

Absolute Power for Maximum Good

Isaiah 44.24–45.19

Sermon

1989 was a good year for movie sequels. Year of Ghostbusters II, The Karate Kid III, Star Trek V: Final Frontier, Friday the 13th VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan. No sequel fared better that year than Indy Jones & Last Crusade (\$197M). But perhaps none more anticipated than Back to the Future II, Marty McFly & Doc Brown fast-forwarding to that far-off distant world of 2015. § Movie in news recently bc of a prediction it made: when Marty entered world of Oct 21, 2015, greeted by hologram congratulating Chicago Cubs for winning World Series. As it turned out, while Cubs made playoffs, didn't win WS—unfortunately, neither did Mets—& AL rep was KC, not Miami as movie predicted. That too was a bold prediction: in 1989 no MLB team in Florida, so prediction not only that lovable losers would finally win, but that team they'd beat didn't even exist. Of course now there is a team in Miami, but they're in NL, not AL. Movie goes to show just how hard it is to predict future.

But what if moviemakers had been right? What if correctly predicted all of it: team in Miami, in AL, both they & Cubs making WS, & Cubs sweeping them for win. That'd be pretty uncanny, right? But not entirely imposs. After all, Cubs did make playoffs & had good shot at going all way. & lots of talk about a baseball team in Miami. Another 1989 movie discussed it quite openly: § baseball comedy Major League starring Charlie Sheen, Tom Berenger, Corbin Bernsen. Whole plot was for Cleveland Indians to be so bad that their poor play would trigger a clause allowing owner to move team to Miami. So not entirely imposs.

But what if BFII had predicted that § Cedric Diggory would die trying to win Tri-Wizard Tourney? or that § Katniss Everdeen would use the 3rd Quarter Quell to stage revolt against Panem? or that § Jacob Black would imprint on a surprising character in the *Twilight* saga. That would

be beyond uncanny, bc in 1989 no one had ever heard of Harry Potter or Hunger Games or Twilight—bc they didn't exist. No way BFII could've predicted them, bc if those chars & events existed, only in minds of their authors—J. K. Rowling or Suzanne Collins or Stephanie Meyer.

Scenario I'm describing somewhat approximates what we find in text Brian just read for us. Isa 44 (p. 505). Ill it this way bc it's easy for us to miss how unreal this prophecy would've struck Isa's listeners. Easy for us to miss bc we're so far removed from historical details of this story & the further removed we are, flatter history seems to us to be. § Isa writing about 700 yrs before birth of J. Isr had fallen to Assyrian Empire, but southern k of Judah still standing, would remain w Jeru as its cap for another 100+ yrs. § Wasn't until 586 BC that Babylon would finally cause Jeru to knuckle under & peo would be deported across Fertile Crescent. Isa foresees all these things & predicts them. But poss that one could listen to Isa & reasonably conclude that that could happen: Bab a rising power, Judah much smaller, could see it happen. Perh a bit like BFII predicting Cubs winning WS—conceivable even if unlikely. But here Isa goes further: looking beyond Bab Cap Isa says G would raise up a king who would send peo back to Jeru to rebuild (13). So not only looking forward 100+ years to Jeru's conquest & exile, but looking decades beyond that to peo's deliverance, return, & rebuilding Jeru. Moving from unlikely but conceivable to unlikely & implausible. & then you get the real kicker: Isa names the king who would do this ~150 years from when he was writing: **Cyrus** (28, 1, 13). § § §

& that is precisely what did happen (**fulfillment**). § In 539 BC Persian king Cyrus worked w the Medes to overthrow Babylon, famously described in Daniel's acct of writing on wall (ch. 5). Cyrus the Great, as history now remembers him, reigned from 559 to 530 BC. & what he did w Jews living in Babylon is precisely what G predicted: sent them home to rebuild their cap city Jeru (Ezra 1.1–4). § 1st attempt to rebuild: 537 BC.

