

8th Isaiah Study: 45.17--48.22

The prophet of 2nd Isaiah is now in full flood. The steady rhythm of the strings, the leading melodies, the crash of percussion, we know this music now. We know the writer's voice. Perhaps we are able to enter more directly his world, to let him speak still more forcefully to us. At the same time we are able to advance at a quicker pace, covering extended passages on themes that have already been encountered.

Verses 17-18 speak of something that is often termed "creation theology," relating it to the making of the heavens and earth as a sovereign self-referring act of blessed creation by God. The viewpoint is reinforced by the prime position of Genesis 1 and the way the seven day creation account is so familiar to us. My feeling, however--suggested already in previous studies--is that here in Isaiah we are at an earlier stage of biblical composition. The priestly writer of Genesis 1 has not yet set down his verses, and when he does it will be because he in fact is strongly influenced by 2nd Isaiah. What we are actually reading here is the first-hand construction of the concept of the blessedness of creation. The prophet is placing together the common idea of a god's authorship of the cosmos with the redemptive theology that frames his whole message. "Comfort, give comfort to my people...(for)... behold your God comes with power!" It is because the prophet now experiences God as supremely life-giving, because he understands the maker of the earth did not create it to be a waste (*tohuw*, at Gen. 1.2a, translated as "void") but a place to be lived in!

The *tohuw abohu* is not primarily a cosmological speculation, a primordial sub-matter. It is rather a human experience of desolation and emptiness, the experience of exile framed by the vast tracts of desert between Babylon and Jerusalem. But now that the Lord is bringing the captives home he can proclaim that "I have not spoken from hiding, nor from some dark place of the earth, and I have not said to the descendants of Jacob, 'Look for me in an empty waste (*tohuw*)' ". God does not intend the desolation of history. Instead "I, the Lord, promise justice, I foretell what is right" (19). All religion that seeks God in dark places, in the places of death--impelled there because that is what so dominates human life, none of it bears comparison to the God of human redemption. Once again there is a core tension in the text between the religion that rises out of generative violence and the completely new thing coming to birth in Israel.

If my argument here is true you can also see how Genesis 1 came to be written the way it is, with its sevenfold affirmation of "good." We can see how the *a priori* declaration of matter as good has emerged from the concrete experience of Israel. Greek thought, which always sought the level of essence, the selfsame, *what is*, conceived the idea of the basic particle, the atom. But Democritus and Leucippus by means of their essentialist and sacrificial thinking--excluding what is different, "the other"--enshrined violence in the cosmos: the random battle of one thing against another, what the French call the hell of things, *l'enfer des choses*. It takes biblical thinking to see everything related to everything, open essentially to the other--and that means first of all the weak and powerless, the *absolute other*. Because of this radical openness the field of creation is transformed into what? Should we perhaps say an infinite relativity? And because of this biblical frame of thinking--everything open to the other--the material creation itself is deemed "very good." We should note incidentally that for Plato "the good" was beyond the universe and only in the world derivatively, not essentially part of it, as Genesis is at pains to insist.

What follows, 20 through 25, is the calling of a judicial assembly from among the exiles to assess the rival claims of gods. Only the Lord who can bring a future of life into being can claim to be God. "Who announced this from the beginning and foretold it from of old? Was it not I, the Lord, besides whom there is no other God? There is no just and saving God but me" (21) As a result of the implied success of the Lord's case the universal gospel of blessing suddenly breaks free: "Turn to me and be safe all you ends of the earth..."(22a), safe from the violence, from the exclusion and death of the other. What a marvelous intuition of the unquenchable appeal of such good news: "To me every knee shall bend; by me every tongue shall swear, saying 'Only in the Lord are just deeds and power' " (24a).

