

THE PLOT IN ISAIAH 40-55¹

S L Stassen²

SUMMARY

In the past a great deal of confusion existed among scholars concerning the roles of the different characters in the "literary drama" of Isaiah 40-55. A good example of this confusion is the question of whether the nations form part of Yahweh's invitation to salvation or not.³ Another example is the different roles allocated to the Ebed Yahweh and the issue of whether he represents Israel, or the prophet, or Cyrus, or an entirely different person.⁴ This confusion is partly due to the fact that the plan/plot of the "drama", as it unfolds in Isaiah 40-55, has not yet been unravelled successfully. A drama usually has a specific plan according to which each character acts and relates to the other characters. In the same manner Isaiah 40-55 has a plot in which each character has their specific roles according to which they act and relate to each other. As in other dramas the plot in Isaiah 40-55 develops into a climax in certain aspects, but to an anti-climax in others.

In this paper I shall attempt to highlight the parts of only a few main role-players in Deutero-Isaiah. Although the plot in Deutero-Isaiah is much more complicated than will be indicated here, my aim is to give an overall pattern according to which the author/redactor has arranged the events in his "literary drama".

- 1 This article is based on a paper delivered at the meeting of the OTSSA in Stellenbosch on 4 September 1996. This article is dedicated to Prof. Daan Pienaar, who is a member of the congregation in which I am a pastor. I got to know him as a person who is dedicated to his work, his church, his wife, his children and especially his grandchildren. As a model grandfather he is exceptionally involved with his grandchildren, telling stories of life, thus preparing the little ones for adulthood. I hope that the "drama" in Isaiah 40-55 will provide yet another story for him to portray.
- 2 Dr. S. L. Stassen, Dutch Reformed Church Universitas-Wes, 63 Scholtz Street, UNIVERSITAS Bloemfontein 9322, and part time lecturer Dept. Old Testament, UOFS, PO Box 339, BLOEMFONTEIN 9300.
- 3 Compare Hamlin (1961), Davidson (1963:166-185), Gelston (1965:308-318), Orlinsky (1967:1-133), Snaith (1967:135-264), Hollenberg (1969:23-36), Dion (1970:161-182), Moyer (1972), Naidoff (1980), Van Winkle (1985:446-458), Wilson (1986) and Stassen (1992).
- 4 Amongst many others there are the studies of North (1955), Mettinger (1983:89 ff.), Steck (1984:372-390, 1985:36-58), Booy (1996:1-14) and Wertitz (1997:30-43).

OPSOMMING

In die verlede was daar al baie verwarring oor die rolle van die verskillende partye in die "literêre drama" van Jesaja 40-55. 'n Voorbeeld daarvan is die vraag of die nasies deel uitmaak van Jahwe se uitnodiging tot redding al dan nie. Nog 'n voorbeeld is die verskillende rolle wat aan die Ebed Jahwe toegeken word en die hele debat of hy Israel, of die profeet, of Kores, of wie ook al verteenwoordig. Deel van die probleem is dat die "drama", soos wat dit in Jesaja 40-55 ontwikkel, nog nie oortuigend ontrafel is nie. Soos in enige drama het Jesaja 40-55 'n plan waarvolgens elke rolspeler optree en in verhouding tot die ander karakters staan. Soos ander dramas ontwikkel Jesaja 40-55 in sekere opsigte na 'n klimaks, maar in ander opsigte na 'n anti-klimaks.

1. ISAAH 40-55 AS COMPOSITION AND THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AS CONTEXT

The assumption here is that Isaiah 40-55 (considered as Deutero-Isaiah) is a carefully planned unit by a final redactor. Whether he is the author or someone else does not matter for the purposes of this study. Deutero-Isaiah can be divided into two parts, namely 40:12-48:22 and 49:14-55:13. Chapter 40:1-11 and 49:1-13 respectively form the prologues of these two halves (Stassen 1991:178-186). In the first half Yahweh's people are mainly called Jacob and/or Israel in the masculine gender,⁵ while in the second half his people are called Zion and/or Jerusalem in the feminine gender. The prologues correspond to their respective halves in the reverse order: In the first prologue Yahweh's people are called Zion and/or Jerusalem in the feminine gender, while in the second prologue his people are called Jacob and/or Israel in the masculine gender.

