

ISAIAH

ISAIAH 45:11-13, YAHWEH'S VERACITY & POWER, PART 2

Another pattern in Isaiah is the nearly continual revelation of God's sovereignty. He is the Creator God of all that exists. As such, He is completely in charge of everything, and He has a plan and a purpose for world history that must come to pass. No false god and no human being can create anything *ex nihilo* as He has done. He is the only true God; there are no other gods in existence. He can do anything and everything that is consistent with His divine nature according to His will. He directs kings and He directs nations. Apparently, there is a need for Him to keep reminding Israel of those facts! He reminds them of this truth a number of times in the book.

Isaiah 45:11 ¹¹Thus says the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: "Ask [שְׁאַל] Me about the things to come concerning My sons, And you shall commit [צַוְהָ] to Me the work of My hands.

After condemning the ones who dare to quarrel with their Maker, the Lord once again reminds them that He is the God of Israel and that He is the One who created Israel. "My sons" and "the work of My hands" are both references to Israel, God's specifically created nation. Instead of quarrelling with Him, they should be concerned about cooperating with Him concerning His plan for history involving Israel and the world. The name Yahweh and the title the Holy One of Israel are always emphasizing His holy name and His complete separation from His creation, Israel. He is intimately involved with the nation, but He is not of the nation, which is a concept referred to as transcendence.

"The Bible teaches that God is distinct from his creation. He is not part of it, for he has made it and rules over it. The term *transcendent* is often used to say that God is much greater than creation. Very simply, this word means that God is far 'above' the creation in the sense that he is greater than and independent of creation" [Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed., 343].

"As *transcendent*, God is uniquely other than everything in creation.... God's being is eternal, the world's temporal. God's knowledge is total, human knowledge incomplete. God's character is holy, humanity's character fallen and sinful. God's desires are consistently against evil yet long-suffering and compassionate; human desires fluctuate inconsistently and often intermingle evil with the good. God's energy is untiring and inexhaustible; the world's energy is subject to depletion through entropy. Hence, God is over and above persons in the world in all these respects.... Because God is separate from the world, Christians cannot bow to any earthly power as God, whether that power be economic, political, religious, scientific, educational, or cultural. The inestimable benefit of bowing to a transcendent Lord of all is that it frees one from every finite, fallen tyranny" [G. R. Lewis, s.v. "God, Attributes of," ed. Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., 498-499].

Verse 11 is difficult to understand, but it may be understood as either making a declarative statement or asking a question. Questioning seems to be more likely even

though the Hebrew interrogative particle is not present. In Hebrew, a question usually begins the first word of the question's sentence with an interrogative particle (א, the letter "He" with the Hataf Pathach vowel which is an "a" class reduced vowel) that indicates a question is being asked. "Ask" is in an imperative verb form which may be used in an ironic manner to mean the opposite. It may also be considered to be a form of Hebrew sarcasm. What He is telling them by using the verb in this way is that they have no right to question Him, their Creator, even though it sounds like He is telling them to ask Him about things to come. "The glory of God is infinitely higher than his people, and his power is comparably greater than anything on earth. Since this is so, it is astonishing that 'my sons' (the Israelites) would dare to ask questions about God's plans for their future. Yes, it is incredible that 'the work of my hands' (45:9), the Israelite people, would even think that they could command God to do something or not do something else" [Gary V. Smith, *The New America Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 263].

Ask, שאל, means to ask, to inquire with the sense of making a request or demanding something from somebody.

Commit, צוה, means to give an order or to command referring to charging someone to do something, i.e., directing someone by means of issuing them commands in various situations. The word may also mean to appoint or to instruct. The NASB is the only version I routinely consult that uses the word "commit." All the other versions use the word "command" or some variation of it: instruct (CSB) or give me orders (ISV).

It seems somewhat impossible to think that immediately after some verses in which God asserts His sovereignty over the Creation and over Israel, that He would be inviting them to question what He is doing and even give Him commands to do anything. He had just rebuked them for challenging Him and arguing with Him! If the grammar is indicating that this verse includes two challenging questions from God to the people and which imply that they have no right to challenge Him, then the verse would make more sense and look like this:

Isaiah 45:11 ¹¹Thus said the LORD, Israel's Holy One and Maker: Will you question Me about the work of My hands? Will you instruct Me about the work of My hands? (TANAKH)

Buksbazen, a Messianic Jew, also holds this view of the verse's interpretation. "It is outrageous for man (finite in wisdom and knowledge) to question God concerning His ways or to tell Him how to deal with His children" [Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah: A Commentary*, 363].

