ALUMNI REUNION 2013

“Gladly learn, gladly teach, gladly remember”

Concordia Seminary invites graduates, spouses, and widows of class years ending in “3” or “8” to the Alumni Reunion, to be held on the Seminary campus June 4-6, 2013.

Featured events will include an alumni/faculty cookout, a banquet, class gatherings, and a Jubilarian worship service.

Details and registration information will be mailed in late February and will also be available on www.csl.edu.
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With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day:

Give thanks to the Lord,
call upon his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples,
proclaim that his name is exalted. (Is 12:3–4)

Sometimes things work out in ways better than we could have planned or even imagined. As it turns out, we are in the thick of a smattering of readings from the prophet Isaiah in series C of the three-year lectionary. The thanksgiving song above is yet to come, a cool drink of water in the ashen desert of Lent, which makes it a sweet serendipity that this issue focuses our attention on the prophet Isaiah, and more pointedly on the importance of his word for the life and ministry of the church. We are at a particular moment in Concordia Seminary’s history where the faculty’s strength in the exegesis of Isaiah is, perhaps, at an all-time high. Three of the writers of these articles are simultaneously busy writing commentaries on Isaiah. The fourth has spent the vast majority of his research on him. And so, we thought it worthwhile to share the fruits of their wisdom and reflection with you.

We do so, however, with an emphasis not on the current state of academic discourse on Isaiah (although these scholars could easily speak to that), but on how Isaiah speaks to your own reflection and practice in ministry and to the current state of affairs in church and world. To that end, you will find practical resources on Isaiah for preaching, teaching, and Bible study to accompany this issue at www.ConcordiaTheology.org.

If you have been to www.ConcordiaTheology.org recently, you will have noticed some discussion there too regarding the office of the ministry. This fall, when Lutheran Witness magazine produced an issue on “The Lord’s Office,” it provoked a bit of conversation on campus. Since that magazine addresses issues from a more “popular” perspective, we thought it helpful to provide resources on the office of the ministry with a scholarly purview in mind. That conversation is being extended to editorials in this issue of Concordia Journal. Were he alive today, I suspect the prophet Isaiah might too have a word or two to speak on that topic.

All of which is why it is nice that the lectionary is speaking Isaiah’s word to us in the here and now. If nothing else, Isaiah is one of the clearest voices to remind us that God’s good word of gospel is just as much a living breath in the Old Testament as it is in the New, despite whatever Marcion of Sinope might have to say about it.

There is, indeed, this day much water still to draw from the wells of this prophet. And the water tastes so refreshing that we might not be able to do anything other than to give thanks to the Lord for it, and then to make it known among all who have ears to hear, eyes to see, and minds to comprehend.

Travis J. Scholl
Managing Editor of Theological Publications
Jesus said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure, even to eat. (Mk 6:31)

Oh, what a sweet invitation, and how sad, almost inexplicable that I don’t retreat more often with Jesus. “Oh, what peace we often forfeit; oh, what needless pain we bear—all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.”1 It weighs on us, the work of the congregation, of the Seminary, being caught up in the “coming and going” of people, and therefore you would think we’d spend more time with him “in whom we live, move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Do our weak devotional lives reflect some illusion that our sufficiency is of ourselves? (2 Cor 3:5). No beating up intended here; we get enough of that in life. Our God waits and watches us with fatherly patience. “He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Ps 103:14). Yes, there are reasons, understandable reasons, why we pastors don’t come apart with Jesus as often as we should. My modest hope for these paragraphs is that Jesus’s invitation—“Come away”—will be inviting surround sound as we pursue our daily duties.

The volume of work is one reason we don’t retreat as often as we’d like. There is so much to do, so many people “coming and going” that like Jesus’s early disciples we sometimes have to “grab a bite” and “eat on the run.” I once asked Uncle Henry (Rev. Henry F. Meyer) how he got everything done. He answered that pastors weren’t expected to do as many things back then (his ministry began in 1929) as we pastors are expected to do today. Today, there are more meetings. Today, there is more district and synodical interest in “helping us” (aka, more meetings). Today, there are more reports. Today, anyone who gets a “good idea” emails it to you, and puts the burden on you to respond. Where does that leave us? “You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary” (Lk 10:41).

How hard to pull away from our digital connectedness! I get hundreds of emails a day and presume you do too. Emails, social media, time consciousness…this is all horizontal, people to people, and it smothers the vertical. “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (Ps 73:25). Disconnect from the horizontal to come away to a deserted place? Devotions or online spiritual snippets are fine, indeed welcome, but they are still enmeshed in the horizontal web. You don’t look up at the expanse of heaven when your face is in your iPhone. “I lift up my eyes”? (Ps 121:1). Be courageous and occasionally pull away from our interconnectedness? It may be the right thing but it often comes with a price: “Don’t you care?”

We may downplay our need to retreat in a solitary place because our pastoral calling is about God, Jesus, holy things. If I had it to do over again, pastoral ministry would still be my choice. How I hope our Seminary fuels, not douses, the desire of young people for ministry! But how tempting to imagine that wearing a collar, donning a stole, or leading the Divine Service equates with being with Jesus. “Often a ritual
becomes only an evasion of real prayer. The wealth of church forms and thought may easily lead us away from our own prayer; the prayers then become beautiful and profound, but not genuine.”

When a Lutheran Witness cover featured a very young man with a clerical collar and offered articles on “The Lord’s Office,” many on our faculty took exception to what appeared to be an incomplete portrayal of the pastoral ministry. One of my concerns about that issue is that a reader could easily infer that the collar and office provide some immunity from the temptations of the devil, the world and our sinful flesh. Such an inference by a lay person or pastor is wrong, dead wrong. The hearts of seminarians and pastors are as impure as they come, and what we don’t recognize unless we take ourselves to a deserted place, we unconsciously learn to conceal from ourselves and others. “Who can discern his errors?” (Ps 19:12). Satan works subtly in our church systems to mute our individual realization that I desperately need a Savior, that you need Jesus. “The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners.”

“O ye of little faith!” (Mt 8:26). There are times when we are about to take ourselves to the desolate place but ministry interrupts. Any weary disciple has had the experience. When Jesus invited his first disciples to come away, the crowds spotted them and soon 5,000 needed to be fed. Despite the “intrusion” of ministry, Jesus remained resolute in his desire for devotion, both for himself (“He went into the hills to pray”) and for the disciples (He “made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida”) (Mk 6:45–46). Yes, there are justifiable occasions when we skip devotion but, if you’re like me, many days we are out-and-out delinquent. Luther said, “Yet we must be careful not to break the habit of true prayer and imagine other works to be necessary which, after all, are nothing of the kind. Thus at the end we become lax and lazy, cool and listless toward prayer. The devil who besets us is not lazy or careless, and our flesh is too ready and eager to sin and is disinclined to the spirit of prayer.”