Now as you might imagine this acct has stirred up a lot of qs & quite poss those qs have already risen in your mind as I've explained what's going on here. Two main **objections** to what this narrative. § “This can't be true bc **imposs to predict fut.**” As I said earlier, one thing to say in 1989 that Cubs would win WS in 2015, but wholly another to say in 1989—or 1789!—that Cedric Diggory would die trying to win Tri-Wizard Tourney. Far too many contingencies, far too many unknowns to be able to predict accurately what will happen. Ergo many bib scholars have concluded on basis of this psg that Isa didn't write it—in fact, that he didn't write anything from ch. 40 on. Ergo if you read scholarly lit on Isa, you'll see writers talk of Deutero-Isa, even Trito-Isa. These scholars bel that, since it's imposs to predict fut, psgs like this must have been written after the fact, but written to appear as if they were prophecies written ahead of time. Much could be said about that, not least of which is hoards of internal evidence contradicting that notion. (See Oswalt & Motyer for details.) But most sig response to that obj: G's very point in bringing this up is to prove that he is true G over vs idols who cannot make such predictions (25–6). Sec of Isa contains four cases against idols in attempt to solidify nat's trust in Y their G. If these were merely seeming prophecies written after the fact, everyone would have known it & thus the very point of these prophecies would have been blunted. Their G would have been just like all the other gods, incapable of predicting fut, unworthy of worship. But history of Isr proved otherwise, for even tho Isr was characterized by idolatry all through its history up to Bab Cap, afterwards no such prob. After exile, after Cyrus sent peo home, peo committed themselves to 1TG in a way unlike previous history. Corroborating evidence this psg written before.

Doesn't yet ans our q: “how can G predict fut? Aren't there too many contingencies? unknowns?” Said a moment ago no way BFII could've predicted HP/Hunger Games/Twilight, bc if those chars/events existed, only in minds of Rowling or Collins or Meyer. How could G know the fut? Cyrus already existed in mind of history's author.

But a 2nd obj & if 1st obj tends to be raised by non-relig peo, 2nd tends to be raised by relig: § “Can’t be true bc **Cyrus is a pagan.**” If 1st is a philosophical obj, 2nd is a moral obj. Interesting to note, 1st obj doesn’t really come up in text. Makes sense, since G not addressing irreligious but his own relig peo. In that light makes perfect sense that 2nd obj does appear (*quarrel*, 9). § See logic of psg: G says, “I created everything & I guarantee Jeru will be rebuilt” (44.24–28). Relig peo say, “Amen!” “& way I’ll do it is through pagan king Cyrus” (45.1–8). Relig peo say, “What? You can’t do that. He’s not of David’s line. § How can you call him *my shepherd* (44.28) & § even more stunningly *my anointed* (45.1—Messiah)?” § Ergo v 9: *quarrel w their Maker*. “You can’t do that.” & G’s response to his relig peo is not to form an air-tight argument in reply. No, he tells his peo, “Who are you to quarrel w me? Who are you to tell me what I am allowed to do?” (9–12). “Remember who I am? I’m your Maker, more than that, I’m Maker of everything. & I have right to do whatever I want bc I am Maker.” § Ergo v 13—“Cyrus is inst I will utilize, & when I do I will do so *in my righteousness*. It will be right. I can employ anyone I want, even those who don’t know me.”

See what G is doing here? Makes this stunning prophecy that could have failed to materialize & builds on that prophecy a massive case for his **absolute power**. Pt he’s driving home: G can do whatever he wants bc **he created everything** that is. That pt bookends psg (44.24, 45.18). To those who q his existence, § he says, “I can predict what will happen bc it’s already in my mind.” & to those who q his morality, § he says, “I can utilize anyone I want—even those who don’t acknowledge me—to accomplish my purposes bc I have absolute power.”

Now that statement, whether you’re relig or not, can be immensely **threatening**. Perh even more so for relig: a lot of what drives spir devotion isn’t pure love for G & love for peo, but an assumption that if I put in for G, he has to do same for me. If I read B & pray, he has to

bless me. If I go to church & give money, he has to make me wealthy or powerful or give me good health. Relig peo tend to presume a tit-for-tat relat w G, G as butler, G as vending machine. But what G says here blows that notion out of water: not an obj to be manipulated, not a talisman to be rubbed, not a waiter to be summoned. He really is G—Creator, Maker, Master, Lord, Sovereign. & there's not enough reading & praying & attending & giving that you can do to guarantee that this G of absolute power is going to work in your favor. What are we but broken pieces of pottery lying on ground of Master Potter's workshop? What can we say? What can we do?

