

Explore the Bible Series for April 30: When God wants to do a new thing, saddle up

April 20, 2006

Posted: 4/20/06

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When God wants to do a new thing, saddle up

- Isaiah 44:1-48:22

By James Adair

Baptist University of the Americas, San Antonio

An entire generation or more of Jews had been born and had grown up in Babylonia, far from their ancestral home. It was common practice in the ancient world for great empires, after they had conquered a territory, to transplant the leading citizens—the ruling family, aristocratic classes and priests—to a distant land and resettle them there.

The idea behind this policy was that rebellions most likely would be led by those who had lost the most in terms of prestige or power. They would be discouraged from leading a revolt if they lived on foreign soil, surrounded by people who spoke a different language and worshiped different gods.

Generally speaking, the people who were transplanted became assimilated into the surrounding culture after a couple of generations and no longer

thought of themselves as distinct ethnically or culturally from their neighbors.



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After about 50 years in exile, the Jews in Babylonia were in danger of losing their identity, unless they experienced a spiritual renewal. “Isaiah of the exile,” the prophet responsible for the oracles in Isaiah 40-55, had a message of hope for the lost generation of Israel, and he also offered a plan for spiritual renewal with a kicker: God would soon let them return home!

Isaiah 44:1-5

One of the most common archaeological finds in ancient Israel is a jar handle from a broken piece of pottery, often stamped with an indicator of ownership—“belonging to Jacob” or “to Obed,” for example. Many jar handles and other objects contain the inscription lmlk (lemelech), which means “belonging] to the king.”

In these verses, the prophet says God is about to pour the divine spirit over the Jews, in effect putting a stamp on their hand that says “belonging to the Lord.” God will not allow Israel to fade into the background, become assimilated to the surrounding culture and lose their identity.

On the contrary, the prophet says Israel’s identity comes from its association with the Lord, an association so greatly to be desired even non-

Jews will adopt the name of Israel in order to claim that association.

Isaiah 44:6-20

Although it is common for people to imagine that the theological outlook of the nation of Israel was more or less constant throughout its history, a close reading of the Old Testament shows Israel's ideas about God and theology in fact developed significantly over time.

Nowhere is this development more apparent than in the "official" position concerning the uniqueness of God, as reflected in the canonical books that date from various periods of time.

The most important common element that held the nation of Israel together during the preexilic period was their belief in the Lord (Yahweh). Israelites were followers of Yahweh, in contradistinction to their neighbors who worshiped other gods.

But did the other gods exist? Apparently many people thought it was possible other gods existed, even though they were not to be worshiped by faithful Israelites. A good example of this point of view can be found in Joshua 24:15, where Joshua urges Israel to serve only Yahweh, as his family will do. Note that he does not deny the possibility of other gods, but he does suggest that they are unworthy of Israel's worship.

One of the great theological innovations of the exilic period was the realization that not only was Yahweh the only God worthy of Israel's worship, but Yahweh also was the only God worthy of anyone's worship, because all other gods were false gods. The extended discussion on the futility of worshiping idols that were not really gods at all is a classic exposition of the uniqueness of God, an idea Israel adopted from that time forward.

Isaiah 44:24-45:7

One of the primary texts in the latter chapters of Isaiah that leads most scholars to posit a sixth-century B.C. date for these prophecies is the present passage, in which Cyrus the Great, king of Persia from 559 to 529 B.C., is mentioned twice by name (44:28; 45:1). Furthermore, the context of the passage indicates it is describing a contemporary ruler rather than a future king.

The language the prophet uses to describe Cyrus is striking. He is called "God's shepherd" (44:28) and even "God's anointed" (45:1), the same word translated elsewhere as "messiah." Of course, Cyrus is not the messiah, merely a person God has chosen to perform an important task, even though he does not know God (45:5). This passage reminds believers God can work through a variety of people and through many different circumstances to accomplish the divine will. For that reason, God's people need to be sensitive to the world around them, outside the church as well as within it, for God might be at work in surprising places and through surprising people.

Isaiah 48:20-21

An old Red Skelton joke has a couple of rabbits hiding in a briar patch while a coyote is circling outside trying to figure out a way to get in. One rabbit looks at the other and says, "Should we make a run for it or stay here and outnumber him?" The other rabbit responds, "I guess we'd better make a run for it. We're both males!"

Through the instrumentality of Cyrus the Great, God had provided the Jews in exile with a means to escape their current situation. Apparently,

however, many Jews were comfortable in their new surroundings and preferred to stay behind. “Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,” the prophet urges them. “God has accomplished a new exodus for Israel, if only you’re willing to join it.”

It’s easy to become comfortable with our lives, and there’s something to be said for stability. However, when God wants to do something new, when a unique opportunity for service presents itself, we need to keep ourselves ready to respond to God’s call.

Discussion questions

- Do other people identify us as “belonging to the Lord”? What characteristics do you look for in people who claim to be God’s people (e.g., doctrines, lifestyle, personality traits)? Do you think people outside the church evaluate “belonging to the Lord” in the same way?
- Although as Christians we claim that there is only one true God, we sometimes act as though other gods exist. What are some of the gods in today’s world that can distract us from following the one true God?
- What is the difference between the way God works through unbelievers and the way God works through believers? How can we discern whether what someone proposes is God’s will? If we think we might be hearing God’s call to change our lives in some radical way, how can we know whether the voice we hear really is God’s?



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