When we do get there, get to that quiet place, how Jesus must smile, sitting by us and seeing us wrestle with problems all on our own. Remember Jesus admonishing Martha? Devotional time often starts with the mind whirring over the issues of the day. Sometimes it’s just normal pastoral concerns, akin in a small way to St. Paul feeling “the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor 11:28). Other times it’s more, something more than routine, perhaps grief, health, finances, relationships, and you feel a heavy weight on the chest. All week long our mind and heart takes “garbage in,” dealing with the frailties, the sins, the unbelief of people and their consequences on us. C. S. Lewis wrote that pain is “God’s megaphone. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.” The first thing in retreat is to get the “garbage out.” Not removed, just out. No effort is needed here; it happens when we go alone and our emotions well up and dominate our thoughts. This reminds us why we have come away to be with Jesus in the first place. Lest I tilt too much toward the negative, sometimes the emotions that first fill our minds in the quiet place are very good emotions, delighting us and giving occasion to thank God. But the good feelings are still that—feelings—and you know you have to rest your soul on something more. Theologically, emotions serve as the paidagogus of Galatians 3:24, the slave who
led children to school. They show how our natural being needs the sanctification of
the word or how godly emotions occasion thanks for the Spirit’s work in our life. “You
have said, ‘Seek my face.’ My heart says to you, ‘Your face, Lord, do I seek’ (Ps 27:8).
So give emotions their due. If you sit down and rush to reading or prayer, you’ll never
get to that stillness before God when Jesus can speak to you and be heard. Luther
wrote, “It is of great importance that the heart be made ready and eager for prayer . . .
What else is it but tempting God when your mouth babbles and the mind wanders to
other thoughts?”9 It’s dependable: alone in thought, earthly problems and joys sooner
or later exhaust themselves and you think, Lord, let’s talk about this. Again, Luther:

I do not bind myself to such words or syllables, but say my prayers in
one fashion today, in another tomorrow, depending upon my mood and
feeling. I stay however, as nearly as I can, with the same general thoughts
and ideas… The Holy Spirit himself preaches here, and one word of his
sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have
learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much read-
ing and speculation.10

Now that we are in the Christ-centered word, it is to be about Christ. He is not
the Walmart greeter who directs us to the aisle of self-chosen blessings to improve our
lot in life, though improvement may well result. He is not the consultant who gives us
advice for leading a congregation or seminary, though again that often happens. He is
not an instrument of forgiveness so that we can brush off guilt and continue on our
own way, our own will being done on earth, forget heaven’s will. This is Jesus, “the
image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were cre-
ated… He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head
of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in every-
thing he might be preeminent” (Col 1:15–18). Apart with Jesus in the deserted place,
we experience the fear of the Lord. “Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you
the fear of the Lord” (Ps 34:11). Not a slavish fear but also not a flip familiarity with
pliable, plastic Jesus. The wholesome fear in the desert place is awe that there is no
condemnation for my personal and pastoral sins. That being the heart, do not restrict
your Savior only to his past passion for your sins. “Where there is forgiveness of sin
there is also life and salvation.”11 All the promises of God in Holy Scripture, the good
promises to sustain your life and ministry and the promises that threaten us because
of our hidden idolatries and sin, all the promises are being fulfilled through Jesus and
that fulfillment is happening in your life, not just in the remembrance of the biblical
history seminaries teach and pastors preach.12 Obsession with Jesus as my hope for the
future grows with every retreat. “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31).
“Whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (Jn 6:37).

That’s your future. Jesus invited the disciples as a group to the desolate place.
I’ve been writing about personal devotion, time apart from others, apart from our
gathering together as church on Sundays and throughout the week. Both are necessary,
time with Jesus alone, and time with other followers of Jesus. Time alone in devotion
is eternally important because it prepares us for the day when we shall give account to 
God for the lives we have lived. The quiet time when we enter into the fear of God, 
acknowledge who we are, confess our sinful and impure hearts, and hear the promises 
of forgiveness and hope in Christ is a foretaste of our entrance into eternity. No one 
will go with you into judgment, not your family, your parishioners, your seminary, no 
one to help you, no one for you to blame. Only Jesus Christ will lead you through “the 
valley of the shadow of death.” But back to ministry we must go, and want to go, just 
as Jesus met up with the disciples at Bethsaida. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “after a 
time of quiet we meet others in a different and a fresh way.” How differently would 
we be with brother pastors, how patient with the foibles of church members, how 
compassionate with everyone God puts before us, how calm and more pastoral with 
the eternal perspective that comes from stillness alone before God! Both personal and 
corporate are needed, and needed in balance. “Let him who cannot be alone beware of 
community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.”

“In repentance and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your 
strength” (Is 30:15). Will we pastors be known as people who have spent time with Jesus?

Dale A. Meyer

Endnotes

3. Bonhoeffer says that a pastor’s authority comes from service rather than the trappings of the pastoral 
office: “The desire we so often hear expressed today for ‘episcopal figures,’ ‘priestly men,’ ‘authoritative personalities,’ 
springs frequently enough from a spiritually sick need for the admiration of men, for the establishment of visible 
human authority, because the genuine authority of service appears to be so unimpressive” (*Life Together*, 108).
5. AE, 43:188. The harsh story in Numbers 15:32–36 warns us against casually dismissing appointed time 
in prayer and meditation. God’s people keep time differently than our surrounding culture.
anger, sadness, fear, enjoyment, love, disgust, surprise, and shame.
8. Walther on emotions: “It is, indeed, proper that in your sermons you depict the happy moments which 
occasionally come to Christians when they are given a foretaste of their future bliss; but you must tell your hearers 
at the same time that these are merely passing moments in the lives of Christians, sun-rays which once in a while 
find their way into their hearts.” (*The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* [St. Louis: CPH, 1984], 312).
9. AE, 43:198–199. Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests a way to bring our thoughts back: “It is one of the particular 
difficulties of mediation that our thoughts are likely to wander and go their own way . . . When this happens it is often a help not to snatch back our thoughts convulsively, but quite calmly to incorporate into our prayer the people and the events to which our thoughts keep straying . . .” (*Life Together*, 85.)
10. AE, 43:198
11. Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar, What is the benefit of this eating and drinking?
January 3: “The Bible has been so many words to us—clouds and darkness—then all of a sudden the words 
become spirit and life because Jesus re-speaks them to us in a particular condition.”
13. Weekly Sabbaths pointed Israel to the sabbatical year and in turn the cycle of seven sabbatical years 
pointed to the Year of Jubilee. Similarly, Hebrews 4:9–11.
15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 80. The “freshness” of rest is described in Ps 92, a Sabbath psalm.
17. Acts 4:13. The question is poignant because of what is added in Isaiah 30:15: “But you were unwilling.”
One of the keys of Lutheran theology is its ability to manage tensions and polarities rather than resolve them, as a more rationalistic approach would seek to do whether rooted in Calvin or Aquinas. That is true within the currents and cross-currents facing the church in the world, and it is true within the church itself. Maybe it’s time to remind ourselves of the actions and reactions that often shape the “yin and yang” of even our own “beloved synod.” As was observed ironically then is still true now: in physics, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction; in the LCMS, too often for every action there is an equal and slightly greater reaction.

