

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 402—"Unpacking Isaiah 44:24"

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Introduction

We are continuing our series of unpacking clear, plain, straightforward passages that can help you understand God and Christ. When people discuss theology, it is all too common for a passage to be thrown out that is disputed, riddled with translation difficulties, textual variants, or centuries of debate within Church history. I find that it is better to begin with a passage that is clear, something that everyone can agree on, and build an argument from there.

In this week's episode, we will discuss Isaiah 44:24. This passage speaks of the creator, his creation, his oneness, and how he was unaccompanied in the process of creation. Isaiah 44:24 is also in the running for the verse with the most singular references in it. Spoiler alert: it has 9.

What does Isaiah 44:24 say, and why does it strengthen the case for the oneness and unity of God?

I. First Impressions of Isaiah 44:24

A. Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth (Isa 44:24)

1. Defines the creator
 - a) Yahweh
2. Speaks repeatedly of his oneness of person
 - a) Thus “says” (singular verb)
 - b) Your “Redeemer” (singular participial verb)
 - c) Who “formed” you (singular participial verb)
 - d) I, *anochi* (1st person singular pronoun) used for emphasis
 - e) Who made all things (singular participial verb)
 - f) Who alone (1st person singular pronominal suffix)
 - g) Stretched out the heavens (singular participial verb)
 - h) By myself (literally, who was with me, a rhetorical question, 1st person singular pronominal suffix)
 - i) Spread out the earth (singular participial verb)
 - (1) Six singular verbs, one singular pronoun, and two singular pronominal suffices, totalling 9 references to the oneness and unity of Yahweh, the Creator.
 - (2) Only 1 person created; he had no help. He did the work by himself; he alone made the heavens and the earth
 - (a) No preexistent son, either as a conscious second person, or as a heavenly angel, archangel, or spirit being.

B. Qere and Ketib readings of Isaiah 44:24

1. Qere - what is read. Ketib - what is written.
 - a) Sometimes in the MT there are qere readings that accompany the written text, usually in the margins. Usually, they offer clarification on how something should be pronounced (such as saying Adonai instead of Yahweh). Sometimes, the qere readings offer what appears to be a grammatical correction or assistance in a sensitive reading, perhaps to avoid irrelevance.
 - b) Over 1,300 instances of a qere reading accompanying the ketiv, and Isaiah 44:24 is one of them. Lucky us.

2. Ketiv = (מִי) (אִתִּי)

- a) Who + with me, a rhetorical question, implying that no one was with him.

3. Qere = [מִי אִתִּי]

- a) From beside me, or idiomatically, “by myself”
 - b) Translators have almost universally translated the Hebrew into English by using this qere, not the ketiv, although some will footnote the ketiv.
4. In short, the original Hebrew says “who was with me” and the qere, perhaps to clarify that this is indeed a rhetorical question, put the two words together, creating a different phrase that effectively means “by myself.”
5. There are other indicators that tell us how Jews understood and interpreted Isaiah 44:24, such as the Jewish targums.

II. Isaiah 44:24 in the Isaiah Targum

A. Targum - Aramaic for “translation”

- 1. The Hebrew Bible would be read aloud in the synagogues, but since Aramaic was the dominant Jewish language, rather than Hebrew, this created the need to both translate and interpret the Hebrew Bible into the common Aramaic language of the people.
- 2. The core oral traditions preserved in the targumic readings of Isaiah date to the Second Temple period, probably during the 1st century AD.
- 3. The text was committed to writing in the 2nd century. AD, with some redactions in the 3rd and 4th centuries.

B. *Thus says Yahweh, your Redeemer, who prepared you from the womb*

- 1. Formed -> prepared

C. *I am Yahweh, who made all things. I stretched out the heavens by my memra*

- 1. The additional first-person pronoun was added here for emphasis, as it is not needed in light of the earlier pronoun “I” and the singular verbs.
- 2. Memra
 - a) Often translated as “word” but it is more dynamic than simply “word.” It can refer to God’s command, his speech, to a direct edict, to the way that God addresses his people (and, naturally, to the way that Israel responded to God).
 - b) The verb *amar* means “to speak” in both Aramaic and Hebrew, so the similarities between *amar* and *memra* are evident.

- c) In the targums, memra, that is, God's word, often functions as a substitute for God himself, sometimes in order not to portray God anthropomorphically (out of reverence and respect).
 - (1) In other words, God's word is not something distinct from God himself. God's word, his memra, is just a substitute for God (you can see the connections with John 1:1 easily here).
- 3. In Hebrew, we have Yahweh stretching out the heavens alone, but in the Targum, Yahweh himself, with the 1st-person pronoun I, stretched out the heavens with his word.
 - a) Since memra replaced "alone," this indicates that the word/memra is not a second person. The word is God himself, the "I" who created.
- 4. *I founded the earth by my might.*
 - a) Instead of stretching out, we have founded
 - b) Instead of "who was with me," we have a parallel line to "by my word"
 - (1) Obviously, God's might is not a separate person. It is an attribute he possesses. God's power and mighty creative acts.
 - (a) It also suggests, with the parallelism, that might and word overlap in meaning.
 - (i) Gen 1:3, God created by speaking forth his powerful word
 - (ii) Several OT texts portray God creating with his might, Jer 10:12.
 - (a) "It is He who made the earth with his might"
- D. So the Targum reaffirmed God's oneness, using singular Aramaic verbs and adding an additional 1st person singular pronoun.
 - 1. It also interpreted the acts of Yahweh performing the acts of creation unaccompanied in terms of creating with his word and his might.

III. Isaiah 44:24 and the Nature of Christ's Preexistence

- A. If Yahweh created alone, and if he could rhetorically ask "who was with me?", then we can start with this clear, plain, straightforward passage and begin interpreting disputed passages
 - 1. You don't start with the disputed and ignore the clear passages
- B. Gen 1:26

C. Proverbs 8

D. John 1:1

1. The word was with God, yet Isaiah 44:24 says “who was with me” (with the implied answer, no one). This proves that the word is not a conscious person alongside God in heaven.
- E. Early Christians began applying their wisdom christology to acts of creation, noting how Yahweh created with his wisdom (Prov 3:19), and since God’s wisdom is now found in Christ, Christians began attributing to Christ, wisdom’s embodiment, the roles of personified wisdom.
 1. God is the creator, but he made all things with his wisdom (Prov 3:19; Ps 104:24; Jer 10:12; 51:15)
 - a) Since Jesus is the embodiment of personified wisdom, we now have portrayals of Jesus typologically doing the things wisdom did
(1) 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2
 2. If we begin with Isaiah 44:24, we know God created alone, which was interpreted in some circles as God creating with his word and with his might.
 - a) Alone explicitly indicates that only 1 person created
 - (1) Word, wisdom, and might are attributes of God, not distinct persons cocreating or acting as agents of creation.
 - (2) This is why Isa 44:24 is such a powerhouse. S tier.

Thanks for listening to this week’s episode!

Join us next week as we continue our search for the first Trinitarian Christian in church history by closely looking at the beliefs and teachings of Melito of Sardis.

Please look forward to our next episode.

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