizes on the largesse of Cyrus in turning the peoples politically subject to him to support of the Yahweh cult. . . . The establishment of the universal Yahweh cult will be a triumph of imperial policy and of national conversion. The conversion will, however, not be due so much to what Israel says as to what Israel is.⁶³

Oswalt writes that

Israel’s function is that of witness as opposed to proselytizer. . . . Israel, by its life and words, is to demonstrate what God is like and what he is doing. Beyond this, it is God who will do the drawing and the bringing of the nations to himself. . . . If Israel will simply be the Israel of God, the nations will be drawn to him.⁶⁴

McKnight contends that “Judaism never developed a clear mission to the Gentiles that had as its goal the conversion of the world,” nor is there “evidence that could lead to the conclusion that Judaism was a ‘missionary religion’ in the sense of

⁶⁰R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, NCB (London: Oliphants, 1978; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 32, cf. 26–70.

⁶¹A. De Groot, *The Bible on the Salvation of Nations*, F. Vander Heijden, trans. (De Pere, Wis.: St. Norbert Abbey, 1966) 68–76.

⁶²Robert Martin-Achard, “La Signification théologique de l’élection d’Israël” [“The Theological Meaning of Israel’s Election”], *Theologische Zeitschrift* 16 (1960):341 [emphasis added]. This point is part of Martin-Achard’s argument for a collective identification of the servant.

⁶³Norman K. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth: Israelite Prophecy and International Relations in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 344. Gottwald appears to limit this passive witness of Israel to the historical time of Deutero-Isaiah (6th century B.C.).

⁶⁴John N. Oswalt, “The Mission of Israel to the Nations,” *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, W. V. Crockett and J. G. Sigountos, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 95.

aggressive attempts to convert Gentiles.”⁶⁵

ATTEMPTS AT EXPLAINING FLUCTUATIONS IN THE PROPHET'S MESSAGE

In their investigation of Isaiah's message, many scholars have encountered a tension between the motifs of nationalism/universalism and subjugation/blessing. Why do certain passages appear to offer redemptive blessings to all peoples and others focus on Israel alone? How can Gentile nations be promised both subjugation and blessing? Many interpreters do not regard the motifs as complementary concepts and resolve this tension in one of several ways delineated below.⁶⁶

The Elimination of Certain Passages

Later additions by a glossator/editor could account for the conceptual tension in Isaiah 40–55. Since Duhm argues that the nations' salvation excludes the possibility of their submission to the exalted Israel, DeBoer also contends that Duhm was one of the first to propose that a glossator positioned the texts which envisage the submission of the nations.⁶⁷

Torrey suggests that the prophet sought to present a new truth, “the inclusion of the whole Gentile world, side by side with Israel, in the family of the One God.”⁶⁸ This message, however, met with resistance⁶⁹ and occasioned the insertion of certain texts that envision Israel's domination of the nations.⁷⁰

⁶⁵Scot McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991) 117. Instead of a missionary religion, McKnight argues that Judaism was “a light among the nations—a ‘light’ because Judaism was fully assured that truth was on its side; ‘among the nations’ because Jews were thoroughly woven into the fabric of the Roman world.”

⁶⁶J. Lindblom (*Prophecy in Ancient Israel* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962] 401-2) epitomizes this approach to the tension in his remarks: “It is, in the opinion of the present author, difficult to imagine that the prophet proclaimed at the same time conversion or salvation of the Gentiles and their subjugation or annihilation.”

⁶⁷Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja: übersetzt und erklärt* [*The Book of Isaiah: Translated and Explained*] 345, 376. De Boer (*Second Isaiah's Message* 90) argues that a glossator corrupted the prophet's nationalistic message with expressions of Gentile redemption, a “*corpus alienum* in the book of Second Isaiah”; cf. J. Morgenstern, “Isaiah 49–55;” *HUCA* 36 (1965):3, 19.

