After Utopia: Isaiah 56-66 on Faith and Adversity

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W hen Sir Thomas More christened his imagined ideal society Utopia, he signaled that such a locale was both a good place (*eutopia*) and no place at all (*atopia*). The disconnection between the real and the ideal remains even when we link them in our imaginations, for this very act merely raises our awareness of the problem. Yet we slog on, hopeful that even a pursuit bound to fail might allow us to inch closer to a world in which, to quote the prophet Amos, "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

The long struggle for a better society, one of justice and freedom and peace, figures prominently in the Bible. Some texts (Leviticus, Ezekiel) envision a paradise centered around the Temple. Others (Deuteronomy) are more skeptical but still seek to improve human life. Still others, notably Ecclesiastes, question the possibility of long-term resolution. The gap between the imaginable and the real remains wide.

Nowhere is the chasm wider than in the book of Isaiah. The first 39 chapters chronicle Judah's gloomy descent into exile as calls to justice and faith go unheeded by society as a whole and particularly by its rulers, who constantly try to manage an unmanageable political world. Then, from the midst of exile, the exhilarating oracles of chapters 40-55 announce God's healing and forgiveness and God's sovereignty over the nations that are mere dust on the scales. In perhaps the most soaring poetry of the Bible, these chapters promise a new world in which the hostile foreign powers become servants of God's people and even nature itself celebrates the restoration of God's elect to the Promised Land.

Then we read chapters 56-66. Utopia does not arrive. The remarkable visions of chapters 40-55, which chapters 56-66 both accept and modify, do not come to pass. Perhaps Utopia will always be no place, because, as Sir Isaiah Berlin put it, "The notion of the perfect whole … seems … conceptually incoherent. Some among the Great Goods cannot live together."[1] Absolute justice and absolute mercy—both desirable qualities—cannot coexist. Utopia is bound to fail. And this fact calls for deep theological reflection.

ISAIAH 56-66 IN ITS WORLD

Such theological reflection always takes place in a context that is at once complex and changing. Isaiah 56-66 reflects the period in Israel's history when it lived under Persian rule (539-322 BCE). Isaiah 44-45 mentions the founding of the empire by Cyrus the Great in the 530s. He and his successors ruled from Afghanistan to Greece, from Egypt (after the 520s) to Uzbekistan, a dominion about the size of the United States. Subjects of this unprecedentedly vast domain spoke scores of languages and practiced an astonishing variety of customs. The Persians allowed considerable local autonomy and adopted many of the artistic, religious, and social conventions of their various subjects (especially of the ancient Mesopotamian civilization), but they also enforced political conformity.

The empire was divided into large satrapies, each consisting of many small regions (*medinot*) ruled by a governor (*pechah*) who was often a member of a longtime local ruling family. The land of Israel was part of the satrapy "Beyond the River," which covered what is today Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and

Israel. Judah (or better, Yehud) was a *medinah*, as were Samaria, Dor, Ammon, and so on. The governors of Yehud, such as Zerubbabel and later Nehemiah, reported to the satrapal government. Local rivalries could become quite intense, and the central government could not always exercise close control over its subjects, as Nehemiah's strife with Sanballat of Samaria shows (Nehemiah 4).

In Yehud itself, life could be difficult. Joel 3:4-8 (4:4-8 Hebrew) describes how merchants from the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon sold Jewish slaves to the Greeks, probably a reference to the rough economic times of the early Persian period. After Egypt became independent in about 400 BCE, Yehud became for a time a border region. Numerous cities to the southern and western parts of the land of Israel were destroyed in the 390s and 380s as Persia and Egypt fought to control the region. Small fortresses guarded the border from Arab marauders. Prosperity returned to the region only in the fourth century BCE, just before Alexander the Great's conquest.

Both the politics and the economy of Yehud came to center upon the Temple, which served as a treasury. While early postexilic prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah had to resort to threats to compel the people to finish building the Temple, and the prophet whose words are collected in the book of Malachi condemned stingy sacrifices, gradually the place of the Temple in Jerusalem became central to Jewish life. (Rival temples on Mount Gerizim Samaria and at Lentopolis and Elephantine in Egypt were eventually destroyed.) The Temple also provided for the pious a refuge, as the author of Psalm 73 testifies.

This period was also the time in which the Bible itself took shape. Older materials were edited into their current forms, and new texts added. The Pentateuch and prophetic books (including the historical works) became scripture. That is, Jews began increasingly to base their lives on the revelations of these books, rather than on oral tradition or prophetic oracles or mere custom. And monotheism became an important boundary marker for Jewish faith. So the Persian period was a time of re-formation of Israel's life of faith under new circumstances in the light of greater understanding of God's revelation to the chosen people.

FROM CONTEXT TO TEXT

In short, the Persian period, with all its turmoil, marked the transition from the faith of Israel to Judaism. New problems and newly deepened awareness of God's nature and activity demanded new theological solutions as people of faith strove to deal credibly with real problems while holding fast to transcendent ideals. Isaiah 56-66 seeks out such answers.

These chapters consist of three major sections: 56-59, 60-62, and 63-66. The core middle section, with its visions of order and divine vindication, restates many of the optimistic themes of Isaiah 40-55, reminding the people that the difficulty of their lives does not necessitate the abandonment of their hopes. The outer two sections both offer visions of a bright future and disquieting acknowledgments of a dark present. Bridging the mental gap between hope and despair are the oracles promising the intervention of the warrior God (59:15b-20, 63:1-6, 66:15-16) who punishes the oppressors and idolaters, both within and without the community of Israel. Chapter 66 forms an *inclusio* with chapter 1, indicating some editorial process designed to bring order to the scroll of Isaiah as a whole.

