

Isaiah 40:1-2 – Beginning of Redemption

Lesson Goals:

1. To appreciate that Isaiah 40-66 deals directly with the idea of restoration, and the return to the land after the 1st destruction, but is relevant to issues of the return after the 2nd destruction;
2. To appreciate that prophecies can be fulfilled in wholly-unpredictable ways and that it is often not easy to determine whether a given event is the one envisioned;
3. To begin to appreciate how complex the ideas of “return and restoration” or “redemption” are and the question of “Is this the redemption?” can often be answered “partly.”

Background information for the teacher:

A. Redaction

The last 27 chapters of the book of Isaiah refer to the period of the “Return to Zion.” This is the period after the year by 538 BCE, when Cyrus, king of Persia, allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem from Babylonia. This does not necessarily mean that these processes were delivered during this time period.

I suggest that teachers grant legitimacy to both of the following positions:

- a. Chapters 40 – 66 were delivered by Isaiah of Jerusalem during his lifetime in the eighth century B.C.E., but refer to the period of the return to Zion.
- b. Chapters 40 – 66 were delivered by a later prophet and were attached to the book of Isaiah because this prophet as part of the school that studied the writings of Isaiah. Note that Tosafot in B Bath 14b states that the "company" that completed the book of Isaiah lived after the lifetime of Isaiah.

I do not think that there is much point in trying to either delegitimize the second view or debate the authorship of the book.

The following points of view, however, are not helpful studying this part of the book:

- a. The chapters (40-66) refer only to the future redemption and not to the redemption of the Second Temple period.
- b. It is impossible for a prophet of the eighth century B.C.E. to be given information about later time-periods.

B. Historical Background

Here are the “bare bones” of what students must know to make sense of this portion of the book.

- A. Students should know the date of the destruction of the first Temple – 587/586 BCE, by the Babylonians. In these years (and the previous and subsequent decades), many Jews were exiled to Babylonia. There, they lived in ethnically-distinct neighbourhoods (by choice, not by force) and lived as communities of Jews. Other groups exiled by the Babylonians (such as the Egyptians, and the northern Syrians) had similar communities in Babylon.
- B. Students should understand that around the year 545 BCE a new king arose in the area east of Babylonia, and conquered Babylonia, establishing a new empire. His name was Cyrus. In conquering Babylonia, Cyrus began “the Persian empire,” which for a long time was simply Cyrus and his descendants running the old Babylonian empire.
- C. For our purposes, Cyrus is important because in 538 BCE, after conquering Babylonia, he began a general policy encouraging various nations conquered by the Babylonians to return to their homelands and build temples. He did this for political reasons: by encouraging these nations to return, he thought he’d create loyalty among them to the “Persian empire.”

While these are the bare bones, it is a good idea for the teacher to know more. Here is some useful bibliography:

Amelie Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983): 83-97;

Israel Eph'al, "The *Western Minorities* in Babylonia in the 6th-5th Centuries BC: Maintenance and Cohesion," *Orientalia* 47 (1978), 74-90

Ran Zadok, *The earliest diaspora : Israelites and Judeans in pre-Hellenistic Mesopotamia* (Tel Aviv, 2002), p. 33.

Oded Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah between the Seventh and the Fifth Centuries, BCE” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, ed. J. Blenkinsopp and O. Lipschits, (Eisenbrauns, 2003).

Lisbeth S. Fried, “The Land Lay Desolate: Conquest and Restoration in the Ancient Near East,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, ed. J. Blenkinsopp and O. Lipschits, (Eisenbrauns, 2003).

I suggest teaching point A above using the map in slide 2.

Frontal Teaching:

First, teach point A above, using the map in slide 2.

Then, ask the students what the Jews might expect to happen to them once they've been exiled.

Do they ever expect to go back to Israel? If so, when? Students should reference the prophecies of Isaiah 11 and Micah, which they've just studied, and introduce another prophecy which was given once the exile already began: use slides 3-4 to teach Jeremiah 29:10-11. This is a prophecy delivered to the Jews who are in exile. (It is not necessary to go into the distinction between 597 and 586.) It creates two very clear expectations:

- a. There will be a return to the land of Israel within 70 years – that is the “aharit.”
- b. There will be “shalom” while in Babylon.

I suggest teaching these verses frontally, and asking the students to define the two expectations.

Then, use slide 5 to ask: How will you know when the time for the return has arrived? Ask students for their suggestions, and save these suggestions on a smartboard panel or on the side of the whiteboard. Students will probably say things like: “God will announce it” or “Mashiah will come” or “We'll all fly on magic carpets to Israel...”. Isolate key points like:

- Obvious divine announcement
- Obvious miracles
- Independent Jewish state
- The “70 years” Jeremiah mentioned.

Then, use slides 6-7 to teach what actually happened. The actual declaration of Cyrus is cited from Ezra 5:13-15, rather than Ezra 1, because the formulation in Ezra 5 is more similar to the language of actual Persian decrees (very technical, based on administration and not religion).

Explain why Cyrus does this – using the map, show how he wants to ensure loyal subjects in the Mediterranean area.

Use slide 8 to contrast the expectations of the people with the reality of Cyrus' declaration.

Ask students: if you were living in this time, would you think that Cyrus' declaration is the “return to the land” that Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah spoke about?

Entertain arguments for a while.

Then assign the worksheet on Isaiah 40:1-2.

Review of worksheet and discussion:

Rather than reviewing the whole worksheet, I suggest reading the two verses and beginning from question 3 – if the students reviewed the story in Bereshit 34, they should understand that the expression means “Seduce”.

Then, show slide 9 – review the end of verse 2 (the first two of the three “keys”) and ask what the point of them is – the point is that “the sentence is over” – and ask “does it make sense that you have to SEDUCE a prisoner to believe that his sentence is over”?

Go back to slide 8, and show: --- because the reality is not what they expected, they think that it’s not the redemption.

Use slide 10 to ask: Why don’t the Jews believe that their sentence is over?

*the reality does not seem to be what Jeremiah prophesied.

*the seventy years is not really up (586 minus 538 equals less than 70) – that’s why Yeshaya says that they’ve been punished “kifyaim” – therefore they don’t have to wait 70 years.