⁶⁸Torrey, *The Second Isaiah: A New Interpretation* 118.

⁶⁹Torrey (*ibid.*, 119-20) writes: “The prophet's large-hearted view of the Gentile world, giving the heathen an equal share with the chosen people in the blessings of the Coming Age, and reserving for the elder brother, Israel, only the added glory and privilege of the leader and benefactor . . . must have been unacceptable to many of those who held fast to inherited notions. . . .”

⁷⁰According to Torrey (*ibid.*, 119-20), “To have a portion with the great and divide the spoil with the strong was hardly enough; there must be such exaltation above the former oppressors as to make it clear that the relative positions have been reversed. This feeling finds expression in certain insertions

A Consideration of Redactional Layers

Several scholars contend that the compositional history of these chapters explains the conceptual tension in the received canonical text. Dion argues that Isaiah 40–55 has five layers of redaction and he suggests that the first stratum contains a primitive universalism which is refined in the following redactions. The primitive nature of the prophet's universalistic conceptions at the time of the first stratum explains whatever nationalism is present in those chapters.⁷¹ On the other hand, Cañellas suggests that "several of the 'nationalistic' passages in Isaiah 40–55 [e.g., 42:13; 47:3f.; 49:26; 51:22 f.] carry the stamp of a retouching that came from the hand of a strict nationalistic spirit."⁷²

A Redefinition of Terms

For certain writers, only the precise definition of the significant terms (e.g., Israel, nations) can resolve the tension between the bipolar motifs: universalism and nationalism. Halas, who concludes that the prophet teaches no nationalism whatsoever,⁷³ but only salvation for all, argues that the terms "nations" and "Israel" have no ethnic connotations and signify ungodly and godly individuals respectively (whether Jews or Gentiles).⁷⁴ The prophet's message is that the nations (ungodly Jews and Gentiles) will experience judgment, while Israel (godly Jews and Gentiles) will enjoy God's redemptive benefits.

Hollenberg contends that Isaiah is a purely nationalistic prophet by suggesting that "nations" is a flexible term, at times meaning "Gentiles" and at other times the "crypto-Israelites." According to Hollenberg, "Crypto-Israelites are those scattered Jews who have been able to accommodate themselves to an existence in the midst of Gentiles."⁷⁵ In his delineation of various passages in Isaiah 40–55, "nations" means "Gentiles" whenever the destruction or the submission of the nations is in

in the text, made at an early date." Consequently, these nationalistic passages are not part of the prophet's original message. By "early date," Torrey refers to a time in the post-exilic period soon after the completion of "Deutero-Isaiah's" prophetic ministry.

⁷¹Paul E Dion, "L'universalisme religieux dans les différentes couches rédactionnelles d'Isaïe 40–55" ["The Religious Universalism in the Different Redactional Settings of Isaiah 40–55"], *Bib* 51 (1970):161–82. Cf. Seizo Sekine ("A Sketch of the Redaction History of the Second Isaiah," *Seishogaku Ronshu* 13 [1978]:32–69; abstracted in *OTA* 1 [1978]:264) for another redactional alternative.

⁷²Gabriel Cañellas, "El universalismo en el Deuterocanónico" ["Universalism in Deutero-Isaiah"], *Cultura Bíblica* 35 (1978):14.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 162.

⁷⁴Roman Halas, "The Universalism of Isaias," *CBQ* 12 (1950):170.

