

## **Bible Studies on Second Isaiah**

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Second Isaiah (chapters 40 to 55) can justly claim to be the single densest source of Jesus' gospel in the Hebrew scriptures. It contains so many genetic elements it is like the African continent to the human species, the space in which our foremothers and forefathers first appeared—in this case it is the place where the distinctive traces of the radically new humanity preached by the prophet Jesus first emerged.

### **Isaiah 40:1-10**

When questioned by John the Baptist about whether he was “the one who is to come” Jesus answers with a record of his activity that reads like a greatest hits list from the prophet Isaiah. “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them” (Luke 7.20-22 Note: translations are taken from the New American Bible unless otherwise stated). For sure this covers the whole range of textual Isaiah, which shows the influence of all this astonishing prophecy (26.19, 29.18-19, 35.5-6, 42.7, 61.1-2a), but when we look to the deep redemptive program of the gospels it is Second Isaiah that provides the really significant elements.

Here is the release of the captives, the overturning of the lethal effect of empires but not by repetition of their military methods. Here is good news for the poor, the joy of God's kingly return to Zion, but not for the Davidic monarchy nor its temple priesthood. Here is sight for the blind, where blindness means something much more than simply physical inability to see. Here is the true shepherd of Israel, leading and carrying the sheep, producing a characteristic atmosphere of trust, gentleness and love. Here, most profoundly, is the Servant of YHWH, the one who will startle nations and render kings speechless, the one who gives his life and does not retaliate and yet somehow brings all prior history and culture to a shattering halt. Chapter forty begins almost at once with the voice of one crying out in the desert: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” (v.3). These words are included near the beginning of all four canonical gospels and explicitly named from Isaiah, testifying to the embedded role of Second Isaiah in the gospel story and its written accounts. What is being announced in this verse is God's personal return to Zion, reversing the departure of God's glory from the temple and city dramatically depicted by the prophet Ezekiel (chapter 10). But rather than an Ezekiel-style return of God's terrifying chariot and cherubim there is the Lord's presence directly to and among the defenseless returnees from exile. “Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care” (11). Here then is the “good news” (gospel) of Second Isaiah that the prophet announces and Jerusalem echoes back, the core message of which is “Here is your God...the Lord God who rules...” (9c-10a).

Implied and inseparable is the emotive heart of the prophecy that generates the note of consolation at the very first verses: “Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...” (1-2) How close are we here to the initial words of Jesus' kingdom discourse in Luke given with typical Jesus-style economy: “Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours” (6.20). In both instances, Isaiah and Jesus, there is the deliberate atmosphere that is itself transformative and constitutes already perhaps one half of the good news—a distinctive new tonality producing a relationship of trust, gentleness and love.

The announcement here of “good news” is paralleled at 52.7-10, immediately before the fourth poem of the Servant, the one that most comprehensively and movingly describes the Servant's sufferings. There is thus an effective textual link from the introductory passage of this prophecy to the most powerfully mysterious—or, as I would term it, most abyssal—point of the prophecy, the place where we encounter the figure who breaks definitively with the structures of rivalry and retaliatory violence and so introduces an entirely new possibility into human existence. We will approach this point progressively through the study but already the textual link with the Servant suggests a literary “inclusion” with the figure

of the prophet. The vocation of the prophet is described immediately before this announcement of good news and therefore stands in vital personal proximity to it (vv.6-8).

In the account of the prophetic call the prophet is told by a voice to cry out a message. The prophet's obedience—"What shall I cry out?"—reminds us of the Servant's listening ear (50.4) In answer he is told: "All flesh is grass" (Hebrew text) and its "constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it" (7 NRSV). The message itself is taken classically as announcing that all flesh lies under God's judgment. Paradoxically the very thing that gives life, God's breath (see Genesis 2.7), condemns the flesh to death by blowing on it. This is already suggested at Genesis 6.3: "My spirit [breath] shall not abide in mortals for ever, for they are flesh" (NRSV). If this is understood dualistically then we have the realm of the human—the earth, the material, the flesh, contrasted with the realm of the eternal—heaven, the spiritual, the soul. And in this way we head straight down the blind alley of Platonic metaphysics. But if the terms are understood anthropologically—i.e. in terms of the cultural constitution of humanity—then everything becomes infinitely more dynamic.

God's spirit blows upon the present constitution of human affairs—upon flesh and its "constancy" which is the mode of relationship of cultures founded in generative violence—to bring them to definitive crisis. But in contrast and parallel to the collapse produced in the present order "the word of our God stands forever" (8). This word is the organic unity of what the prophet hears from God and understands God as doing. Word and deed in Hebrew are always taken as a single reality. This unity of God's action reaches forward from the judgment upon human history and institutions, represented most powerfully by the 1 From Anthony's book, *Cross Purposes*, an early description of abyssal compassion... "Our modern or postmodern situation can justly be construed in and by the image of the abyss. The gospel event of the cross may be understood to take place in the human abyss—the depth of injustice, meaninglessness and horror it can sink to—indeed, to reveal it to humanity. And at the same moment a redemption by the cross may be glimpsed to arise in the abyss, to change it from within into a place of radically new possibility, to effect an absolute novelty of human selfhood. The final and true referent of this term, its resting place, therefore, is not a darkness, a chasm, a pit in the heart of the world. On the contrary, it is the active moment itself of the gospel, a moment, until then unimaginable, of life, of hope. It is the act or moment of *abyssal compassion*, much more a verb than a noun, in the sense of moment as movement. This is the real starting point of these reflections, and without it the concept of the abyss is of course intolerable. (p. 18) destruction of Jerusalem and subsequent exile, to the amazing opening up of gospel compassion and nonviolence represented by the prophet's whole message of consolation and including most profoundly the figure of the Servant.

The impossible communication of a new way of being human is destined to outlast and replace everything that now seems so relentlessly, ruthlessly, fatally human.

## 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 *tohuw* 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).

#### **CHAPTER 41.1-29**

As the contemporary pop lyric has it (a take, I'm sure, on Hemingway), "Did the earth move for you?" I ask it in respect to Second Isaiah, and only half in jest. Do we feel the earth-shattering power of the text, the way it makes all foundations tremble ("the ends of the earth," 41.5), foreshadowing the collapse of the whole present order of human affairs? The prophet is writing history in an extraordinary way, grabbing hold of the dull repetitions of power and poverty and bending

them into a near-unrecognizable future. Past, present and future strike loose from all their dead forms and become instead an electric pathway of life.

The immediate cause of the transformation is the new force in ancient near eastern politics, Cyrus, charismatic king of the invading Persians who overran the Babylonian empire and set the scene for the return of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem (2-3 & 25). In 538 BCE Cyrus issued an edict permitting the resettlement of a Jewish community in Palestine and the restoration of worship in a rebuilt temple. The following year the first company of exiles returned to Judea.

The original deportations had taken place from 598 to 581, but the crucial date is 587 when Jerusalem was captured, its walls destroyed, its temple and all its buildings and houses reduced to rubble. A half dozen years prior to the first deportation Jeremiah had prophesied that the people of Judah and Jerusalem would spend seventy years under the heel of Babylon (Jeremiah 25.11), a period consisting of a decade of sabbath years, signifying perhaps all their previous history of neglected justice (Leviticus 26.32-35). Whatever the symbolic value Jeremiah seems to have been almost right to the year, from the date of his prophecy to the date of the return. But it is not mechanical precision that is the heart of prophecy: it is the vigor of a confidence to see the outworking of God's saving purpose through the most contradictory of circumstances and to set a definite future date for their profound reversal.

Here is the power of the prophet's word, to take history in its grasp and proclaim a genuinely different future out of it. So the Lord makes his key taunt in respect of other gods: "Let them come near and foretell to us what it is that shall happen! What are the things of long ago? Tell us, that we may reflect on them and know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come! Foretell the things that shall come afterward, that we may know that you are gods! Do something, good or evil, that will put us in awe and in fear. Why, you are nothing and your work is nought!" (22-24a). Here Isaiah exposes the full dynamic of Israel's grasp on the future: because her past history has such distinctive pattern it demands a coherent shape to the future.

By the time of the exile Israel had already accumulated a narrative history that vastly exceeded in detail and moral density the celebratory king lists and stories of their wars characteristic of other nations. Isaiah had a unique literature and this surely became clear to the prophet through contact with Mesopotamian culture. Thus it is not simply the foretelling of the future, which was practiced by all cult priests and prophets in some way or other (auguries, haruspices etc.), but a foretelling that entered into a different type of future altogether (and therefore could be said already to arise from that future).

So in reflecting on the things of long ago Isaiah understood their extraordinary reach. In his words God addresses "Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, offspring of Abraham my friend— you whom I have taken from the ends of the earth and summoned from its far-off places" (8-9). The address "servant" is applied to the whole of Israel, replacing the power figures of king, priest and even prophet; it is an essentially sympathetic term to ancestors who were none of these things, who were marginalized from their own world. Isaiah reaches back to Abraham and Jacob as figures that suit an Israel stripped of king and temple and security; they too came from "the ends of the earth," the forebears of exilic Israel.