The NET Bible presents the same type of rebuke but in an emphatic declarative manner rather than as questions. The translators recognized the sarcasm present in the exchange. "'Ask me.' The rhetorical command sarcastically expresses the Lord's disgust with those who question his ways" [*The NET Bible*, 2nd ed. "Isaiah," 1295 n. k]. While I think they add too much into the verse in terms of literal hermeneutics, I do think they capture the sense of it quite well.

Isaiah 45:11 ¹¹This is what the LORD says, the Holy One of Israel, the one who formed him, concerning things to come: "How dare you question me about my children! How dare you tell me what to do with the work of my own hands! (NET Bible)

The most literal translation of this verse is straightforward and some commentators believe it is best viewed as sarcasm or as "an oxymoron that any reader would catch" [Gary V. Smith, *The New America Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 263 n. 578, citing J. L. Koole, *Isaiah III, Volume 1, Isaiah 40-48*, 456-458].

Isaiah 45:11 ¹¹Thus said Jehovah, The Holy One of Israel, and his Former: Ask Me of the things coming concerning My sons, Yea, concerning the work of My hands, ye command Me.' (YLT)

However, if the ironic use of the imperative is the correct way to understand the verse, and it does make the most sense, then this interpretation is not quite as literal as the TANAKH, because it is not grammatically accounting for the ironic or sarcastic use of the imperative verb.

"Some Hebrew (and English) sentences do not begin with the sign of a question but can rely on intonation or context to convey the idea that a question is being asked; thus, it is possible to translate this short clause as a statement or a question. As a statement God would be encouraging the people to 'ask me concerning the things to come for my sons,' but it seems more likely that this is a question, 'Should you ask me about the things to come for my sons?' The area of the people's concern relates to things that will happen in the future, presumably the hard and fearful times that are coming before the future rebuilding of the nation" [Gary V. Smith, *The New America Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 264].

Constable views this verse as irony and probably sarcasm on the part of God in response to His created nation questioning His decisions concerning their future. "Since Yahweh is Israel's Lord, Holy One, and Creator, what right did the Israelites have to question His decision to use Cyrus to deliver them in the future? The question in this verse is probably ironic in meaning: go ahead and question my judgment concerning my sons (Israel and Cyrus), and command me concerning the work of my hands!" [Thomas L. Constable, *Thomas Constable's Notes on the Bible, Volume IV: Isaiah-Daniel*, 4:130].

The other way to interpret this verse is as a straightforward declarative statement. If that is the correct interpretation, then God is not merely granting the Israelites permission to ask Him about the future, He is commanding them to ask Him. Unger viewed this as a possibility but qualified it by suggesting that this was appropriate only if they viewed the issues from God's perspective. "It may be construed declaratively. Instead of striving with Me concerning My purposes, it is your privilege in prayer to ask and even command Me—providing it is for My highest glory and your greatest good—..." [Merrill F. Unger, "Isaiah" in *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1267]. "The meaning is: If ye would have any information or satisfaction concerning the future, about which ye can neither know nor determine anything of yourselves, inquire of me" [C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Isaiah*, vol. 7, 7: 446].

The reminder that He is the Creator God is intended to once again make the statement that He can do whatever He wants to do with His creation. He is sovereign and no one has the authority to tell Him what to do, how to do it, or when to do it. He is the one in charge. That includes His interaction with Israel as well as with the entire created order.

Isaiah 45:12 ¹²“It is I who made the earth, and created [בָּרָא] man upon it. I stretched out the heavens with My hands And I ordained [צִוִּיתִי] all their host.

This is an emphatic statement concerning the fact that it is Yahweh alone who created all that exists. He made the earth, He created man, He stretched out the universe, and, once completed, He commands everything in it, that is, He maintains it and controls it. Notice the use of verbs that reveal His omnipotence and His sovereignty.