The genres used by Deutero-Isaiah do sometimes suggest a "Sitz im Leben". The typical smaller pre-exilic prophetic units are replaced by larger composed units. In other words, the various passages in Deutero-Isaiah do not function as separate and isolated units, but should be read in their wider contexts (cf. Westermann 1981, Melugin 1976, Gitay 1981). Likewise it can be accepted that the various themes and metaphors in Deutero-Isaiah are not merely isolated in smaller units, but also function within the wider context of the book to develop an overall scheme.

5 Isaiah 41:27, 44:26, 28 and 46:13 are the exceptions.

The Babylonian exile of the Jews in the sixth century BC with all the political changes brought about by Cyrus, the Persian king in the Ancient Near East, is considered as the point of reference. It is very important that one should orientate oneself to a world of which Babylon, and not Jerusalem, is the centre. All references to the nations as "islands" and "ends of the earth" therefore lie on the fringe of the Babylonian world. In some instances these nations were in the same predicament as Israel, because they were also oppressed by the Babylonians and very anxious to be freed from these bonds (Hamlin 1961:3-60).

2. THE PLOT IN ISAIAH 40-55

2.1 An outline of the plot

All the themes and metaphors in Deutero-Isaiah may be grouped under the following two main themes, namely (a) Yahweh's omnipotence and (b) Yahweh's steadfast love for his people.

In the first place Yahweh wants to establish the fact that He is omnipotent and in charge of the events in history. This theme is dealt with particularly in the first half of the book, chapters 40-48. There are two main characters, namely Yahweh and the idols. On the one hand Yahweh claims all power and property in the universe and on the other hand the idols try to contest Yahweh's claim to omnipotence. These main characters each have their own representation: Yahweh makes use of Israel as his witness while the idols have the nations as their witness. In his attempt to convince the nations that their idols are nothing but illusions and that they should rather seek their salvation from Him, Yahweh makes use of two different servants, namely the *prophet* and the heathen *king Cyrus*. Their respective ministries differ radically in style, but Yahweh as the omnipotent one has the right to use both of them as his servants. Although the Israelites find it difficult to accept the idea of a heathen king being used as Ebed Yahweh, Yahweh continues to execute his plan. The "bad boys" of this whole drama are the Babylonians for whom there is no hope and to whom no salvation is offered by Yahweh (Stassen 1992b:254 ff.).

The second main theme in Deutero-Isaiah deals with Yahweh's love for his people. Zion continually questions the steadfastness of his love for her. In the second half of Deutero-Isaiah in particular one can see how Yahweh very anxiously declares his love to his people. The metaphor of a renewed marriage

between Yahweh and Jerusalem strongly underlines this message (Stassen 1985:170-172, 1994:57-73).

2.2 Yahweh and Israel versus the idols and the nations.

Although Yahweh and his people, Israel, may be regarded as the main role-players in Deutero-Isaiah, their positions are further underlined and exaggerated by the antithetic role played by the nations and their idols. The author of Deutero-Isaiah wants to make it clear that there is no question about Yahweh's power and omnipotence in the universe. To do this the idols of the nations are put into a position of supposed opposition to Yahweh's claim. This is done in the form of the trial speeches or disputations: Yahweh makes use of Israel as his witness while the idols have the nations as their witness (41:1-7, 21-29; 43:8-13; 44:6-8 [together with v 9-20, 21-22]; 45:18-21).

The first phase of this development can be detected in 41:5-7 where the nations ("the islands" and "the ends of the earth") tremble in fear, because they have only their manufactured idols to rely on. This theme is further developed in the following trial speeches between Yahweh and the nations to show the despair of the nations as well as the nothingness and blindness of their idols.

The dispute between Yahweh/Israel and the idols/nations develops gradually into a climax when the nations eventually accept the verdict that the idols are nothing.⁶ In 45:14-17 the nations are depicted as people who realize that Yahweh is the only God that can save. In 45:18-21 the controversial position of the nations is declared by Yahweh: "fugitives from the nations", "those who carry about idols of wood", "who pray to gods that cannot save". Because of their changed attitude the nations' renewed status as people who qualify for deliverance by Yahweh is underlined by his invitation to "turn to me and be saved" (45:22a). In this context Yahweh declares that the nations now will know Him as the only one that can save and control history: "Before me every knee will bow, by me every tongue will swear" (45:23b), and "They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength.'" (45:24a).