But not only is the prophet emboldened by this singular heritage; events of the exile itself and, above all, now its imminent overturning convince him that the final outcome of history is in the hands of Israel's God (41.26-29). So the Lord is seen formally to challenge the other peoples and gods (1 & 21), to a kind of assembly and debate that will settle the substance of their respective claims to reality. This is not a discussion on monotheism as such, even less one of trite cultural superiority. It is neither a philosophical nor a nationalistic issue; rather it is anthropological in the deepest sense. What Isaiah has understood is the absolutely singular effect on human time provoked by a God who embraces the weak and the poor in order to create out of their very weakness and poverty an entirely new order of truth. In comparison the gods of the nations, "all of them are nothing, their works are nought, their idols are empty wind!" (29)

The address "my servant" (8 & 9) is in itself a somewhat indeterminate title (Hebrew *ebed*) that can express a privileged relationship as well as actual slavery ("the king's servant" e.g. 2 Samuel 14.19). This surely is its advantage; there is no fixed institutional role implied, and Isaiah can proceed to invest the term with a revelatory depth and energy. Directly after these verses he tells Israel not to fear or be dismayed, implying the servant-people's situation of great insecurity and weakness. The condition is underlined at verse 14: "Fear not, O worm Jacob, O maggot Israel, I will help you, says the Lord; your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel."

These graphic epithets together with YHWH's response could justly claim to be the anthropological core of Isaiah's gospel: worm and maggot (preferable to the more size-oriented interpretation of "insect" in the NRSV) are the horrifying companions of dirt and death (we are reminded of Job's condition), but yet they have a redeemer, a *go'el*. This is the nearest kinsperson, the vindicator of blood, obligated by Hebrew law to come to the rescue of a relative threatened with extinction. The term is rich in Old Testament associations (e.g. Leviticus 25.25, Numbers 35.12ff, Ruth 2.20) and now here

is predicated in the first-person of Israel's God. It becomes a key axis for the whole prophecy. YHWH is the nearest kinsperson, the *go'el*, of Israel precisely in her condition of powerlessness and incapacity for survival through self-defense (43.14, 44.6, 24, 47.3, 48.17, 59.20). But Israel is YHWH's servant exactly in the same measure; she is the servant because she shares the powerlessness and incapacity for physical violence that characterized Abraham and Jacob and so demanded originally the intervention of a *go'el*. It is also here, therefore, that the individualized figure of the Servant and his character of nonviolence have their creative matrix; he will appear directly and in this specific aspect at the beginning of chapter 42.

And yet Israel's redeemer will also make of her "a threshing sled, sharp, new and double-edged" (15a), an image that seems replete with violence. But not so when we see the object against which this image is directed: it is not designed for use against the peoples (as would be the case in an ideology of war) but against the mountains and clearly these have symbolic value. What else can the mountains mean but the cultural realities which stand in the way of Israel in its return to historical identity: the gods, the kings, the armies and the idols of the other nations, infested with the power of violence and the violence of power? It is this cultural reality which Israel so visibly lacks, and their deficiency in this regard must have sorely tempted a number of the exiles to give up and go over to the triumphant majority. The prophet assures them that, on the contrary, their condition of being dispossessed of these things will itself somehow reduce the mountains to chaff and scatter them to the wind. In parallel to this assurance the exiles are told that their actual return to Jerusalem is not to be feared for it will be accompanied by a transformation of the desert into a garden (17-19). The flowering of the desert and the abolition of violent culture are prophetic-poetic mirror images, one of the other. For sure, the road from Babylon to Jerusalem did not suddenly become a Versailles. Nothing could be that easy. What the prophet was asserting was not something brought about by a magic wand but a bending of the future into the present that made both these impossible claims ring deeply and wonderfully true.

This is the time-shattering faith of the prophet, faith in the creator who "has called forth the generations since the beginning" (4). A God who calls forth the hills and the deeps, the sun and the planets, men and women made in his image, this is the same God who calls into being Cyrus, the desert as a garden, the people Israel as his servant, and then too his Servant, his chosen one in whom he is pleased (42.1). The sequence is slow, majestic, cumulative, irresistible, the very pith of human creation and re-creation.

#### **ISAIAH 42. 1-17**

At 42.1-4 we encounter the initial poem related to the mysterious, fascinating figure of the Servant. A 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar first isolated this passage and three subsequent poems as a literary unit (49.1-6, 50.4-9, 52.13-53.12). He thought they were from a hand later than the original author. Others believe there was a variety of material available from separate but sympathetic sources which a final prophetic writer wove into an effective whole.

Warnings against artificially separating out these poems from the whole of the prophecy should be taken seriously: would, for example, first-century Jews have thought in terms of the "four poems of the Servant"? It is in fact very difficult to imagine the depth and vigor of the overall prophecy without the presence of the poems. They are like major peaks rearing signature heads along a mighty mountain-chain.

A further nuance is the near-impossibility for the Christian reader to study the figure of the Servant in abstraction from the gospel record of Jesus. So deeply interwoven are the prophecies and features of the Servant in the text of the New Testament it is very difficult to mark off in our minds where the prophetic portrait of the Servant ends and the gospel figure of Jesus begins. All the same, if we exercise a deliberate effort of restraint and concentration it is possible to identify the startling role of the Servant in the sixth century prophecy of Second Isaiah.

At once the key characterization of the Servant that leaps from the page is his nonviolence. It is this feature that is qualitatively new and distinguishes the Servant from quite anything that has been seen in Israel before. "Not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench..." (42.2-3). Unlike the echoing pronouncements of traditional prophecy or the public officials of the king the Servant's words will not be imposed on his listeners. Neither will he act against the weak, as do the powerful, to render their weakness definitive. Instead there is the opposite suggestion: he will seek to preserve them by means of a solidarity with their situations of vulnerability. For he refrains from violence over a long duration marked by his own suffering commitment to justice and refusal to be crushed, just as he has refused to crush them: "He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth" (3c-4 NRSV).

This is truly astonishing. Out of the crucible of the destruction of Jerusalem and the ignominious exile followed by the return of a remnant marked by a complete lack of military force there arises a new theme in Israel. The title "servant of

God” has been applicable to king (David, 2 Sam 3.18) and to prophet (Elijah, 1 Kgs. 18.36); here it denotes a figure with characteristics of both but differing from them by an absolute qualitative difference. Unlike the king the Servant will not use violence, and unlike the traditional prophet he achieves his mission by a testimony of silent faithfulness as much as by words. And yet such is the power and reach of this mission that it establishes justice on the whole earth. “And the coastlands wait for his teaching” (4c). The furthest limits, the ends of the earth are waiting for his teaching and judgment, his *torah*, on a par with the intervention of Moses, but now a word that speaks to every human condition everywhere. And all this expressed in the brilliant economy of four verses only. In a single moment of historical lucidity the prophet has found a word to reach to the *eschata*, the ends of everything, a final word of truth and meaning to the whole tottering human condition.

The only reason this qualitative breakthrough is not highlighted by commentaries is the way it does not fit a culture of generative violence. It is wrapped almost unconsciously in the interpretation of the Servant as “necessary victim” derived above all from the fourth poem. We will return in later studies to this discussion but we can see at once how the gentleness, compassion and nonviolence of the Servant could be seen not for their own sake but as byproducts of a necessary victimhood, as of one “smitten by God.” It is astounding that the prophet himself underlines this as a *false* interpretation (53.4c) and yet because of the enormous power of the scapegoat mechanism to generate our range of meaning, we have continued to construe the Servant in precisely this logic (only now grotesquely explicit unlike the archaic covering-over of the victim). His work of suffering is somehow to satisfy, appease, pacify the enraged violence of God. Yet, in contrast, we hear right at the outset of the first poem that the dynamic appeal of the nonviolent Servant is to human beings, rather than directed toward God. The “coastlands” represent an anthropological truth as much as geographical, humanity at its most essential, in its elemental constitution as human. The Servant appeals, therefore, to the human as human.

The relation to humanity is made emphatic in verses 5 to 9. These lines are understood by scholars as a response to or commentary on the poem. The second and third poems have similar responses; in all three the ideas of the preceding poem are expanded and to some degree explained. At verse five God YHWH, the creator, is introduced as the speaker: “Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spreads out the earth with its crops...” We have seen in previous studies how the creator God is the same as the God of history, and, more specifically, of a radical challenge to history. His creative power is absolute because his historical intervention brings something absolutely new to the world. Here the same dynamic equation is expressed but the hinge of universality is the role of the Servant. At verse 1 we heard how the Servant is one upon whom God has put his spirit. This is in the pattern of spirit-anointing of kings (e.g. Saul and David, 1 Sam 11.6, 16.13) but then we also heard directly that the spirit-endowed Servant “shall bring forth justice to the nations.” Now there is a slight but real hint—at least through the proximity of the text—that the spirit given to the Servant is somehow continuous with what the creator God has given to all people. YHWH creator is the one “who gives breath to (the earth’s) people and spirit to those who walk on it” (5c). The argument works, therefore, in the same fashion as before when the prophet has spoken of creation and redemption together:

YHWH is the creator and life-giver of all because he has, through the Servant, a project of redemption and healing spirit for all. And consequently, at some mysterious level, the spirit given to all is essentially in tune with the Spirit of the Servant.

