

Fifth study in Isaiah: 42.18-43.12

If we read quickly over this section we can hear at once two distinctive notes struck, one apparently the standard tune of a righteously angry God, the other vibrating with a wonderful new timbre, the compassion of God accompanying his people in the very desolation he had previously inflicted. The first is the braying of war trumpets. The second is the voice of a songbird in the depth of the forest. Even thus 2nd Isaiah discovers its brilliant new abyssal theology, of a God of redemption in and against the depth of his own justice.

The historical meaning of Israel as voiced by the prophets was a demand for faithfulness to a covenant of interpersonal justice, and this demand was enforced by the sanction of divine violence. But now the formula is turned on its head. God is seen to accompany and rescue his people in the very conditions of suffering their sin warranted. The power of this paradox fused Luther's thought into its characteristic vision: the God of justice and God of grace mysteriously and terrifyingly intertwined, with a final victory going to grace. Mimetic anthropology, however, allows us to see something much deeper, and by virtue of the same Lutheran principle of faithfulness to the scriptures. It is the apparatus of violence by which humans do and understand everything which is intertwined with the startlingly different logic of a nonviolent God.

What happens in essence is that through the course of the biblical story God is revealed on the side of the human victim, the one oppressed by violence; ultimately, therefore, he cannot himself be the agent of violence. It takes time to get to the clarity of this truth, for God must first choose a people in a world fully conditioned, in fact constituted, by violence. The new language or logic of a world constituted by something other than violence is so absolutely foreign, i.e. formally unknowable, that the pathway of revelation must first proceed by a violence turned against violence in a kind of permanent crisis. Violence driving out violence is of course the classic human solution; what makes it different here is the completely overt, historical and non-mythological nature of that divine violence and the way it is invoked consistently on behalf of the weak, the poor, the victim. In other words the God of the Old Testament appears violent precisely because violence is the age-old hidden grammar of humanity that must first reach the pitch of intolerable human crisis in order then to be rejected.

Once the threat of violence is seen fully enacted against the people of Israel (the Exile) then God has made a victim of the people whom he called not to make victims! There is something impossible here; this violence is truly contradicted from within. It is the undying greatness of the prophet of 2nd Isaiah to have intuited this and placed side by side the traditional logic of divine punishment and its absolute collapse in compassion--for the first necessarily leads to the second. Once again, therefore, this is an anthropological process--God is not essentially described in it, only the pathway toward the place where his true revelation may break forth. It was necessary fully to subvert the logic of violence in order that the qualitatively new could be revealed. Thus Luther's *deus absconditus*, the hidden god, is not to be understood mythologically and collusively, the unfathomable mixing of mercy and violence, but anthropologically and transformatively. It represents in fact a biblical pathway, through the fog of human misconstruction in violence, to the beautiful light of God's truth and peace.

The God of penal wrath is, therefore, a penultimate construct, halfway between pagan mystification of violence and the true God free entirely of violence. The authentic revelation could only occur when Israel fully entered the role of victim, experiencing the collapse of all its human recourses of violence (including righteousness itself), and thus allowing God to emerge in his true identity fully at her side.

So now to the text, first to verses 18 to 25 of chapter 42. They clearly present God under the old heading, to the point of invoking the recent suffering of Israel as a warning for her future (23). But there is also a pregnant irony in the description of the people as a blind and deaf servant of the Lord (18-20). We will hear at 50.4 the individualized Servant declaring that "Morning by morning he opens my ear that I may hear..." The figure of servant jumps from a single individual to Israel-as-a-whole, and then back again and here we have a hint why this is the case; Israel as a nation was intended to manifest God's glory to the world and in default of fulfilling her mission the individual Servant steps forward. All the same the original vocation remains that of Israel. So the prophet remarks that the Lord's intention, through his servant Israel, was to make his "law great and glorious" (21). But now the plan of God has come to nothing, for instead "This is a people despoiled and plundered, all of them trapped in holes, hidden away in prisons. They are taken as booty, with no one to rescue them, as spoil, with no one to demand their return" (22).

