

## A Baptismal Crossing Isaiah 42:1-9

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Who in the Old Testament reading of Isaiah is “you”? “You,” to make a long story short, is *you*—you, the reader of this page, and I. A long story that is, from the original “you” of this Isaianic song to the you who are reading it now.

I, Yahweh, call *you* in righteousness  
and take *you* by the hand.  
I form and make of *you*  
the covenant of the people,  
the light of the heathen. (v. 6)

You and I, here and now, are obviously not those sixth century B.C. Jewish exiles far from their Palestinian home, crushed and demeaned by their Babylonian captors, disillusioned with impotent old Yahweh and attracted to his glossier rivals Marduk and Bel and Nebo.

But if we are not the intended addressees of Second Isaiah, what are we doing reading their mail? Eavesdropping? Who gave us the right? And do not answer, please, “But this is the Word of God,” which is assumed automatically to apply to everyone. That is the way biblicists (including highly sophisticated historical critics) short-circuit the long story, merely by invoking—without authorization—some Name-dropping formula like verse five, “Thus says Yahweh, the Lord.” Indeed the Lord does say. But as Luther reminded biblicist Carlstadt, one must always ask first the truly historical question, To *whom* did the Lord say it? And by all historical evidence the Lord did not say Isaiah 42:1-9 to *us*—who, if we appear in that poem at all, appear as “the heathen.”

But then why, by what long story, have we heathen come to take such liberties with the Lord's invitation to his Jewish people as if that included us as well? “Behold my servant,” he invited them, “in whom I have delight.” (v. 1) What entitles us to “behold” their delightful Servant of the Lord as ours? Aren't we, by horning in on the beholding, being peeping-toms, religious voyeurs? It all depends, doesn't it, on who the beloved Servant is? I do not mean by that, who the Servant was at the time of Second Isaiah. That we do not know for sure and, since the prophet was not all that specific about the Servant's identity then, or all that consistent, we do well not to pry unduly.

What we do know, in a way that even Second Isaiah did not, is that in the long story the favorite Servant of the Lord eventually turned out to be that one who “came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan,” Jesus. At his baptism “a voice came from heaven,” repeating itself after half a millennium but this time with unerring specificity, “*You* are my Son, the Beloved, my favor rests on you.” (Mark 1:11) In today's liturgy for the Festival of the Baptism of Our Lord, the ancient “you” of Second Isaiah now crosses over to you and me through the connecting “you,” Jesus. Granted, this Christian recourse to that later lone Jew in order to admit us to his people's heritage hardly relieves the scandal of us heathen as party – crashers. But at least it does fix responsibility for our inclusion squarely upon him—not on some anonymous “thus says the Lord”—and upon us for ever having believed him.

For us, then, there is no point in pretending to read Isaiah forty-two as though we did not know how it comes out in the end—who the “you” is, and who the Servant. That would be

phoney historianship or antiquarianism. We have seen the answer, so we believe, at the back of the book. That is why the front part, however “old,” is ours as well.

### Initial Diagnosis: Babylon

If we wish to be numbered among Second Isaiah’s “you,” it is only fair that we accept also his diagnosis. This will not require fancying ourselves as captive Jews in long ago Babylon; we do not have to lose ourselves in that history. On the other hand, we might just find ourselves in it, thanks to the prophetic way it is “seen through” (dia-gnosed) not only by this anonymous prophet but by the One whose “voice” he is.

What is the problem confronting the prophet? To begin with, his people have been scattered—some no doubt by choice, but many by slave-raids and deportation—from their “devastated land” (49:19), with Jerusalem left behind in “heaps.” Now as dislocated nobodies in a hostile environment they “fear continually all the day because of the fury of the oppressor.” (51:13) They are victims of the harshest injustice, “a people robbed and plundered...trapped in holes and hidden in prisons” (42:22), the objects of “devastation and destruction, famine and sword,” whose “sons have fainted [and] lie at the head of every street like an antelope in a net.” (51:19, 20) Such persecution may defy imagination, yet even the most sheltered of us must know in some measure what it is to be “a dimly burning wick,” “a bruised reed,” (v. 3) that is, not just the doers of injustice but the ones it is done to—to the very verge of being burned out.

Probably nothing quite so much as literal exile, being forced from the security of familiar haunts and from the accustomed protection of one’s civil rights, is apt to drive home how all human misery is not just self-imposed but world-imposed, environmentally. Injustice may also be what we ourselves commit, yes, but at least as often it is what is inflicted upon us by people and principalities under whom we are compelled to live and work. That is not always apparent. Back in the cozy safety of Jerusalem, where your backyard was your own and even the neighbors’ dog respected you, it was tempting to imagine that, if injustice befell you, there was no one to blame but yourself, or yourself and perhaps city-hall. That myopia is itself part of our captivity.