The address to the Servant develops precisely in expression of this theme: “I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice, I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light to the nations” (6). Literally the Servant is himself “a covenant of (a) people,” that is a coming together of a people through and by him; in and by himself he is a bond of union for all. In the same way the Servant is a light of nations. By means of this individual God gives a brilliant new possibility to all humanity. His effect is:

“To open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness” (7). These phrases have broad existential reference for they apply to all humans everywhere. They signify the multiple levels of human imprisonment and alienation and the Servant’s ability somehow to penetrate them and lead their victims to light and freedom.

How marvelous is this? Simultaneously a fresh figure and theme leaps out of Israel, out of its worst abjection, and the Exodus blessing of liberation typical to Israel becomes a universal possibility. The one consistent note that makes possible this universal expansion is the suffering nonviolence of the Servant. Through his abyssal witness to nonviolence and compassion a complete human liberation has become possible for humanity. There **follow** logically very special claims made by the God of Israel, claims to singular divine reality and at the very same moment the proclamation of new reality: “I am the Lord, this is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the earlier things have come to pass, new ones I now foretell. Before they spring into being, I announce them to you” (8-9). The God of Israel said in

advance the terrible events of the exile would occur but also there would be an eventual return from exile. And now, on the basis of this proven sovereignty within the course of history, including crucially a pathway of liberation from its mechanisms of violence, something categorically new is promised to the world.

It is not surprising that after these extraordinary claims the prophet speaks a hymn of ecstatic praise to God (10-17). The whole of creation is invited to sing a new song to God in response to the new thing he has done. The sea is the element of chaos or natural violence but it is exhorted to join the celebration (10). The coastlands are mentioned twice again but also the desert regions to the south; all these places and their inhabitants are called on to cry out in praise to God (11-12). The prophet invokes the traditional image of the God of Israel as a warrior: war or battle is of course the classic situation in which generative violence is in motion and Israel has always understood God as fighting on its side for the sake of his purposes (13; cf. for example Exodus 15.3). The prophet invokes this traditional image but then at once shifts to a qualitatively new metaphor that is consistent with the whole tenor of the Servant poem. God speaks of herself as a woman in childbirth, referring to an apparent silence and lack of activity which was really “holding myself in” (14a). “But now, I cry out as a woman in labor, gasping and panting” (14b). Rather than moving precipitately to attack God in fact is laboring over lengthy time in a deep struggle of gestation.

Giving birth is the truly alternative act of human generative suffering. In fact it is the only theme in the human repertoire that can challenge the generative power of violence, occurring with as much of a continuous rhythm as violence but always stretching to give life rather than reaching to take it. The shift in metaphor itself signals a cultural change of truly epochal dimensions. God-in-labor within history is a God who changes the very meaning of being human. This is the significance in the next verse of the mothering God laying waste to mountains, hills and herbage, and drying up rivers and pools (15): even the fertile creation is overthrown where it is structured according to the old order. It becomes instead the desert where the truly new arises. Those who do not understand this, the blind, will be led in their darkness until it is turned to light (16). Those who continue to trust in the idols of generative violence will inevitably be shamed before the final transformation of history brought by the God-in-labor (17).

Here then is a definitive rebuttal of all facile Old Testament/New Testament or God-of-wrath/ God-of-mercy distinctions. Already in the sixth century before Christ the prophet of Second Isaiah had produced a seismic upheaval in the understanding of God and the anthropology that shapes and expresses it. The triumphalist distinction between Old and New Testaments is itself a function of the old order that the Servant and God-in-labor are in process of overthrowing. The deepest inspiration of Hebrew thought is a radical break with all forms of domination, violence, the surrogate victim, and human culture based upon them. And at the risk of laboring the point it should be stated once more that the “wrath of God” is a theological-anthropological construction that we ourselves produce, and is referenced in this sense in both Testaments. It is a kind of anti-matter of biblical revelation, what happens once we are confronted by God with our own violence and yet hang on to its generative function. “God” then appears only as violence because we have chosen him perversely and deliberately to be such. Needless to say this has catastrophic spiritual and historical consequences, and is powerfully reflective of our contemporary situation. It is the figure of the Servant that guarantees a new theology. The Servant is like a new element, a new physics, because he is in fact a new anthropology. He is a covenant of people, a breakthrough that enables a new union based on the overturning of universal victim-making into love. Alongside him the sense of God is changed from warrior to mother-in-labor. This is it, nothing more or less. Do we not feel the red-letter power of the Isaianic prophecy?

### **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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 misconception 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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, *‘ādām*, 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

### **Isaiah 43:14- 44:8**

In our study of Second Isaiah it's time to pause and start over. You know...like a piece of music that comes to a full stop only suddenly to begin again, with all the joy of the tune lingering in your brain playing again, afresh.

By now we are aware of most of the major themes in 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah, of the wonderful new note of gentleness and nonviolence, of the singularity of Israel's God that goes with it, the claim of this God to be sole source of creation, before whom the nations are a nothing, a void, exactly in the same way as was the primordial emptiness prior to creation. We have seen the cultural subversion at work in this message, and hand in hand and ever more insistent, the strange enchanting discomfiting figure of the Servant.

To what could we compare this? Perhaps a barren landscape, with broken rocks and dust, nothing to suggest a human environment...then suddenly, as if on the surface of Mars, appears a dwelling, beautiful in construction and material, more than adequate to sustain life. Who or what could have done this?

The image is different from that of the famous "argument from design," where someone finds a watch in the desert and concludes there must be intelligent thought behind this. The watch becomes a metaphor for the universe, and so, the argument goes, there must be a divine mind behind the universe...a rational inference. Here instead is the possibility of human existence, a place to dwell, to live and be at peace: and so, we conclude, there must be an intention of human life behind this building. An anthropological inference. The God of Israel is at work to bring about the full and perfect life of humanity.

If we look at the study in this way then it loses all purely academic, historical or supernatural reference. It becomes, along with so much else in the bible, a singular event, equivalent to the emergence of matter itself, of the first living organism, and even more than that. It is the emergence of true human possibility, the possibility of human life that we all dream and long for, a life without carping care, without built-in dissatisfaction, without envy, hatred, anger, death.

And is not the study more urgent still because the crisis of decision is upon us? Are we not facing all around us day after day renewed evidence of the unsustainability of human existence based on rivalry, alienation, greed, power, violence? More and more the text of the bible comes to be seen not as an education in righteousness for the sake of an other-worldly reward but an education in humanity for the sake of true life on earth. And this is God's doing. The God of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah points forward to chapter twenty one of Revelation where "the home of God is among mortals (in the heavenly city on earth). He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (3-4).

So, now, when we turn anew to the text of our study (43.14-44.8) we hear precisely this note of human recreation, and with renewed insistence. "I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King....I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise" (15, 19-21 NRSV) Did the writer mean simply in a literal way that the startling new intervention by God—one decisively to outstrip the glory of the Exodus (16-18)—would be new rivers in the desert? A technical triumph/miracle in the steppes? Certainly the prophet would be sending a vivid image of encouragement to returnees from exile who would have to make the arid trek somewhere along the northern fringes of Arabia. But this remains a matter of the particular journeys made by groups of Jews from Babylon, none of the details of which Isaiah or anyone else bothers to record. As the prophet paints the picture it is indeed only the wild animals who are public witnesses of the watering of the desert.

No, the true miracle is the creation of a people in and through the events of the return, with a distinctive new sensibility of what it means to be this people: "I am about to do a new thing...I give water in the wilderness ...to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise." The flowering of the desert is simply the external physical symbol of this radical human newness. It signifies the dwelling space for humankind in conditions where such a dwelling would at first seem impossible. It is the reconstruction of humanity away from its age-old dependence on force, foundational violence, cities, temples, bloodshed, moving instead toward gentleness, compassion, trust, nonviolence. That is why the prophet pointedly records the original miracle of Exodus—

"Thus says the Lord, who opens a way in the sea, and a path in the mighty waters. Who leads out chariot and horsemen, a powerful army, till they lie prostrate together, never to rise, snuffed out and quenched like a wick..."—only to comment that it should no longer be remembered: "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not..." (16-18). The new thing that the Lord is doing founds a community on a new generative principle (water in the desert), deeper and more truly re-creative than the liberation by force of the Hebrew slaves.