6 Dijkstra has observed that Yahweh never plays the role of a judge in the lawsuit speeches of Deutero-Isaiah. Yahweh rather plays the role of the *gô'el* redeeming his people according to the different metaphors being used to describe the relationship between them (Dijkstra 1997, cf. footnote 32).

2.3 The relationship of Israel/Zion with Yahweh

There are mainly two accusations levelled by Israel against Yahweh that become obstacles in a sound relationship between Yahweh and his people. On the one hand Israel doubts whether Yahweh is in control of world history. On the other hand they reproach their God that He has forsaken and forgotten them.

The trial speeches in the lawsuit between Yahweh and Israel imply that Yahweh has surrendered to the enemy's gods, for example 42:18-25 and 50:1-3. In both passages it is made clear by Yahweh that He was not forced into a situation where He had to abdicate and surrender his people to the Babylonian gods. He Himself decided to use the Babylonians as an instrument to punish his people for their transgressions against Him.

Israel's doubt in Yahweh's rule over the world can be inferred even in the trial speeches against the nations. Although the purpose of these trial speeches is apparently to convince the nations of Yahweh's omnipotence, the actual intention of the author is probably to convince the Jewish readers of Yahweh's rule over the universe. Even if the trial speeches are officially directed at the nations and their gods, it is in the end Israel, albeit as witness for Yahweh, who is the primary target. They are to be convinced that He is the only one that rules over all.

Even in 40:27-31, where the collective lamentation is understood, Yahweh is accused of growing tired or weary. This passage begins with Yahweh's answer to the lamentation: "Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by my God?'" In his reaction to this lamentation the Lord answers as "Creator of the ends of the earth" (v. 28).

Israel's reproach against God that he has forgotten them can be traced particularly in those passages that have the collective lamentation as background. A good example would be 49:14-26.⁷ This passage starts with Zion's lament that "the Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me". In his answer Yahweh declares his loyalty and love as a mother would to her child or a husband to his wife. The metaphor of Yahweh as Zion's husband is very

7 Westermann treats 49:14-26 as "ein grosses Gedicht". According to him this poem consists of all the elements of lamentation: in v. 14 "die Anklage Gottes", in v. 21 "die Ich (Wir)-Klage" and in v. 24 "die Feind-Klage" (1981:38).

prominent in the second half of Deutero-Isaiah, as becomes clear in 49:14 ff., 50:1-3, 51:17-23, 52:1-3 and 54:1-17. Not only is Yahweh willing to forgive his "ex-wife" for her unfaithful conduct in the past, but He is also anxious to decorate her with jewels and honour her as his wife (Krupp 1972:1 ff, Stassen 1985, 1994:57-72).

One of the reasons why Yahweh makes such a fuss of his people is so that the rest of the world may see their salvation and consequently believe in Him. 45:14-25 is a good example to illustrate the direct relation between the restoration of Israel's honour and the acknowledgment by the nations of Yahweh as the only God. In a way Israel becomes the show-case for Yahweh to reach the nations.

2.4 Yahweh's special agents

In the past much has been said by scholars about the so-called "Ebed Yahweh", without solving the problem of who this Ebed actually is or whom he represents. The Ebed Yahweh is a mysterious character who is very much involved in Yahweh's plans with the Israelites as well as the rest of the world. The problem is that the term "Ebed (Yahweh)" is used by Deutero-Isaiah in different ways. This term sometimes denotes Jacob and/or Israel, for example 41:8 and 44:1. It is also applied to a figure that may typically be described as the prophet, for example 42:1 and 49:3 (after a text critical emendation).⁸ In the scholarly debate about this Ebed other passages, where the term Ebed is not used, but where the same mysterious figure emerges, are also used as part of the reference. Traditionally the typical passages quoted for dealing with this figure are 42:1-4, 5-9, 49:1-6, 50:4-11 and 52:13-53:12 (Duhm 1902:277). A scholar like Karl Elliger (1978:199-201) even put the servant of 40:6-8 in the same category as that of 42:1 ff.⁹

To my mind one of the reasons why this problem has not been solved satisfactorily is that the necessary distinction has not always been made between the instances where the so-called Ebed is fulfilling the typical suffering role of a servant and where the Ebed is acting in a more aggressive and triumphant manner. A good example is the traditional delimitation of the first

8 There is reasonable consensus amongst scholars that "Israel" in v. 3 is a midrashic insertion at a later stage in the redaction of Isaiah 40-55.

