

Deutero-Isaiah – A Theology of Resistance for a Time of Empire
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Second Isaiah was written in a time of great empires. Empire building has always been an expensive proposition requiring corvee labor and the resources of other nations. For several centuries, the fortunes of the small, now-divided nations of Judah and Israel were largely determined by the politics of empire as one after another—first Assyria, then Babylon, then Persia—stepped forward in a grab for resources and power. In particular, these landlocked empires needed access to the sea through Syria-Palestine if they were to import their luxury goods.

Thus it was that the northern kingdom of Israel first fell to Assyria while the southern kingdom of Judah was next captured by Babylon. Judah's population was marched away into exile in Babylon where captivity weighed heavy on the Hebrews. The traditional markers of Israel's election as God's chosen—the Davidic monarchy, the Promised Land, Solomon's glorious temple—lay in shattered ruins. Her trusted social and religious institutions no longer functioned. At every level, Israel's identity as a people of faith seemed called into question.

Exile was not an easy identity then nor is it an easy identity today. When the once familiar categories of "homeland" and "nation" no longer apply, exiles are left as rootless orphans, cut off from land and history. Yet an exilic existence continues to be a reality for millions of humans today, many Christians among them.

[N]ow more than perhaps ever before, people are chronically mobile and routinely displaced, inventing homes and homelands in the absence of territorial, national bases....80 million people now live in 'foreign' lands. One million people emigrate permanently each year, and another million seek political asylum....[In] 1994, there were 18 million refugees from natural disaster or war.¹

Exile is not limited to geography, however. A people who feel marginalized from mainstream cultural values can also live in exile though they have never left their homeland.² Unable to identify with the values of consumer capitalism and militaristic patriotism that are culturally dominant today, many First World Christians also find themselves living as "resident aliens" in exile in the midst of empire.³ Indeed the cynicism and ennui of the modern age may well be signs of a deeper despair that comes from living under an ideology of empire.

To worship idols in the form of ideology—whether that of empire or nation—is nonetheless idolatry. Those on the borders of empire are no less caught in the grip of its pervasive, all-defining ideology. When a people's identity as a faith community differs from the dominant culture, compromise is constant temptation and assimilation a constant threat. Indeed the Western church has too often adopted the thought forms of nationalism and empire. Rather than speak the truth to power, the church has failed to image itself in Jesus' terms as 'salt' and 'light' to the dominant culture and instead has served to legitimate power and privilege. "[I]n leaning over to speak to the modern world," today's Christians have too often "fallen in. We have lost the theological resources to resist, lost the resources even to see that there was something worth resisting."⁴

Just as the Babylonian empire ran its course, so too Western dreams of dominance, as defined primarily by white men of privilege, may now have come to an end.⁵ Indeed Western culture is increasingly questioned as defining for the rest of the world. To the extent that the church of today has—like Israel—identified Christian interests with national interests, like those in exile, Christians experience the disorientation of having the structure of their once reliable 'world' shattered. In reality, modern Western society is so secularized that the assumptions and assertions of the church no longer receive automatic cultural acceptance and reinforcement. An identity grounded in faith is often ridiculed; its symbols and sources of meaning are mocked and dismissed by popular culture. No longer enthroned in

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Jerusalem with institutes of power and privilege—indeed Brueggemann says that Christians who are powerful “must travel incognito”—Christians today know the reality of an exilic life in Babylon.⁶

Rather than attempting to prop up old myths of dominance or denying that faith is counter-cultural to empire, Christians need to disengage from the myth that Christian interests are identical with national interests. When the community of faith maintains a distinctive identity as an alternative to empire, in its particularity and uniqueness, that identity is subversive. Thus the questions posed by exile—

questions of identity and the grounds for hope, questions about who or what is the cause of [our] malaise, questions about the continuing validity of symbols and symbol systems, questions for and in a time of radical change, questions for those who are rootless or whose future seems fruitless and fraught with conflict.⁷

Marking a pivotal theological transition between the Old and New Testaments, exile theology is a theology for such a time of transition, for a people who have lost their identity. Isaiah calls Israel into a critical relationship with power and with structures that oppress. He proclaims a radical theology of resistance as an alternative identity to that defined by empire. Exile is a call and a vocation. Where empire declares human initiative to be the primary force behind its core values of success and progress, Isaiah’s theology witnesses to justice and holiness at the core of life.⁸ Where empire justifies the individual self as its primary focus, in this theology, it is the servant and the stranger who are central. Thus this theology of resistance is also a theology for Christians today.