And so at once the prophet turns to the symbolic center of the culture of violence, the temple. The text here is condensed but it seems that the complaint of verse 23 (that in the period of exile, and afterward, the Israelites did not make sacrifices) is ironical because in fact there was no temple in which to do so; it had been destroyed. This sense is made explicit when God then declares the situation to be his doing, saying: "I have not burdened you with (the practice of) offerings, or wearied you with frankincense" (23 c & d). The latter means in Hebrew: "I have not wearied you with demands for incense." In other words, you did not do the usual religious cultic things which you use to show devotion, but that's also because you could not, and you could not because in point of fact I didn't want it. The irony is further played out by contrasting the absence of the sacrificial burden with very present sinfulness:

"I have not burdened you...or wearied you...but you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities (23 c & d, 24 c & d NRSV).

We have here the classic prophetic critique of temple sacrifice now become irony after the fact. But the irony has a profound point for it is also a place of spiritual opportunity. The forced loss of the means of cult becomes a wonderful empty space in which to emphasize immediate personal relationship. And this happens to an extraordinary degree when into the empty space of no-temple explodes a great first-person thunderbolt of divine forgiveness, regardless of temple sacrifice: "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will remember not your sins" (25 NRSV). In one stroke the whole apparatus of temple offering for sin crumbles. God moves with absolute sovereignty outside all the structures devised by humans to order relationship with him. For sure, the text does labor ironically with the enormous traditional value given to temple and sacrifice—plans were most probably already under way to build the second temple. But the prophet's double-edged voice and then the great proclamation of personal forgiveness make plain the real prophetic dynamic. The business of burnt offerings and fat of sacrifices is part of the old order of humanity now made obsolete by a relationship with God drained of all foundational violence. And, as always, this is only God's doing, the doing of God who speaks and acts singly and autonomously, "I, I am He who (acts)... for my own sake..."

There follows an apparent reversal: God calls his people to a trial. Second Isaiah had announced a summons to trial before in respect of the nations (41.2, 21-4, 43.8-13). Now it is the people who are indicted and all the way back to a patriarchal ancestor, probably Jacob (see Hosea 12.3-4), and also including all the priestly interpreters of the law (26-7). The judgment is terrible: the princes of the sanctuary, the priests, are thrown down, and the whole people are put under ban, in other words, destroyed utterly, irreversibly. How does this horrifying extermination fit with the just-announced divine forgiveness, either emotionally or historically? The answer must be in relation to the project of human recreation represented by the whole story of the people. They are not in fact exterminated, but their previous mode of existence as a people—one hinging especially around the function of priests and temple—is erased in order that something qualitatively new might take its place. Once again this new thing is decisively a matter of personal relationship, something at once and strikingly expressed in the following verses.

How beautiful are these expressions of loving relationship and how obviously do they understand the flowering of the desert in terms of human recreation! "Hear then, O Jacob, my servant... Thus says the Lord who made you, your help, who formed you from the womb: Fear not... the darling whom I have chosen" (44. 1-2). I think the NAB version is correct in translating the Hebrew *Jeshurun* as a term of endearment or privileged relationship—the other contexts in which it appears (Dt.32.15; 33.5, 26) say as much. The prophet of Second Isaiah now capitalizes on this sense to headline the quantum shift of relationship accompanying the return from exile. "I will pour out water upon the thirsty ground, and streams upon the dry land; I will pour out my spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up amid the verdure like poplars beside the flowing waters" (3-4). In previous biblical tradition, including Isaiah itself, the spirit of God is given to leaders for specific historical purposes not to the whole people generally and indeterminately. Now God's relationship with his people is no longer a matter of particular historical purposes but an end in itself, bringing with it overflowing life, life to make barren ground break forth in lush growth. And now we understand the meaning of the terrible "ban;" unless all previous cultural moorings were snapped the new possibility of exponential life could not appear.

Verse five gives an image of reciprocal love on the part of the people. They will tattoo on their hands the Lord's name to show their utter commitment to him. But the sense also reaches out beyond the borders of Israel, with foreign people adopting the identity of "Jacob" and taking "Israel" as their name. Such will be the magnetic power of the new humanity created by this relationship with God that other peoples will voluntarily forsake their old identities and take on that of Israel. Or, put another way, the people blessed by the spirit will irresistibly overflow their own boundaries to encompass others in the human transformation brought about by their God. The section ends with a repetition of the unique claims of this God—the first and the last, besides whom there is no other (6). Once again this makes perfect sense not as a canceling out of other gods in a struggle of rival cultures and theologies. My god is better than yours! These singular claims flow logically not from such old-order conflict but from the place of human recreation that the prophet had entered and

understood and, with that, the definitively “other” meaning of the God who was bringing this about. If humanity’s constitution was no longer on the basis of armies, of temples, of sacrifice, of violence, then an utterly divergent sense of the divine both accompanied it and necessarily brought it to being.

Only the one true God indeed could do this, could break the seamless human culture of death and institute the possibility of a culture based entirely on life. The role thereafter of Israel was to be a witness of this absolutely astonishing event of recreation (8), the discovery in the wilderness of a place of boundless life. Even so the harsh Marscape of human history is suddenly blessed by a wondrous new construction, one where human life may truly dwell.

#### **Isaiah 44:9-45:17**

At 44.9-20 there is a pretty obvious intrusion in the text. In the middle of 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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. 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah—is a spiritual-theological advance of unparalleled magnitude. Indeed the figure of Jesus of Nazareth would be inconceivable without 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 prehistory 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.

### **Isaiah 45:17—48:22**

The prophet of 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 live-giving, because he understands the maker of the earth did not create it to be a waste (tohu, at Gen. 1.2a, translated as "void") but a place to be lived in!

The *'tohu vo bohu'* 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 (tohu)' ". 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 (messiah) 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)

### Isaiah 49.1-26

Second Isaiah is among the high Himalayas of biblical literature, towering up alongside the Yahwist writings of Genesis, the Davidic narratives in Samuel and Kings, and even the masterpiece of Job. This can be said on the prophecy's own account, before we begin to value it from a Christian point of view. The reason is the language of the prophecy advances in a startling new direction within our human condition of violence, turning from the either-or of victor or victim, violated or avenger, and articulating a third way, that of transformative nonviolence in the depth of suffering--what I have called elsewhere "abyssal compassion." Once we grasp this as its character, one emerging to astonishing light at the end of the sixth century BCE, we can begin to understand how and why it is ultimately appropriated and practiced by the first-century prophet and Wisdom person, Jesus.

Turning to our study we are at the point (49.1-7) where we encounter the figure of "the Servant" for a second time. Because we are now confronted with this as a repeated literary feature, one that may be separated out from the rest of the text, we must attempt to deal with it in a systematic way.

Scholarship first isolated the four poems of the Servant (42.1-4, 49.1-6, 50.4-9, 52.13-53.12) at the end of the nineteenth century. Today they are often characterized as biographical pieces; the second and third autobiographical. Following the first three poems there is an expansion or commentary (42.5-7, 49.7 and 50.10-11) which further describes and qualifies the character of the Servant. The individual is named as the Servant in the first, second and fourth poems, and in the commentary on the third. In all the poems the distinctive tone is of nonviolence, patient endurance, suffering. The fourth poem reiterates the structure of the first poem in the initial introduction by the Lord, "Here is my servant..." / "See, my servant....", followed by a more detailed description of the character. The third poem anticipates the maltreatment that becomes much more brutal in the fourth, and the commentary on the second poem anticipates the fourth poem's report of contempt and hatred felt by the nations toward this person and yet the shock administered to the mighty through him ("kings...shall stand up and princes prostrate themselves" [49.7] / "kings shall stand speechless" [52.15]). In addition the second poem parallels the first in the note of outreach to world, something echoed again in the relationship to nations and kings in the fourth. Thus there is literary and thematic unity between the four poems.

When the poems were isolated in this way it brought the subsidiary questions of who wrote them, whom they were about and how they got into the text. Did the prophet Second Isaiah himself write them? Or, alternatively, did someone else write them, at an earlier or a later point? Then were they about the prophet himself, or about another individual whom we do not know? Were they simply referring to Israel in metaphorical terms? If there was a separate writer, why was this other writer's material included in the prophecy? And so on. Separating the poems in this way also led to a reaction, an assertion that the material is intimately linked to the rest of the text and should not be artificially isolated as the "Servant poems." Clearly the figure of the Servant is embedded in Israel's own weakness and abjection, and Israel is itself called a servant on a number of occasions (41.8 f., 44.1 f., 44.21, 45.4, 48.20, and even here within the present poem at 49.3). Plainly any interpretation of the Servant cannot be divorced from the experience of Israel as a whole, as a collective entity, a single people with a divinely-originated story now characterized by weakness and suffering. This is also important in terms of contemporary Christian-Jewish dialogue and theology; it is vital to recognize the continuing role of the Jewish people in bringing God's purpose to the world.