Chapters 46 and 47 drive home the lesson of discontinuous generative principles by first emphasizing the incomparable action of YHWH and then detailing the downfall of Babylon. The point of difference between YHWH and the gods is made by a telling inversion. First the idols are described as having to be carried, "carried as burdens by the weary," and then themselves stooping and bowing down together with their bearers, unable to save them, in their turn, from going into captivity. In contrast the Lord addresses Jacob as "my burden since your birth, whom I have carried from your infancy" (46.3b). The striking opposition of an image in which the Lord carries his people is made even more powerful because of its immediately tender and maternal character. And then the poet goes further still. Now the Lord is a care-giver to an aged Israel: "Even to your old age I am the same, even when your hair is gray I will bear you. It is I who done this, I who will continue, and I who will carry you to safety" (4). Whose heart would not be melted by the appeal of such a God? I remember my father carrying my grandfather when he was old and feeble. Israel's father/mother will continue to do the carrying even when her own child has grown to feeble old age!

The vast distinction between powerless idols and the powerful God of history leads to a ringing assertion. It repeats the first-person divine declaration that is a constant throughout 2nd Isaiah. "Remember this and be firm...I am God, there is no other; I am God, there is none like me. At the beginning I foretell the outcome; in advance, things not yet done. I say that my plan shall stand, I accomplish my every purpose." (8-10, cf.41.4, 43.3, 11, 15, 25, 44.6.) The "I am" of Exodus 3.14 is echoed by the absolute "I am" of God's name at 43.11 and 25. Indeed the Exodus name stands in continuity with the whole thread of first-person utterance in the prophecy and it holds the same essential meaning: the first person of the verb to be in the mouth of God announces a God of absolute relational fidelity to Israel and, by extension, to his creation. It is equivalent to "I am always here, before you, behind you, with you, for you." The customary footnote that explains it in terms of "the absolute and necessary Being" is another example of Greek ontologizing (*what is*, rather than *I am*). Psalm 139 would be a much better reading, in place of dead philosophizing: "Behind and before you encircle me...such knowledge is beyond me...Where can I hide from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee? If I ascend to the heavens you are there; if I lie down in Sheol you are there too" (vv.5-8)

There follows the apostrophe to Babylon, "Come down, sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon" (47.1) This is a standard prophetic taunt song, reveling in the defeat and disgrace of an enemy. What makes it theologically important is the way it works in context, the way in which the declarative "I" in the mouth of Babylon, in the time of its triumph, is a grotesque

mimic of the first-person theme in the mouth of YHWH. As the prophet recalls, "You said, 'I shall remain always, a sovereign mistress forever!'...Saying to yourself, 'I, and no one else!...Because you felt secure in your wickedness, and said, 'No one sees me.' Your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said to yourself, 'I, and no one else!'" (7-10) How typical of imperial power to judge only according to its own wisdom and dismiss the watching gaze and the opinions of others! Triumphant violence feels completely insulated from criticism and self-doubt. But the onrush of history must bring an inevitable encounter with reality. It is only a matter of time. In the case of Babylon it was the wisdom of astrologers and stargazers (13) that provided the intellectual validation of its triumph. What is it now in the era of U.S. empire? What is its astrology? The wisdom of markets, of money, of consumerism and its "freedom," of the manipulated violence of crowds, of "democracy?" The truth is that it is only the God of radical openness to the other who can claim "It is I, I the Lord; there is no savior but me" (43.11). All else is doomed to disappear "in a single day" (47.9).

Chapter 48 takes the cumulative lessons of Israel's history and makes them an appeal to Israel to learn truly their content. "Things of the past I foretold long ago, they went forth from my mouth, I let you hear of them; then suddenly I took action and they came to be. Because I know that you are stubborn and that your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead bronze...Now that you have heard, look at all this; must you not admit it?" (3-6) The prophet is surely referring to the constant theme of coming destruction for Jerusalem that sounded in prophets like Amos, Zephaniah, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel. It had been a symphony of future ruin and one that was now more than fulfilled in fact. But, now, on the basis of this historical authenticity the word of God may declare, "From now on I announce new things to you, hidden events of which you knew not. Now, not long ago, they are brought into being, and beforehand you did not hear of them, so that you cannot claim to have known them." And where before it was destruction promised it is now historical redemption.

