ISAIAH 45: GOD’S “I AM,” ISRAEL’S “YOU ARE”

Samuel E. Balentine
Richmond, Virginia

The locus classicus of the expression Deus absconditus, “the hidden God,” is Isaiah 45:15: “Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior” (NRSV). At least since the time of the Reformation, this verse has been adapted in both Jewish and Christian communities for a variety of theological assertions about God’s hiddenness. B. Pascal observed that God is always Deus absconditus, hence the proposition set forth in his Pensees: “any religion which does not affirm that God is hidden is not true.”1 M. Buber suggests that the Old Testament assertion of God as a self-concealing God invites people of faith to reflect positively on the apparent “eclipse of God” in the modern world.2 In familiar fashion, K. Miskotte sees in Isa. 45:15 a positive rejoinder to an overly tragic nihilism. To declare the hiddenness of God, he argues, is to offer a confession of faith in the God who surrounds us with the “presence of an absence.”3 For S. Terrien God’s “presence-in-absence,” or as he so elegantly puts it, God’s “elusive presence,” is the central theological assertion of both Old and New Testaments.4 And to this list, we would be remiss if we did not add the name of K. Barth, for clearly his assertion that all true knowledge of God begins with the knowledge of God’s hiddenness, remains an influential argument in contemporary theological discourse.5

Typical of much of this discussion, however, has been a tendency to isolate Isaiah 45:15 from its biblical context and to relocate it within various theological or religious systems of thought.6 Pascal, for example, appropriated this one verse, with no commentary, as a proposition of evangelical Christian theology (by way of Jansenism). For him the basis of God’s hiddenness had little or nothing to do with Isaiah or the exile. It derived instead from the Augustinian notion of humanity’s total depravity. God is hidden because sin has separated humankind from God. Religion’s task is to teach that God hides from those who sin and is revealed to those who seek God. Any religion that forsakes this assertion and its instruction is, therefore, not true.
K. Barth also appropriates this text into a Christian theological system, again with little attention to its context in Isaiah. In Isaiah the issue to be resolved is whether verse 15 is a continuation of the confession of the nations (begun in verse 14), or a reflection of the prophet on the mystery involved in such a confession, or, as I shall argue, a confession/assertion of the Israelites themselves. Of these options there is no creditable way to see Isaiah 45:15 as an announcement by the deity. Yet, in a real sense, this is the gist of what Barth seems to be saying. All true knowledge of God begins with knowledge of God’s hiddenness; i.e., hiddenness is part of a divine revelatory plan designed to lead to a faith in God.

What I propose to do here is to reexamine Isaiah 45:15 within its biblical context. I do so not to remove the Hebraic witness to God’s hiddenness from theological discussion, but rather to restore to the theological discourse something of both the surprise and the anguish that seem to me to inform this biblical assertion. I begin with an overview of the structure and primary rhetorical features of Isa. 44:24-45:25. I will then attempt to clarify the assertion that God hides himself within the context of this particular literary unit, and then within the larger context of the metaphor of divine hiddenness in the Book of Isaiah and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

I. Isaiah 44:24-45:25: God’s (Modified) Resume

The text presents three reasonably distinct divine speeches (44:24-45:7; 45:9-13; and 45:20-25), addressed respectively to Cyrus, Israel, and the nations. Only in 45:14-19 is the identity of the speaker less clear. And even here, the standard formula kōh ‘āmar yhwh identifies God as speaker in v.14 and in vv.18-19. The problem lies in vv.15-17, verses which I will address in more detail in the pages to follow.

The general theme of all of the speeches is the uniqueness of God, especially as manifest in God’s decision to call Cyrus as the agent of Israel’s deliverance from Babylon. The entire unit has the appearance of a quasi-dialogue between God, on the one hand, and the nations and Israel, on the other. In the first speech (44:24-45:7), God speaks