Nevertheless, it is clear the poems also develop a distinctly new figure with a dramatically individual story: someone who does not use violence, who experiences fruitless labor, and who finally undergoes suffering and death. The figure is differentiated from Israel at 49.5, directly after it has been identified at 49.3, and here the statement is functionally and rhetorically very difficult to argue with. The Servant is one prepared in the womb for a mission to Israel. "For now the Lord has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him." Here is a description of a vocation within Israel and an echo of the call of the prophet Jeremiah is audible in the text (Jer.1.5). Moreover we remember Jeremiah's intensely autobiographical expressions in the "confessions," setting the precedent for the autobiographical writing of this poem and the following. At the same time, the tone of the Servant is significantly different from that of Jeremiah, the former's patience and nonviolence contrasting with the unresolved anguish and vengefulness of the latter. Nevertheless, in terms of a general pattern the Servant definitely takes the profile of one who follows a prophetic pathway from the womb, who gives a first-person account of his life, who suffers failure, exhaustion and persecution.

And yet again, a difference from the autobiographical prophet is produced by the first and the last poems. These are rather biography, presented in the third person. How do they fit with the first-person of the other poems? Above all, the fourth poem gives an account that by its very character transcends ordinary biography, telling of one who's death--the terminus of all biography--somehow becomes generative of further life. It is at this point that the poems leap beyond any category of biblical writing known heretofore, and to such an extent that the mystery of this piece remains in some measure even to today. We save a thorough-going consideration of the fourth poem to its own point in the study; however, we should note at once the way it casts a back-light on the earlier poems, adding powerfully to their underlying drama and meaning. Because the Servant is said ultimately to die in a way that produced an unfathomable yet revolutionary impression on the fourth poem's writer it seems impossible to deny that at this point we are dealing with a real event in real time. In other words, the anonymous Servant of the fourth poem is modeled on an historical individual known to the poem's writer and whose death was unique in a mysterious but absolutely concrete way. And once we concede this, we are left with the emergent thesis that the individual concerned is the original prophet of Second Isaiah.

Because if the final text of the prophecy connects the figure of the fourth poem with the autobiographical figure of the second and third--as it clearly does--the persuasive question arises: who else but the original prophet would have had both the standing and the immediate connection to the whole prophecy to have his vocational experience and its final terrible outcome included in the final text without further explanation? On this basis we may thus assume that the two autobiographical poems already existed (and very possibly the first), perhaps separate from the main prophetic discourses, but then afterward a disciple and eyewitness built on their style to construct a stunning account of the prophet's passion and death. Ultimately the fourfold succession became embedded in the textual tradition of Second Isaiah.

In this reconstructed account of the poems the prophet's teaching, life and persecuted death open up something absolutely new to the world. Just as he said; "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 beforetime you did not hear of them, so that you cannot claim to have known them. You neither heard nor knew, they did not reach your ears beforehand" (48.6b-8). What greater novelty is there than the death of the Servant in the last poem, something signaled at 52.15 echoing the sentence just quoted from the earlier passage: "So shall he startle many nations...for those who have not been told shall see, those who have not heard shall ponder it?"

But, finally, if this is the case, why did the fourth poem writer and/or editor who finally collated the Servant material with the rest of Second Isaiah's prophecy, why did they not communicate the identity of this figure, for example in the way Jeremiah's story is told in the book under his name? Why did the Servant remain anonymous although grounded in an historical individual? The reason is not hard to find: the prophet always saw the theme of servant in much broader terms than himself; it was Israel's destiny and when he saw himself (or others) as "Servant" it was always within the common vocation to which Israel was called as a people. By leaving the figure open in this way (by making it a cipher, in a pattern later imitated by the gospel of John in the character of "beloved disciple") the prophet made it profoundly available to anyone else to embrace--exactly as one day it would be by Jesus, the Wisdom person and prophet from Galilee. Both the writer of the fourth poem and any subsequent editor remained faithful to this radical openness represented by the servant theme, for it was a principle established by the prophet himself.

When we now turn to the text of the study we hear at once the speaker announce his identification as the Servant. He begins by making a clear link to the first poem. The "coastlands awaiting his teaching" in 42.4 are answered directly in the present tense by the Servant here: "Hear O coastlands, listen O distant peoples" (49.1a). This suggests a personal appropriation and evocation of the servant described in the first poem. Among other things it means that the explicit nonviolence of the Servant described in the first poem is borne over into the second.

Following this connecting half verse there is the account of prophetic vocation already mentioned. The element of "he gave me my name" is worth underlining, as in the absence of a proper name it implies a function or role in both sociological and symbolic terms, i.e. the "servant." Generally the designation "servant" could apply in a wide range, from a high official (of a king) to a menial slave. Thus, without further specification of meaning, the author allows another studied ambiguity to enter his usage, in addition to the individual/Israel one. The actual term is introduced is at verse three, but it is first preceded by a metaphor of the Servant as a concealed weapon, a prized arrow kept in reserve in the Lord's personal armory. The foundational and graphic meaning produced by violence is used to suggest an even more powerful meaning brought about by its opposite. Here in fact is the Lord's ultimate weapon, designed to overcome all culture based in the founding principle of weaponry. It is the alternative human genealogy of the "servant," who is not a king, warrior, or priest, but nevertheless and in a definitive sense is one who acts for the Lord and on his authority. "You are my servant, he said to me, Israel, through whom I show my glory." The speaker claims the title explicitly, but then the text shifts suddenly to denote the speaker as "Israel." Some consider this an interpolation but it matters little. It makes perfect sense in terms of the open identification of the Servant, including all Israel, that I have already

suggested. For the Servant to switch from an individual to the nation of Israel in the space of a verse is fully consistent with the representative and generative figure he introduces.

Just as the patriarch Jacob is "Israel," now, in a new revelatory moment, the Servant gathers the people into himself in a new genealogy. The difference is that the figure of Jacob provides a biological origin, the one the Servant offers is cultural.

Verse four introduces the theme of suffering in the life of the Servant, and it at once balances and interprets verse two. In its compass should be included the condition of exiled Israel which must inevitably have provoked the thought that the whole of its previous history as God's people was negated (c.f. 40.27, and the constant refrain to "fear not," 41.10, 14, 43.10). But now this experience is also applied in a more personal sense to the individual prophet who at some point concluded that his own work was in vain. What was the context of this thought? Was it the failure of the exiles initially to respond to the message of return? Or, perhaps deeper and more significant, their refusal to embrace the revolutionary message of "servant," without promise of king or temple and the power that goes with them. On offer was simply a new way of being human in direct relationship to the Lord, and this must have appeared impractical to many. That kind of engrained cultural reaction is much more the likely response that would cause a sense of defeat in the prophet. But then immediately there is a countering expression: "Yet my reward is with the Lord, my recompense is with my God;" and again it carries a very personal sense proper to a prophet. The enormous challenge of changing culture is sustained (and can only be sustained) by the direct relationship with God that is the sure fountainhead of Second Isaiah's prophecy.

Indeed the struggle that verse four indicates leads directly to the key verse differentiating the Servant as an individual from Israel, something that in the text also forms the basis of a promise of recompense from God. Within the mysterious shifting back and forth between Israel and an individual it appears that the experience of rejection may have consolidated the prophet's private sense that now he was himself to be the "Servant" and in relation to his people. "For now the Lord has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him, and I am made glorious in the sight of the Lord, and my God is now my strength" (5). Do we hear here the epochal breaking free of a vocation that runs deeper than any heretofore experienced in Israel, priest, prophet, or king?

Once the possibility is broached--of an individual Servant with a calling in relation to Israel--the poem moves back swiftly to the earlier sense of the Servant in relation to the rest of the world. The next verse clearly echoes 42.1 and also verse 42.6, and it parallels its own first verse echoing 42.4, thus providing a further element in the integration of the four poems. "It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." It has been suggested by some that the first poem was originally written about Cyrus, the extraordinary Persian protagonist of the Lord's purpose (c.f. 45.13). He is the one called "anointed" rather than any Davidic heir (45.1), and it is possible to see the nonviolence in the first poem (42.2-3) reflecting Cyrus' reconciliatory policies toward his enemies and restorationist policies toward broken nations like Israel. But, even if that were the case, now in the final pattern of the four poems everything is suddenly subsumed into Israel and, yet further still, into the individual prophet. The universal purpose fulfilled through the enlightened conqueror of Babylon is now radically redefined in relation to Israel and an exceptional individual within it. And it is the next verse that introduces the core themes by which this redefinition is brought about.

"Thus says the Lord, the redeemer and the Holy One of Israel, to the one despised, whom the nations abhor, the slave of rulers: when kings see you, they shall stand up and princes prostrate themselves because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you" (7). With the fresh introductory formula ("Thus says the Lord...") we have moved beyond the poem itself and have entered a separate prophetic oracle placed there as commentary. We see this because its terms at once foreshadow the shocking drama of the Servant in the fourth and final poem. Again we will delay a full consideration of the fourth poem to its due point in the study but we should note how the anticipation here of one of its major images serves to tie all the poems to its stunning finale. This finale has the power to take the symbols of imperial and military culture turn them upside down, and then make them all subordinate to that inversion. Great kings who conquer nations with violence--and notwithstanding his enlightenment that must include Cyrus--all of them shall fall prostrate before the one despised, the one precisely without power of violence, the slave of all. Only the inversion of violent power into a nonviolence which trusts absolutely in God's faithfulness, only this can bring about the overturning of universal violent culture. In this verse the prophet has gone well beyond the simple return from exile as the new deed of Israel's God. He has entered swiftly, precipitously even, into a radically transformed humanity brought about by a figure emptied of violent power and a new experience of God discovered in and through that figure.