There are various ways of outlining these chapters. Blenkinsopp, for example, finds 25 separate oracles here, and Childs only 11. Moreover, typically of prophetic books, the sequencing of the oracles is fairly loose. Think of the prophets as the literary equivalent of a beautiful quilt. The carefully cut bits of fabric, of widely differing origin, fit together into a beautiful whole. In the prophets, literary order arises from the combination of otherwise disconnected things. Oracles of widely differing moods alternate as a way of drawing the audience into this complex world and forcing them to think deeply about an appropriate theological response to it.

So perhaps it is more useful to think of these chapters in terms of broad themes. Three immediately leap out.

The first is the *identity of the community*. These people possess a narrative (and the narrative possesses them); it is one of redemptive suffering. In its worship, it can remind God of its distress and seek deliverance (59:1-15a) but can also hear the prophet's promise that God does indeed hear and act (59:15b-20). This community is gifted with prophets, who speak words of weal and woe, and both recall the people to its story and recast that story for a new day.

Daringly, the first oracle in these chapters (56:1-8) invites eunuchs and foreigners who worship God to be full-fledged Israelites. This is daring because it seems superficially to contradict Deut 23:1-8's exclusion of just these people from the assembly of the Lord. More to the point, it is also daring because a small, threatened community naturally tends to build walls around itself. But for the prophet, the boundary consists of the observance of the Sabbath (and thus of social justice) not of birth. He seems even to entertain the possibility of foreigners becoming priests (56:6-7).

Such a boundary can thus cut across the visible community, marking off some for ultimate divine rejection (66:1-6) because they engage in idolatry, though they also have close connections to the Temple. Some scholars propose that we should understand this intercommunity strife as a reflection of social conflict among groups with differing levels access to power. This is possible, but not how the prophet understands the issue. For him, the problem is a more universal one.

This becomes clear in chapters 60-62, which lays out the mission of the prophets as the care for the poor, captive, and oppressed of Israel (61:1-3). Israel by definition consists of the downtrodden, who now will live in peace with their erstwhile oppressors (61:3-7). The citizens of a rebuilt Jerusalem will wear the label "holy people, redeemed of Yahweh" (62:12). The redeemed community owes its new flourishing life to God, and they will acknowledge this in all they do, especially in their dealings with one another.

Hence the second theme: *ethics*. Like all previous prophets, the ones responsible for Isaiah 56-66 envision a community practicing justice. This means caring for the poor and using festivals as opportunities to help them (58:1-14; cf. Neh 8:12). Even in a non-utopian world, God's people do not treat each other primarily as economic beings, as producers. Rather, they embrace a vision of human dignity that strives for balance among persons, so that they have neither too much nor too little. To do otherwise is to reject the entire history of salvation, to substitute some other narrative about reality for our own.

And grounding this theme of ethics is a third theme of Isaiah 56-66: *worship*. We read here of festivals marked, as is always the case in the Bible, by rejoicing, by care for the vulnerable, and in short by a profound awareness of the ultimate harmony infusing creation because it lies under the protection and guidance of God. Isaiah 58 picks up the perennial theme of the prophets: worship expresses commitment to the lifeways of God; hence true worship always accompanies a radical commitment to justice for all. Worship without justice is worse than useless; it is a disgusting act. Conversely, justice stands or falls on the basis of a transcendental ethic; I treat you equitably in the distribution of material and social goods because we are both subjects of the one ruler, God.

These themes run through the oracles of Isaiah 56-66. Here we see a view of a community that, while it must live under duress, nevertheless seeks to express as fully as possible the vision of God for humankind.

OUR COMMUNITY OUTSIDE UTOPIA

Problems beset all utopias as Berlin and many others have noted. Certainly the idea of the perfect society embeds contradictions that seem unresolvable in light of human sinfulness. Most utopias, More's included, envision the enslavement of some for the benefit of others. Even a text such as Isa 61:5-6, which notes that Jews will be priests while foreigners tend their vines (echoing a theme of Isaiah 55) could imply such a view, though in a very soft form. Ancient people never conceived of a truly egalitarian society; perhaps they were simply more realistic about the persistence of self-interest than we are.

But at the same time, Isaiah 56-66 (like 40-55) contains visionary language that can inspire us to dream more boldly than the ancient prophets themselves could do in their own setting. This is the great strength of

such language: its full meaning is not exhausted in any given historical or social situation. Thus Luke 4:18-30 could use Isaiah 61 as the mission statement for Jesus' ministry, even if the ancient prophet did not have Jesus in mind. The language of hope works that way.

And so it may be for us, as we try to work for justice in our own era when millions go to bed hungry while millions more drive SUVs to their lavish homes in segregated suburbs. Perhaps in avoiding a naïve belief in a utopia while simultaneously espousing some of the most daring visions of community in the Bible, the prophets of these chapters invite us to live in two worlds at the same time—that of the turbulent present, and that of God's future—and to work diligently for the transformation of the first into the second. We will not reach this goal. Utopia is not an option. Yet the longing for justice and commitment to risk-taking service are visions worth keeping alive among the people of God.

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END NOTES
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