Part of our problem is the political realities of a seemingly two-party system, with leadership that tends to lead about half of the church, exacerbated by the growing sense of polarization that almost rivals the gridlock of our national political debacle. In spite of a large degree of dysfunction, the system has a certain sense of recalibration every decade or so. This may not produce balance, but it may keep us from getting too far out of balance. But the “either/or” dare never supplant the “both/and” of Lutheran theology.

So which is it, law or gospel, faith or reason, horizontal or vertical, personal or corporate, pure doctrine or aggressive mission, bread and wine or body and blood? What are we, liturgical or evangelical, protestant or catholic, congregation or church, pastors or people, male or female, our grandfather’s church or our grandchildren’s church?

Some recent examples may serve to illustrate both the need for corrective reaction and the concern for over-reaction. One that comes quickly to mind is the debate over worship—style and substance—with gradual overreactions that tend to polarize this issue into extreme positions. Instead of helpful discussion over Lutheran theological “substance” within a variety of appropriate and even culturally relevant Lutheran “styles,” we can all too easily lose track of much of any Lutheran substance, on the one hand, or become galvanized into some rigid conformities of “style,” on the other.

In our effort as a seminary to engage and to serve the whole church, our symposium this fall addressed the wide-reaching and wide-ranging topic of “justice,” in large part (as the context was set at the opening session) in reaction to a generation where such issues were suppressed as too easily connected to social-gospel tendencies. The positive reaction in many corners of our church indicated the need for this move toward better balance, at the same time that many expressed concern that we not lose our bearings either. But the conversation was very well received, and a sense of balance was fostered.

As another example, the CTCR is about to release a major study on immigration issues, with intensive research, input, and internal debate by the commission itself. In discussing the overall tone and focus, it was noted that it may well upset folks on opposite sides of this issue. This was followed by the quip that this means it is right on point: properly positioned between more extreme or polarizing views.

Or, from another context, and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, we Lutherans often like to observe that if the Catholics think we are Baptists, and the Baptists think we are Catholics, then we are probably doing some things right.
As another example, one might note some recent articles in the Lutheran Witness, emphasizing a fresh reprise and review of basic Lutheran themes, including the cover feature on “The Lord’s Office” from November, 2012. This is a very important topic, as issues of church and ministry continue to concern our church—and its ministry. Some of that is inevitable, as we manage the appropriate polarities between the proper roles and relationships of clergy and laity, the office of the public ministry and the priesthood of the baptized, clericalism and anti-clericalism, functionalist views and Romanizing tendencies, not to mention the old debates among Walther, Lohe, and Grabau.

I personally remember the introductory comments by then Concordia Seminary President John Johnson at the 150th Anniversary Theological Convocation of the LCMS back in 1997 on the topic—yes—of church and ministry, in which he observed that “difficulty with the doctrine of the Ministry is endemic to Lutheranism and a demonstration of its genius.” He went on to note that “our view of the Office of the Ministry rests on understandings and expressions of irreducible tension” and that “dis-solution of the dialectic…signals the demise of the creative tension that characterizes the historical Lutheran concept of ministry.” Others might rightly argue that we need to move beyond such debates actually to be church and to do ministry and mission, but here we are again trying to keep our balance.

This renewed emphasis may well be understood as a helpful corrective to perceived overemphasis away from a proper understanding of and respect for the office, as well as the man who fills it, hence the exhortation to “love your pastor” (as one article in the Lutheran Witness is titled). We applaud and affirm such sentiments, based on the responsibilities entrusted to our “called and ordained servants of the word.” As a seminary committed to the formation of pastors, well-grounded in the theological disciplines and formed for ministry and mission leadership amidst the challenges of our present age, we certainly share such a call for renewed support for those who will so serve in our Lord’s name. In this context, one might review the very helpful “Themes for Pastoral Education” developed by our synod, augmented by our seminary “pastoral formation outcomes” that emphasize both the habits of mind and heart and the responsibilities of the pastoral ministry in the public service of the word of God.

Nevertheless, there is always the concern for some overreaction in seeking to correct this perceived—or real—imbalance. This, in turn, can lead to the same problem in the other direction. It is precisely at this point that our language must be careful and clear, and we would call attention to the helpful joint statement published by the systematics departments of both seminaries: “The Office of the Holy Ministry” *CTQ* 70 (2006): 97–111 and *CJ* 33 (2007): 242–255 (also be made available on www.ConcordiaTheology.org). I commend continuing discussion of these important issues on both sides of the proverbial aisle, and we will follow up with some posts and suggestions for further reading from a more technical point of view, with thanks to several of my colleagues for their insights as well. For now, I would close with a couple of examples to help sharpen our thinking.

As one illustration of the importance of the “both/and,” one might ask whether the authority of the keys is given to the church or to the office of the ministry. From
the Scriptures and our Confessions, the answer is “yes” (cf. Mt 16:19, Mt 18:18–20, Jn 20:23, SA III, 4, Tr. 22–24, Tr 67–68, LC Conf. 13–14). If given exclusively to one or the other, we have lost the proper balance. And so we might slip into the error of denying the public role of corporate (and private, for that matter) absolution that is distinctive of the office, or we might slip into asserting that only pastors can speak absolution in any sense, or worse, that only pastors can speak the Word or teach the faith. There is, of course, a distinction in the public function of the office, as performed by one called by God through the church as manifest in a congregation to do so regularly and faithfully for those who have called him, but such language needs to be precise and carefully understood, lest, again, we lose our balance, and then lose our way.

Another tension point lies in the question of authority: is it with the office or with the Word? Frankly, this one is not simply a “yes,” but if I may use words from a different context carefully, both a quatenus and not simply quia issue. That is to say, the authority of the office lies in the Word, not in the pastor’s persuasiveness, personality, education, or ordination. Without the Word the office has no authority. This also means that the authority of the office is because of (quia) the word, but also in so far as (quatenus) the Word speaks and has scope. Beyond the Word of God, the office—and the one who is called to exercise it—has no authority to speak, at least not from the office.

One could offer other tension points for helpful discussion and distinction: call or ordination, or the actual doing of ministry, yes, in the administration of the means of grace but then out the door and into the world, without slipping into a simple functionalist view? Does “everyone a minister” really mean “everyone a pastor”? Or does “not everyone a minister” really mean only pastors can do “ministry”? Is it Church and Ministry, or Ministry and Church, or just (the office of the) Ministry? Is the “uniform” of the pastoral office a sign of proper humility as one clothed with Christ (though the biblical model is really the baptismal robe of righteousness of all God’s saints), or is clergy garb the sign of authority, like a police officer? And is that proper authority one of gospel gifts or of power and privilege beyond the means of grace? One hears of excesses and abuses on both sides of the aisle. Finally, is it about fine theological distinctions or about actually being the people of God, in ministry and in mission, in church and into the world? Yes!

