

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – January 13, 2019

## Isaiah 43:1-7

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com).)

### Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### Commentary on Isaiah 43:1-7 (From *Homiletics*; “Lord of the Seas”, January 10, 2010)

For more than a century, scholars have recognized that the book of Isaiah appears to be comprised not simply of a collection of prophetic oracles and acts — as most prophetic books clearly are — but rather of two or three larger, more pronounced divisions, marked by distinctive shifts in vocabulary, theme, tone and historical referents. Today’s reading comes from the second of these large “chunks,” commonly known as Second Isaiah, a disciple of the eighth-century prophet who worked in Jerusalem’s royal court (so-called First Isaiah). This unnamed disciple, working in the late sixth century B.C. (perhaps 545-539 B.C.) composed a work commonly known as the “Consolation of Judah” (chapters 40-55 of the canonical book), and today’s reading is a paradigmatic example of that title. It is an oracle promising the people of Israel that, despite their suffering and fear, their God will ultimately deliver them from all that keeps them from being God’s chosen people.

The oracle begins, as many prophetic oracles do, with the formulaic “(But now) thus says the Lord” (v. 1), but unlike many occurrences of the formula (e.g., Isaiah 28:16; 49:22; 65:13; Ezekiel 7:2, 5; etc.), in which it is prepended to the poetry itself (as indicated by the regularity of the meter that begins after the formula), the formula serves in its present context as the first half of the first line of poetry (the first hemistich). It’s somewhat analogous to the incorporation of the epistolary formulae “Dear Liza” and “Dear Henry” in the folk song “There’s a Hole in My Bucket.”

The opening lines of the oracle are classic Hebrew parallelistic poetry: “he (A) who created you (B), O Jacob (C) // he (A’) who formed you (B’), O Israel (C’).” The language of Second Isaiah has long been known to rely heavily on motifs from creation, and it isn’t accidental that this oracle includes two verbs — *create* and *form* — found in both creation narratives in Genesis. The Hebrew verb *bara*, “to create,” means to create something not from metaphysical nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*, an idea later attached to the creation narrative) but from that which isn’t humanly usable or useful. Neither the story of creation in Genesis nor the several narratives of Israel’s origins suggest that either was created from nothing; rather, both were created by the deliberate action of God working on existent realities (the primordial watery chaos in the case of the creation; disparate tribes and peoples in the case of Israel).

The parallel verb *yatzar*, “to form,” is used most frequently to describe the work of potters (e.g., Isaiah 29:16; 41:25; Jeremiah 18:4, 6) and woodcarvers (Isaiah 44:9, 10, 12; Habakkuk 2:18, referring to graven images). It is also used

in Genesis (2:7, 8) to describe God's forming the *adam* from the *adamah* — the “earthling from the earth” (or the “human from the humus,” a non-etymological pun). The Hebrew verb does get extended in meaning to include forming thoughts and plans (e.g., Psalm 94:20), but this usage is less frequent. The word denotes external more than internal activity, which is the point the book of Isaiah makes frequently: Israel's existence isn't an idea but a physical reality dependent on the prior action of its God (Isaiah 27:11; 43:21; 44:2, 21, 22; 45:9; etc.).

Although the 10th-century united monarchy of Saul, David and Solomon split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah after Solomon's death, the ancient name “Jacob” persisted, especially in poetry, as a synonym for the people of Israel (frequently in the phrase “house of Jacob,” found more commonly in the book of Isaiah than anywhere else, e.g., 2:5, 6; 8:17; 10:20; 14:1; 29:22; 46:3; 48:1).

The Hebrew verb translated “redeemed” has acquired enormous theological content over the centuries, but in its earliest use it simply meant “to act as kinsman” in two important areas: to restore a dead man's name from oblivion by siring offspring with his widow (the so-called “levirate marriage” dramatized in the book of Ruth), and to restore a family's ancestral property lost through indebtedness. The *go'el* “redeemer” (using the active participle of the verb) was the person who bore this responsibility, whether he fulfilled it or not (as in Job's lament in 19:25, where he complains that although he knows his redeemer lives, that redeemer is not, as expected, coming to Job's aid). The fundamental sense of the verb is to restore something to its rightful condition, with very little suggestion in the Old Testament of this condition being primarily spiritual. God's redemptive activity on Israel's behalf was fully historical and physical: redemption from Egyptian bondage (Exodus 15:13; Deuteronomy 7:8), dispersion among the peoples (Nehemiah 1:10) and, here, Babylonian exile, among many other distresses.

The waters and fire referred to in verse 2 are probably metaphorical references to the arduous process of return and restoration, rather than any specific ordeal mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament (such as crossing the Sea of Reeds or the fiery furnace of Daniel).

God's great love for Israel, as well as his unique relationship with Israel, is reflected in the statement (vv. 3-4) that other nations have been given as Israel's “ransom” (v. 3) or “in exchange” for Israel (vv. 3, 4). The prophet isn't implying that other nations have been sacrificed for the sake of Israel's prosperity but rather that divine favor was shown to a nation that didn't deserve it any more than those nations that didn't receive it. This was an important and often overlooked component of Israel's theology of election: Israel did nothing to merit divine favor because its sins, as the prophets observed with thundering regularity, were often identical to those of the nations whom the Lord had rejected.

The compass points specified in verses 5-6 (“from the east, and from the west” ... “to the north ... and to the south”) are not, as they are with contemporary people, metaphors; they reflect, rather, the cosmology of the prophet's world, in which the earth was viewed as a flat, roughly square sheet, with a top and bottom edge (north and south) and two sides (east and west). Within that arena, Israel existed as an historical entity and interacted with both the nations and the divine.

The oracle concludes, as it began, with the verbs of creation: “whom I created ... whom I formed and made” (v. 7). This “envelope structure” (technically called an “inclusio”) reflects the literary artistry of the poet both in providing structural cohesion to the oracle and also in emphasizing the link between the world's creation, Israel's creation and, now, in the face of imminent redemption, Israel's re-creation. This oracle is one of the Old Testament's literary masterpieces.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

## Reflection Questions on Isaiah 43:1-7:

- 1.** As noted in almost any commentary on this passage, these words from Isaiah were originally meant to comfort and assure a defeated Israel living in the midst of the Babylonian Exile, and the refrain “do not fear” was specific to the turmoil and unsettledness of that context. What are the fears that threaten us today? What are the “waters” and the “fires” that you/we are going through in our time for which we need such comfort and assurance?
- 2.** This passage contains words of comfort and assurance. One might say they reveal God’s gentle and comforting nature. But consider them in context. The two concluding verses of Isaiah 42 (24-25), immediately preceding these words, paint a different picture of God’s nature: *Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler, and Israel to the robbers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey? So he poured upon him the heat of his anger and the fury of war; it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand; it burned him, but he did not take it to heart.* How do we reconcile or make sense of these two seemingly very different portraits of God’s character? Are these contrasting natures reflective of God? Are they indicative of the Israelites wrestling with and evolving understanding of God’s character? A false dichotomy? Something else entirely?
- 3.** This passage contains many allusions to the larger formative narratives of Israel’s identity – creation and chaos, Abraham’s calling, the exodus event, etc. It also is understood to foreshadow and point toward Jesus’ identity as Messiah (Redeemer). How do you experience these connections to the larger story of our faith tradition? Is it resonant with your own experience / life story? Or is it hard to relate or connect to? Why?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?**