

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

ISRAEL'S CRUCIFIXION-FOR US Second Sunday after the Epiphany Isaiah 49:1-7 Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

49:1 Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me. 2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. 3 And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." 4 But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God." 5 And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered back to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength—6 He says, "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."

7 Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

[Note #1: Verse 7 does not belong to vv.1-6; moreover, some

scholars suggest that v.7b should follow v. 12, forming the unit: 7a, 8-12, 7b. I presume that the creators of the Lectionary liked the christological flavor of v.7 and so attached it to vv.1-6; but the verse unnecessarily confuses the original unit vv.1-6 by adding "Holy One" to the possible identities of God's servant.]

[Note #2: The perplexing question of who the "servant" is in vv.1-6 is clearly stated in v. 3; but only here in the suite of Servant Psalms. Otherwise, the servant's identity is irresolvable, either as a select individual or as the whole People. If "Israel" in v. 3 is original, then how can "Israel" bring Jacob (=Israel) back to the Land of Promise in v. 5 and v. 6a? Or was "Israel" added to the text (after the return) because in fact no single Israelite brought Jacob back, but rather Cyrus the king of Persia? So while the question of the servant's identity remains, the servant's mission is clear enough: to bring Israel back to the Land of Promise, to make Israel "a light to the nations, that (God's) salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (v. 6).]

[Note #3: The exegesis that follows is exclusively for Christians, for reasons that will become increasingly clear. The text before us, especially in conjunction with the suite of Servant Psalms (read 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12), is contextually ambiguous but it is not a wax nose to be bent to our liking. Even if the fourth Psalm was written a bit later than the others, they form a cohesive whole and are mutually interpretative. The Servant Psalms were likely written during the period 587-539 BCE, that is, between the destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of the Babylonian Empire. In this sense, the immediate context is the Exile, allowing for a period of several deportations to Babylon and a brief period of return to the Land of Promise.]

[Note #4: The ambiguities in our text can, with one exception, be explained by reference to the three moments of the Exile: the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile(s) to Babylon, and the return to Jerusalem. A reader of Second Isaiah (Isa. 40-55) or even Third Isaiah (Isa. 56-66, written upon the return, c. 530 BCE) would understand the Servant Psalms in that limited context, and the exegesis will make note of those readings. But the Servant Psalms take us well beyond that context, for the simple reason that v. 6b in our text, even if loosely construed as making Israel top-dog in the world, was not fulfilled by any known "servant" at the time, not even close to the suffering/redeeming servant as described in the fourth Psalm. Only a reader who understands "Jacob/Israel/servant" as successive servants in a broad historical context can make sense of the sweeping promissory note in v. 6b. The Servant Psalms, like Second and Third Isaiah as a whole, must be read in the wider context of God's promissory history with Israel and the world, from the calling of Abram to the historical present, and into the future. As a Christ-truster reading this text in 2014 CE, I propose that the Servant Psalms are best understood as a prophetic soteriology concerning the entire history of Israel in respect to God's promise to Abram—of which we Christians, having been "grafted in" (Rom. 11:17) to that history by faith in Jesus Christ, remain a "wild shoot." We are not passive onlookers in this unfinished historical drama (for Paul, the end of the age was at hand), but for nearly 2000 years have been active participants in salvation history, which is Israel's history, that is, in history proper; for apart from Israel world history is meaningless. In Christ we are Israelites among Israelites, sharing in their holiness, that is, their distinctiveness, from our beginning in Christ until the end of history. Although our holiness, our distinctiveness, is different from historical Israel's, it is God-given and "irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). So when we read this text, it is

addressed to us, the former “nations” (v. 6), as much as to historical Israel then and now. For, since salvation history is not yet at an end (witness the Holocaust and the state of Israel), we Christ-trusters, like Israel herself, are in the thick of it all. Our standing in salvation history—in history proper—begs the question: who now is “Israel” and who now is “Gentile”? The answer, as I suspect we have known all along, will be humbling.]