9 From the way Elliger treats Isaiah 40:6-8 and 42:1-4 in his commentary on Deutero-Isaiah (1978) one could conclude that he would identify the prophet as the Ebed Yahweh in all of the above mentioned passages.

Ebed-passage as 42:1-4, or 42:1-7, or 42:1-9 or even as two separate passages, namely 42:1-4 and 42:5-9. If 42:1-7 or 42:1-9 is taken as one passage applicable to the servant, there is a confusion between a suffering and gentle servant (v. 1-4) on the one hand and a more aggressive and triumphant servant (v. 5-7) on the other. If, however, 42:1-4 and v. 5-9 are taken as two separate passages, one may assume that two different servants are mentioned here.¹⁰

Another problem in this debate is that a distinction is seldom made between the instances where the Ebed is depicted as a passive receiver of Yahweh's deliverance, and where the Ebed is depicted as the more active, though sometimes suffering, servant who alongside Yahweh accomplishes the deliverance of Israel and the nations. An example of the Ebed as passive receiver is Jacob/Israel in 44:1, while 49:1-6 depicts the more active Ebed serving as Yahweh's agent.

If these distinctions are taken into consideration, I would suggest that three categories of the Ebed Yahweh are found in Deutero-Isaiah, namely (a) Israel as the passive receiver of salvation by Yahweh, (b) the prophet as the active, gentle and suffering accomplisher of Yahweh's salvation of Israel, and (c) King Cyrus as the more aggressive and triumphant servant of Yahweh complementing the work of the prophet.

The prophet as servant, or the prophetic office, can be traced in passages such as 40:6-8, 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 8-9a, 50:4-11 and 52:13-53:12. This theme develops gradually from a positive, but sceptical, start from the prophet's viewpoint to an anti-climax where he eventually meets his death as martyr. Every passage constitutes a different phase in the development of this theme. In 40:6-8 the prophet is called upon to preach the message of salvation to his people, but he doubts whether it is possible for Israel to be restored as Yahweh's people. In 42:1-4 he acts as the faithful servant who brings justice to the nations in a very subdued and gentle manner. In 49:1-6 we hear the prophet lamenting that he has trouble fulfilling his task, but he is urged on by Yahweh to continue. In this passage he is further burdened by a command not to limit his restoring action to Israel only, but to extend it to "the nations" and "the ends of the earth" as well. The development of the prophet's suffering and his feeling of

10 Elliger (1978:200-201) considers v. 1-4 to be a prophetic call narrative relating how Yahweh has appointed his servant. Verses 5-9 are treated as a separate passage of which v. 6-7 are considered as a quotation of Yahweh calling Cyrus to his service. This quotation is then framed by the disputation in v. 5 and 8-9 (Elliger 1978:228-229).

rejection by his compatriots become apparent in 50:4-11. In 52:13-53:12 the suffering of the prophet ends in a song by his compatriots mourning his death. In retrospect they realize how he had acted in a prophetic capacity to accomplish their deliverance.¹¹

King Cyrus as Yahweh's servant can be traced in passages such as 41:1-7 (v 2-4), 41:21-29 (v 25), 42:5-9, 43:14-21 (v 14), 44:24-28, 45:1-7, 45:9-13 (v 11, 13), and 48:1-19 (v 14). Contrary to the passages that are concerned with the prophetic office where a definite development of the theme can be traced, the passages that deal with Cyrus do not show a development of the theme. From the beginning till the end his role is pictured in aggressive and triumphant terms. Basically his role is described as twofold: (a) He has to release Israel as well as the nations from captivity by the Babylonians. This he does by demolishing the Babylonians in his campaigns. (b) He has to rebuild Jerusalem for Yahweh (44:28, 45:13).

There is a very special relationship between Yahweh and Cyrus. Although Yahweh has summoned him by name without Cyrus knowing or acknowledging him as Lord (45:4,5), there is the hope that Cyrus will in the end "know that I am the Lord" (45:3). Very sacred titles are used by Yahweh to explain his relationship with Cyrus: "my shepherd" (44:28), "anointed" (45:1), "whose right hand I take hold of" (45:1). Although Cyrus accomplishes the triumphs over all the nations, it is Yahweh that fights on his side in this holy war (45:2).