The hymn that follows makes the point in a further, highly significant way, in verses 8 though 26. Just as after the fourth poem at 52.13-53.12 there follows a hymn celebrating Zion as mother so also here there follows a hymn which addresses the holy city as mother Zion. The whole piece is filled with feminine imagery but from the doubled sequence of Servant poem/mother-

Zion hymn we can deduce that this is not simply a convenient metaphor but the conscious articulation of a new human formation. Absent king, temple or priests, the only social symbols supplied for the people of the return are the nonviolent figure of the Servant and the feminine persona of the Lord's city. In itself this is enormously suggestive: the faithful nonviolence of the Servant is complemented and fulfilled by an emerging social formation that is feminine-compassionate in character. The classically male roles associated with warfare and sacrifice, these have disappeared, to be replaced by a mother and her children. But it must also be underlined that the maternal figure of Zion is herself not continuous with received culture: she comes to her role only after the collapse of her received identity and existence as a city.

"But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.' " This verse (14) follows a passage on the return from exile (8-13) which repeats a series of motifs already encountered--the liberation of captives (9a: 42.7), the miracle of return through desert and mountains (9b- 11: 41.18, 35.6, 40.3), the return from all sites of exile, east and west (12: 43.5-6), the call to all creation to celebrate (13: 44.23). But the record of God's love and liberation of his people (10b) here precludes the voice of Zion; she now speaks on her own behalf and becomes an active subject for the first time in the prophecy. Thus it is no longer the process of return but the city of Jerusalem which is the central concern. In reply to her lament the Lord makes one of the most resonant statements of all scripture, at once establishing God's maternal character and underwriting Zion's. "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name; your walls are ever before me." Slaves were branded with the mark of their owner and the image of God engraving Zion's name on his hand almost certainly adds the note of slave/servant to the maternal figure as description of God. Thus we have in verse 15 a theological breakthrough of enormous consequence: just as Israel is servant and mother, so is God, and the theological breakthrough is a mirror of the anthropological one and vice versa. There is indeed no way of assigning priority to either end of the pair; as the anthropological scene changes so the possibility of a new meaning of God emerges, but the changed theology must also truly emerge before a new (nonviolent) anthropology can be confirmed.

Immediately the meaning of God as mother is proclaimed then Zion is spoken of in a cascade of verses, asserting and celebrating her transformed motherhood (17-21). "Look about and see, they are all gathering and coming to you... Though you are waste and desolate, a land of ruins, now you shall be too small for your inhabitants... The children whom you lost shall yet say to you, 'This place is too small...' You shall ask yourself: 'Who has borne me these? I was bereft and barren, who has reared them?' " Zion as mother had come to an end; her children had been kidnapped, killed and she left desolate. Now, to her intense surprise, a new generation of children, and in the most basic sense, is arriving. Verse 20a means literally "The children of your bereavement" shall appear, and in 21b she asks plainly who has borne the children when hers were killed and she was made barren. These are most extraordinary offspring, an "unnatural" generation unlike any known before, one that comes from the breakdown of all previous generation. Verses 22-3 go on to speak of the peoples and their kings bringing Zion's children to her. This could mean a repatriation of exiles from many different quarters, as in verse 12, but also, and more profoundly, it refers to Zion generating offspring all the way to "the coastlands" through the Servant who brings "light to the nations." The connection is made through the same image of kings and princes showing absolute submission to the Servant (v. 7) now transferred to Zion: "Kings ... queens... with their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet" (NRSV 23.ab). The submission is not shown happening by any image of the force of armies or the power of an emperor, and so the only adequate image in the text is the Servant's unfathomable power of nonviolence. Zion's new children transcend every border and come to her across all prior cultures, for the sake of the entirely new humanity that is generated in her through the figure of the Servant.

The following three verses add a rhetorical question and a Wisdom reflection. The question is precisely in relation to violence and the power that comes from violence: "Can booty be taken from a warrior or captives be rescued from a tyrant"? This is the simple and age-old question of how can you possibly have any success against superior force, the question that prompts every society to arm itself to the teeth. The Lord answers roundly "Yes," and it is clearly without any invocation of force on the part of Israel. It is simply the work of the Lord, the background of which has already been given. It is noteworthy that this is possibly the Old Testament text behind Jesus' rhetorical parable: "No one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can plunder his house" (Mark 3.27). And in his case the way he has tied up the strong man is to cease any reciprocity whatsoever in the sphere of violence. He works from another generative source and so has effectively bound the strong man.

Here in Second Isaiah, however, the text adds an oppositional element that could be understood as invoking the reciprocities of violence. "Those who oppose you I will oppose..." (25c) and the verse immediately after could be read within that same frame. But if we read it more deeply we see coming to the surface the self-inflicted and self-multiplying character of human violence, chasing its own self-solution. This is also understood as the agency of the Lord who is sovereign and pro-active in all historical situations, no matter the human dynamic. "I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood, as with the juice of the grape" (26). This terrible promise clearly presents the exponential, self-devouring character of

human violence rooted in desire, imaged by the metaphors of eating and drinking the self. The root metaphor of the eating and drinking of violence is in fact is a Wisdom reflection found in Proverbs 4.17: the wicked "eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence;" and earlier we can read: "they must eat the fruit of their own way, and with their own devices be glutted" (1.31). In our present text the image has become the full violent consuming of self and we can here recognize a Wisdom thought made terrible in the prophetic context. In an anthropological reading of the prophecy the statement makes even deeper sense: once the revelation of nonviolent humanity is given through the Servant it becomes progressively more and more impossible to mask the truly violent--i.e. the foundational violence--of our old humanity. And its attempts to restore its age-old foundational vigor will become accordingly more and more frenzied and terrible.

The arc of this revelation is long but unrelenting. It produces its inevitable effect of redoubled violence as the old generative anthropology seeks again and again to re-found itself, but only serving thus to create more and more effects and sensations of violence. In an ultimate sense this can be said to be the Lord's doing, allowing our old self-formed/ malformed humanity to fill up the measure of its violence, which is always the selfsame measure by which it refuses the revelation of new nonviolent humanity. We know from the daily news the continuous tide of actual societal violence in our world--in shootings and atrocities, in schools, places of work, homes, hotels, highways, shopping malls, churches, fields and street corners, and in the correctly named but completely self-deceived end-times violence of right-wing Christianity. It is a terrible thing but is not what the prophet described more and more our actual condition? Sacred resources are exhausted and we are left with naked killing. In these conditions the Servant appears as our one true hope.

### **Isaiah 50:1-51:23**

In our last study we looked at the exceptional character of Isaiah's songs of the Servant. We asked the questions, how did they get there, who are they about? The most fruitful hypothesis is that they are about the actual prophet, the primary author of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah, and were included by an editor. Two were autobiographical, written by the prophet himself (2 & 3), and two were written about him in the third person (1 & 4). We also noted the essential characteristic of the Servant, his unwavering nonviolence, a quality that has been obscured or passed over in most commentaries.

And now the pace quickens again. The third song comes quickly in chapter fifty, and only one further chapter separates it from the great, climactic song of fifty two and fifty three. This intervening chapter, however, is vital for it powerfully underlines themes of election and redemption, making emphatic the sense that God is about to do something on a level with the mighty acts at the origin of the people's history. At the same time the image of historical human violence re-asserts itself with sudden brutal force.

The chapter begins with the trope of divorce that we know from the prophet Hosea. There the Lord renounces his bride, Israel: "Protest against your mother, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband" (2.4). But, as is typical for the prophet of the return, it is used in the reverse sense, to re-awaken people close to despair. Nevertheless, he still reminds them of the inescapable facts of why this all happened: "Thus says the Lord, Where is the bill of divorce with which I dismissed your mother?... It was for your sins that you were sold, for your crimes that your mother was dismissed" (1). But the reminder is not where the stress lies and in the next two verses the Lord protests that he has always been in process of returning to his people: "Why was no one there when I came? Why did no one answer when I called?" If there was any doubt that he had the power to overturn the situation, he then declares: "Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem?" Images follow that recall the primal miracle of the Exodus, the drying up of the sea. They set the standard for a new act of redemption, the new exodus of the people. This theme has been hinted at before (43.2, 16-18) but it now it begins to emerge with major symbolic force.