DIAGNOSIS: Despising History

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Without History

Who were we when God first promised Abram that, through his progeny, “all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3, etc; the exact wording is immaterial)? Who were we when the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt? Who were we when God revealed himself in the Torah/Law? Who were we when Israel was taken prisoner to Babylon, about when the Servant Psalms were written? Who were we when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified as “king of the Jews”? We were nobodies: without a history, virtually dead, cut off from the People of God (read Eph. 2). Fair enough, but who are we now, by faith in the Crucified, God’s own beloved Son? Who are we now, some of us having suffered for the faith in those early years (and beyond)? Who are we now, nearly all of us having assimilated ourselves and our faith to worldly culture, power, and prestige through Constantine and the Church? Who are we now, having clung to such power and privilege while Israel, still “the apple of God’s eye” (Deut 32:10, etc, etc), was relentlessly and mercilessly scapegoated, herded away from us like some disease without a cure? Who are we now, after rediscovering the gospel 500 years ago? Who are we now, having killed 6,000,000 Jews (among others)? Who are we now, after God has shown his holy arm by

recreating the state of Israel (reminiscent of the return c. 530 BCE)? Who looks more like the servant of God (v. 3), the Church or Israel? With respect to Israel we are, sad to say, “without excuse” (see Rom. 1:20). And without Israel we are without a history. And it gets worse for, as always, “judgment begins with the household of God” (1 Pet. 4:17).

[If, on the other hand, we are to read our text more narrowly—and thus for us un-historically—then as onlookers to, rather than participants in, God’s history with Israel we could say: 1) that God’s servant apparently “labored in vain” to prevent the destruction of Jerusalem, that he failed to bring repentance to Israel for her apostasy, and that Jacob/Israel was exiled by God; see v. 4a; 2) that Israel’s return to Jerusalem was the minor task for God’s servant/Israel; see v. 6a; 3) that the major task for God’s servant was, by virtue of the return, still a lively promise; see v. 6b. That much we could readily grant. But if we could part the curtain of history just a bit, we might, from our perspective as Christ-trusters, see that major task fulfilled, at least for us, in Jesus Christ. If salvation comes only through Christ (Acts 4:12), even or especially for Israel, then the question remains how God’s servant (Israel or Jesus or the Church) could bring “salvation to the end of the earth” (v. 6b). Quite apart from Israel, there are many more “families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3) yet to be included in Christ. The servant’s major task, then, is only partly fulfilled. In view of the subsequent history of Israel, and the Church’s failure to join in Israel’s history, God’s promise to Abram remains the chief problem posed by the text.]

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Flight from History

If the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the “king of the Jews,” is for us Christ-trusters the formative event in salvation history that gave us a history, if only in

him and thus also in Israel—fulfilling God’s promise to Abram in v. 3 and v. 6b—how is it that we have failed to become historical alongside Israel? This is not a question about missionary activity (Paul’s efforts notwithstanding) or about Israel’s failure to apprehend her messiah (that in any case is now impossible). This is about our failure to apprehend Israel as God’s instrument of salvation “to the ends of the earth,” that is, “to all the families of the earth”—and so to apprehend ourselves as God’s instruments as well. We have not trusted in this promise—hence also in the God of this promise—the very promise, the very God, that we claim to trust (we now call this failure “sin”). How can this sweeping statement be true? See Step 1. Our text tells us that trusting in God is a hidden enterprise, as hidden as the failure of God’s servant to prevent the Exile. “In the shadow of his hand he hid me” (v. 2). What we Christ-trusters are facing, like the servant in our text, is real failure, historical failure. Our scapegoating of Israel (among others) throughout world history was like Exile over and over again; and the Holocaust (among other genocides) demonstrates our flight from the history of salvation. Saving faith is not just about us!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *God Hidden in Israel’s Suffering*

Our text, together with the other Servant Psalms, reveals the God-awful truth about what God is doing in salvation history. But that revealing is also concealed. We can see what God is doing but we are confounded by it. Neither faith nor unfaith can make sense of it; as Paul said, God’s ways are “inscrutable” (Rom. 11:33), a bottomless conundrum. The servant of God, an enigma to himself and to the world, sees Israel’s failure to trust in God, his own failure as a servant of God (v. 1), and the exilic suffering of Jacob/Israel (v. 2 and v. 4a). And yet, despite his/Israel’s failure and suffering at the behest of God

(v. 1), it is nonetheless “too light” a task for the servant/Israel “to restore the survivors of Israel” (v. 6a)! The *greater task* that God has given his servant/Israel is “to be a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (v. 6b). In this task he/Israel will suffer greatly, though now innocently (this is made explicit in the celebrated fourth Servant Psalm in Isa. 52-53) and, like the servant/Israel in our text, will be seen as a failure. Who wants *that* assignment? Is *that* what it means to be “a light to the nations”? Is *that* what it means for God to be “glorified” (v. 3)? God, therefore, is implicated in the innocent suffering of his own beloved Children; see Isa. 53:10. The Servant Psalms are clear enough on that point. Who, if not Israel, can endure or even contemplate such a task? We Christ-trusters know, of course, that Israel’s hidden suffering in Jesus Christ (we see it, they don’t) was the means by which we nobodies were saved, “grafted in” to the Children of God (again, we see it but they don’t). Truly, the shadow of God’s hand has fallen upon God’s servant/Israel (v. 2). Wasn’t Jesus’ suffering enough? Or has his servanthood passed to us, his body, the Church? It is an impossible thing to contemplate—though we must, along with Israel—that our own task might well be suffering *for others* to bring salvation to *them*. Yet the history of Israel’s suffering at the hand of the Church says that God’s salvific task is not yet completed. If massive suffering is what happens to the Children of God (not for themselves but for others), what, then, is in store for us Christ-trusters? Is it possible that our death, the death of the Church, though well deserved for participating in the mass-murder of the Children of God (among others) and thus not entering into God’s history with Israel, will be the very means of fulfilling v. 6b—not of course for ourselves but for many other “families of the earth”? Or is that task (requiring great suffering) not ours at all but Israel’s, to our shame and God’s “glory”? These questions cannot be