⁷⁵D. E. Hollenberg, "Nationalism and 'the Nations' in Isaiah XL–LV," *VT* 19 (1969):26–29. In other words, at times the prophet uses the term "nations" to refer to the children of Israel who had become so swallowed up within the nations that he can describe them as *foster children* (49:22 f.).

view, and it means “crypto-Israelites” whenever salvation is promised to the “nations.”⁷⁶

The Situation in the Prophet's Time

Several scholars posit that the conditions external to the prophet occasioned the fluctuation between the motifs of universalism/nationalism and blessing/subjugation. Bewer maintains that Israel's resistance to a universalistic message encouraged the prophet to appeal to the nation's pride by returning to a nationalistic ideology.⁷⁷

Lindblom argues that the instability of Isaiah's time caused this variation in motifs. As Israel's circumstances changed, so did the prophet's declarations to them.⁷⁸

Hempel suggests that the prophet's reference to the retributive “cup of reeling” (51:22 ff.) and the enslavement of Egyptians (45:14 ff.) are manifestations of his falling back into the vengeful hatred felt by many Jews as a consequence of their recent subjugation at the hands of the Gentiles. He writes that during the exilic period, when an abundance of hate against Babylon and Edom had accumulated, “Deutero-Isaiah does not indeed escape this danger [of lapsing back into vengeful hatred] when he, in maintenance of belief in the election of the people (e.g., the Davidic dynasty (55:3), and Jerusalem, promises the retribution reflected in drinking the cup of reeling (51:22f.) and the enslavement of Egypt.”⁷⁹

Begrich contends that the prophet merely inserted universalistic material into the preexisting nationalistic traditions. Since Israel's nationalistic hope was so integral to their traditions, the prophet made no efforts to peel away the obsolete centripetal motifs. He suggests that

In view of these existing realities it might be more accurate to recognize that Deutero-Isaiah received a previously established tradition and that he was not able to single out parts that he did not like. . . . The only thing that remained for him was to shift this tension under the dominant point of view of the glorification of Yahweh. One cannot deny that this adoption of a wider reference was equivalent to an independent tradition

⁷⁶Ibid., 27-29.

⁷⁷Julius A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament*, 3d. ed., Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies, no. 25 (New York: Columbia University, 1962) 222.

⁷⁸J. Lindblom, *The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah: A New Attempt to Solve an Old Problem*, Lunds Universitets Arsskrift N.F. Avd. 1. Bd 47. Nr 5. (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1951) 67. Lindblom later asserts that the tension between these motifs is humanly incomprehensible and will only be resolved one day by God Himself.

⁷⁹Johannes Hempel, “Die Wurzeln des Missionswillens im Glauben des AT” [“The Roots of the Missionary Intention in the Faith of the Old Testament”], ZAW 66 (1954):263.

by him.⁸⁰

Along with Begrich, Gelston argues that this nationalistic material represented an inherited tradition which the prophet was unable to transcend or repudiate.⁸¹

Stuhlmüller separates the message of Second Isaiah from that of the servant songs. Because of the pejorative treatment of the Gentiles in other passages (Isa 40:15-20; 41:11; 43:3, 8-13; 44:9-20), many of the prophet's expressions about the nations' recognizing Yahweh (40:5; 42:12; 52:10) are to be regarded as merely stylistic and exaggerated ways of presenting the wondrous work of Yahweh within Israel. Of three passages that seem to refer to Gentile conversion, two are explained away⁸² and the third (45:22) is ignored.⁸³ An extraordinary leap toward universalism is made in the servant songs (whether written late in what Stuhlmüller calls "Second Isaiah's" ministry or by his disciples), only to be ignored by the post-exilic community.⁸⁴

Finally, Blenkinsopp also identifies developments toward universalism in Isaiah 40–66, which were occasioned by changing historical and social circumstances.⁸⁵ In chapters 40–48 the prophet depicts the Gentiles being admitted as proselytes to a confessional community (as opposed to a nation-state).⁸⁶ In the next section (chaps. 49–55) Cyrus is given the task of repatriating the dispersed Jews. Having failed in this task, the responsibility reverts to the exilic community and its prophetic representatives. Due to its ethnic and cultural mixture, the post-exilic community sought to accommodate these new peoples (chaps. 56–66).⁸⁷

⁸⁰Joachim Begrich, *Studien zu Deuterjesaja [Studies about Deutero-Isaiah]*, ThB, no. 20 (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1963) 86.