Andrew H. Bartelt

Endnotes

3 AC XXVIII, 20–23.
Whether understood as an inaugural call or not, Isaiah 6 plays a significant role in the structure of the book of Isaiah, and it offers a rich lode of biblical theology that plays out in the larger message of Isaiah. This brief essay will highlight several key theological themes, undergirded by careful attention to translational issues, with the goal of proclaiming God’s word as anchored in this text yet connected to the larger literary and canonical context.

Isaiah 6 introduces the central section of the larger literary unit of Isaiah 2–12. This “Book around Immanuel” turns on chapter 7, written in third person biographical style, which, in turn, is surrounded by chapters 6 and 8, in autobiographical style. Chapter 6 introduces both the need for a prophetic word and the fact that it will not be heard; chapter 8 plays out the immediate impact of the Immanuel sign, as anticipated in 7:14–25 and unpacked in 8:8 and 8:10.

Isaiah begins (1:1) with an overview of this great “vision” (יָנָה) which this great prophet “visioned” (יִתָּנֶה). Chapter 2:1 introduces the “word” (דָּרֶךְ) which he “visioned” (יִתָּנֶה) against Judah and Jerusalem, a theme that is picked up in 9:7 (ET, v. 8), where a “word” (דָּרֶךְ) falls also on Jacob and Israel. In chapter 6, Isaiah “sees” (יָנָה) the Lord God, Yahweh Seba’oth, in his heavenly throne room, surrounded by those hosts, or angelic armies (חֲגוֹיִם). This is a common description of prophetic revelation, as the prophets were privy to the information and “game plan” of the king’s inner council (see the very similar description in 1 Kgs 22:19, cf. also Jer 23:18). The reason for hearing “insider information,” however, was not so that it might be guarded or hoarded, but proclaimed.

Such revelation is also grounded in the historical realities of the day, so that prophetic proclamation would relate to the real world in which God’s people live and die. It was a crisis moment: the king was dead. King Uzziah was noted for a long and prosperous reign, 52 years, according to 2 Kings 15:2 (Azariah = Uzziah, cf. 2 Chr 26, which documents both his military expansion and his great offense in usurping the authority of the priests, which resulted in leprosy). The first half of the eighth century BC was somewhat of a “silver age” of the monarchical period, highlighted by peace,
expansion of both Israel (under Jeroboam II) and Judah, and prosperity. The early chapters of Isaiah reflect this time, further characterized by a sad and sorry decline in spiritual faithfulness.

Already in chapter 1, Isaiah denounces the “multitude of sacrifices” (1:11ff). His concern is the vain ritualism and formalism of those who “honor [God] with their lips, but their heart is far from [him]” (29:13), but the sheer quantity of animals noted in 1:11 indicates a wealthy class with an abundance of goods alongside a paucity of humility and faith. Chapters 2–4 further document this prosperity and false security (e.g., 2:7–8). Chapter 3 begins by describing the loss of male leadership and then proceeds to describe the loss of women’s fineries, with a list of 21 items that will be taken away (3:18–23). Many of these are foreign loan words, suggesting a large number of imported and exotic—and thus expensive—trinkets. The series of “woe” oracles in 5:8ff include any number of abuses by the rich over the poor, such as the buying up of real estate (5:8) and the manipulation of justice (5:23), not to mention a leisure class that spent all day at lavish feasts, with drinking from dawn to dusk and late into the evening (5:11–12, 22).

But now the king was dead. Uzziah’s son Jotham was already established as co-regent, but this was a time of transition and uncertainty, exacerbated by the growing tensions in the Middle East. The Neo-Assyrian Empire, under Tiglath-Pilser III (biblical Pul, 2 Kgs 15:19) was rising to new heights of power and terror. Within two decades, Israel would be lost to Assyria, and within two more decades, Jerusalem would be at the mercy of Sennacherib.

Yet into this moment of crisis in the house and lineage of David, Isaiah sees a king, “high and exalted” (אֲדֹנָי), sitting on a throne. The inference is indirect; God is not called king, although this is, indeed, the kingdom of God. Isaiah calls him “Adonay” (אדוניא), a title that accents God’s lordship and sovereignty. In contrast to those who are “proud and lofty” (אֲדֹנָי), 2:12ff), he is not simply lifted up in heaven above, but also on the earth beneath, on the ark where Yahweh is enthroned upon the cherubim (1 Sm 4:4, 2 Sm 6:2, Is 37:16, Ps 99:1, 1 Chr 13:6). The temple is, after all, the meeting place of Yahweh in the midst of his people where heaven and earth, God and humanity, worship above and worship below all come together in space and time for us. Here is the presence of the true king (identified explicitly at the end of 6:5), who is not dead at all, but very much alive and well and sitting on his throne.

In fact, the hems of the royal robes come down and “were filling” the temple (אֶלֶם אֲדֹנְי). The use of the otherwise intransitive verb ἐλέμων in the Qal is significant, as this is distinctive of theophanic contexts, specifically where Yahweh’s “glory” (כְּבוֹד) enters and “fills” the temple. Two key passages in this regard are, first: Exodus 40:34, where, in the dedication of the tabernacle it is reported that “the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle” (אָלָם אֲדֹנְי הַבַּיָתָה); and second, 1 Kings 8:11, where the same transitive use of the Qal also appears in the dedication of Solomon’s temple, in describing that “the priests were not able to stand to minister before the cloud, for the glory of Yahweh filled the house of Yahweh (אֶלֶם אֲדֹנְי הַבַּיָתָה אֲדֹנְי הַבַּיָתָה). Again, ἐλέμων in the Qal).
We shall return to this grammatical question in verse 3, but the theological importance of God’s “filling” the temple highlights the very presence of God on earth, where, in fact, the finite can contain the infinite, though it can never control the infinite. The interconnection of the heavenly throne room and God’s presence on earth is made manifest in our worship, as the church militant is united with the church triumphant, surrounded by angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. God “comes down” (cf. Ex 3:8) to be “with us” (“Immanuel”) to “fill” his earthly dwelling place, first in the tabernacle, then in the temple, then in the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus, and now in his very body and blood in our midst and into our lives.

