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Metaphoric Offensiveness: Isaiah's Ministry of Shock

STEVE WEATHERS

The only people buying books of poetry today are other poets—at least that's what literature teachers charge. This bleak description of contemporary reading habits may well be accurate. It is a doubly lamentable situation for Christian readers, of course, for significant sections of scripture—the Old Testament prophets immediately come to mind—are replete with poetic devices. An interpreter is certain to err in approaching these texts with inadequate sensitivity to the figurative language so often employed.

In *Language and Imagery in the Old Testament*, J.C.L. Gibson offers a helpful reminder: “ancient Israel did what we call theology poetically rather than conceptually.”¹ That hermeneutical principle is essential in appreciating both the ministry and artistry of the prophets. But a clarification is in order. Writing “poetically” might well connote florid phrasing and saccharine sentimentality. In the case of the prophets, however, that connotation must be rejected—virtually reversed, in fact—for the poetic devices employed by these seers are often anything but sugary. The book of Isaiah is a remarkable case in point. Few, if any, writers of the Jewish canon surpass this author in bumptious energy and sheer metaphoric abrasiveness.

SHOCK JOCK

Isaiah is, in some ways, the original “shock jock.” A fearlessly provocative speaker, he vents his ire on the airwaves, broadcasting his message in terms intentionally designed to trouble. And why should listeners not be troubled? When the redeemed community is dull of hearing, provocative language is appropriate—indeed, essential. When God's people are blindly sleepwalking on the precipice of apostasy and, thus, of self-destruction, only the edgiest language will serve as a sufficiently sharp warning. Isaiah's metaphors are often stern cautionary signs—flashing beacons to mark the boundaries of theological safety.

Always a handy and tempting alternative in the ancient Near East, idolatry constituted one of those deadly crevasses along which Judah roamed. This nemesis of true worship had, in fact, secured a disturbingly public purchase upon God's people. Accordingly, Isaiah sharpens his tongue to address the danger.

The prophet's incisive rhetoric cuts through callous to the hidden quick. Invoking the Israelites' reticence concerning matters of human reproduction, he depicts idols as particularly repulsive keepsakes, soon to be recognized as such:

Then you will defile your idols overlaid with silver and your images covered with gold; you will throw them away like a menstrual cloth and say to them, “Away with you!” (Isa 30:22)²

The implied absurdity is striking. Who would intentionally hoard her soiled feminine pads, preserving them in household shrines for the reverential gaze of onlookers? The sane person quietly disposes of these untidy objects. But God's people are not sane. So the prophet has designed a metaphor to turn the stomach and, hopefully, to turn the heart toward the source of all purity.

The untidiness of menstruation is merely one sample of Isaiah's rhetorical shock tactics. There are more. To warn against ill-advised foreign alliances, the prophet crafts still another, equally disturbing analogy.

ALCOHOLIC ALLY

Fearing Assyrian invasion, the people of God had dispatched diplomatic envoys to Egypt, hoping to secure a strong ally in the impending conflict. Panic was palpable. Anxiety had peaked. Where was the tiny nation to find protection and strength in the face of such a foe? Egypt seemed a welcoming (and well-armed) fortress in a time of storm.

The crisis was driving God's people to seek help in virtually any quarter—in any quarter, that is, save that in which the terrifying holiness of Yahweh resided. After all, to seek help in that quarter might necessitate penitence and humility, painful states of mind for arrogant man. Consequently, the redeemed community ignores its own scriptural admonitions (“It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes” [Psalm 118:9]) and instead pins its hopes on the military prowess of Egypt.

In times of national crisis (or personal crisis, for that matter), people feel their vulnerability and weakness as never before. Their own capabilities are exposed as negligible, even laughable. Too often, however, the anxious soul forgets the nobler convictions and loyalties that have guided it in more serene moments. Put simply, fear can drive one to irrational desperation. And so it was in this case. Without soliciting a divine mandate, without so much as asking for God's blessing, the leaders of Judah cast themselves upon the good will of Egypt, fully believing it would prove a sufficient shield against Assyrian swords.

Isaiah, of course, will have none of it. He knows only too well that the nations are mere “dust on the scales,” weightless and well-nigh invisible entities in the affairs of God (Isa 40:15). In a masterful rhetorical move, then, the prophet casts Egypt in a less-than-flattering light. “Would you hire a stumbling, vomiting drunk for a security guard?” he asks, in effect. The question is relevant—indeed, urgent—for the Lord's spokesman reveals that, like the spirit of an individual, the spirit of a nation is not autonomous. Human morale and intelligence are susceptible, as is the whole of creation, to the intervening hand of God. In this case, that divine hand will pour out confusion and impotence upon Egypt's intelligentsia and militarists: “The LORD has poured into them a spirit of dizziness; they make Egypt stagger in all that she does, as a drunkard staggers around in his vomit” (Isa 19:14-15). Not a particularly encouraging image, is it, for a nation in need of a respectable ally?

Once more, Isaiah's predominant message is underscored. Stop trusting in human ability! Whether it be votive images or the military armaments crafted by human hands, neither can offer a dependable stay against disaster. Only God, a rock of hiding for the besieged soul, constitutes a sufficient refuge for Judah. Repeatedly, in varied verbal formulations, the writer stresses this fact: “Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?” (Isa 2:22).

In the current crisis, that admonition is of crucial importance. God's people must realize (and quickly) that the terrifying violence of the Assyrians will not be staved off by paltry stopgap measures. If a rather bizarre visual aid will speed that realization, Isaiah is game.

NAKED TRUTH

Metaphor is now taken to an extreme as the prophet's naked, shoeless figure is seen wandering the streets. For three years, mothers snatch back their children from possible contamination with the apparently deranged exhibitionist. For three years, drunkards shout obscenities through the open doorways of taverns as the humiliated man walks past. For three years, officials debate what to do with this troubling eyesore and public nuisance. All of these are hypothetical scenarios, of course, but all quite likely, for Isaiah is unrelenting in his radical teaching technique. His body, browned by sun and chapped by wind, will constitute a walking metaphor, an educational device for those with spiritual learning disabilities. His Lord commands, “Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet.’ And he did so, going around stripped and barefoot” (Isa 20:2). Because the traditional garb of mourning has gone unheeded or unacted

upon, Isaiah discards it for a still stronger metaphoric message. Nudity is now invoked, charges of crudity intentionally provoked.

The prophet would likely have welcomed such charges. Public anger would at least signal his success in accessing the emotional faculty of his audience. Isaiah understood, no doubt, that it is at the emotive level that genuine change takes place—hence, his frequent reliance upon metaphors of the grotesque and disturbing variety. Walter Brueggemann rightly notes that in some situations the “poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality.”³ When one’s audience has become calloused to traditional, prosaic discourse, in other words, extreme measures are the last resort.

This pedagogy of nakedness, then, is yet another attempt to probe for the quick of the national psyche. Judah’s complacent confidence in Egypt as an ally and protector must be shaken:

Then the LORD said, “Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush, so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared—to Egypt’s shame. Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be afraid and put to shame. In that day the people who live on this coast will say, “See what has happened to those we relied on, those we fled to for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! How then shall we escape?” (Isa 20:3-6)

How then shall we escape? This is precisely the question the prophetic teacher hopes to elicit from his slow learners.

Predictably, he has a ready answer at hand, one provided by Yahweh: “the man who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain” (Isa 57:13). Beyond the prophet’s desperate metaphors, as always, the true God patiently waits to be found and confided in. He waits today.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 J.C.L. Gibson, *Language and Imagery in the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 13.
- 2 All scripture references in this article are NIV unless otherwise noted.
- 3 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 40.