⁸¹"Surely it is truer to say that the prophet discerned in moments of high vision the glorious fact that Yahweh's salvation was for all the world, while at other times he sank back to a more traditional and superior attitude towards the Gentiles" (A. Gelston, "The Missionary Message of Second Isaiah," *SJT* 18 [1965]:316. Georg Fohrer (*History of Israelite Religion*, D. E. Green, trans. [Nashville: Abingdon, 1972] 327), argues that besides the prophet's emphasis on universalism, his preaching also contained "questionable nationalistic and materialistic elements" (because of his reliance on earlier prophets).

⁸²Isaiah 44:5 refers to the conversion of scattered Jews and the universalistic elements in 51:3-8 are redactionally removed.

⁸³Carroll Stuhlmüller, "God in the Witness of Israel's Salvation," *God in Contemporary Thought: A Philosophical Perspective*, S. A. Matczak, ed., Philosophical Questions Series, no. 10 (New York: Learned Publications, 1977) 372-73.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 376; cf. Christopher R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1956) 184; Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, G. W. Anderson, trans. (New York: Abingdon, 1956) 250-55.

⁸⁵J. Blenkinsopp, "Second Isaiah—Prophet of Universalism," *JSOT* 41 (1988):83-103.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 85-86.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 90-98.

The Recognition of Israel as God's Servant Nation

All of the above approaches address the conceptual tension in Isaiah 40–55 by unnecessarily explaining away one of the bipolar themes, rather than retaining both sides of the tension.⁸⁸ As Christensen contends, “The dialectic within the prophetic literature of the OT in terms of nationalism and universalism is part of the very structure of the canon itself. It is not to be removed by scholarly reconstruction of the biblical text, nor is it to be explained away by semantics.”⁸⁹ Recognizing the nation of Israel as God's chosen instrument of blessing the nations offers a possible resolution of the conceptual tension in the prophet's message.

First of all, the prophet Isaiah intentionally emphasizes God's future restoration of His chosen people as well as the extension of redemptive benefits to the nations. Through the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12) Yahweh chose Abraham's descendants as a special people for Himself. There He promised to bless this special people and proclaimed His intention to bless all nations of the world through them. Yahweh constituted them as a nation by means of their Exodus from Egypt and His provision of the Mosaic Law. Yahweh gave Israel this legal code so that she, by living in accordance with its demands, might be a nation distinct from all other nations around her. As Exod 19:4-6 explains, by so doing the chosen people would function as a “treasured possession,” “a kingdom of priests,” and “a holy nation.” Yahweh intended that Israel function in a mediatorial or representative role before the nations. The prophet Isaiah built his argument upon this foundation. Isaiah's primary message for God's people is that Yahweh intends to deliver them from Babylonian exile and restore them to great power and glory in their homeland. Yahweh's intervention on their behalf will have obvious worldwide implications.

As part of His promise to restore His chosen people, Yahweh reassured His children that He would intervene on their behalf as a Warrior (41:8-10; 13-14; 42:13), totally annihilating Israel's enemies (41:11-12, 15-16; 49:25-26b). He would use Israel as an instrument of divine judgment against the nations. Like a threshing sled rips apart the stalks to release the grain, Israel will decimate the Gentiles that refuse to submit to Yahweh (41:15-16). This divine judgment upon the nations was likened to the transformation of an oasis to a desert (42:15). Because He values His

⁸⁸The retention of both sides of this tension requires that Isaiah 40–55 be viewed as a unit with a coherent message. Several scholars have recently argued that the final or full form, entire book of Isaiah deserves attention (cf. R. E. Clements, “The Unity of the Book of Isaiah,” *Interpretation* 36 [1982]:117-29; Rolf Rendtorff, “Zur Komposition des Buches Jesaja” [“Concerning the Composition of the Book of Isaiah”], *Vetus Testamentum* 34 [1984]:295-320; idem, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986] 198-200; Christopher R. Seitz, “Isaiah 1–66: Making Sense of the Whole,” *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, Christopher R. Seitz, ed. [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988] 105-12). They contend that the growth of the book took place with an eye to its final shape.

