

ISAIAH 44.9-45.17

At 44.9-20 there is a pretty obvious intrusion in the text. In the middle of 2nd Isaiah's poetry there is a flat piece of prose, consisting of a diatribe against idols. The satirical argument has been attracted by the passing remarks on idols at 45.16 and again at 46.1-2, and hinging on the theme of shame. But the scribe inserted the additional text here where it would seem to do least violence to the poetry. We can see the urgent parallel commands on either side, and yet also that there is not a major disruption to the sense and flow of the original text: "Fear not...You are my witnesses!" (8) and "Remember this...you, O Israel, who are my servant!"(21)

The intrusion is itself instructive. It gives us a window into the way scripture is formed, by many hands, more often anonymous than not, and sometimes growing organically, by one free-floating piece of tradition (oral or written) finding a home in or attached to another. Overall it suggests that the scripture is always in a dynamic process of self-interpretation or elucidation, sometimes more obvious than others, and sometimes more inspired than others. For example here, the attack on idols, although stinging, is superficial compared to what 2nd Isaiah himself says.

The prose critique of idols argues how utterly dependent on human beings they are; in fact they are less useful for humans than the materials out of which they are made. They are of no more value than what is left of wood after it has been used for warmth and cooking. Those who worship them are "chasing ashes" (20). This is a rationalist Hebrew critique, and we can see essentially the same argument more fully and incisively expressed in the deuterocanonical or apocryphal book, Wisdom of Solomon, at 13.10--14.31. The key point is: idols have no substance.

On the other hand when 2nd Isaiah makes the same point he always does so in the context and against the background of the historical sovereignty of Yahweh, and it is in contrast to this that the idols have no substance. We saw this already at 40.17-19ff where the point is not the mere craftsmanship as such, the human shaping of an idol, but Yahweh's extreme craftsmanship of human history out of the void, compared with the pathetic position of idols being crafted by humans! There is the key statement followed by the rhetorical questions: "Before him all the nations are as nought, as nothing and void he accounts them. To whom can you liken God? With what equal can you confront him? An idol cast by a craftsman which the smith plates with gold...?" (Read on to verse 24, and see also the study on the section.)

The leading prophetic critique, therefore, is not the material emptiness of idols but their historical powerlessness and triviality in comparison to the Lord. They are incapable of Yahweh's enormously creative effect in respect of history. In fact with idols there is no history at all, there is just business as usual, the same old same old. It is because Yahweh is seen to change the deep content of human existence that idols lose their purchase on the human soul and *then* they are seen to be worthless.

But before this revolution has occurred they are in fact very powerful indeed, as Girard has shown us. They are sacraments of a culture based on violence and the mystification of violence. They are the primary pillar of stones where the foundational murder--very often by stoning--took place. Thus they do have substance, very much so. It is only because the prophet was not at all invested in these themes, but rather in a very new basis of humanity coming from Yahweh, the redeemer of Israel's history, that they have lost this formidable effect and appear in contrast absurd.

Why then does the text not clearly show their previous role, neither in the interpolation nor in 2nd Isaiah proper? Why does it not present the Girardian analysis, i.e. the terrible human power of idols before the biblical pathway goes on to subvert their meaning? Why does it not bring this to the surface but only recounts their latter-day powerlessness?

The answer is perhaps that biblical revelation must first fully insulate and negate the power of idols before it can reveal their power. Moreover, there is a sense in which the biblical pathway continues itself for a long time to share in the thought-world of violence, and so is unable to isolate completely the root meaning of idols. In other words the revelation itself remains significantly compromised. To reach the Girardian understanding we have to embark on a long and sustained biblical journey, looking to a wider, deeper register of biblical texts. These include Genesis, the Abel and Joseph stories, aspects of Exodus (reading Egyptian crisis from the side of the Hebrew slaves/victims), Job and Jonah, and above all in our present study, the Servant where the mysterious figure of Israel/the prophet/one unknown voluntarily accepts the blows of collective violence. And then we understand the absolutely critical role of Jesus who took these aspects of the tradition and in a world-shattering gesture fulfilled their evacuation of violence from revelation in his own body.