This is no easy ‘Christ against culture’ model, however, where the faith community lives in withdrawal and isolation from the surrounding culture. For Isaiah also introduces a daring universalism to the Hebrew mission that calls for them to be “a light to the nations.” If it is to speak the truth to empire and bear witness that there are indeed alternatives to life under empire, the faith community must be willing to participate in the life of the dominant community while resisting its power as defining. Indeed exiles must become bilingual, learning and speaking the language of empire while, at the same time, “never forgetting the cadences of their ‘mother tongue.’”⁹ Living in the world but not of it, the exilic community recognizes that any alternative threatens the all-defining power of empire as universal and thus empire is inevitably hostile to minority identities, whether those of ethnic or faith community. Nonetheless it takes the risky step of negotiating a space that lives in the tension between its own distinctive counter-cultural identity and the broader culture to which it must bear witness.

Isaiah’s call to Israel to a new understanding of her identity and mission is a call extended to Christians today. While First World Christians, for the most part, fail to recognize the full extent of their exile from mainstream power, the Third World—including marginalized communities within First World nations—cope with this reality on a daily basis. To the extent that it already practices a theology of resistance to empire, it is the Third World—along with the “Fourth World” of diaspora—that is most likely to model a strategy and a theology for resistance to empire.

Questions: Are you living in the shadow of empire or in the belly of the empire beast? Does where you are situated change how you relate to empire? Where are you held captive and where are you too comfortable? What would it mean to practice a theology of resistance to empire?

Historical Context:

After the death of King Solomon in 922 b.c., Israel split into two smaller, more powerless kingdoms. The ten tribes of Joseph formed the kingdom of Israel to the north while, to the south, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin formed the kingdom of Judah. These two small kingdoms were more vulnerable than ever to the politics of surrounding super powers in their grab for resources and power. The Assyrian Empire was first to threaten the two kingdoms and, in 722 b.c., it conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. Many refugees fled south, taking the name “Israel” with them. For those who remained behind, Assyria’s policy of occupation and inter-marriage would eventually result in the racially-mixed Samaritans who would forever be polluted by foreign blood and practices in the eyes of the southern kingdom of Judah.

In less than 100 years, however, it was Assyria’s turn to be defeated by Babylon who then went on to conquer the southern kingdom of Judah. The Holy City of Jerusalem was plundered—her walls razed to the ground. The temple of Solomon—that sacred center of the Jewish universe—was desecrated by the presence of foreigners and reduced to rubble. As a symbol of Yahweh’s defeat, temple vessels were carried off to Babylon and placed in the

temple of Marduk.¹⁰ The ordered universe, as Israel knew it, no longer existed. The failure of nationalism with its culturally legitimated temple cult was absolute.

While Assyria's policy for conquered peoples was one of occupation, Babylon's policy was one of exile. The cream of Judah's political, ecclesiastical and intellectual leadership were carried off in a series of three deportations leaving a peasant class behind to fend for itself in the rubble of destruction. Babylonian policy has often been portrayed as relatively enlightened, at least on the surface. Like other conquered peoples, the Hebrews were interred in a separate, self-governing ethnic enclave. The merchandise of the world passed through this city and the Israelites were allowed to take advantage of the considerable economic opportunity Babylon had to offer. Some readily adapted, prospering economically to become landholders and slaveowners. Thus, when Babylon was eventually defeated by Persia, not every Israelite would choose to return to Israel and start over again.

The intent of exile was nonetheless to oppress ethnic identity and acculturate a people to Babylonian values. Here in Babylon, the fabric of Hebrew religious and ethnic identity seemed tenuous indeed. The Davidic monarchy, the Promised Land and Solomon's glorious Temple—so central to Hebrew identity—could no longer be claimed as the mark of Yahweh's Chosen. Here compromise was a constant temptation and assimilation a continual threat. How seductively bright the worldly metropolis of Babylon—with its public libraries and recreation centers, its towering ziggurat and magnificent hanging gardens—must have seemed. Spectacular religious processions, like the glorious New Year's procession with its recitation of the *Enuma elish* creation myth, paraded the strength of foreign gods.