Also notice the use of the personal pronoun “I” that begins all three lines of this verse. The first two uses of the personal pronoun in the first two lines actually begin with two pronouns (one independent personal pronoun and one subject pronoun present in the verb form), “I Myself,” or literally, “I, I” which is an emphatic declaration that it is Yahweh Himself who created the heavens and the earth. The Hebrew syntax is indicating that there is something in this situation that is very important and it is being emphasized. The most accurate, literal translation would be: “I Myself made the earth ... I, My hands stretched out the heavens ...” (LEB). God is emphatically declaring Himself to be the Creator God; there is no other.

As a reminder, we must understand that the word create, בָּרָא, (cf. Gen. 1:1) which means to create referring to something that has not been in existence before, is a word that pertains only to God, and, as such it is “a purely theological term. This distinctive use of the word is especially appropriate to the concept of creation by divine fiat. The root *bara* denotes the concept of ‘initiating something new’ ... The word also possesses the meaning of ‘bringing into existence’” [Harris, Archer, Jr., and Waltke, s.v. “בָּרָא,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 127].

This verse is following the verses that were used to rebuke those Israelites—and by application anyone—who questions and challenges God. The point being made here seems to be that the same God who created everything is certainly capable of taking care of what is going to happen in the future. He is, after all, the God who knows the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10). The same God who is the God of the past is also the God of the future. The attributes of God do not change; He is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). His power to create and to control His creation are eternal powers. The Psalmist proclaimed that the work of creation was merely the work of His fingers (Ps. 8:3). In this verse, it is said that He stretched out the heavens with His hands. Any God who can do that can do anything. God's power to do such amazing things in the past is a significant indication that the same power God still possesses can and will do equally amazing, creative, and miraculous things in the future. Conversely, mankind has no power to do the things that only God can do and man has no right to question Him about anything that he has done or will do. Consequently, they need to submit to His plans for world history. “If God is able to control, guide, keep track of, and care for the ten thousands of stars spread out over the immense heavens, surely he is able to deal with the important issues that his few people were facing on earth. There is also no need

for anyone to quarrel with God's plans or question God's ability to do what he has promised" [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 264].

Ordain, צָוָה, means to give an order, to charge, to command referring to charging someone to do something. The NASB is the only version that uses the word "ordain." In English, the word "ordain" means to officially order or to decree something, to prescribe, or to determine something. Technically, the word "ordain" works in this verse, but "command" is much more in line with the Hebrew definition and that is the English word all the other translations use. In this context and in the English language, "ordain" just doesn't give us quite the same idea as the word "command" gives us. Other translations that are better include: "... and I commanded all their host" (LEB) or "... I give orders to all the heavenly lights" (NET Bible). The command may refer to the creation of the heavens as they are brought into existence, but it seems to relate also to maintaining the universe during its day-to-day existence.

Verse 11 ended with the question, "Will you instruct me about the work of My hands?" In verse 12, those hands are said to be the same hands that not only created Israel, but also stretched out the heavens. In Isaiah's day, that was an amazing enough statement, but today with the photos taken by the Hubble Telescope, along with other scientific discoveries concerning the universe, it is an even more amazing feat to understand the creative work that took place in forming the immensity, the complexity, and the beauty of the universe. No human being has any right to question God about the use of His hands. The heavens exist as the mere work of His hands, and once formed, He commands the universe to operate according to His purposes for the accomplishment of His will. As the work of His hands, Israel is also subject to the commands of the Holy One of Israel.

In terms of working with the hands, we cannot discount the previous discussion concerning those who use their hands to fashion idols (Is. 44:9-20). They are limited to using what God has already created to craft idols that they then very foolishly call their gods. Mankind's hands are weak and insignificant in comparison with the hands of God. Conversely, the hand of God, the one true God, made everything that exists including mankind. No one is in a position to argue with or tell God what to do, how to do it, and when to do it.

Because He has done all this, i.e., created all things, He has the right to raise up and appoint anyone He chooses, including an unbelieving, pagan king, to further His plans for the creation or any part thereof, in this case, for Israel and her repatriation back to Israel.

Isaiah 45:13 ¹³"I have aroused [עוּרָה] him in righteousness And I will make all his ways smooth [יָשַׁר]; He will build [בְּנֶה] My city and will let My exiles go free [שְׁלַח], Without any payment or reward," says the LORD of hosts.

This verse specifically relates to Cyrus without explicitly calling him by name as the previous verses did. The context makes it clear that Cyrus and his release of the Israelite captives in Babylon, My exiles, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, My city, are the subjects.