⁸⁹*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Nations,” 4 (1992):1046.

people so highly, Yahweh promised to give nations as ransom for Israel (43:3b-4).⁹⁰

Secondly, the blessing upon the nations chronologically follows their judgment/subjugation. After Yahweh crushes all those Gentiles who stand in opposition to the extension of His kingdom throughout the earth, as the uncontested Sovereign of the universe He will also offer His redemptive benefits to the Gentiles who will submit to Him (45:22-25).⁹¹ He will liberate the nations from oppression and enable them to live in a world where His equity and justice are commonplace. Whether the Messiah or some form of national Israel serve as the referent of the servant figure in the servant songs,⁹² Israel clearly exercises a prominent role in the realization of Yahweh's intentions for the entire world.

Finally, Israel functions as Yahweh's vehicle to bless the nations at the same time as she holds a place of priority over them.⁹³ After judging recalcitrant Gentiles, the Lord will sovereignly cause the nations to expedite the return of scattered Israelites to their homeland (43:5-7; 49:22-23a). These surviving Gentiles will bring tribute to Israel and be subject to her (45:14; 49:22b), recognizing Israel's role as God's servant nation. They will care for Israel as parents care for their child (49:22b). Nations that do not know Israel will hasten to her because of her relationship with Yahweh (55:5). And after the Lord opens the floodgates of divine blessings for both Jews and Gentiles, Israel will function as "the mediatory nation at the head of the nations."⁹⁴

Bremer suggests that Israel's relationship with the nations has always been dialectical. God's chosen people are both set apart from the nations and chosen by God to mediate blessing to the nations. He writes, "Israel is at once the people of the exodus and the people of reconciliation. Israel is set apart, and Israel brings blessing. And the blessing is not to be distinguished from the separation. It is precisely as the

⁹⁰In Isaiah 43:1-7 Yahweh promised to do all that is necessary to accomplish the deliverance of His chosen people. Egypt, Cush, and Seba are nations He will give as ransom as part of His deliverance of Israel from any threatening, destructive force.

⁹¹The prophet Zechariah also affirms that only those "survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem" (Zech 14:16) will worship before the Lord and keep the Feast of Tabernacles.

⁹²Whether the servant figure represents an individual or a collective entity, this figure has an intimate relationship with Israel. The prophet calls the servant "Israel" (49:3) and presents the servant as the epitome of all that Yahweh desired that Israel be. In another work (Grisanti, "The Relationship of Israel and the Nations" 185-96), the present author argues that the Servant in Isaiah 40-55 is a mediatorial Davidic figure who comes to be known as the Messiah.

⁹³Oehler (*Theology of the Old Testament* 501-504, 516-21) argues that this interplay between subjugation and blessing will occur simultaneously as well as consequentially. God's judgment upon the wicked nations occurs in a punctiliar fashion, wiping out those Gentiles that resist His intentions. However, the subjugation of the nations to Israel continues throughout the remainder of history. In this sense, not only does God's blessing upon the nations follow His judgment upon them, but is also co-existent with their subjugation to Israel.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 518.

people of the separation that Israel bears the blessing.”⁹⁵ It is Israel, as God's chosen, separate nation, that God will use as His vehicle for mediating redemptive blessings to the nations of the world (e.g., New Covenant provisions). Isaiah's emphasis on Israel's blessing alongside the nations' subjugation is just another manifestation of the divinely established dialectic in Israel's relationship with the nations. It is as God's chosen people that Israel serves as His agent of blessing upon the nations. The redemptive meeting between Yahweh and the nations depends on the existence of Israel in the midst of the nations. By living for Yahweh the chosen nation lives for the world.