And where does all this leave us? Well, it serves to make the highly relevant point that we have today reached a meaning of scripture only over a long pathway and, after our own two thousand years of Christian compromise with violence, we converge with a radical and privileged understanding of revelation. This is what this webpage is all about, affirming and asserting the absolutely crucial value of this interpretation. The concept of generative violence exposed and transformed by the biblical God is the present quantum mechanics of theology. Because of it everything is to be viewed and appropriated differently. It is therefore of singular importance that we understand the level and value of interpretation that is here brought to bear on the text. We are looking at a meta-account which is able to transform the face of historical Christianity.

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Picking up the text again at 21 we see that there is a double affirmation that Israel is the Lord's servant and it is in this role that she will never be forgotten--an implied contrast with the traditional promise that the Davidic monarchy shall endure forever before God (2 Samuel 7.16). And then we hear the remarkable statement that the Lord has swept away Israel's sins "like a mist;" and this is the work of the Lord as redeemer, the *go'el*. Here there is the vital nexus of thinking that says return from exile is simultaneously forgiveness of sins: they are one and the same thing. How important is this for understanding biblical redemption and the gospels. When Jesus forgives sins it is not a legal absolution or salvation derived from the satisfaction or substitution offered by the cross; it is indivisible from the program of the kingdom in him, from the healing of Israel, from the sovereign coming of God to his people. The cross is the consequence of the kingdom, not the kingdom the consequence of the cross. Thus when God makes a move to restore his people's life then immediately their sins are forgiven, and, of course, vice versa. No wonder the prophet breaks forth in a shout of joy! (23)

The implicit critique of the Davidic monarchy continues with the dramatic naming of Cyrus, king of Persia (559-529) as the Lord's anointed. It is prefaced by a ringing declaration of the creator

God's annihilation of human wisdom. Again this is in fact what makes the Lord the creator, not simple power of cosmogony but the undoing and reversal of human non-history: "I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth; who frustrates the omens of liars, and makes fools of diviners; who turns back the wise, and makes their knowledge foolish...who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be rebuilt and I will raise up their ruins' " (24-6 NRSV). All the doom-sayers of the history of violence, the augurs of sacrificial wisdom, the readers of truth in the helpless agonies of the victims, all this is overthrown by the Lord who returns the exiles to Jerusalem and decrees the rebuilding of ruins. With these events the meaning of writing itself, derived from sacred signs and the victims behind the signs, runs against its source, becomes "deconstructive": i.e. the raising up of history's victims. No wonder the God who does this is read as the true creator of all, for his writing goes back to a completely other beginning.

The key by which the Lord accomplished this marvel is Cyrus. "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose..."(28). There follows a truly amazing set of promises to the Persian soldier, well able to rival the Lord's constant support for the hero David. He is termed "his anointed" (45.1) which is of course the technical name for the king of Israel. Then the Lord describes him as he "whose right hand I grasp, subduing nations before him, and making kings run in his service, opening doors before him and leaving the gates unbarred: I will go before and level the mountains; bronze doors I will shatter and iron bars I will snap" (1-2). We know from other historical sources that Cyrus won two armies of Medes to his cause without a drop of blood shed, that he ruled the largest empire the world had seen to date, from Pakistan to Lydia, and that the people of Babylon opened their gates to him in 539 BCE without a battle. The prophet's description of him is, therefore, strictly accurate. The new and startling thing is that 2nd Isaiah sees the Lord as entering into direct relationship with him, giving him all his victories "so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name" (3b). We have no way of knowing how Cyrus reciprocated this personal approach of Israel's God, if in fact he did so at all. (It seems that Cyrus had a respectful, even devout attitude to all foreign gods.) What is clear is that the prophet understands Cyrus and his career in terms of biblical vocation and meaning. Cyrus is part of Israel just as Israel is part of Cyrus' empire!