Before, however, we get to what we might call the Exodus catechesis there intervenes the third song of the Servant. He bursts in with the claim that the Lord has given him "a well-trained tongue" (NAB), "the tongue of a teacher" (NRSV, note: "of those who are taught"). In other words, this individual has learned his message before he comes to teach it. Correspondingly we find out his mode of study includes "morning by morning" being awoken in order "to listen as those who are taught" (4). The purpose of this intensive schooling is that he may "know how to sustain the weary with a word." Here is a picture of an individual totally focused on the contemporary meaning of God's word, researching it continually at the borderline between the public world of history and the waking moments of depth consciousness where the new thing of God may come wonderfully to expression. And what he discovers is precisely a word for the weary, for those crushed by history, the ones who normally would not merit a second glance by the gods of this world.

But what is the content of the word? That God will come triumphantly and violently to their rescue? No, it cannot be this, for that would simply replace one system of self-vindicating violence with another, and the god speaking would be just one more soulless idol out of world history. Instead, the faithful prophet understood that something extraordinary was required. He, in his own person, was asked to provide the word, a meaning never seen before, of one who did not use violence but endured it in limitless trust and hope. Only in this way will all the cultural co-ordinates, all the unthought semiotics, all the meanings, be challenged to their roots, and then beyond, by God's creatively new thing. What the Servant hears is precisely and unmistakably nonviolence.

The Lord God has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.  
I gave my back to those who struck me,  
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;  
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting,  
therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;  
he who vindicates me is near.  
Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.  
Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.  
It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

It seems evident to me from all the songs, but especially here, that the appellation "Suffering Servant" is a misnomer, linked very probably to theories of penal substitution. Rather the figure is much more accurately and dynamically called the "Nonviolent Servant." Indeed, in the circumstances of the prophet, penal substitution would have meant nothing: for even if he could have conceived of such an un-Hebrew thing—a single arbitrary substitution for guilt, rather than collective responsibility—it would go against the headline theme of his prophecy, that the time of punishment was over (40.2). Moreover, if this were the meaning of his suffering, if he were somehow bearing the punishment due to others, how could he have asked so urgently, Job-like, for "vindication"? The connection with Job is also made by the theme of adversaries who contend with him and a legal confrontation with them, but here, unlike Job, God will be the judge in favor of the Servant rather than a party to the dispute. Therefore, the Servant clearly sees his suffering as unjust before God: he bears no guilt. The fact that he seeks a vindication also marks his suffering as formal nonviolence. He has with his whole being not reacted against attacks, but with his whole being he regards the attacks as unjust: he has set his face "like flint" exactly against the violence. Finally, it is God's word which has revealed the whole process; God is the author of revelatory nonviolence.

What we read here, therefore--the simple fact of the Servant's persecution and his response of proclamatory non-retaliation--must be allowed to stand in and for itself. Further, I believe, that this stark phenomenon of nonviolence should be the interpretive key for the fourth song, rather than apparent substitutionary motifs there determining the meaning of the rest. We shall return to this, of course, when we come to the fourth song. In the meantime, we should recognize that we are in the presence of a defining moment in the body of prophetic literature and its breaking open of divine truth. The word given to a prophet *is* his revelatory nonretaliation to violence: "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks...I did not hide my face..." It stands clearly, therefore, in a genetic relation to Jesus' teaching, "To those who strike you on one cheek, turn the other also."

The following verses, 10-11, are the most evident instance of a commentary on a Servant song, for they set out to appeal formally on the Servant's behalf. We can see here a tradition-process at work in relation to the Servant: his words are preserved, and then he himself becomes a subject of reflection and honor. And the honor is extraordinary, for the disciples of the Servant claim a convergence between fear of the Lord and obedience to the voice of the Servant, asserting that this is a way to walk in the darkness, a way of trust and reliance on God. This would suggest again an identification of the Servant with the primary prophet of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah; for what "voice" could be meant other than that of the overall text, with the autobiographical song as a particularly poignant and telling instance? In contrast, the disciples' contemporaries concoct their own light, kindling firebrands they have made themselves, hinting perhaps at political and military devices. The consequence is terrible: they will walk in the flames they have kindled and "lie down in torment" (11). Here is a striking case of a discipleship group gathered round the words and memory of an exceptional teacher. It does not matter that they were perhaps only a handful, what makes it stunning is the teaching of absolute trust through nonviolence preserved by this group. We have no idea of how the group fared within the other major trends of post-exilic Judaism, or whether its insights reappeared later, for example in such nonviolent movements as "the wise" of Daniel (noting the Wisdom link of "fear of the Lord" with the Servant). What we do know is that the disciples were convinced enough to grasp and preserve the epochal breakthrough of the nonviolence of the Servant.

Chapter fifty one is pitched between the twin poles of an account of God's founding acts of salvation and a disturbing declaration of turning the oppressor's violence back on itself. It's as if the prophet, having previously established the key contemporary actors of his prophecy—the single, sovereign God of Israel, the beloved city of Zion, the mysterious figure of God's servant—now moves to link them fully to the great themes of Israel's past. From this springboard the prophecy will be able to celebrate its climactic vision with greatest intensity: God's glorious personal restoration of Jerusalem, the promise of light for the nations, and the figure of the Servant (including the editorial insertion of the fourth song).

The prophet reminds the people of their birth from Abraham and Sarah, “the rock” and “quarry” from which they were formed. The reference returns us to the Genesis narrative, recalling that the Lord “blessed (Abraham) and made him many” (2). This suggests that at least some of Genesis tradition had reached a settled form by this point, i.e. the prophet was reading some version of the Hebrew scripture. The next verse reinforces the possibility, for the sequence goes directly from the model of Abraham and Sarah to the model of Eden, hinting at an established textual proximity. Just as God made the barren Abraham and Sarah into a people, so will he comfort Zion, “will comfort all her waste places;” and then, immediately, he “will make her wilderness like Eden” (2-3).

Following there is a proclamation of God's universal intention of salvation which strongly echoes the language of the first Servant song. “Listen to me, my people...for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples...my salvation has gone out, and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope” (4-5). This again integrates the material of the Servant with the main prophecy, but here there is a new element: a sudden absolute declaration of the creational and trans-creational power of this salvation. “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, and earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended” (6). These are stirring words, developing from the earlier insistence that the God of Israel is the sole creator, based on his unique character as a God of redemption. Now the thought goes further. There is an infinite or, better, an abyssal sense in relation to God's redemption in human history, meaning that it has no internal end or limit, and this contrasts with the actual universe. The deliverance that comes from God has a sense of life which goes on for ever; as such it establishes itself as “metaphysically prior” either to creation or its end.

This is an astonishing biblical discovery, a question of primary or seminal revelation. When commentaries or study bibles describe the meaning of this verse as referring to “God's eternal salvation and justice, in contrast to the impermanence of the heavens and earth” you hear the fatal echo of Greek categories, the division of reality into different *realms* or *natures*, one divine, perfect and unchanging, the other material, mortal, impermanent. But what is being spoken of by the prophet is not to be understood as a different realm or nature but a different mode of relationship, one which is inherently without end, because it is relationship-to-and-for-the-other. It is *de facto* a mode of relationship that belongs to present existence because it is about actual deliverance from oppression. In other words, the prophet has discovered the eternal within time, the endlessness of absolute (nonviolent) giving of life to and for the other. This is why, at the very same time, he can claim with such authority that the present universe may not exist or could one day collapse, but God's nonviolent deliverance will go on for ever. The present universe is of course not yet structured according to God's deliverance and that is why there is a vivid sense that it could indeed wear out and vanish. There must at the same time, however, be the implication of a new heavens and earth, structured according to God's nonviolent deliverance. Indeed this is where the whole Isaiah corpus ends up: “As the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your descendants and your name remain...” (66.22).

Once this amazing sequence of thought is launched the prophet places his discovery in relation to the founding event of Israel's history and tradition. Only the birth passage of the Exodus can stand as a symbolic equal of this discovery. And because what is being talked about is indeed “new creation” the prophet includes in his description of the crossing of the Reed Sea an element of creation mythology that is at the measure of the drama he is relating. The primordial sea monster, *Rahab*, is known to us from other places in the Hebrew bible, where YHWH's struggle against the violent forces of chaos preceding creation is recounted for its own sake (Pss.74.13, 89.11, Jb. 26.12). In the Genesis 1 creation account this element of struggle is almost completely absent, because the Priestly writer is concerned to eliminate violence as having any elemental role in creation. However, other writers use it as a record of YHWH's power and might, and the prophet here employs it in the same way. But in a radical new reading he associates this power not with creation as such but with the central phenomenon of the Exodus. He merges the defeat of the dragon with the drying up of the sea, making the primordial battle an event of redemption, an event of human history.

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord!  
Awake, as in the days of old, the generations of long ago!

Was it not you who cut Rāhab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?  
Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep;  
Who made the depths of the sea a way, for the redeemed to cross over? (9-10)

So once again the experience of redemption re-writes the meaning of creation. The Exodus was an event of “true” creation and it is the same (re)creative power which will return the captives to Zion. “So the ransomed of the Lord shall return...(11). And lest anyone might protest that the imagery of violence contradicts my argument about nonviolent redemption it is evident that in the overall context we have here a case of inverted or transposed imagery. What looks like one thing actually means something else, and is intended to mean something else. The effect of God’s nonviolent redemption is so certain that it amounts to the decimation of the dragon, but of course the dragon is the violent power of oppression itself, first Egypt (cf. Ezek. 29.3), and now Babylon, and this is what God has caused to cease to be.