Everything about this pagan king and his activities concerning the conquest of Babylon and the freeing of the Israelites from captivity to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple are done at God's direction. Because He is sovereign, no one has the right to question God concerning His appointment of Cyrus to be His anointed agent to Israel.

God has a plan for the reign of Cyrus which involves placing him in power in Persia, enlarging his power, wealth, and territory and finally, empowering him to the point that he is capable of conquering the mighty Babylon, which is the necessary precursor to freeing the captive Israelites in Babylon. The wealth that he amassed was necessary for funding the rebuilding of the Temple, and the territory he controlled allowed him to ensure the safety of the Israelites.

Aroused, עורר, means to arouse, to be hot or ardent, to awake, to stir, and to start to move referring to being in an alert state ready to do action as an extension of being in a physically awake state. The word is used to refer to raising something or someone to action, of agitating someone, or of motivating someone. This verb form is causative, which means that God is bringing about this state resulting in the sense of causing to be agitated, excited, or aroused. "This verb is typically used of God's unusual moving of unexpected people to do his will" [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 264]. It is also in the perfect verb form meaning completed action, but this is still a future activity; therefore, it is properly considered to be a prophetic perfect.

This verse also begins with two pronouns (one independent personal pronoun and one subject pronoun present in the verb form), "I Myself," or literally, "I," which is an emphatic declaration that it is Yahweh Himself who is ordering this king's steps. Again, the Hebrew syntax is indicating that there is something being revealed in this situation that is very important and it is being emphasized. The most literal rendering is, "I Myself have stirred him up ..." (LEB). In terms of Hebrew syntax, this is the same situation that occurs in the first two lines of verse 12. Here, the emphasis is on the fact that God raised up this king to action so that God's plan to repatriate the Israelite exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem so the Temple and the city could be rebuilt. This action sets up the presence of the nation for the appearance of the Messiah King a few hundred years in the future.

All of the emphasis placed on this revelation by the emphatic grammatical use of the personal pronouns is designed to remove all doubt about whether or not this pagan king was doing God's will at God's behest. "The text makes it clear that his [Cyrus'] rise to power was not just a coincidence, a stroke of good luck, or something that he engineered through some savvy political maneuvering.... The main point is that God is the central actor stirring up this powerful ruler and providentially overseeing his ways, so that it will be possible for him to build my city Jerusalem and send out 'my exiles' [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 265].

"Once again, the first person independent personal pronoun is used to give special emphasis to the sentence. Cyrus did not arise by accident, nor by his own choice. He rose up because I called him. This emphasis is continued throughout the verse. History is solely in the hands of the Creator. The great Persian emperor, like the earth and the stars, exists and comes forth at the command of God alone" [John N. Oswalt, *The New*

International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66, 210].

What does it mean that Cyrus will be raised up in righteousness? Cyrus is a pagan king who has no inherent righteousness apart from God. Furthermore, no human being, fallen or saved, has any righteousness apart from God. The righteousness described here is the righteous result of God's actions through this pagan king. God is righteous and God's works are all totally righteous regardless of who is performing the works on His behalf. The righteousness on display here is about doing the right thing, that is, Cyrus is doing God's will whether he knows it or not, and God's call, God's will, and God's works are always only righteous.

“God insists that he will have done the ‘right’ thing in calling Cyrus.... So God says that his decision to use the pagan king in order to accomplish his larger creation and election [appointment] purposes is absolutely the right one in the light of all the circumstances, and that Israel, the object of those purposes, is in no position to challenge the decision” [John N. Oswalt, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66, 211*].

Cyrus almost certainly never knew that God was directing his steps before he conquered Babylon. He probably did not have access to the prophecy of Isaiah before he interacted with the Israelites in Babylon after he occupied at least some of the territory surrounding the city of Babylon that had a Jewish population. Once he became aware of the prophecy, however, he stepped up and obediently released the Israelites for their return to Jerusalem, and he facilitated God's directive to rebuild the Temple.