Several nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars have recognized that the prophet envisages the salvation of the nations as well as the exaltation of Israel over the nations.⁹⁶ In his discussion of Israel's relationship with the nations, Ringgren emphasizes that “there is an important restriction on this universalism: Israel is the dominant nation, and the Gentiles will serve Israel and its God.”⁹⁷

More recently, Van Winkle asserts that

the salvation of the nations does not preclude their submission to Israel. The prophet does not envisage the co-equality of Jews and Gentiles. He expects that Israel will be exalted, and that she will become Yahweh's agent who will rule the nations in such a way that justice is established and mercy is shown. This rule is both that for which the nations wait expectantly and that to which they submit.⁹⁸

Oswalt maintains that blessing and judgment coming upon the Gentiles are coordinate rather than mutually exclusive concepts (not either-or, but both-and).⁹⁹ He writes, “To those who come in submission and acceptance he [God] offers a blessed parent-child relationship. But, to those who insist on taking his gifts by force, he shows nothing but implacable hostility.”¹⁰⁰ Zion is at the same time a source of life and a source of death to the nations.

Both divine judgment and blessing will come upon the nations of the world. The Gentiles will enjoy these blessings by virtue of Israel's mediatorial function and at the same time they will be subject to God's chosen people.

⁹⁵Hendrik Bremer, “Israel and the Nations,” *Memnonite Quarterly Review* 32 (1950):54.

⁹⁶A. Knobel, *Der Prophet Jesaja [The Prophet Isaiah]*, Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament (Leipzig: Weidmann'sche Buchhandlung, 1843) 322, 324, 344; Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* 516-21; S. R. Driver, *Isaiah: His Life and Times*, rev. 2d ed. (London: Francis Griffiths, 1904) 140, 144, 150, 156.

⁹⁷Helmer Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*, D. E. Green, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 292.

⁹⁸Dwight Wayne Van Winkle, “The Relationship of the Nations to Yahweh and to Israel in Isaiah XL–LV,” *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985):457.

⁹⁹Oswalt (“The Mission of Israel to the Nations” 85-105) traces this coordination of these motifs throughout the prophets.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 89.

CONCLUSION

In his recent overview of “the nations” as a biblical motif, Christensen affirms that the

study of the nations within the canonical tradition of ancient Israel leads inevitably to the primary tension between the concepts of nationalism and universalism. On the one hand, particularly within the prophetic literature, there are passages which express the narrowest self-interest and even hatred for Israel’s enemies among the nations. But alongside these stand passages expressing an exalted vision of worldwide salvation for “the nations.”¹⁰¹

Isaiah 40–55 contains passages that manifest both sides of this tension. The customary descriptive terms, “nationalism” and “universalism,” do not sufficiently reveal the constitutive issues in this debate. The role of Israel in Yahweh’s extension of redemptive benefits to the nations as well as the consequent relationship of Israel and the nations demand attention in addition to the issue of the extent of those redemptive blessings.

Assertions that the prophet is the “missionary prophet of the Old Testament” or that he is an ardent nationalist without any concern for the nations frame this debate. Between these two extremes, the prophet Isaiah neither depicts Israel as a nation of world-traversing missionaries, nor does he exclude the nations from participation in divine redemption. Consonant with relevant antecedent Scriptures, the prophet argues that God’s special dealings with His chosen people not only benefit Israel, but also carry significance for all nations. Isaiah underscores Israel’s role in providing a witness to the nations. This witness function is not in the New Testament sense of bringing the message of Yahweh to the nations, but “in the sense of being a people of God whose life shall draw nations to inquire after Yahweh”¹⁰² (cf. Isa 2:1-4; 43:10-11). It is as God’s chosen people that Israel can exercise a mediatorial role with regard to the nations. Isaiah’s fervent desire for Israel is that they will respond to God’s intervention on her behalf and carry out her role as God’s servant nation before the world.

¹⁰¹*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Nations,” 4:1037.

¹⁰²Elmer Martens, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).