

**BIBLE STUDY NOTES BY TONY BARTLETT**

**SECOND ISAIAH: ISAIAH 40-55**

**CHAPTER 40. 12-31**

After the stirring introduction of 40.1-11 the prophet moves quickly to unpack the message he has announced as the core of his vocation : "All flesh is grass...the grass withers...when the breath of the Lord blows upon it" (40.6b). An account of YHWH as creator develops hand in hand with an uncompromising prophetic statement of the annihilating power this God represents in relation to all human culture.

Verses 12 through 26 present the prophet's famous emphasis on the creative activity of God, but it is not to be understood as a kind of high theology of creation derived from the intellectual implications of monotheism. God is creator in as much as he is essentially "other" from the thinking and action of the nations. It is for this reason that he can be considered a creator in the absolute sense--he does not represent a continuation of the world as it is, but comes from completely outside its present construction. The philosophical otherness of God derives from cultural otherness, not the other way round.

Verse 12 gives the normal image of the sheer power of the creator, cupping the waters of the sea in his hand, holding in a measure the dust, the mountains in a scale, but this is placed in a parallel with the "spirit of the Lord" which stands beyond human control or manipulation (13). The parallelism of creation and otherness-to-culture is reinforced when Isaiah uses the same image of the creator's activity-- weighing the earth in a scale--for the nations in relation to him, but in a pejorative sense: they are as "dust on the scales; the coastlands...no more than powder" (15). And immediately the prophet provides us with a key illustration of their fatuous character: the means of choice by which the nations seek to deal with God, i.e. sacrifice, the means by which they seek to direct and instruct him, is rendered absurd in its own terms. If you were to set the whole of Lebanon ablaze and kill all its animals this would not be enough to do the job (16). Then comes the argument's climax, identification of the nations as sheer nothing, as the void itself, the *tobum* or waste that preceded creation in Genesis (1.2). There God is the creator of the world out of primordial chaos, here the nations are described in the same way in present terms, as primordial chaos in comparison to his spirit. It is a small step to understanding this chaos in fact as the relentless violence of the nations, now as then.

Logically connected to sacrifice and its pointlessness in relation to God is idolatry which is ridiculed as a matter of human invention and construction (19-20). It is reduced to banality not because Isaiah does not know the power of religious forms but because he sees God as incomparable to any cultural norm or theme (18). The reduction of idols to absurdity depends on his sense that God is doing something totally different from whatever is represented by these artifacts. What a startling message this is and how uncomfortably it seems to fit with contemporary multiculturalism! But Isaiah is not engaging in any form of cultural superiority. Something much deeper is going on. What we're looking at is not an anti-idolatry on any superficial level, such that we could cry "idolators" to whatever pagan

culture, but something that goes to the root of the nations' self-projection as such, beginning today with our own. The way Isaiah trivializes the business of idolatry could just as well be employed in regard to the contemporary making of cars or computers, to Chrysler or Microsoft. The prophet does not bother to name the forces involved in idolatry which are one with the violence of sacrifice, showing themselves as power, arrogance, greed; he's much more interested in establishing the positive truth of revelation. **Indeed this positive revelation has in his view already begun to overturn these themes, subverting them with the nonviolence and compassion of the return from exile, above all with the humility and abyssal giving of the Servant.** This is why he seems so completely dismissive.

By now we understand Isaiah's pattern of thinking: God is supreme as creator exactly in the same measure as he is supreme over history. For God as creator the earth's inhabitants "are like grasshoppers" (22) but this is the same reality that brings the rulers and princes of the nations to naught and nothing, returning them to their original emptiness (22-4). They and their power are the "all flesh" that God's breath blows away (24). And indeed this truth returns us to the origins, the beginning of things. "Have you not understood [these things?] from the foundations of the earth?" (NRSV 21) For Isaiah Israelites have always known that God's original creativity is something very different from the way things actually stand on earth.

But again what is God's power that reduces princes to nothing, the breath or spirit that blows them away? Will it be the same supreme violence that they themselves are so adept at using? If we leap forward in Second Isaiah to the theme of the Servant we find that it is because of him: "(T)he one despised, whom the nations abhor, the slave of rulers: When kings see you, they shall stand up, and princes shall prostrate themselves" (49.7). God's power in history to overcome and transform human culture is attached throughout this prophecy, obliquely at first but then more and more insistently, to the amazing paradoxical subversive figure of the Servant.