Once you are cut off from Jerusalem and have all you can do to survive under the Chaldeans, your sense of injustice becomes remarkably cosmopolitan, trans-national, inter-ethnic. There, in an inhospitable land, you cannot help but hope that sometime, someone else, “will bring forth justice,” not to the city-council back in Jerusalem, but this time to all “the nations” (v. 1), to “the coastlands” (v. 4), to the whole “earth” (v. 4), to “the heathen” (v. 6), on whom your and your people’s fate—you finally discover—has always depended. Unjust Babylon is not geographically all that distant; it also controls Jerusalem. Physical banishment has a way of making that diagnosis vivid.

Isn’t that why genuine justice (*mishpat*), when it does occur, strikes us as surprising, as the exception, and injustice strikes us as the rule: because those in this world on whose hospitality we depend, the powers who control our historical sojourn, can be counted on to deal justly with us only so long as our interests are not foreign to theirs? Maybe for awhile we can pose as guests, but before long we wear out our welcome. The Japanese say company are like fish: after three days they begin to smell. So in a world of strangers the hosts’ justice is short-lived and highly selective. What is missing is not justice altogether, justice now and then, but justice as a steady diet, lasting and consistent and all-inclusive. The need for someone who not only will “bring forth” justice (vv. 1, 3) but who, having brought it forth, will “establish” it as a permanent feature of existence. “Righteousness,” as the prophet knows, needs to happen “as truth” (v. 3), as what life truly is all about always, not a sometime deviation from the statistical norm.

That is the problem, and then only in its most evident form: the “earth” is a Babylon, we are its exiles, and the *mishpat* which exiles so sorely need for survival is at best erratic and abnormal, just enough to drive them to despair.

### Advanced Diagnosis: Blindness

Up against Babylon's injustice, where do despairing exiles look for help? I suppose they look where any exiles do, at least at first, to Babylon. After all, if it is Chaldean power that put us in exile, that must be what we need too, Chaldean power, to get us out. What is the secret of our captors' clout and moxie? What ever it is, that is for us.

Isn't that reasonable, to emulate our captors in order to be free of them? If it is, then that brand of rationality, says Second Isaiah, is "blind." That is our captivity, our "dungeon," "the prison [of our] darkness." (v. 7) The very metaphors emphasize how the prisoners' mentality, just because of its compelling reasonableness, has already hoodwinked the victims. By now they have so internalized Babylon that it dominates even the way they "behold" their escape from it, or rather mis-behold it.

But mis-beholding is not only blindness. It is also injustice, unrighteousness. Victims, too, practice injustice. It may not be the obvious Babylonian variety, the overt victimizing of other human beings. Exiles' injustice is subtler but at least as fatal: mis-beholding the deliverer. That does the gravest injustice to the real Deliverer. Soterological mis-beholding, known also as idolatry, is injustice at its source.

But did the exiles—I mean the original Jewish ones in Babylon—really idolize Babylonian superiority as cravenly as all that? Doesn't Second Isaiah himself reflect how that superiority had already begun to slip? Wasn't it widely suspected, also among the exiles, that the once mighty Chaldean empire of Nebuchadnezzar, now in the hands of inferior successors, was soon doomed to defeat by a new foreign invader, the bold and exciting Cyrus of Persia? Isn't it likely that he was the one on whom the exiles were now betting? From their standpoint, wasn't Cyrus, if conquerors there must be, the thinking man's conqueror?

Indeed, even among Babylonians there seems to have been a powerful priestly class, angered at their own government's neglect of the god Marduk, who likewise looked to the oncoming Cyrus for deliverance and for the renewed worship of Marduk which he promised to bring. Eventually it was disaffected Babylonians within the walls who opened the gates of the city to Cyrus' general, who entered it without a struggle. So much for Babylonian superiority, as also the exiles must surely have "beheld." Rightly so. But righteously so?

The trouble is, even Cyrus the Persian was just a more successful version of the Babylonian's kind of power. He happened to be better at it than they currently were, and more attentive to their own god Marduk than they were. Any Jewish exiles, therefore, who grasped at straws and turned to Cyrus as their new deliverer were still dreaming like slaves. They were courting the same Mardukian idolatry he was.