By the time of Second Isaiah's prophecies, Israel had been some forty or fifty years in captivity. The generation that had lived in Jerusalem was dying or, at best, held dim childhood memories of life in Jerusalem. Traditional markers of the faith lay in ruins. With the destruction of the temple, the primary sign of Yahweh's dwelling among the people was lost. Was it even possible to worship Yahweh without temple-validated sacrifices? Would the next generation be completely seduced by the glittering materialism of the Babylonian super-power and the empire-building power of their gods? Would the cultural and religious assimilation of future generations completely wipe out the Hebrew heritage of faith? When her public institutions supported religious and ethnic identity, as they did in Israel, there was little need to claim an identity intentionally. Without a national identity, however, Israel must now face the difficult question of how to maintain her distinctive identity as a people of faith when that identity differs from the surrounding imperial culture.

With the collapse of nationalism as a model and the painful experience of having to question almost every aspect of religious and political identity came a reforming of the tradition impressive in its creativity.¹¹ Scriptures were written down and consolidated. Synagogues were developed as teaching institutions to preserve the heritage of faith. Concrete symbols of Jewish identity—observation of the Sabbath, circumcision and dietary regulations—received renewed stress in an effort to resist assimilation. Steps were taken to solidify laws and traditions that would ensure religious identity. Religious identity began to shift from a temple cult, nation state and monarchy to the more portable religious identity of earlier times centered around household rituals. While often exile is portrayed as a period of religious ossification, it is also possible to read this period as the difficult birth of dramatically different forms of religious life and radical strategies for the formation of an identity as a community of faith.¹²

A Theology of Resistance for Those in Exile Then and Now

Despite her renewed religious practices, captivity weighed heavy on Israel, emotionally and spiritually. Israel understood her situation in theological terms as the action of Yahweh in judgment upon their sins—for “I have tested you in the furnace of adversity” (Isa. 48:10b). Strangers in a strange land, they felt abandoned by God: “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me” (Isa. 49:14). Had Israel broken the covenant so completely that Yahweh would never forgive her? Was Yahweh so weak and the gods of the super-powers so strong that Israel would never be free from captivity?

Thus religious practices alone would fail to address the deep-felt need for a theological answer to Israel's crisis of faith. Pluralism with its constant threat of assimilation would also need to be addressed with theological seriousness and creativity. Into this spiritual and theological turmoil, came a nameless prophet whom we know only as Second or Deutero Isaiah because his writings are found in chapters 40 to 55 of the prophet Isaiah. Deutero Isaiah was called by Yahweh and charged with comforting God's people and teaching them to “sing to the LORD a new song...[for] the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them”(Isa. 42:9-10a).

Along with whatever meager belongings the exiles were able to carry with them on their long, dusty trek into captivity, they also carried—like tattered, well-worn photographs—the habits, customs and memories of the national homeland left behind. Yet, in exile, the context for these memories has changed. Living in the belly of the empire beast, mourning her past glory as God’s elect and in a deep disconnect with her past, Israel would need to be shocked out of her fantasies of militaristic might and religious dominance. The community of faith in exile must re-think in a radical way their previous assumptions of who God has called them to be. Calling for a time of self-examination and a “re”-membering of their historical relationship with Yahweh, in the belly of the empire beast, Deutero-Isaiah proclaims a radical theology of resistance to empire.

Theological Themes of Deutero Isaiah:

Themes: 1) Judgement and Redemption, Lamentation and Comfort; 2) “Re”-member the God of creation and history rather than an election to privilege; 3) Called to an identity as Servants, not to nation or empire, but to God’s intended purpose; 4) The community of faith in a pluralistic world; 5) Sing a new song, an evangelical song, of promise, hope and imagination.

1) *Judgement and Redemption, Lamentation and Comfort:*

For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer. (Is 54: 7-8).

