



• Isaiah asks – who rules history?

God has promised to restore Israel¹. He has pointed to his greatness as the Creator to show that he is well able to fulfil his promises². Now Isaiah asks the question in a more pointed and precise manner. Who rules history? He asks the whole world to consider the question³.

1 40:1-11
2 40:12-31
3 41:1-7

*1'Come to me in silence, you distant lands!
Let the peoples put on fresh strength!
Let them come forward and speak;
let us meet together at the place of judgement.'*

• Like a court hearing

• Cyrus – who allowed the Judeans to return to Israel

The language is that of people disputing, coming to a court to reach a settled verdict. The questions revolve around one particular character. Isaiah does not tell us whom he is referring to. Later in the prophecy it will become obvious it is Cyrus, the conqueror of Babylon who allowed the Judeans to return to Israel. But at the moment Isaiah is exploring possibilities. Abraham came from the east. He pictures another rescuer from the same location.

*2'Who has woken up someone from the east,
whom Righteousness calls to his service?'*

God can call anyone to be his servant

God can call anyone to be his servant, even an unconverted pagan soldier. Anyone can be made to serve God even when he does not know he is doing it. Cyrus was 'woken up . . . from the east' by God. God's saving righteousness can call to his service anyone he wishes.

God can give nations to anyone, or take nations away from anyone

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*'He hands nations over to him
so that he may dominate kings before him.
He turns them to dust with his sword,
to wind-blown chaff with his bow.
3He pursues them and moves on in contentment,
by a path on which his feet do not walk.
4Who has done this and carried it through,
calling into being the generations from the beginning?
I, Yahweh – with the first of them
and with the last – I am he.'*

God can do what no idol can do

God can do what no idol can do. When the faraway places of the earth see the approach of a conqueror, they begin to tremble.

*5The distant lands have seen it and fear;
the ends of the earth tremble.*

They begin to encourage each other to turn to the idols for help.

• Seeing the conqueror approach, they turn to idols

*They approach and come forward;
6each helps the other
and says to his brother, 'Be strong!'
7The craftsman encourages the goldsmith,
and he who smoothes with the hammer
spurs on him who strikes the anvil.
He says of the welding, 'It is good.'
He nails down the idol so it will not topple.*

• The gods are useless

The gods are useless. They are meant to help their worshippers, but their worshippers have to help them!

In his control of history God keeps his people safe

In his control of history God keeps his people safe. God refers to Israel. He rules the world. He does what the idols cannot do. When everyone else is afraid, his people do not need to be afraid. God's control of history is designed to save his people and in the midst of it he uses his people. God's 'Israel' (which now has gentiles in it!) is at the centre of his purposes of blessing.

• God's people do not need to be afraid

⁸'But you Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you seed of Abraham who loved me . . .'

God's chosen people are:

Who are these people that God chooses and uses and blesses?

(i) Israel – descendants and all who have faith in God's promise

(i) They are '**Israel**'. The name goes back to the father of the nation, Jacob. He was a crook, a grabber, a man with a twisted personality. But God saved him, brought him to the point where he prayed as never before and he became 'a prince with God' ('Israel') because of his having learned to pray. All who descended from him became an earthly nation of 'Israel'. Equally, all who are like him by faith in God's promise are God's 'Israel', grafted into his people.

(ii) God's servant

(ii) They are **God's servant**. Earlier in the book of Isaiah, Isaiah himself was called the servant of God¹; so were Eliakim² and David³. Now in Isaiah 41:8, 9 the term is applied to the nation. We shall see the term again in 42:1, 19; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21, 26; 48:20; 49:3, 5, 6, 7; 50:10; 52:13; 53:11. (Isaiah 24:2 is another mention of the word, but unimportant.)

¹ 20:3

² 22:20

³ 37:35

(iii) The object of God's sovereign choice

(iii) They are the **object of God's sovereign choice**. Jacob himself was loved in a special way while his brother Esau was used by God differently. All of God's Israel are 'children of Jacob', undeserving people whom God has loved.

(iv) Abraham's seed

(iv) They are **Abraham's seed**. Abraham also was chosen by God in a striking manner. He was brought from the ends of the earth, from a place far away from Israel. All of God's people resemble Abraham and Jacob. They are undeserving people, chosen people, people made into God's servants by God's grace. History revolves around them.

• Believing gentiles have become part of the seed of Abraham

God's Israel – we must remember – has been enlarged. All believing gentiles have become part of the seed of Abraham. They are grafted into the true people of God. God is the Lord of history, working for his people.

(v) A protected people – their enemies will be exterminated

(v) They are a **protected people**. Those who are his people need never be afraid. God says to them:

*⁹'I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, "You are my servant"; I have chosen you and have not rejected you.
¹⁰So do not fear, for I am with you; do not look around in desperation, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.'*

Their enemies will eventually be exterminated.

(vi) A significant people – God will stand by them

(vi) They are a **significant people**. Though they are like a worm in their apparent insignificance, yet God will stand by them.

¹⁴'Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, you little people of Israel. I myself will help you – it is an oracle of Yahweh, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.'

• They will become a threshing sledge

The worm will become a threshing sledge! All its enemies will be defeated.

*¹⁵See, I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them, and reduce the hills to chaff.
¹⁶You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up, and a gale will blow them away. But you will rejoice in Yahweh and glory in the Holy One of Israel.'*

(vii) Sustained through all hardships

(vii) **They will be a people sustained through all hardships.** They may be thirsty but God will meet their needs. They will be given not a few drips or splashes but rivers and springs.

*¹⁷The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I, Yahweh, will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.
¹⁸I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs.'*

• Their desert-like situation will be transformed into paradise

Their desert-like situation will be transformed into a paradise.

*¹⁹I will all at once put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set pines in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress,
²⁰so that the poor and needy may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of Yahweh has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it.'*

• The neediest will see that God was with them all along

Soon the neediest of God's people will recognize that God was with them all along.