Back in the theophany of Isaiah 6, this comingling of heaven’s throne room with God’s presence on earth is described further as a place of activity and power. The “fiery” seraphim with their six wings (or pairs of wings?) are clearly part of the entourage of Yahweh Seba’oth (ךבא, “hosts” or armies). They are attending to the king of heaven and earth, who is far greater than Uzziah ever could be and even David and Solomon might have been, and they humble themselves in reverence. With the third set of wings they do not simply “fly,” as is suggested by the usual translation. The root נש is used here not in the more common Qal (as in v. 6) but in the Polel, denoting some stronger sense of activity, at the very least “flew around” or maybe “hover” as the cherubim served as guardians over the ark (Ex 25:19, 1 Kgs 8:7). The antiphonal chant that follows may also suggest a flying back and forth, but in whatever sense is indicated, this is not ordinary flight.

The power of the presence of God continues to be experienced, as the angelic choir now literally rocks the house with shouts of praise that echo back and forth. Would that our worship rattled the rafters with such powerful antiphons—the way fans can sway a stadium! The kingdom of God offers more profound theology, combining the power of God’s “holiness” with the presence of God’s “glory.” These terms are rich in import, but in sum, God’s “holiness” is his “otherness,” that which would keep God at a distance, were it not his desire to make us a holy people by his grace and through the sacrifice that forgives sins and empowers holy lives. God’s “glory” is his manifest presence or substance that fills the temple and would be at the center and the head of his people on earth, just as the cloud led Israel through the wilderness and marked the presence of God in their midst, and around which the camp was organized. Hummel cites the dictum, “God’s holiness is God’s presence concealed (deus absconditus); God’s glory is God’s holiness revealed (deus revelatus).”

The “trisagion” of holiness is Hebrew superlative: sanctus sanctorum, the third degree, describing the holiest one who is present in the holy of holies. From the other side of the throne room come the shouts of glory, but again, not in a static but in an active sense. If the root והל in the Qal is also here to be understood in a transitive sense as in verse 1 (see above), then the import of this tight poetic couplet must be appreciated beyond the confines of both the heavenly and the earthly temple. To be sure, the form can be read as the noun, “fullness,” but the full sense of even the traditional translation must be comprehended. Literally, the line reads, “the fullness of all the earth is his glory.” This is usually transposed into, “all the earth is full of his glory.”
Too often this is understood as though we simply see God’s glory and goodness throughout the earth, often and only in the wonders of his creation. Indeed, “the heavens declare the glory of God and the work of his hands the firmament declares” (Ps 19:1). But, as do the tabernacle and temple theophanies, Isaiah 6 deals with more than the “first article” glory and grandeur of the Creator’s work. Here God is present in a “second article” way; this is God’s glory as his incarnational “real presence” on earth, as the word would become flesh. The point is that the whole earth is to be full of this glory of God, which we now know, fully, in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6). Isaiah 11, building on the centrality of Zion as the “magnet” for all nations of 2:2–4, indicates that the “earth will be full of the knowledge of Yahweh, as the waters cover the sea” when the “resting place” of the root of Jesse will be “glorious” (ךְבוֹד).

From a First Testament vantage point, the “glory of God” (הָנָבָד יְהֹウェָה) is never limited to any one place, but it is primarily located and associated with the ark, there in the box behind the curtain, in the holy of holies. But the seraphim are caught up not only in the power of God to come down, to be present on earth in the midst of his people, but also and even to fill all the earth. One could parse the form נָלַל as the infinitive construct that it is (which form overlaps with the noun, as a gerund), but the sense of even the noun—in this theophanic context—should be transitive, as we have seen in verse 1: thus not “fullness” but “the filling.” Or one could take the infinitive as the verbal form that it is: the filling of all the earth, or his glory is to fill all the earth.

Further confirmation of this transitive use of the Qal comes in the verse that follows, which continues the sense of God’s presence in a mysterium tremendum, “the house was filled with smoke” (אֶלְמָהּ, the Niphal form). Smoke is also associated with the presence of God, whether through sacrifice or incense, which “owns a deity nigh.” It clearly evokes the cloud of God’s presence in the tabernacle, temple, and wilderness. Thus the “smoke” of verse 4 is somewhat parallel to the “glory” of verse 3, and the use of the verb נָלַל in the Niphal would serve as the passive counterpart to the previous use of the Qal as an active form. While the Niphal of נָלַל is not uncommon, its passive sense is distinct from the otherwise usual intransitive sense of the Qal (Qal: “be full of” versus Niphal: “be filled with”), and the use of the Niphal here further highlights the active and transitive sense of the Qal in this context.

All of this is to argue that the antiphon articulates the presence of the God who is not simply “sovereign” but incarnate into his created order, and whose purpose is not simply to rule and reign in the heavens but to establish his kingdom on earth, and even to fill the earth far beyond the bounds and borders of the land to which he came as human. This King Jesus was the infinite in the finite, the eternally begotten Son who came down from heaven to be present within space and time, yet to make his presence known into all the earth.

For ancient Israel, the focal point of that presence was the temple, Zion, Jerusalem. When the Messiah came, John noted that “we have seen his glory” (Jn 1:14, δόξα cf. כבוד), and Jesus stated rather shockingly, “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:19). For the post-ascension new Israel that now includes both Jew and Greek and seeks to include those of every nation, tribe, people, and
tongue (Rv 7:9), the presence of God goes forth in word and sacrament quite literally to *fill the earth* as the game plan is given in Acts 1:8, from Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria, and to the end (οἰκονόμου) of the earth, both in space and in time.

Indeed, it is at the very point in our corporate worship when we anticipate the presence of the “glory of God” in the body and blood of Christ to enter and fill our space and time and even to touch our lips and fill our lives that we join with the angels and archangels and all the company of the heavenly hosts in singing this same song. And then the body of Christ that is his people goes forth to *fill* all the earth, out the door and into the world.

But first, Isaiah responds to the presence of the “thrice-holy” God as is appropriate: a sinner before the holy God can only cry out in despair. The Hebrew רֲצָא is used sparingly, only four times in Isaiah as compared to the more common דRouterModule, used 21 times. There may be only a subtle distinction, but רֲצָא would seem the stronger of the two, used here in chapter 6 and only in 3:9,11 (in anticipation of the word of divine judgment in 3:13ff), and in 24:16, where again the prophetic first person expresses despair before the cosmic judgment of God. דRouterModule is generally used with a participle, announcing “woe” or something that needs attention to someone else, as in the series of “woes” in 5:8ff. (By contrast, Isaiah 55:1 uses דRouterModule to proclaim something good, not bad, though this may, in fact, be for rhetorical effect.)

In a series of clauses that begin with רָא (“for, because”), Isaiah describes his condition in several interesting ways. First, he uses a verb that may well have intentional wordplay, punning on the interplay between רָמא –II, “to be silent, dumb” and רמא –III, “to destroy,” thus “be destroyed.” A master of wordplay himself, Isaiah could well be referencing the “silent scream” that accompanies the sudden sense of destruction when we open our mouths in horror and find that nothing comes out.