It is no easy task to speak of judgment and redemption, lamentation and comfort in the same breath yet that is the task Yahweh seems to have assigned Isaiah. Exile is an experience of abandonment where the sense of God’s absence can be profound. Paralyzed by despair, Israel no longer holds forth any hope – for “the LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.” (49:14b). This despair at God’s absence is as much communal as it is personal since it involves a public awareness that the glory that once was Israel is now gone. Though the hearts of the Hebrew people have been torn apart, along with the world as they knew it, perhaps this is a necessary part of God’s plan. “What if they were the stewards of something that had to have its shell broken before it could ever get out? What if God were working through their failure as he could never have worked through their triumph?”¹³

In the Hebrew tradition of lament, the expression of pain, indignation, grief, complaint and rage are all permitted, even encouraged, as part of a living relationship with God. It is acceptable to rail at Yahweh for being unfaithful and allowing suffering to occur. It is permitted to cry out – enough is enough! Though lament is not common in the Christian tradition, Brueggemann suggests that today’s congregations need to become intentional communities of lament and dare to name the despair of living under empire.¹⁴ Only when former images of glory and domination have been fully lamented and grieved will there be room emotionally and spiritually for comfort and renewal.

There is no cheap grace, however. Before for a people can accept the actuality of redemption, they must face the shadow of judgment. Israel must publicly name the loss of her dreams of national and religious dominance. Shame over the mistakes and sins of one’s past is a form of honesty that keeps individuals and nations vigilant in the present. Though Western culture tends to abhor the concept of “shame,” shame must be faced. To fail to face one’s shame is to participate in a “culture of denial” and to perpetuate the myth of empire that life in its midst is prosperous and free.

Ultimately, however, Yahweh’s judgment will lead to the comfort of redemption and wholeness. The images Isaiah chooses for redemption are taken from the comfort of family life. Yahweh comes as the nearest and dearest of kin. Like a parent comforting a wounded child, Isaiah speaks tenderly of God as a mother who cannot “forget her nursing child” and who will always show “compassion for the child of her womb. Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Isa. 49: 15). Yahweh comes as a “goel,” or “redeemer kin” -- a term that is used more by Second Isaiah more than all other Old Testament writers together. A “redeemer kin” has the obligation to redeem family members forced by poverty to sell their property or themselves into slavery, to avenge injustice and restore family honor thus making the family whole once again.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. (Is 40:1-2)

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. (43:1b)
I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer. (49:26)

Questions:

1. How comfortable are you using lamentation and complaint to speak to God? What losses and proud images must we name and grieve to make room for God's renewal? What would you name as the shame of your nation and your religion?

2) The God of creation and history rather than election to privilege:

Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, "My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention." – Isa. 46: 9-10

In Babylon, the power of empire was so all-encompassing that Israel fell hopelessly under its sway to define her identity and reality. Israel not only doubted Yahweh's faithfulness in the past, she doubted God's power to save her from the present. Over time, election as God's chosen people had become a mark of privilege for Israel rather than a covenantal relationship that entailed responsibility. The story of Yahweh's faithfulness would need to be "re"-membered, interpreted in the context of exile as a living text able to resist the defining power of empire.

Brueggemann notes that: "People without memories settle for the way things now are. People in active touch with their memories become restless and filled with energy, prepared in a variety of ways to live beyond imperial definitions and boundaries."¹⁵

To reassure Israel of Yahweh's historical faithfulness and promises kept, Isaiah reaches back in time beyond their memories of nationalism and monarchy. He by-passes the election tradition to "re"-member the Hebrew story before there were kings and temples and instead lifts up stories of creation and a people wandering in the wilderness. The God who brought creation into being is surely able to break into exile with a power that can shatter empire's grip. Thus he calls Israel back to the one true God who alone can create life and bring newness into situations that seem beyond redemption. For the best that empire can offer is contained in perishable, earthly forms and shaped by obeisance to gods who, mute and passive, lack the power to satisfy or bring life.

For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): I am the LORD, and there is no other. – Isa. 45:18

I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save. To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, as though we were alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales-- they hire a goldsmith, who makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries out to it, it does not answer or save anyone from trouble. – Isa. 46: 4-7

Isaiah then reminds Israel that Yahweh not only creates order out of chaos but has also been present through-out their history bringing creation in line with God's intention. He takes them back to the time of Abraham and the time of Exodus when the Hebrews were a people of the way, summoned by God and sent forth into the wilderness with the promise that they would be God's people and God would accompany them always. Then Yahweh was not locked in political and religious institutions but was more portable than sedentary. Then the people, acting in faith, traveled lightly, living in the wilderness, completely dependent on Yahweh to sustain their lives.