But doesn't Second Isaiah extol Cyrus as Yahweh's "anointed" (45:1), by whom the Jewish "prey would be taken from the mighty" Chaldeans (49:24) and who would "set my exiles free"? (45:13) That Cyrus was Yahweh's instrument, there is no need to deny, for Yahweh too can operate with Persian power. He can play terribly rough. (47; 43:14-17) Yet quite apart from the fact that Second Isaiah expected more from Cyrus than he got, even this optimistic prophet had to admit that when it came to Cyrus' knowing the real Source of his power, he "does not know" Yahweh.

Says Yahweh to Cyrus,

*I surname you, though you do not know me, ...  
I gird you, though you do not know me. (45:4,5)*

Says Cyrus, in a well-publicized inscription about himself,

Through all lands [Marduk] made his way, [Marduk] looked, [Marduk] sought a righteous prince, a being whom [Marduk] loved, whom [Marduk] took by the hand. Cyrus, King of Anshan, [Marduk] called by name and designated him to rule over all lands.

To this the exiles may object, “Marduk, Schmarduk, what’s in a name, so long as Cyrus—under whatever gods—gets the job done?” That pragmatic attitude may be good enough for Cyrus, though then again it may not. In any case, such theological opportunism will never do for exiles. It only deepens their “darkness.” As if it did not matter whether the god in question were Yahweh, so long as someone, anyone, come to the exiles’ aid. How bureaucratic of them, how managerially modern, where what counts nowadays is the job-description and its goal regardless of who it is who does it. The doer had better be an expert, of course, but if she is not she is after all an exchangeable unit and can always be replaced. In its theological form that sort of bureaucratic “rationality,” as Max Weber called it, Second Isaiah calls idolatry. It is the “dungeon” which keeps exiles mis-beholding their deliverer, blind in their own injustice.

### **Final Diagnosis: Blame**

So the exiles are the victims of Babylon’s injustice, yet they themselves compound the injustice with their own violation of the Lord’s *mishpat* by looking elsewhere—Marduk, Nebo, whatever works—for help. But then, notice, because of their own slavish complicity, the Babylonian injustice against them turns out to be, at bottom, their just due. Injustice functions as justice? In the end the captives’ oppression is not only the cruel doing of the Babylonians but the just doing as well of Yahweh. Ironically, there was some truth after all to the canny advice, when in captivity look to the captor. But that is so only if exiles recognize their real Exiler, and that their exile at his hands is all too just, rather than be preoccupied with mini-oppressors like the Chaldeans.

Evidently, one *reason* exiles cannot behold the Lord as their hope is that they cannot behold him as their Afflictor, and that as part of his *mishpat*. How could such injustice as they incur be what they have coming from him? However privileged their status as Yahweh’s servants, maybe precisely because of their status, they deserve the special reproach, “Who is blind but my servant?...Who is blind...as the servant of the Lord?” (42:19)

Rather than believe that, exiles would prefer to focus instead upon tyrants like Nebuchadrezzar and, when talk turns to good old Yahweh, excuse him as probably having forgotten them or as having done all he could though he means well. Yahweh, forgetful? Shorthanded? That is as wishful as it is mistaken.

Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler,  
and Israel to the robbers?  
Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned...?  
So he poured upon him the heat of his anger and the might of battle. (42:24-25)

So “look, you blind,” says the prophet, “that you may see.” (42:18) Who, we were asking, is “you”? Is there a motion to withdraw the question?

### **Initial Prognosis: Birth-pangs**

Seeing through us is one thing, seeing us through is quite another. So much so that in the crossing we need to change the subject—away from ourselves, that is, the subjects under diagnosis. But the new subject to whom attention shifts is not, as pious folk might suppose, God. At least not God in mere contrast to us. That would be too religious for our own good. Anyway

there is no need for “God the Lord” (v. 5) to *enter* the transaction when in truth it has been God’s affair—for good or ill, “weal and woe”—from the outset. The change of subject is away from us, all right, but *to...well*, to whom? Answer: to another one of us—the Servant, as Second Isaiah calls him, or in the Markan gospel for this festival, “Jesus Christ.” (1:1)

Granted, the whole point of the Markan account of Jesus’ baptism seems to be that this man, God’s unique “Son,” the Isaianic “Lord” for whom John the Baptizer was preparing the way (1:1-11), just as Second Isaiah had stressed that the Servant was entrusted with doing what only God can do. (vv. 1-4) All of which has the effect, doesn’t it, of contrasting Jesus with us? So isn’t this the standard change-of-subject after all, native to most religions, in which the patients who are diagnosed as hopeless must finally turn to the only superior power left to turn to, the divine physician, the healing deity?