The second רָא-clause is striking in highlighting the confession not explicitly of the prophet’s sin, but of the fact that he is unclean, specifically as a man with unclean lips (the Hebrew uses a construct chain, “unclean of lips” מָטֵא). There is no indication that Isaiah has touched anything unclean, yet he claims unclean lips. He has no business being in the temple at all with anything or any body part unclean, but clearly the confrontation with the holy God has brought him to this realization, perhaps by simple yet stark contrast with God’s superlative holiness.

Further, his confession is both individual and corporate, as is consistent with biblical ecclesiology: it’s not just “about me” but “about us.” As all the parts of the body are connected to one another as the whole (cf. Rom 12:3ff, 1 Cor 12:12ff), so the concern for sin is a matter of corporate concern.

Finally, the third רָא-clause makes explicit what was implicit from verse 1: this is about the true king, Yahweh Seba’oth. The Hebrew word order fronts the direct object for emphasis: “for the king, Yahweh Seba’oth my eyes have seen.”

How does the Holy God respond to this man of unclean lips, most unholy but humble in confession of his unworthiness? God sends a messenger of grace, one of the fiery seraphim, with a coal from the altar to purge the prophet’s unclean lips. The structure of verse 7 is well worked. The first bicolon is linear, with the Hiphil use of the verb “touch” (חָבָה) followed by the Qal:
He caused [it, the coal] to touch upon my mouth, and he said, “Look, here, this has touched upon your lips.”

Then follows the key statement of absolution, in a short chiastic bicolon:

“Gone is your guilt // your sin is atoned.”

The word pair of “guilt” or “iniquity” (יהוֹנָא) and “sin” (תַּעַנְיָה) is inclusive of both guilt (sinfulness and its ongoing result) and actual sin(s), somewhat as comprehensive as our helpful categories of both original and actual sin. Unclean lips are made clean; sanctified for holy service, for lips that would proclaim God’s word of absolution are first lips that have been touched by God’s word of absolution.

As is well known, at this point the focus of the chapter shifts. The personal experience of the prophet in the presence of King Yahweh is now turned to the commission and mission of the prophetic messenger to go and tell, and to say “thus saith the king . . .” The one who has been invited in to the throne room of the king is now ready for sending, and Isaiah responds with a willing spirit.

And so the mission sermon too often ends. But the mission has only begun, and it will be a difficult one. It is to God’s own people, but it includes all the nations. It begins with what Isaiah has been given to see and hear, to know and proclaim, but it also includes a much bigger perspective, beyond his own experience and life and times. But first he must bring the earthly king and the people of Judah to come to know that they, too, are unclean and unworthy before the holy God.

This is the context of what can seem to be most troubling words in the verses that follow, beginning with the command to say to “this people” (הַעֲנָיָה) that they “should try as hard as they can to hear and to see, but they won’t understand,” as the text might be paraphrased. That the people of God are called “this people” is likely sarcastic and reflects the tension introduced in 1:3, where “Israel does not know” yet they are still called “my people.” In 1:4 they are described as a sinning nation (הָיָה וְהָעֲנָיָה) and then a “people heavy with iniquity,” (מִשְׁגַּדְו נָאֵס וְעַנְיָה) introducing the word pair of “sin and iniquity” from which Isaiah has received absolution here in 6:7. This sarcastic tone is certainly clear in 8:6, 11, 12, which come in the final passages of the literary unit that begins with ch 6, and this tone may extend to 9:15 (ET v. 16). The phrase is used elsewhere in Isaiah only in chapters 28–29, where the context again is pejorative (against Ephraim in 28:11, 14; against those in Jerusalem in 29:13–14).

What follows in verse 10 is even more troubling, as though God is commanding the prophet to do the very things that would prevent understanding and repentance. The goal of these imperatives is stated at the end of verse 10, “lest they see and hear, and their heart understand.” (The “heart” in Hebrew idiom is the center of thought, similar to English “mind.”) They are not to “perceive” or “understand,” no matter how intently they may “listen” and “look.” Of course, these were people who were “wise in their own eyes” (5:21) and who dared God to “speed up his work so that they might see” (5:19). Their assumption was that God would not act upon his threatened judgment and instead relent from his punishment and spare them.
Again a translational issue may prove helpful. The final clauses are usually translated “and [lest] they repent and be healed.” The verb הוהי ("return") is often used for the “turning toward God” that is at the heart of repentance. But grammatically, the verb can also function as the auxiliary verb (adverb), “to do again.”12 This is clearly the use in 6:13 (תָּשָׁבַח "it will again be for burning"), and may well be the case also in verse 10. If so, then the sense is not to avoid repentance, but to avoid the falsely assumed confidence in the grace of God to let them off the hook “yet again.” This is consistent with the fundamental problem at the time: the people of God had grown complacent in taking God’s grace for granted.

Thus the ultimate goal of verse 10 is that they are not “healed again.” Even if the translation includes the sense of “turning” in repentance, which would seem to be the proper goal of the preaching of a message of warning, the concern for a false or insincere repentance was as real as the “vain sacrifices” in 1:13. But the more likely translation stresses the repetition (“again”) of a healing that would spare a body now so battered and bruised that there was no place left for further discipline (1:5–6). What needed to be understood, and made as painfully clear as Isaiah could make it, was God’s decision that the nation would be destroyed, totally devastated, as described in the following verses. The vineyard parable had declared that the vineyard will be destroyed (5:5), and despite the vain “wisdom” of those who made evil good and good evil (5:20), there is a darkness and distress that will make light into darkness (5:30, cf. 8:20–22). And it needed to be proclaimed, whether the people recognized it or not.

Theologically, this is the “alien work” of God’s judgment and justice. It is the action of a God who “kills in order to make alive” (Dt 32:39; cf. 2 Kgs 5:7). When Amos noted that God had “relented,” he also heard God then to add, “I can spare them no longer” (Am 7:8–9). It is the work of God’s revealed truth that must root out all claims to human effort and false hope, which are the natural assumptions of mankind, “curved in on oneself.”

Stated another way, before anyone can see what God wants to reveal, normal human and sinful “sight” must be blinded. Along with sight and sound (eyes and ears), also the thoughts and imaginations of human hearts need to be shown for what they are. In fact, the language of “making fat” and “making heavy” may mimic the lifestyles described in chapter 5.13 Perhaps almost sarcastically, the command might be paraphrased, “if you think you know it all, as confirmed by your lifestyles of excess, then be fat and heavy, and show your hearts and ears and eyes to be what they are, dull and unresponsive, so that you cannot by your own reason or strength rightly understand and claim healing—one more time!”14 Similarly in chapter 29, in a word of judgment also against Jerusalem, the same point is made even more dramatically, “blind yourselves and be blind” (root תָּעַשֶׁה), “be drunk but not from wine.”