The condition described is one of complete abandonment, of a dispossessed subterranean nation, effectively the victims of genocide. Here indeed is the situation of so many uprooted forced-marched enslaved sick and vanishing peoples, smashed and overwhelmed by powerful empires. This was the state of Israel, no different from so many others, except the prophet adds the extra, unbearable dimension that this was the just act of her God. "Who was it that gave Jacob to be plundered, Israel to the despoilers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned? ...So he poured out wrath upon them, his anger, and the fury of battle; it blazed round about them, yet they did not realize, it burned them, but they took it not to heart" (24-5).

The prophet thus repeats the standard theme of God's punitive wrath and in fact renews it by seeming to suggest it could happen again because the people remained indifferent despite the terror of their circumstances. We have then a reiteration of traditional prophecy, of a God who becomes terminally hostile toward his own people. But now at once follows an extraordinary change of tone, an approach that speaks from a completely different sensibility and yet one that results organically from the intense crisis of the first.

The section begins with an adversative "But now," making explicit the dialectical change of approach. The Lord is the speaker and he introduces himself with the characteristic that we have become familiar with from 2nd Isaiah: God is the creator and maker of his people, paralleling his claim to be the sole creator of the physical world. What underpins the physical claim is at once made clear. He is the redeemer, avenger, the *go'el* of his people who have become victims in their history, who are almost mortally weak. This is the new thing done by God and it reshapes the whole universe in its light. But how does he do this?

"When you pass through the water, I will be with you..." The Lord invokes the image of the Exodus but without the signs and wonders, signaling only the solidarity he gave those escaping from slavery. And then the very element in which he was present as power through

violence, the pillar of fire, this becomes the other hazard against which he protects them. "When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you" (43.2). The latter is not forced interpretation for we have just read that it was the Lord who set Jacob "on fire all around...and burned him..." (42.25 NRSV). So now the Lord protects Jacob from the very element of violence he had previously unleashed against him.

The role of redeemer suggests the price or quittance paid for the release of a relative who had become a slave through debt (Leviticus 25.25, 48-9). Now in this instance God, who is the authentic relative to destitute Israel, gives the territories of Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for her. This is a very concrete sense of exchange and may anticipate the Persian conquest of Egypt when it became a satrapy in 525 BCE, twelve years after the first exiles returned to Palestine. Yet of course there is no actual physical or metaphysical exchange at the divine level (one victim people for another); for to whom is God offering a ransom price? The words are only a poetic device rooted in the enormous power of mimetic transaction to focus human thinking. God loves his people so much he gives vast lands in return for her: "because you are precious in my eyes and glorious, and because I love you" (4a).

And then at once there is the slight tremor in the text so typical of the prophet. The next doublet gives a further statement of exchange, now in general terms: "I give men in return for you and peoples in exchange for your life" (4b). The meaning seems obvious following the previous doublet, except the word translated "men" is in fact singular in the Hebrew, *'adam*, man, rendering the phrase: "I give a man for you." Only a slight hint and possibly just a fluke of a copyist. Nevertheless the text as it stands opens the whole exchange passage to the dynamic of the Servant and the possibility that some creative hand deliberately pointed in that direction. In which case the motif of "exchange" becomes much more potent and profound, referring to the existential reality of the Servant, his freely accepted vocation and the way violence is mirrored endlessly, and so undone, by his faithful nonretaliation.

The possibility is strengthened by further reversal of key tropes. Verses 5 through 7 present the picture of a universal return, from the four points of the compass, a stirring image of the ingathering of all God's people, all those called by his name. Then at verse 8 we hear that this includes "the people who are blind though they have eyes, who are deaf though they have ears." These are the same characteristics attributed pejoratively to Israel at 42.18-20, things for which she was so severely punished. Now, however, the same blind and deaf people are led toward glory. The NRSV translation puts a slightly different spin on the Hebrew, saying the people are "blind, yet have eyes...deaf, yet have ears!" Essentially the same point emerges. These benighted befuddled people now see and hear!