Another aspect of God's righteousness that is on display here is His faithfulness to Israel. God has a plan and a purpose for the nation and part of that plan is imposing divine temporal discipline on the nation for disobedience and rebellion, hence the Babylonian captivity, and part of that plan is restoring the nation in preparation for the appearance of the Messiah King at what we now know was His First Advent. By announcing these things beforehand, the nation would realize that when these things happen Yahweh is directing their steps, ordering their future, and ensuring that everything comes to pass just as He has planned things come to pass. Despite the amount of revelation they have received, the Israelites have generally rejected the light received and remained in the dark concerning the spiritual things of God.

2 Corinthians 3:14–15 ¹⁴But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. ¹⁵But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart;

Romans 11:25 ²⁵For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

The interesting thing to note is that Cyrus immediately and obediently embraced God's directives to release the Israelites and rebuild the Temple while the majority of the Jews were, and still are, existing in a state of disobedience and rebellion.

Cyrus probably thought he was a great warrior king who no one could defeat, but his strength was in Yahweh and not in himself or in his army. God was going to ensure that Cyrus defeated every foe he faced up to and including Babylon. Smooth, *יָשָׁר*, means to be smooth, straight, or right referring to making level or straight. It is a metaphor for saying that the way before Cyrus was going to be unobstructed and would allow for unimpeded travel which would facilitate his success along the way. This was God's work that was intended to accomplish His will. The verb form indicates intensity; God is seriously at work in this endeavor. Cyrus's success was a necessary, but also an incidental part of the plan of God. Incidental means an accompanying but not a major part of something. Cyrus had to be successful to get the point where he could conquer Babylon and accomplish God's purposes for Israel at that point in time, but the pagan king's success was only important in terms of advancing the plan of God. God was going to ensure that Cyrus was where he needed to be when God needed him to be there. Once there, the king was going to receive the revelation he needed to fulfill God's plans for Israel through the king.

In the words, "He will build . . .," the emphasis moves from God to Cyrus. Literally, this reads, "He himself shall build . . ." (LEB). Build, *בָּנָה*, means to build, to rebuild, or to fortify referring to building something by combining materials and parts. Rebuilding and fortifying are the issues involved with rebuilding the city of Jerusalem. The Hebrew syntax is again the key to understanding that the emphasis is on the king. God is ensuring that this will take place, but the king will see to it that the city is rebuilt and the Israelites are set free to return. The king will not do the actual construction work himself, but he will see to it that it gets done.

In reality, the opposition to rebuilding both the Temple and the city of Jerusalem was intense. The Temple did not begin to be rebuilt until two years into the return of the exiles (Ezra 3:8). At some point, opposition to the Temple stopped the construction until Darius found the decree Cyrus issued and ordered work to resume (Ezra 4-6). The Temple was completed in 515 B.C. which was 22 years after it was started. The city remained in ruins until Nehemiah secured the approval of Artaxerxes in 446 B.C. to return and rebuild it (Neh. 2-6). That was about 93 years after the Israelites were freed by Cyrus to return to the city. Cyrus obviously did not see the work through to completion, but the orders he gave served as the basis for eventually getting it done.

The Israelite captives in Babylon are going to be freed to return to Jerusalem. Free, *שָׁלַח*, means to send, to let free, to dispatch, referring to granting freedom to and to free from confinement or some type of service. This verb form is intense; God is serious about getting the Israelites back into the land. He has a plan for the Israelites and they have to be back in Israel if that plan is going to unfold as designed—which it must, of course, do.

In terms of recompense, Cyrus, it is recorded, was promised nothing to fulfill the mission God was going to set before him. He wouldn't have to be coerced or bribed; He will willingly follow the prophecy's dictates and see to it that they are fulfilled. Apparently, he was moved and impressed by what had been written about him in the Hebrew Scriptures nearly two centuries beforehand. Generally speaking, despotic kings do not do things

when there is seemingly no material benefit in it for them, but Cyrus was doing God's will both before he knew it and after he was informed through the prophet Isaiah.

"It would be normal to expect a great ruler to act out of selfish interest in order to achieve some financial gain in building Jerusalem. Since Cyrus will not do these things for any fiscal reward, it is evident that the hand of God has directed his path" [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 265].

"The Almighty Yahweh would do this without even rewarding Cyrus. Cyrus' action would not put him in the Lord's debt because he would simply be carrying out the will of the sovereign God" [Thomas L. Constable, *Thomas Constable's Notes on the Bible, Volume IV: Isaiah-Daniel*, 4:130].