But what if, as in the case at hand, the physician himself is one of the patients, a fellow victim inhabiting their “earth” (v. 4), a nobody on their “street” (v. 2), as sensorily beholdable as any idol, baptized in the same river with the rest of the “sinners,” and so generally like them as to leave us wondering when the Isaianic title, “servant,” refers to him and when to his people. This religiously unconventional approach is what Second Isaiah calls “the new things” by contrast with “the former things.” (v.9) The challenge is to enjoy what Second Isaiah calls “good tidings” (40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1) and Mark calls “the gospel” (1:1)—too good not to be true.

How good it is for once to find a leader in the religious community who is so humbly a servant, a minister, that “he will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street.” (v. 2) This is one public servant who does not crave publicity or toot his own horn. But then, comes back the objection, he hardly needs to be when he has Second Isaiah to toot it for him and the evangelist Mark and 1,500 years of Bible copying and distributing and reading to provide him the most ambitious PR network in history. (This article is just one more pitch.) By comparison the most headlined denominational executives with their self-publicizing house-organs and mass-mailings appear as shrinking violets alongside Jesus who, like no other, is “famous to all ages.” Even if in the Markan account his religious experience at his baptism was not observed by anyone else, that is scarcely the case anymore. By now that must be one of the most publicized private experiences ever. Are the tidings about him so good, after all?

There are other and probably better ways to interpret the verse, “He will not cry or lift up his voice...” The verse may be describing not the Servant’s self-modesty but his forbearance toward others, his compassion for the “bruised reed” and the “dimly burning wick.” It is against them, then, that he does not “lift up his voice or make it heard in the street” as judgment. Here the divine *mishpat* become “the sparing of these already under sentence of death.” (Westermann) Unlike “earlier prophets of doom,” this Servant brings “the quiet proclamation of God’s ... comfort to the exiles.” (Whybray) That cheering interpretation, we might add, is echoed by Mark, who contrasts John the Baptizer, a latter-day prophet of doom, with Jesus and his better baptism of the Healing Spirit. (1:7,8) “When he [Jesus] touches upon [sinners’] sin he does it so gently that the reproach is hardly noticeable.” (Elert) What is so good then about Servant Jesus’ reticence is that in him God’s final diagnosis of “you deaf” and “you blind” is being silenced, consuming Jesus instead. In Jesus’ restraint God, to put it plainly, swallows hard, bites his tongue, eats his own words. Evidently there are times when it is best, for us and our salvation, that God keeps silent, and Servant Jesus is that suffering silence of God.

Return for a moment to the earlier, alternative exegesis. Suppose the Servant’s silence does refer to his personal humility. The effect for us is still the same good tidings. For what is it that is objectionable about a superior’s advertising himself? Is it only that bragging reflects conceit? That would hurt only him. Isn’t it that bragging also hurts others, those he impresses: bruised reeds, mis-beholders, the condemned? The celebrity’s obtrusive superiority, the one-sidedness of his public image—only his best foot forward, his most photogenic profile, no hint of his own doom—makes the prosaic, unsung lives of his hearers and readers seem all the more insignificant. By comparison, how out of it they feel, that they have to fantasize vicariously with

him in order to belong. I once heard a conscientious pastor confess that whenever he reads his denomination's newspaper he is depressed by how inferior his own obscure ministry appears. Superstars, especially saintly ones, are like the final diagnosis, condemning.

Still, didn't Jesus' own superiority, his superior helpfulness, have the similar effect of depressing those he helped? Remember Peter's "Depart from me, for I am a sinner." Yes, but that accusatory effect upon others seems to be exactly why Jesus imposed such a news-blackout on his fans and kept his accomplishments as secret as possible, until..

Wrede thought the "messianic secret" in the gospel of Mark was added to hide the fact that Jesus never considered himself Messiah. That theory is increasingly untenable. It is at least as credible that the historical Jesus was deliberately secretive, and for very messianic reasons: to protect little people from being overwhelmed by a distorted, one-sided superman image of himself, to keep bruised reeds from being further bruised, until...

Until when? "Till," as Second Isaiah says, "he has established justice in the earth." (v. 4) And when is that? Only when the full story could finally be told, including the other side of it, the doom side. Full justice is done him not merely in his wonder-workings and exorcisms, which tend to overawe, but finally only in his suffering and defeat on the cross—"woe" as well as "weal"—which is where justice is being done to the dimly burning wicks. Until the cross it would have been premature for him to be "heard in the street," knowing the wicks and the reeds would have heard the wrong message and been crushed by it.