In the last passages where Cyrus is mentioned as servant of the Lord, there is a growing realization on the part of the Jews that Yahweh is serious when He talks about Cyrus as his servant. Consequently there is a growing resistance on their part to which Yahweh has to react and explain to them why He is using a heathen king as his "shepherd" and his "anointed" (Gitay 1981:177-190, Stassen 1996:87-106). In 45:9-13 we see a disputation between Yahweh and Israel, because the Israelites reproach God for employing a heathen king to perform a holy task. Yahweh responds to their criticism by stating that a creature cannot query the actions of his creator (v 9-10). In v 11 Cyrus is even called Yahweh's child and in v 13 Yahweh further declares his commitment to

11 In connection with Isaiah 53, Smith argues that the Israelites regarded Cyrus's anointment in 45:1 as being an affront to the house of David: "The consequence ... of this proclamation of Cyrus must have been that the prophet would seem to some of his own people a traitor, worthy of death" (1944:74).

Cyrus: "I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness, I will make all his ways straight".

2.5 The Babylonians ("bad boys")

The "bad boys" in this whole drama are the Babylonians for whom there is no hope and to whom no salvation is offered by Yahweh. In 40:23-24 they are depicted as the influential people that are degraded by Yahweh to nothingness. In 41:1-7 they are uncertain and panic-stricken, because they have disregarded Yahweh's omnipotence in history and pay the penalty as a result.¹² In 42:14-17 Yahweh, in his theophany, becomes a threat to them.

In their relationship with the idols the Babylonians are made the fools throughout. In 40:3-5 Yahweh is worshipped and honoured in the desert in a way similar to the worship of the Babylonian gods in the streets of Babylon.¹³ Thus the roles are reversed, because Yahweh, and not Marduk, receives all the credit for the course of history. In 40:19-20, 41:6-7 and 44:10-20 the Babylonians take trouble to manufacture their idols, merely to experience that these idols cannot deliver them. The contrary rather happens: The Babylonians, when they take to flight, carry their gods in order to save them (46:1-2). In the trial speeches where Yahweh challenges the idols to prove their validity as real gods, the Babylonians along with their so-called gods are declared to be nothing (43:13b; 44:9).

In her relationship with Israel Babylon is always depicted as the oppressor. In 43:14 the oppression of Israel is given as the reason for Babylon's downfall. Babylon is also compared to a bad experience of the past that Israel should rather forget (43:18). It is exactly because of this past experience that the roles of Babylon and Jerusalem will now be reversed.

12 Probably this passage does not only have the Babylonians in mind, but the whole world that was incorporated with the Babylonian Empire (Stassen 1992b:54-58). It is not by chance that there is no distinction made between the nations and Babylon in the beginning of Deutero-Isaiah, because all of them are still committed to their idols. As the drama in Deutero-Isaiah develops and the nations gradually become disillusioned by their idols (45:16), Yahweh's invitation of salvation to them becomes more intense (cf 45:22-23). In the reversed order the Babylonians get more associated with the practises of idol-making and idol-worship (46:1-2, 6-7, 48:20) (Stassen 1992b:249).

13 There are certain Babylonian cult songs similar to the song in Isaiah 40:3-5 (Stummer 1926:171 ff, Falkenstein & Von Soden 1953:258, Beuken 1979:21).

This reversal of roles occurs in two ways: Firstly there is a clear contrast between 47:1-3 and 52:1-2 where "queen" Babylon is now demoted to a slave woman, while the former "slave" Jerusalem acquires her new position as queen (Stassen 1985:66-69, 1992b:230-231). The other contrast is that of 47:8-11 and 51:22. In this instance Babylon is pointed out as the immoral woman and punished accordingly, while Jerusalem is pardoned for her unfaithful past and the cup of wrath is taken away from her (Stassen 1985:62-65). It is noticeable that, although the women have committed the same crime, namely adultery (that is, worshipping other gods), they are treated differently by Yahweh. Babylon encounters God's wrath while the Israelites are granted Yahweh's love and forgiveness (48:1-11). The reason for the Lord's inconsistency here is that He has to protect his Name against the other nations which always associate Israel with Yahweh (48:9-11). For that reason Yahweh's name must be proclaimed to "the ends of the earth", while the Israelites must flee from Babylon in order to escape the judgement of the Lord (48:20a).