The fact that God might provide healing to them if they would respond even just one more time is actually a testimony to the “proper work” of God to save. The so-called “inviolability of Zion” is a major theme in the book of Isaiah, and, to be sure, he proclaims a message of peace and security anchored in God’s presence in Jerusalem, as articulated most clearly in the final passage in the first half of the book, 33:20–24,
including the fact that no one will say “I am sick” and that the “sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven.” Indeed, in the end, God remains a God who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in chesed (חסד)—and relenting from the punishment” (Ex 34:6, Nm 14:18, Jl 2:14, Jon 4:2, Ps 103:8; cf. Ps 86, 5, 15).

But in chapter 6, the message of Isaiah is first to proclaim the full weight of the law. In fact, it will get worse before it gets better. Isaiah reveals a sense of the seriousness of his message; he asks, “how long, Adonay?” returning full circle to the address for God in verse 1. Here there is no remnant; if there is a tenth left, it, too, will “again be for burning.” The land will become a desolation (נחלות) and “forsaken” (נƜח). Whatever hope may be suggested by verse 12, the “holy seed” of the final line is at best a seed that must first die before coming to life (cf. Jn 12:24), yet a sign that even a tree cut off may, indeed, be restored to life (Is 11:1).

All of which is to say that the end of Isaiah 6 is not the last word. There are hints within the text, even beyond the cryptic final verse. The “burning” of verse 13, consistently used as a sign of judgment, is also a purging that will restore holiness (4:3–4; cf. 1:25). Isaiah’s own experience of despair before the holy God is, at heart, the goal of bringing Judah to understand their similar fate, so that there may be cleansing through destruction and restoration.

But first the story must play out. In the chapters that follow, King Ahaz shows himself to be a son of David who, on behalf of his people, has not ears to hear. God’s offer of salvation in God’s grace and power alone is rejected, so that the sign of Immanuel, God’s presence in the midst of his people, is one, first, of destruction (7:17–25, see also 8:5–8 and how this plays out in 8:18–22).

But once the nadir of darkness has been reached, “those walking in darkness will have seen a great light” (9:1 = ET 9:2). In fact, the themes introduced in Isaiah 1, 2–12, and specifically in chapter 6 will play out in the rest of the entire “vision” of Isaiah. Once they have come to grips with darkness and blindness, those whose eyes are blinded and ears stopped up will come to see and to hear. This begins to unfold in chapter 29, as the theme of blindness is highlighted and heightened (29:9). Verse 10 reports that God himself has closed the eyes of the (false) prophets. What is worse is that the “vision” has become “words in a sealed scroll,” which is sealed to those who can read, and ironically then given to those who cannot read, who, in fact, are not able to read it (vv. 11–12)! “This people” is then accused of vain worship (v. 13). God will show his true wisdom and wonder (v. 14), and the wisdom of the wise and the understanding of the discerning (ทร年年底: sede עת: נlığı: ד, cf. 3:3, 5:21) will be undone. Such people who love darkness are further described as those who “turn things upside down” (שד, cf. 1:7), as clay telling the potter what to do (cf. the theme of the inversion of good and evil in 5:20).

However, in 29:17 the great reversal is announced, “in a very short time.” The land will be rejuvenated, and in that day “the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and from darkness the eyes of the blind will see.” Chapter 35 speaks of the new creation, following the cosmic destruction of chapter 34, and announces that when “your God
will come and save you” (35:4), “then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.”

Clearly with Isaiah 6 in mind, God announces in 42:16 that he will “lead the blind . . . and turn the darkness into light” and then proclaims in 42:18, “hear you deaf, look to see, you blind!” This is the major theme of Isaiah 42–44, testifying that the commission of 6:9–10 has been carried out. God’s “servant” Israel is even more blind and deaf than the nations; they have seen many things but not observed; they have had ears opened, and they still don’t hear. But God would lead out “those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf (43:8).

By contrast to the realities of human blindness, Isaiah 59:1 affirms that “the arm of YHWH is not too short to save,” nor his “ear too heavy” to hear. The real problem is then identified: it is the “iniquities” and “sins” of the people that have separated them from God. And so the cycle continues: sin, blindness, judgment, sight, and renewal.

But God’s glory will continue to be revealed among his people. His ways are hidden, yet revealed and present (55:6–8); his word would not “return void” (55:9–11). God would not forsake his people but become the one who would say “Here am I,” in spite of an “obstinate people” (65:1–2). To those who were dwelling in darkness, Isaiah would say, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of Yahweh has risen upon you (Is 60:1). Indeed the suffering servant, first to be despised, rejected, and even killed (Is 53:3–8) would be “high and lifted up” (Is 52:13, cf. Is 6:1 and 2:11–12 as otherwise properly predicated only of Yahweh). He would proclaim comfort to all who mourn (61:2ff), with a reversal of the “reversals” of 3:24, where “instead of” good things would be bad, now “instead of” ashes and mourning, a crown of beauty and a garment of praise. The imagery of a cut-down tree is replaced with “oaks of righteousness” (61:3). And in 62:4 what was to become a desolation is now renamed and restored as “Hephzibah” (“my delight is in her”) and “Beulah” (“married”). These words may recall the setting of Isaiah 7 as well, as Hephzibah was, in fact, the mother of Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:2) and thus the queen of Hezekiah, who was likely unmarried at the time of chapter 7.

Finally, that glory of God that would go forth to fill all the earth would, indeed, be declared among the nations (66:18–19). Isaiah begins at the end (“in the afterwords of days”) with a vision of the nations coming to Zion (2:2–4). Isaiah ends at the end, which is a new beginning, with a new heaven and a new earth (65:17–25, cf. 11:1–10). Zion would give birth to her children (66:7ff) and even amidst the final judgment of the holy God, “all nations and tongues will come and see my glory” (66:18). And those who survive and are dispersed into all the world will “declare [God’s] glory among the nations” (66:19). Indeed the nations will, in fact, come to Zion, that is wherever God is present, now in the risen Christ, who in sacramental word and presence would go forth to fill all the earth.
Endnotes

1 Commentaries discuss and debate whether Isa 6 is the “inaugural call” of Isaiah, in spite of the fact that his prophecy is dated to the reign of Uzziah (1:1), whose death is the time reference in 6:1. Keil-Delitzsch (C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Commentaries on the Old Testament, Isaiah [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973], 188) reconcile that tension by noting that 6:1 refers to the year in which Uzziah died, but that he was not necessarily yet dead, preserving the accuracy of 1:1. Wildberger provides a summary of views and cautiously affirms that this is, in fact, the call narrative (Hans Wildberger, Isaiah 1–12, trans. Thomas H. Trapp [Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 1991] 256ff. See also Brevard S. Childs, Isaiah [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], 51ff.). Oswalt dates chapters 1–5 to the time of Uzziah and argues that they introduced the entire vision, with a major section beginning with chapter 6, which serves as a hinge to the rest of the book (John N. Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986]). My own view is that the call, whether inaugural or not, is intentionally placed here as an introduction to the “Book of Immanuel” and forms a bridge from the prophet’s ministry under Uzziah to the confrontation with Ahaz that follows (see Andrew H. Bartelt, “The Centrality of Isaiah 6 (–8) within Isaiah 2–12” in Concordia Journal 30:4 [October, 2004]).