The horizon of biblical revelation suddenly opens to include an exceptional individual of world history marked by an enlightened, non-bloodthirsty, culturally-and-politically-generous response to his own stunning success. In concrete fact it means that this man gave to exiled, dispossessed and powerless Judea a once-in-a-millennium opportunity to return to their native Jerusalem without forfeiting their religious allegiance or cultural tradition. Cyrus therefore signifies the brief emergence in the sixth century BCE of a utopian politics. Without him there would be no 2nd Isaiah, no book of consolation, no salvation history of compassion, and no suffering Servant. The prophet is without a doubt right in calling him anointed. Cyrus is a personal source of biblical revelation, easily on a par with David, or any of the Judges.

By virtue of the exile and return the revelatory possibilities of the biblical God have extended well beyond the borders of Israel. And they are already a testimony to the world, including to our own time and situation. Everything that the Lord had done through Cyrus for Israel (4-5) happened "so that toward the rising and the setting of the sun men may know that there is none besides me. I am the Lord there is no other" (6). And later, in verse 14, we read that groups of people "shall come over to you and be yours, they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will make supplication to you, saying, 'God is with you alone, and there is no other; there

is no god besides him.' " (The initial words could read "The toilers of Egypt and the merchants of Ethiopia, and the Sabeans, tall of stature," indicating a variety of peoples and thus making more sense.) In other words the peaceful return of the exiles through Cyrus is testimony to many diverse peoples of the deep truth of the biblical God. We can endorse this from a present-day perspective: not only is the survival of Israel in extremity an historical marvel but the new articulation of divine meaning through these circumstances--i.e. 2nd Isaiah--is a spiritual-theological advance of unparalleled magnitude. Indeed the figure of Jesus of Nazareth would be inconceivable without 2nd Isaiah. The whole complex, therefore--the personality and career of Cyrus plus the words and insight of the prophet--becomes a self-authenticating witness of the action of a God of nonviolent redemption in and through history.

There is then an immediate and wonderful resonance to the poetry of verses 7 through 13, beginning "I form the light and create the darkness, I make well-being and create woe" and ending "He shall rebuild my city and let my exiles go free without price or ransom, says the Lord of hosts." We can let them stand in their own right for their power of conviction and expressive beauty. Everything that has happened from the exile onward has brought about an outcome of genuine human change. "Let justice descend, O heavens, like dew from above...Let the earth open and salvation bud forth...!" Who are we then to contend with our Maker when in the appearance of dark days we claim that God's project has come to an end? Israel is set free without the necessity of a price or ransom, a statement seeming to contradict that of 43.3. But ultimately both are true, because whatever ransom is given to purchase freedom it is itself an act of infinite gratuity. Otherwise it would not be a true ransom from a world based on the violence of exchange. Here again is forgiveness of sin as the sweeping away of mist, the descent of justice from heaven like dew, images evocative of the boundless gratuity of nature.

And finally then we rejoin the question of idols. "Truly with you God is hidden, the God of Israel, the savior!...They go in disgrace who carve images" (15-16 NAB). This translation is to be preferred to the NRSV "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior." Nothing that we have read up to this point would suggest any kind of essential hiding of Israel's God, a Lutheran *deus absconditus* permanently inaccessible to human understanding. The dynamic of the text leading to verse 15 is that foreign peoples are now confessing that "with you only is God" because of the historical transformation achieved by the Lord. Thus God is in fact to be found only in Israel and to that extent has been hidden from human minds blinded by their nonhistory or pre-history of culture based in violence. But he has been hidden only to be revealed and that is the force of the exclamation: it's one of discovery--"now I see where you've been hiding!" Israel's God is hidden to the extent that the human meaning it both depends on and promotes has needed the extraordinary combined circumstances of Cyrus, the return from exile and the prophetic word to bring to the world's attention. Here indeed is the beginning of the gospel. And, then, once you recognize the movement of the God of historical redemption the falsehood of the religious claim of idols is shamefully obvious. They have zero liberative force, and less than zero. In contrast Israel, despite its present weakness, shall never be shamed in future ages. For it is then that humanity, slowly but surely, will be transformed according to the truth just now being brought forth in and through Israel.

Ch. 44

⁹All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame. ¹⁰Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good? ¹¹Look, all its devotees shall be put to shame; the

artisans too are merely human. Let them all assemble, let them stand up; they shall be terrified, they shall all be put to shame.