Only at the bitter end, where exiles are, did the time finally arrive for him to "cry and lift up his voice," and then hardly in the form of an ego trip: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) Second Isaiah had anticipated this cry of the Servant.

For a long time  
I have held my peace;  
I have kept still  
and restrained myself;  
Now I will cry out  
like a woman in travail,  
I will gasp and pant. (42:14)

What a graphic christological metaphor: the mother bears the pain so her baby need not die but live. And her scream, no one could mistake for a commercial.

The newborn ones who are delivered through the pangs of Jesus' fatal baptism are not likely to construe his motherly cry as conceit. To their ears, no longer deaf, it is the best of tidings. Nor do they quibble whether such a trade-off of One for the others strictly qualifies as justice, *misphat*. It does when it is the pathos of that Parent "who created the heavens and...the earth and...gives breath to the people on it" (v. 5) and now goes into labor to the point of death so that the little ones may live. Any tidings as good as that have got to be just.

### **Advanced Prognosis: Beholders**

Through a change of subject from the exiles to the Servant, Yahweh's retributive justice becomes a justice of mercy. But in the course of that crossing, so do the exiles become something new, his beholders. Recall, injustice is not only what they suffer from their Babylonian captors but also the self imprisonment by which they are blinded to their true Deliverer, with the result that they themselves incur blame for their Babylonian captivity. The intervention by Servant Jesus, however, does not merely relieve them of blame, as though in all other respects they remain the same, "blind." The tidings are better than that. As vicarious as Second Isaiah's christology is, and Mark's after him, ineffectual it is not. The solution to the exiles' captivity is not in the Servant alone but, better than that, also in their beholding him.

The Servant's beholders still get bruised and burn dimly, and justly so, just as the Servant did. But that is what is new about them: "just as the Servant did." They now suffer and die as they never could have before, as not even the "servant" Cyrus could but only the beloved Son does, namely, as the Lord's clear-eyed beholders. As such, the exiles are already out of the "darkness" and "dungeon" on their way home to a new life, pre-enjoying resurrection. The Lord said of his Servant, "I have put my spirit upon him" (v. 1) and at Jesus' baptism he did so. (Mark 1:10) To "behold" is to "be held" by that same holying Spirit, but now as a personal act of our own, newly created subjects, believing as no one else can do for us. Though Christ died in our stead, he rose not in our stead but to initiate resurrections of our own.

Commentators who claim that Second Isaiah foresaw the Servant's resurrection from the dead claim too much. The New Testament ought to be permitted a few surprises of its own. But even in the Gospel of Mark, whose report of the resurrection of Jesus is sparse enough, the reader need not wait until the open tomb to find rebirth among Jesus' beholders. While he was still on the cross a centurion—notice, not a disciple but a bona fide "heathen"—beheld the same thing which the "voice from heaven" and the descending Spirit had given Jesus to behold. "Truly this man was a son of God." (Mark 1:11; 15:39) "The heathen centurion...heard Jesus' cry of Godforsakenness in rejection by God, and believed." (Moltmann) Such believing or beholding or being held is, as Paul later discovered, the sinner's own *mishpat*.

### **Final Prognosis: Brilliance**

This same pitying *mishpat* extends even to our world-oppressor, Babylon, and through us, Babylon's victims. But how can we go as "a light to the nations" (v. 6) if we go looking like victims, resembling all over again "those who sit in darkness"? (v. 7) We go resembling the Servant, not for a moment concealing our servanthood any more than he did, but also not concealing the infectious grin which grows on us through beholding him.

What hilarious secret has the Servant heard that, as we hear it too, it begins to show on us, up and down "the earth" all the way to "the coastlands"? (v. 4) Really, his secret is highly communicable: "...My chosen, in whom my soul delights" (v. 1), "...My beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11) That highly placed favoritism toward the nobodies is the Servant's beauty, which is also in the eyes of his beholders and in their servantlike communities and institutions. That is what makes them not just "a covenant to the people" but, as one Jewish scholar captures the Hebrew pun, "a *brilliance* to the people." (v. 6)

When one prisoner laughs, the others—maybe even the jailer—brighten too, probably with curiosity, wondering what she knows that they don't know, and not resting till they are in on her joke. Even Babylonian bureaucracy and Mardukian idolatry cannot extinguish the reeds and wicks who kindle to Jesus the Servant and who, reflecting him, light up the surrounding "dungeon" with their up-beat, high-morale liberation. It is Christ's church—Vatican II remembered to call it his *lumen gentium*—which is what the "heathen" have coming to them. It serves them right. *Mishpat*.