As a final symbol of God's historically creative power the prophet draws attention to the heavenly host, the planets and stars beloved by the astrologers and astral cults of Babylon (26). These figure among the "powers and principalities" of the New Testament and for Isaiah they represent the cultural combination of rite, calendar, astronomical observation, and cultic control and significance of the immense phenomena of the heavens that was the boast of a developed religious system like Babylon. The prophet shows Israel's Holy One as commanding and naming and ordering this impressive multitude. Thus the created value of the heavens is not lost (unlike the "nothing" of human culture) but it is named, redefined, reinterpreted in terms of the historical intervention of YHWH. Already, therefore, the historical force of Israel's faith is felt, already the stars are demythologized and rendered available to human thought for the purposes of a good creation and creative good just as Genesis 1 outlines.

For all these reasons Jacob is not to despair, not to give up because of its impoverished helpless situation (27). God is the eternal God, creator of the ends of the earth precisely in this way: "He does not faint nor grow weary, and his knowledge is beyond scrutiny. He gives strength to the fainting; for the weak he makes vigor abound" (28) Because the God of Israel is understood as engaged in a sustained historical journey to overturn the preconditions of

human culture, the conditions that create the weak, those lost to human importance, then for that very reason the weak, those lost to human importance, are given strength. Here then is the birth of hope, the boundless resource of the weak, the light against all darkness: "They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar as with eagles' wings" (31).

Isaiah 40:12-31 (NRSV)

- <sup>12</sup> Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand  
and marked off the heavens with a span,  
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure,  
and weighed the mountains in scales  
and the hills in a balance?
- <sup>13</sup> Who has directed the spirit of the LORD,  
or as his counselor has instructed him?
- <sup>14</sup> Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,  
and who taught him the path of justice?  
Who taught him knowledge,  
and showed him the way of understanding?
- <sup>15</sup> Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,  
and are accounted as dust on the scales;  
see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.
- <sup>16</sup> Lebanon would not provide fuel enough,  
nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering.
- <sup>17</sup> All the nations are as nothing before him;  
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.
- <sup>18</sup> To whom then will you liken God,  
or what likeness compare with him?
- <sup>19</sup> An idol?—A workman casts it,  
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold,  
and casts for it silver chains.
- <sup>20</sup> As a gift one chooses mulberry wood  
—wood that will not rot—  
then seeks out a skilled artisan  
to set up an image that will not topple.
- <sup>21</sup> Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
- <sup>22</sup> It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,  
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;  
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
- <sup>23</sup> who brings princes to naught,  
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

- <sup>24</sup> Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,  
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
when he blows upon them, and they wither,  
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.
- <sup>25</sup> To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
- <sup>26</sup> Lift up your eyes on high and see:  
Who created these?  
He who brings out their host and numbers them,  
calling them all by name;  
because he is great in strength,  
mighty in power,  
not one is missing.
- <sup>27</sup> Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and speak, O Israel,  
“My way is hidden from the LORD,  
and my right is disregarded by my God”?
- <sup>28</sup> Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.
- <sup>29</sup> He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.
- <sup>30</sup> Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;
- <sup>31</sup> but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.

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### Questions for Discussion

1. “Second Isaiah” is generally understood to be the work of a prophet speaking to Jacob in captivity in Babylon. In that setting and from the perspective of God's long-term care of his near-broken people he has seen the captors as “dust.” It is tempting to identify easily with the biblical people and to overlook the way that God grinds to dust our own contemporary “sacrificial” systems. Over whom is it comforting or self-serving to see God standing as the creator--other? What sacrificial systems are we in fact still using to “direct” or “enlighten” the Lord?
2. The “heavenly host” is not weighed out as dust the way that culture is. Rather, God redefines them, renames them. We have here an image of creation, co-opted

by culture to support our sacrificial systems. How does our science co-opt nature now in ways that support or authorize our violence against one another (whether physical, spiritual, or economic violence)?

3. The prophet's hearers are encouraged not to despair, for the One who reduces our cultures to dust will strengthen those who "wait for the Lord." "Common Sense" says that it is irresponsible to be "passive," not to "act" on behalf of the downtrodden. Apart from speaking the truth, are there ways to "act" that we can reconcile with the call to "wait?" How does "resistance" resemble "waiting?" When does it stop resembling waiting?