The memory of word fulfilled and the promissory word of a future had an extraordinary effect on the Jewish community in exile. As Herbert Tarr says, the Judeans "were the only people in antiquity exiled from their homeland and national religion who maintained their religious and social identity in captivity." And he adds: "Then still another miracle: in response to King Cyrus' edict, a substantial number of Judeans...did return and erect the Second Temple." Here is the huge reversal on which so much of 2nd Isaiah is predicated. Persian Cyrus began his irresistible rise to power in the year 550 when, without a battle, two armies and the Median empire surrendered to him. The prophet of 2nd Isaiah, sunk with his fellow exiles in the dustbin of history in Babylon, notices and begins to understand that the fidelity of YHWH to his people will one day be realized through this new leader from the east. "I call from the east a bird of prey, from a distant land, to carry out my plan. Yes, I have spoken, I will accomplish it; I have planned it, and I will do it." (46.11) Here is the new thing announced and just brought into being, the concrete possibility of return.

And it was more than simply the cycle of revolution, a new military power to crush the Babylonians. There was something about this Cyrus. When he finally took the city in the year 539 and the people opened the gates to him, again without a battle, it was as much a matter of religious devotion as military prowess that won him victory. In his own record of the conquest, the *Cyrus Cylinder* found by archaeology, he states: "When I entered Babylon as a

friend and when I established the seat of government in the palace of the ruler under jubilation and rejoicing, Marduk the great lord (god of Babylon) made the magnanimous inhabitants of Babylon to love me, and I was daily endeavoring to worship him..." This universal religious attitude is reflected in Cyrus' eventual decree to the Judeans in 538 that they be permitted to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the temple there, a policy that was backed by a grant from the royal treasury. It is evident that the founder of the Persian empire was a deeply religious man who in some fashion believed in one "Lord, the God of heaven." If all gods are to be honored with sincerity, and when, above all, that sincerity is shaped by genuine nonviolence, preferring persuasion to killing, then we feel we are in the presence of the only religion worthy of the name. Clearly the prophet at some point came to that conclusion: "All of you assemble and listen: Who among you foretold these things? The Lord's friend shall do his will against Babylon and the progeny of Chaldea. I myself have spoken, I have called him, and his way succeeds!" (48.14-15). And a moment later Cyrus himself speaks (the last person mentioned not the Lord): "Now the Lord God has sent me, and his spirit." (16d)

Really this is stunning. All the religious privileges previously associated with the Davidic kings are given to a Persian barbarian. And so we see the amazing convergence of the inexhaustible relationship of Israel with her God and a completely different cultural context that evidences the very same relationship. The prophet has done something remarkable, leaping national and historical trajectories in order to plot the deep course of divine redemption. And what makes the convergence possible is not the superficial pluralism of our own time: tolerating differences in order that capitalism may thrive. No, the difference of generative principles remains; it is because Cyrus has somehow adopted the principle of radical openness to the other that he inherits the spirit-mantle of Israel's kings. "Thus says the Lord to his anointed (*meshiah*) Cyrus, whose right hand I grasp...For the sake of Jacob, my servant, of Israel my chosen one, I have called you by your name, giving you a title, though you knew me not." 45.1a & 4)

Here then is the new thing, the truly new thing. No wonder the prophet bursts out in uncontrollable celebration, declaring the redemption of the Lord that absorbs, because it both repeats and exceeds in meaning, the images of exodus: "Go forth from Babylon, flee from Chaldea! With shouts of joy proclaim this, make it known; publish it to the ends of the earth, and say, 'The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob. They did not thirst when he led them through dry lands; water from the rock he set flowing for them; he cleft the rock, and waters swelled forth.'" (48.20-21)

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Some questions for reflection:

1. What does it mean to you to suggest, as Dr. Bartlett does, that Genesis 1 is the result of Priestly reflections on 2nd Isaiah? That the goodness of creation as a theme emerges from the prophet of the exile?
2. What does it mean for us to hear that God's people are redeemed, not by might given directly to them, but by an outside power, someone who does not even know their God? Does this speak to our own need for security?