So it is that the new prophetic tone unfolds a redemptive program that seems destined to work come what may. What could provide this confidence? Only the revolutionary stress on personal relationship (note the "I...you" connection continually repeated), showing us a God who loves his people in the very pit of their failure. Because of the abyssal love of the Lord the most obtuse, the most purblind, must one day come to see and hear. On this basis, and this alone, the Lord is able to summon and challenge the nations to a contest over history and truth. Which of the nations (and by implication their gods) could have revealed this? (9) Impossible, based as they are on systematic vainglorious violence! Instead Israel is now indeed the Lord's witness and servant, chosen to be such, called "to know and believe

in me and understand that it is I. (And that) before me no god was formed, and after me there shall be none."(10) Here is the famous monotheism of 2nd Isaiah, but we see that it is far from an intellectual proposition, a philosophy of the unmoved mover or highest good. Rather it is based on the in-breaking of an entirely new category into human existence, a compassionate nonviolent God. This event is so categorically new it could only have come from outside the present sphere of reality, from "eternity." "It is I, I the Lord; there is no savior but me. It is I who foretold, I who saved; I made it known, not any strange god among you; You are my witnesses, says the Lord. I am God, yes from eternity I am He." (11-13a)

Eternity here is not a category of endless time, or the endless self-presence of truth, ideas which are actually intolerable to human sense. In Isaiah's prophecy we reach the thought of eternity only through love and that is what it is, boundless love. The great affirmation of the uniqueness and eternity of Israel's God only comes from a revelation of love which is the end of the cultural gods of violence. Only, but precisely, on this basis is the Judaeo-Christian tradition entitled to claim the exclusive truth of their God. Conversely, therefore, Christians must understand that they can only make this claim by acknowledging the full pathway of revelation this study has described: from the penultimate God of penal justice to the God of boundless love.

It means as Christians we assume ownership of the anthropological progression described in the bible. We are the people who have been brought through this long travail to see ourselves and the world differently, to have new eyes. We are like Neo in the *Matrix* movie who sees not just the surface appearance of people but the codes that make up their complex violence. The ability to see is the gift of God.

42:18-43:12

18 Listen, you that are deaf;
and you that are blind, look up and see!
19 Who is blind but my servant,
or deaf like my messenger whom I send?
Who is blind like my dedicated one,
or blind like the servant of the LORD?
20 He sees many things, but does not observe them;
his ears are open, but he does not hear.
21 The LORD was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness,
to magnify his teaching and make it glorious.
22 But this is a people robbed and plundered,
all of them are trapped in holes
and hidden in prisons;
they have become a prey with no one to rescue,
a spoil with no one to say, "Restore!"
23 Who among you will give heed to this,
who will attend and listen for the time to come?
24 Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler,
and Israel to the robbers?
Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned,
in whose ways they would not walk,

and whose law they would not obey?
25 So he poured upon him the heat of his anger
and the fury of war;
it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand;
it burned him, but he did not take it to heart.
43:1 But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
3 For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
4 Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
5 Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
6 I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
7 everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."
8 Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes,
who are deaf, yet have ears!
9 Let all the nations gather together,
and let the peoples assemble.
Who among them declared this,
and foretold to us the former things?
Let them bring their witnesses to justify them,
and let them hear and say, "It is true."
10 You are my witnesses, says the LORD,
and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed,
nor shall there be any after me.
11 I, I am the LORD,
and besides me there is no savior.

12 I declared and saved and proclaimed,
when there was no strange god among you;
and you are my witnesses, says the LORD.

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Questions for reflection:

1. Dr. Bartlett illuminates some startling realities about the dual images of God present in this text. The violence initially attributed by the prophet to God is offset, or rather, radically reframed by the God's decision to be with God's people in the very desolation caused by God's own wrath. The decision to "be with" Israel in her exile does more than mark a sea-change in the prophetic witness to God's love. It calls us to make the same shift. Are there places in our own lives where the shift to the "God of boundless love" is so difficult that we are still prone to set the old, violent god alongside the real one?
2. Isaiah struggles to make sense of the reality of the violence that Israel has suffered, continues to suffer. This violence is real, and is related to Israel's unfaithfulness, if not the punishment for it. What is certain is that God suffers with Israel. Can we reframe our understanding of the evils that befall us or others so that we can see them as a result of our mimetic bondage that God both permits and shares?
3. Dr. Bartlett shows us that it is the very deaf and dumb whose failure to see and hear led them into captivity that God now plans to bring back. Not the ones who see, or those who hear, but those who deserve nothing better than their exile. It is this apparent contradiction that witnesses to God's glory. How have we failed to witness to this God among the peoples of the world? How have we Christians substituted instead a God who blesses those who are deserving?