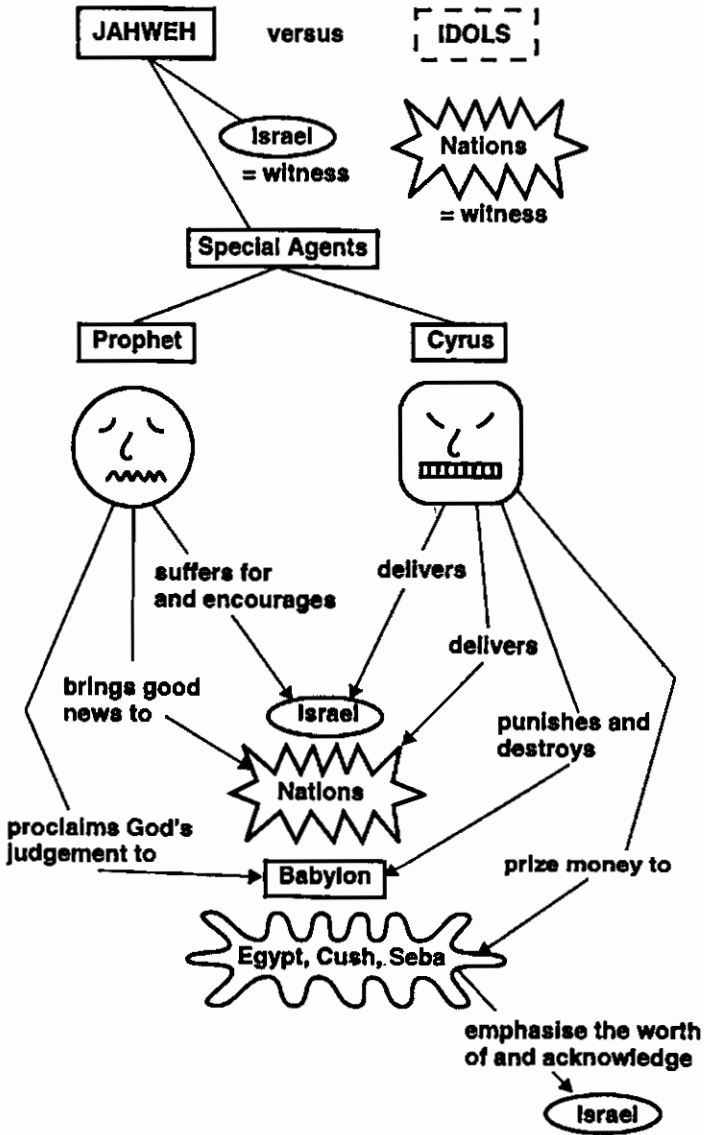
2.6 Egypt, Cush and Seba

In Deutero-Isaiah the combination of the names Egypt, Cush and Seba occurs only twice, namely in Isaiah 43:3 and 45:14. Deutero-Isaiah had a special role in mind for these nations, although there is a slight difference in the way they are applied in these two cases (Stassen 1992a:160-180). On both occasions their names refer to the tradition that they represent wealth, splendour and honour.

In Isaiah 43:3 Egypt, Cush and Seba are used to emphasise the worth and splendour of Israel in Yahweh's mind. Yahweh loves Israel so passionately that He is willing to give Egypt, Cush and Seba in exchange for them. Egypt, Cush and Seba further have the function of acting as bait for Cyrus to motivate him to deliver Israel. It is true, however, that Cyrus never conquered Egypt, although his son, Cambyses, did so. This would serve as even greater motivation for Cyrus to consider Egypt, Cush and Seba as a much coveted prize.

In Isaiah 45:14 Egypt, Cush and Seba are used to establish Israel's new status in the eyes of the world and to stress the glory of God in the eyes of the world. This means that if these nations admit that Yahweh really is in the presence of Israel, no other nation would even think of denying it. The way in which Egypt, Cush and Seba submit themselves to Israel may be regarded as unrealistic, but the message is clear: Yahweh has given Israel a new status.

A DIAGRAM OF THE "DRAMA" IN ISAIAH 40-55.



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