¹²The ironsmith fashions it[□] and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers, and forging it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. ¹³The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. ¹⁴He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. ¹⁵Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. ¹⁶Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, “Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!” ¹⁷The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, “Save me, for you are my god!”

¹⁸They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. ¹⁹No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” ²⁰He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?”

- ²¹ Remember these things, O Jacob,
and Israel, for you are my servant;
I formed you, you are my servant;
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.
- ²² I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud,
and your sins like mist;
return to me, for I have redeemed you.
- ²³ Sing, O heavens, for the LORD has done it;
shout, O depths of the earth;
break forth into singing, O mountains,
O forest, and every tree in it!
For the LORD has redeemed Jacob,
and will be glorified in Israel.
- ²⁴ 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;
- ²⁵ who frustrates the omens of liars,
and makes fools of diviners;
who turns back the wise,
and makes their knowledge foolish;
- ²⁶ who confirms the word of his servant,
and fulfills the prediction of his messengers;
who says of Jerusalem, “It shall be inhabited,”
and of the cities of Judah, “They shall be rebuilt,

and I will raise up their ruins”;
27 who says to the deep, “Be dry—
I will dry up your rivers”;
28 who says of Cyrus, “He is my shepherd,
and he shall carry out all my purpose”;
and who says of Jerusalem, “It shall be rebuilt,”
and of the temple, “Your foundation shall be laid.”

Ch. 45

1 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him
and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him—
and the gates shall not be closed:
2 I will go before you
and level the mountains, □
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron,
3 I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
4 For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I surname you, though you do not know me.
5 I am the LORD, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god.
I arm you, though you do not know me,
6 so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other.
7 I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the LORD do all these things.
8 Shower, O heavens, from above,
and let the skies rain down righteousness;
let the earth open, that salvation may spring up, □
and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also;
I the LORD have created it.
9 Woe to you who strive with your Maker,
earthen vessels with the potter! □
Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, “What are you making”?
or “Your work has no handles”?
10 Woe to anyone who says to a father, “What are you begetting?”

- or to a woman, “With what are you in labor?”
- 11 Thus says the LORD,
the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker:
Will you question me[□] about my children,
or command me concerning the work of my hands?
- 12 I made the earth,
and created humankind upon it;
it was my hands that stretched out the heavens,
and I commanded all their host.
- 13 I have aroused Cyrus[□] in righteousness,
and I will make all his paths straight;
he shall build my city
and set my exiles free,
not for price or reward,
says the LORD of hosts.
- 14 Thus says the LORD:
The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia,[□]
and the Sabeans, tall of stature,
shall come over to you and be yours,
they shall follow you;
they shall come over in chains and bow down to you.
They will make supplication to you, saying,
“God is with you alone, and there is no other;
there is no god besides him.”
- 15 Truly, you are a God who hides himself,
O God of Israel, the Savior.
- 16 All of them are put to shame and confounded,
the makers of idols go in confusion together.
- 17 But Israel is saved by the LORD
with everlasting salvation;
you shall not be put to shame or confounded
to all eternity.

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Some questions for discussion:

- 1) Dr. Bartlett points out that the scribe, the author of the “intrusion” has a different understanding of the (negative) value of the idols than does Second Isaiah. One is fundamentally an attack on the idols and their “material emptiness.” The other is a critique based on the historical efficacy of God, an efficacy that reduces all others to meaninglessness. In this contrast we have an example of a basic question we can ask ourselves when we feel “prophetic.” Are we writing “against” the idols (as in the intrusion) or “for” God (as in Second Isaiah)? In the terms of Preaching Peace, are

we “against” violence and mimesis? Or “for” peace? Where have you been “against” something destructive or evil? When “for” something life-giving or good?

- 2) There is a remarkable parallel between the image of the return and freeing of captive Israel in Second Isaiah as a demonstration of the nature of divine will and the same image in the Exodus. What Second Isaiah seems to have done here is expand the agency of this will to include Cyrus. How uncomfortable it must have been to see God working out the divine purpose, making visible the divine will through someone who appears to have no knowledge of our God. Can we look outside our own traditions to find agents of redemption and peace working, perhaps, even to our own “good?”