The word that follows is a repetition of the relational motif of the whole prophecy, “I, I am he who comforts you” (12). We can situate it imaginatively in the period before the conquests of Cyrus, when the people were still subject to the violence of Babylon. “Why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die, a human being who fades like the grass. You have forgotten the Lord, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. You fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor...” (12-13). We have here the classic 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah contours of God as creator who, for that reason, is to be trusted to govern all human affairs. But we remember too the logic by which this thought gets put in place: because the God of Israel governs the affairs of history for the sake of justice, including of nations beyond Israel, for that reason he is seen as the creator of all. “The oppressed shall speedily be released; they shall not die and go down to the Pit, nor shall they lack bread. For I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the Lord of hosts is his name” (14-15). The stirring of the waters is a standard trope in the creational battle with the sea (Pss. 74.13, 89.10, Jb.26.12-13) and so connects this oracle with the previous one. The stirring of the water is also present in the Genesis 1 account, but without the figure of an active hostile force. We see again, therefore, the merging of creation mythology with redemptive history, with what might be named “continuing creation.” YHWH is the creator of the world, the condition of possibility for all history, because he exercises sovereign power within history.

Another, philosophical way of saying the same thing is “liberation determines ontology.” This idea can take form in contemporary anthropological terms: for example, when we see the stirring of the sea as a metaphor for the provocative intervention by the God of the bible in the depths of the human condition, stirring up themes and truths which we would rather not recognize but which will eventually serve to bring about our true and full humanity. What results then is a terrible battle with the human heart and the cultural reality it produces, not allowing it its congenital obscurity and misconstruction. The spiritual and cultural battle is unrelenting. What the old formula of humanity demands is, again and again, a scapegoat, and it must twist and turn in the unyielding light of the gospel to find one that works. In fact the only scapegoat that has any chance of working today is the one who can be shown to be a victimizer, one has previously indulged in discharging violence against an innocent victim. But of itself this simply brings the process itself more and more to light, so that it is undermined from within, with the constitutive anger and violence more and more on display and loosed from traditional restraint.

Which leads us by a sure inner logic to the final section of the chapter. The image of the cup of wrath is a powerful anthropological concept which traces its lineage from the prophet Habakkuk. He worked during Babylon’s relentless rise to power at the end of the seventh century when she defeated both Assyria and Egypt. The Chaldeans, as the people of Babylon were known, were understood as God’s instrument of justice, but not without a tone of simultaneous reproof. “See, I am raising up Chaldea, that bitter and unruly people, that marches the breadth of the land to take dwellings not his own. Terrible and dreadful is he, from himself derive his law and his majesty. Swifter than leopards are his horses, and keener than wolves at evening....He scoffs at kings, and princes are his laughingstock; he laughs at any fortress, heaps up a ramp, and conquers it. Then he veers like the wind and is gone—this culprit who makes his own strength his god!” (Hab. 1.6-11) The double edged quality of retributive violence, just and unjust and once, led Habbakuk then to articulate a cycle of violence at work against all imperial forces, including obviously Babylon: “Woe to you who give your neighbors a flood of your wrath to drink, and make them drunk, till their nakedness is seen! You are filled with shame instead of glory; drink, you too, and stagger! On you shall revert the cup from the Lord’s right hand, and utter shame on your glory. For the violence done to Lebanon shall cover you, and the destruction of the beasts shall terrify you; because of men’s blood shed, and violence done to the land, to the city and to all who dwell in it” (2.15-17).

The problem of course to our eyes is one of infinite regress—you have to keep hiring a new hit man to eliminate the one before! But it does not seem this was an issue to Habbakuk. It was simply a matter of historical justice: those who had handed out the cup of wrath would be made to drink it themselves. Jeremiah (25.15-29) picks it up in this sense, and Ezekiel (23.31-34)

makes it an image of God's judgment on Jerusalem, for her crimes. What is distinctive about 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah is that the exilic situation turns the image around: it is already exhausted, Jerusalem has drunk fully her dose of the cyclical cup. "Rouse yourself, rouse yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who drunk to the dregs the bowl of staggering" (51.17). And unlike other recipients, who presumably simply got what was coming to them, his language is filled with pathos for Jerusalem's condition: "Your children have fainted, they lie at the head of every street like an antelope in a net; they are full of the wrath of the Lord, the rebuke of your God" (20). The changed tone is significant and goes along with the overall sense of compassion of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah for the people of exile. Nevertheless, the compassion is strictly delimited and the cup continues its rounds, exactly with a vengeance. We could say in our contemporary language that the need for a scapegoat is undiminished (even, and perhaps especially, from the side of the victim.)

Therefore hear this, you who are wounded, who are drunk,  
but not with wine: thus says your sovereign, the Lord, your God  
who pleads the cause of his people: see I have taken from your hand the cup  
of staggering; you shall drink no more from the bowl of my wrath. And I will put it into the hand of your tormentors, who  
have said to you,  
'Bow down, that we may walk on you'" (21-3).

This picture speaks to the endless discharge of violence, but what does it have to say to the theology of nonviolent redemption? Surely it amounts to flat contradiction and rejection? Two things need to be said regarding the text. First, as a matter of human fact, nothing had changed: the reason why the exiles could now return is because a new military power had risen to overthrow Babylon. The historical truth was that the persecutors had lost their power and were now very soon to experience the inevitable staggering of their own wounds and weakness. The prophet was simply reflecting the cyclical historical phenomenon of the cup. In the emergent light of the Servant we stand therefore at the borders of two anthropological constructs. One is the mediation of God through the endless fluctuations of violence, and this remains precisely because we hang on to violence as the generative source of our humanity. If we live by violence we will experience God as wrath. The other is something only dimly perceived that occupies the same human scene as the former but means an entirely different humanity *and* theology.

This leads in turn to the second consideration. The note of compassion for the victim, Jerusalem, has now introduced a new element in the old cycle—a strange, contradictory feeling for the victim. Even though it be only Israel, it is still something new in the collective field of history. Then, right at the end of the oracle, comes a phrase that dramatically changes the whole perspective; the agency shifts from the oppressor to the oppressed, and we are immediately back in the territory of the Servant with the compassion becoming transformative rather than simply a passing emotion. Directly after the last phrase spoken by the oppressor, "Bow down, that we may walk on you," comes the indicative statement in respect of Israel, "And you have made your back like the ground and like the street for them to walk on." We are reminded at once of the preceding song of the Servant, "I gave my back to those who struck me" (50.6), and the intentional, non-passive, proclamatory character of his suffering. We move, therefore, in this final statement from the age-old oscillations of violence to the new, interruptive humanity of willed nonviolence. It is only a hint and could easily be passed by. But in the earlier light of the Servant it seems necessary to grant this shift of subject its own due weight and the possibility of a decisive, revealed break in the procession of the cup. A new humanity stands under the shadow of the old.

It would take an individual of extraordinary insight and courage to grasp this sliver of possibility. But here at the end of 51 we are truly in extraordinary territory, with the language of good news, its messenger, and the Servant who gives his life like a lamb, directly on the horizon. When Jesus spoke of the cup he had to drink and yet he feared so greatly—language that could hardly have been invented by the Christian community—it is impossible to find a better Old Testament textual background than here. And the textual proximity of the other themes would then go on to reinforce the possibility that he intentionally embraced the Servant figure for his own mission and destiny.

As regards the cup, therefore, we are faced with the possibility that Jesus voluntarily opted to drink its contents, not because he believed there was any personal anger on his Father's part that he had to appease—nothing in his talk elsewhere about his Father would render that thought, and frankly I believe it outrageous to entertain it—but because the figure of the Servant simply required it of him. The whole fabric of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah promoted compassion for the victim and the figure of the Servant made the enactment of that compassion concrete, generative, dynamic. We need not speculate either that Jesus thought anything so 21<sup>st</sup> century as "interruption of the cycle of violence." In fact we should probably consider that his thoughts were deeper, more intuitive, more abyssal, along the lines of the figure of the Servant itself. He was not thinking "human" thoughts but the dim outline of something impossibly new, a vision of Wisdom that he saw as a child and was sealed at his baptism, as it were "under water." In deep faithfulness to this vision he embraced the Servant in relation to the cup, and the answer came as swift as sunlight,

he must drink the cup himself. Only in that way will Israel, and the rest of the world with it, be saved from going through its old, old history, over and over again. Only in this way will the wrath of violence and the violence of wrath cease to be the destiny of all. Jesus stood at the borderline of two humanities, and with unparalleled will and imagination he, and he alone, opted for the new. He did so by imbibing the endlessly old to translate it, in his own person, to the endlessly new.