See G's abs power an immense threat & I suspect for a lot of irrelig peo out there, perh some of you, that threat is very reason you deny or at least q his existence. Bc you understand, better than some peo who profess to be Xians, that if G really is there, then he really is G—the L, not Someone to be trifled w—the K, not grandfather-like caricature offered by so much of contemp Amer evangelicalism. G not the Man upstairs, sitting on his rocking chair, really concerned for you & gives great hugs, but man! wish I could do more to help you. Whatever that is, it's not G of the B, not G of Isa 44–45. & that's why some of you deny or doubt G's existence, bc far less of a threat than if you acknowledge him for what you know him truly to be.

But there's something about G that removes threat, something on display in this psg. A G of absolute power could be a cosmic tyrant if aim of his power was mere subjugation—forcing peo to grovel at his throne. But what does this G do w his abs power? He employs it for **maximum good** (8). § G recog we've made a mess of his good world by our injustice & so he commands heavens to rain down justice, to let what is right be done. & what is right? § Salv of his peo: deliverance, rescue—rescue from our own wanderings, rescue from mess we've made of his good world. & lest you think G is parochial/interested only in Jews, look at whom he rescues. Three purposes for working through

Cyrus: § that Cyrus would know Y (3), § Isr (4), § world (6). Intention not merely to have Jeru rebuilt, but to rebuild ruins of world/not merely rescue broken Jews, but rescue broken Gens too/not merely bless one nat, but bless all nats. G not only Isr's Maker (9) but of all humankind (11). Thus peo of all nats would come to him (14), cares about every single indiv he has made. Use of Cyrus: to prove that he cares about everyone, even those who don't know him. Abs power for max good.

But even Cyrus wasn't ult. While proclamation in Ezra 1 attributed success to Y, archeological records show that he was a good politician: praised all the gods. Equal opp idolator. But even this pagan pointed ahead to another shepherd who would come & deliver his peo from their ultimate captor—not Bab/Rome but their own sin. Cyrus foretold of another king who would *accomplish all that G pleased* (28). Persian king a type prefiguring One G would anoint § to *subdue nats before him & to strip kings of their armor* (1), not by military conquest but by humility of a submissive life. Whole psg points ahead to t&g Cyrus that would come, & no matter whether you think this txt was written by Isa, Deutero-Isa, or Trito-Isa, psg still written centuries before J was born, & yet this prophecy ult finds its fulfillment in him. Bc like Cyrus J the M would accomplish all that G pleased, but unlike Cyrus who ult failed to acknowledge G, t&g Cyrus, t&g Shepherd, t&g Anointed One knew the L his G & followed him all the way to the cross where he died for the sins of his peo. & on that cross, as relig hypocrites mocked him & his closest friends deserted him, he could have used his abs power to end it all. But instead on that cross he used some of his final breaths to whisper a prayer: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.* Abs power for max good. Friends, all the proof you need that G's abs power is not a threat but is for your good—all the proof you need is found at the foot of the cross. & when you cross the garden to the tomb where they laid J & see that it is empty, you know that the One w abs power lives on to bless you & to do you good all the days of your life. This is the gos, & it is for all who will come to J.

Gos changes you in at least three ways:

1. § Confess your limited power. We're not ult. A point G is driving home in my own heart. Very busy fall, very little margin in our fam life right now, consequently feeling very tired. Very grateful for my wife who remembers I'm a cancer survivor much more readily than I do—she knows my limitations far better than I do. & a psg like this is a means of grace to us who are driven/goal-oriented/want to see our plans succeed. We're not G, we're just clay pots, ready for the Master to do whatever he wants.

2. § Trust his absolute power. May seem like same point, but here I'm speaking specifically about your adversity—your job loss, your declining health, your emotional state, your financial crisis. Didn't get to talk much about 45.7 §. Even when life hurts, G's abs power is in control. You can trust him. Look at the cross, it's all proof you need.

3. § Do the most good. Shamelessly ripping that off Salv Army! Say another way: *do good to everyone*. OK, now ripping off Apos Paul! Follow logic: since G created everyone, he cares about everyone. Comforting words for us. But now let's turn that outward: since G calls us to be like him, we too are called to care about everyone—even those who don't know Y & maybe never will, even those who hate Xians & Xianity, even political opponents, even pagans. *Let your light shine in such a way that peo see our good works & glorify our F in heaven*. OCC, Restore NYC, SFFC.

Always kinda wished I had a Delorean. § Any Delorean would do, but esp one MJFox drove. If we could transport ourselves forward five years forward, what would our church be like? What do you see? What will we become? It's already in the mind of the Author. By his grace, let's go live the story.