positively answered apart from the historical fulfillment of God's Promise. But that would mean embracing history...

PROGNOSIS: Embracing History

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Israel's Crucifixion

For us, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus means that God is including us in his promise to "bless all the families of the earth." Jesus, the "king of the Jews," accomplished for us nobodies what was in every way impossible for us. In that task, Jesus fulfilled for us the original promise to Abram. But Jesus, God's "servant" (Phil. 2:7), also raised the stakes. In him, we see for the first time that what we needed to be saved from is sin, unbelief (and its consequence, death), exactly the same sin/unbelief/death that has plagued the Children of God from the beginning. The Gospel organically binds us all together in that failure, but also binds us all together in the promise. Jesus, the "Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), "for our sake was made to be sin who knew no sin" in order for us to be included among the Children of God and to "become the righteousness of God in him/Christ" (2 Cor. 5:21). Being thus "grafted in" to Israel means that God has injected us Christ-trusters into Israel's history, not only for Israel (to the "glory" of God; v. 3) but in a larger sense for the salvation of "the nations" (v. 6b). This is how God's promise to Abram is being fulfilled; but neither Israel nor the Church recognizes our inclusion. Nonetheless we are included by virtue of Christ's own organic inclusion. Moreover there are other "families of the earth" yet to be saved from sin and thus to be included in God's promise. Our own inclusion into Israel may be hidden from the world but not entirely from us. We, like Israel, now share in the *greater task* for God's servant "to be a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the end of the earth" (v. 6b). With that shared task, we one-time nobodies have

entered into history proper, God's history. Though it is a history fraught with suffering (for others), it is the only history that promises God's "blessing" (Gen. 12:3).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting the Promise*

Our holiness, our distinctiveness, unlike Israel's, is our faith *alone*. Trusting in Christ means trusting in God's promise; hence also in the God of that promise. That is our shared "blessing" with Israel. We have shared in Israel's history as well, whether we have recognized that or not. But now that we do, now that we trust that that is so—for that is what the promise says—we are surely in awe of it and driven to our knees. *After* we have repented of our horrific failures (see Step 1), but only after that, we may begin to reflect in earnest, if only tentatively, what our shared blessing with a crucified and risen Israel might mean for the world. Prayer for the strength to repent and for the strength to be an honorable sibling in the family of God is the rightful companion to such faith. A Confession of Faith that recognizes our inclusion into Israel would help us "never to forget" the heavy task laid before us both (v. 6b). With the servant in our text, we may, even or especially in our failures, exclaim, "Yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God" (v. 4).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Servants of God*

With us or without us, God's promise will be completely fulfilled. It may be without us! But if we muster the courage, that is, the love, to enter into God's history along with Israel, then our blessing will be realized in world-history, incarnated as it were. But that would mean entering into a suffering world, a world under sentence of death (even as it is a world under the promise of life). It would mean relinquishing our hold on worldly power and prestige and privilege, and devoting our energies to a suffering world; no doubt also

becoming poor. Such a dispossession would be to God's "glory" and perhaps ours as well. We are servants to the world, are we not? This strange "blessing" of ours may well be thought of as folly or stupidity, maybe even by Israel herself—for God's hand casts a heavy shadow. But for us love is never foolish, never just a lark; it is the activity of the Holy Spirit recreating the world in the image of Christ. We have all the gifts needed to the task; we do not have to create them (1 Cor. 1:4-9). Our servanthood to the world would mean being a humble Church. It would mean, like Pope Francis did, declining the papal suite in favor of the guest room. It's a start. But the crucifixion of the Jews must never happen again—unless we ourselves are crucified along with them. If the gospel—which is the ultimate blessing of the Promise—is to be at all credible to the world, let alone to Israel, it will be offered, in the Name of God, in servanthood to the world.