[Y]ou that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you. – Isa. 51: 1-2a

Once settled on the land, however, the land seduced Israel. She craved a strong national identity, greater security, more consumer goods. Building great cities and glorious temples, institutionalizing armies and taxes, the few began to live at the expense of the rest. Israel forgot her covenant responsibilities and began to believe the power of her own hands had created her abundant blessings. Whereas previously, a theology of “dominion” related primarily to the care of creation, then a royal theology developed that understood Yahweh’s covenant as a covenant with the Davidic monarchy. Yahweh became identified with kingly power–“King of kings,” “Lord of lords,” “God of gods.”

Now, in exile, Israel has returned once again to the place where she is more dependent on Yahweh than on institutionalized power or national dominion. Brueggemann suggests that in the Western world, Western Christians too often identify with the monarchial model and with election as defining for their faith. Christians today need “re”-member their faith in light of the creation and wilderness stories.

Questions

The concept of election often creates tension in interfaith dialogue. How do you make sense of election – particularly in light of Israel’s need to have their old concepts challenged?

3) Called as Servants, not to nation or empire, but to God’s intended purpose:

You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off....I formed you, you are my servant.
– Isa. 44:9b, 21.

Isaiah calls Israel out of the deep despair that them defines as servants to empire. For those who identify with the privileges of empire, the call to servanthood is a call to be something one is not. Living in exile in Babylon, however, the role of suffering servant was Israel’s actual reality – they were indeed suffering as servants to the empire. If they are to discover Yahweh’s liberating power and faithfulness, they must first be willing to name the reality of their servitude.

Servanthood to Yahweh is a distinctive identity. Israel is called–not as servant to nation or empire–but as servants of God’s intended purpose for all nations and all creation. Yahweh’s promise no longer belongs exclusively to Israel for the task of the servant is to bring justice (mishpat) to the nations. This call does not rely on kings and priests alone to serve the Lord but calls the whole community of faith forth in service. This is a call out of privilege and into responsibility. This is a call not to power but to powerlessness for Yahweh works through suffering and defeat more than through power and victory. “He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice” (Isa. 42:2-3). Servanthood calls Israel into a new relationship with her enemies and with power. The captives are to become the carriers of the good news of salvation to their captors.

Questions:

1. What does it say about power that God asks us to be servants who are powerless and vulnerable? Is it possible for servanthood to be a form of resistance to empire?

4) Living as a Community of Faith in a Pluralistic World:

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. – Isa. 49:6.

The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. – Isa. 54: 5.

One of the most unique features of Isaiah's theology is the universalism that is introduced into Hebrew theology for the first time. Admittedly, in DeuteroIsaiah, Israel's relationship with other nations is not clear cut for both positive and negative images of foreigners appear. Indeed the prophet himself seems to waver back and forth as he struggles to understand who Israel is apart from a strong nationalistic identity. For instance, in Isa. 49:6, Israel is to be "a light to the nations." This passage is followed, however, by a description of other nations where: "With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet" (Isa. 49:23b).

In the midst of pluralism, the shape of Israel's relationship with those outside the bounds the faith community is more emerging than definitive. Nonetheless Isaiah's theology moves toward a universalism that is striking in comparison with the nationalistic focus of monarchical theology. No longer will strategies for justice and equity be closely aligned with national interests. All nations—indeed all of creation—are to be restored.

Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. – Isa. 42:5-7.

Perhaps the most shocking of Isaiah's declarations is the fact that Yahweh's servant—the instrument of Israel's deliverance and restoration—is to be the foreigner, Cyrus of Persia.

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,...For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me....I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me. (45:1, 4-6)

Israel evidently rebels at the astounding thought that the anointing oil of Jewish royalty will be poured on the head of a pagan, a "goi" messiah. Yahweh's response, however, is a swift one:

Woe to you who strive with your Maker, earthen vessels with the potter! Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, "What are you making"? or "Your work has no handles"?

Thus says the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work of my hands? I made the earth, and created humankind upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, and I will make all his paths straight; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the LORD of hosts. – Isa. 45:9, 11-13

With this call to a pagan outsider, the mold of Yahweh's servant is broken open. Isaiah calls the people of God to look beyond ethnocentrism to find liberation in unexpected sources. Yahweh's unusual choice of Cyrus as the "goi" messiah prepares the way for Jesus, the uncomfortable Messiah, who comes as an illegitimate infant born in homeless poverty, as a refugee child raised in exile in a strange culture and speaking an unfamiliar tongue, as a day laborer and political dissident who is crucified a criminal for confronting the powers of privilege. Living in exile, in the tension of maintaining a distinctive identity in the midst pluralism, the people of God today are also called to look for liberation from unexpected sources – from demanding minorities and uppity women, from impoverished third world villagers living without electricity or running water, from people sleeping homeless on city streets.

Questions

How might other nations or non-Christians be bearers of God's liberation or teach us to sing a new song? What strategies and theologies of resistance might the Third World have to offer the First World?

5) *Sing a New Song, an Evangelical Song of Promise, Hope and Imagination:*

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? –Isa. 43:18

In exile, the community of faith has a deep longing to “touch and handle things unseen,” to experience that which satisfies more than the trivialized and manipulated desires of empire. Until Israel can hope again in “things unseen,” she will remain in despair, captive to the thrall of Babylon. Isaiah therefore calls Israel to envision the mighty and creative power of Yahweh that extends beyond the boundaries of the known world and is able to break into exile with a gift of liberating grace.

Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. – Isa. 54: 2.

To break the mesmerizing hold that empire has on their being, the world in which Israel lives will need to be re-described through the eyes of faith. This will require the bold imagination of liturgical acts. For Israel’s resistance to being defined by empire must not only be theological but liturgical. Liturgy, with its “evangelical” language invites the community to enter into a world beyond the bounds of empire, a world filled with potential and open to fresh possibility. In the act of worship, Israel re-enacts God’s faithfulness in the past and renews her hope for the future. Each time Israel re-enacts this drama of an alternative, God-filled reality, she loosens the control that subjects her in servitude to empire. By imagining a world where Yahweh is center, she ridicules the power of empire and actually enters into a world beyond its control. Isaiah

invites exiles to sing against reality, to dance toward a future not even discernible, to praise the faithful God who will not be held captive by imperial reality. The singing and dancing and praising is an act of hope, a betting on God’s capacity for an inexplicable future.¹⁶

The modern world portrays life as a fixed reality where there is no possibility that any newness could enter in from the outside bringing change and renewal. In popular culture, the language of faith—of liturgy and sacrament—is discredited and ridiculed. The imagination with its ability to conceive new possibilities is disparaged for not being rational. In the belly of the empire beast, promise and hope are alien categories. Indeed the killing of alternatives is essential if empire is to maintain its control and render a people powerless. Even more than in Babylonian times, today’s secular society is hostile to a “conviction of things unseen.” By continually re-enacting her distinctive theological and liturgical identity, Christians today, like Israel in exile, uncover our role in bearing hope and promise as good news to all nations. The story told by empire is exposed for its fraud and is replaced by the story of Yahweh’s in-breaking faithfulness and liberating promise. This is the good news that the people of God are called to proclaim and evangelize. This is good news to be shared with all peoples and nations.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" – Isa. 40: 9

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” – Isa. 52:7

Questions

How can Christians claim an evangelical language of promise, hope and imagination in a secularized society? Is it possible to sing a new song—one that is liturgical and sacramental—in today’s cynical culture?

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1. Survey of International Lab on Migration by United Nations cited in Smith-Christopher, 2002: 28.
 2. Klein 1979: 149.
 3. Exile can also be “social, moral, and cultural,...liturgical and symbolic” (Brueggemann 1997: 3).
 4. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) cited in Smith-Christopher, 2002: 193.
 5. Indeed, to a large extent, the Western church has been so identified with power and privilege it has fought change in the status quo preferring “an enhancement and guarantee of our preferred present tense” to God’s in-breaking newness (Brueggemann 1997: 22-23, 114).
 6. Brueggemann 1997: 115.
 7. Klein 1979: 5.
 8. Brueggemann 1997: 30.
 9. “Such negotiations may seem to purists to be too accomodationist. And to accomodationist, they may seem excessively scrupulous” (Brueggemann 1997: 11).
 10. Smith-Christopher, 2002: 60.
 11. Brueggemann, 1997: 101; Smith-Christopher, 2002: 12, 22.
 12. Smith-Christopher, 2002: 192.
 13. Paul Scherer, *Event in Eternity* (New York: Harpers and Brothers, 1945) 21.
 14. “Folk need pastoral help in relinquish a ‘home’ that is gone, and in entering a new ‘dangerous’ place that we sense as deeply alien.” Brueggemann 1997: 2, 4.
 15. Brueggemann, 1997: 121.
 16. Brueggemann, 1997: 126.