2 Etymologically, the word simply means “big house” and can mean either “palace” or “temple.” When referencing the temple it can refer to the larger complex (although יִבְנָה is more common for the whole temple, cf 6:4), but more technically, יִבְנָה is the “holy place” or sanctuary between the porch and the “holy of holies” (1 Kgs 6:5, 17; 7:50, Ez 8:16, often translated [anachronistically] as “nave”).

3 The Qal is normally “be full of,” with the Piel carrying the transitive sense, “to fill.” The presence of the direct object marker (יַה) confirms the transitive sense here.

4 The precise depiction of these heavenly beings is much discussed, usually with some sense of “fire” or “burning,” based on the verbal root לַשׁ. The use of the word as a noun is used to describe the “snakes” or serpents in the wilderness (Nm 21:6, used almost as an adjective in the phrase מַעֲשֶׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל, “fiery serpents,” which may refer to the burning of their bite; cf. also Dt 8:15.

5 The form is dual and could possibly be so translated.

6 Whether “covering their feet” engages the euphemism for genitals is not clear, but the reference to “feet” in Is 7:20 would suggest this use.

7 Each team has its mantra, but at the University of Missouri the antiphon is “M-I-Z // Z-O-U,” chanted back and forth from one side of the stadium to the other.


11 The three-fold use of י clauses is often noted as a link between the call narrative of chapter 6 and chapter 40 (cf. 40:2).

12 For this function of hendiadys, see Andrew Bartelt, Fundamental Biblical Hebrew (St. Louis: CPH, 2000 = FBH and FBA, 2004), 215f. See also Ronald J. Williams, Williams’ Hebrew Syntax (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) 91.

13 There is likely further word play on the root בָּלַע, “to be heavy,” which is also the root behind the “glory” of God (תְּבוּשָׁה), and is used again in the Hiphil with a quite opposite sense in 8:23 (ET 9:1, “to make glorious.”)

14 Cf. Luther’s explanation of the Third Article, “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him.”

15 Both the text and translation of verse 12 are notoriously difficult and require a detailed excursus of their own. The Qumran reading (1QIsa8) suggests several cultic references, and the translation כַּפָּר as “stump” is at best word play on the image of the arrogant tree, including also the lineage of David (from which rootstock a shoot will come, 11:1). But otherwise the word refers to a standing stone, most common as a cultic memorial. As best as can be reconstructed, the text may well read, “like an oak or terebinth, a cut down Asherah pole (is) the sacred stone of a high place.” The sense would be that the vain and false worship of the people is characteristic of the cultic high places (which neither Uzziah nor Jotham removed, 2 Kgs 15:4, 25, and on which Ahaz worshipped, 2 Kgs 16:4).


17 A reference to a royal wedding between Hezekiah and a virgin possibly betrothed to him may well be an allusion to the prophetic word in Isa 7. However the interpretation of Isa 7:10-25 is unpacked, there is reference to a virgin, thus unmarried, and what would appear to be a royal son that will carry forward the promises of God to the house of David, unlikely fulfilled in Manasseh and ultimately fulfilled in the birth of Jesus of the virgin Mary, the Son of God who came as both “David’s son” and “David’s Lord.”
Christ and the Nations
Isaiah’s Gentile Oracles

Paul R. Raabe

Introduction

How should Christians read the Old Testament? That is a huge question, but
the answer can be summarized with five adverbs: They should read it philologically,
literarily, holistically, historically, and theologically. While all those adverbs and dimen-
sions are intertwined, here I want to focus on the theological angle. The theological
angle includes the three articles of the Creed, seeing Old Testament theology as cre-
ational, soteriological, and Holy Spiritual—with a capital S. It also means seeing the Old
Testament as centered in Christ, and that entails a reading strategy that is incarnational,
sacramental, ecclesiological—because with Christ goes his church—and eschatologi-
cal—we should think not only of Christ’s first advent but also of his second advent.

Here I want to focus on the question: How should Christians see Christ in the
Old Testament? To address a question like this it is always better to look at a portion
of Scripture rather than speak in vague generalities. So, I will concentrate on Isaiah’s
Gentile oracles, Isaiah 13–23. There are three connections I want to stress.

First, identify Yahweh dwelling in Zion in the temple with the Second Person
of the Trinity, the pre-incarnate Christ. In the fullness of time this same God “became
flesh and tabernacled among us” (Jn 1:14). Jesus said, “Destroy this temple and in three
days I will raise it up,” referring to the temple of his body (Jn 2:18–22). In his temple
vision Isaiah saw the “glory” of Christ (Jn 12:41). Isaiah’s Zion theology is christocen-
tric theology. In terms of the Trinity we confess that Jesus is the Son of God in the
flesh. In terms of monotheism we confess that Jesus is God in the flesh, God with us,
God tabernacling and templing among us and for us. Therefore we connect Isaiah’s
Zion theology with Christ and his church.

Second, see Jesus as Israel reduced to one, or, Israel condensed into one.¹ Jesus
fulfills Israel’s history and not only future-tense prophetic promises. During his public
ministry Jesus of Nazareth repeated and recapitulated the story of Israel. He replayed
Israel’s history and undid its negative side so that his new Israel would inherit the bless-
ing. Matthew especially emphasizes how Jesus embodied and consummated Israel’s his-
tory.² Jesus is the true Israel, and those who belong to him by faith are his new Israel.

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² Concordia Journal/Winter 2013
With Jesus comes the church. Therefore we connect Isaiah’s treatment of ancient Israel with Christ and his church. “Since Christ is ‘Israel reduced to one,’ and since Israel’s inner history was all recapitulated and consummated in Him, the ‘new Israel,’ the church, expresses its identity and mission in terms of the promise given to the old Israel.”

Third, Jesus fulfills the Old Testament’s promises of a coming anointed King, a new and greater Davidic King who will rule over all nations in righteousness. Therefore we see Isaiah’s promises of a new Davidic King as fulfilled by Jesus the Christ, of the lineage of David (e.g. Mt 1:1; Rom 1:3).

These three connections relate to Jesus as true God and as true Man. We must equally emphasize Jesus in both his natures. Jesus is God among us. Jesus is also true man, God’s human agent to us and our human mediator to God his Father.

Isaiah 13–23

Too often Christians take a selective pick-and-choose approach to the Old Testament. For the book of Isaiah they are familiar with Isaiah 7 and Isaiah 40 and Isaiah 53 for example, but the rest of the book of Isaiah is treated as “fly-over” material. Against such an approach we need to emphasize and inculcate in our people a holistic approach. The book of Isaiah is not a collection of one-liners. It is a scroll that flows from chapter 1 to chapter 66. It is presented in that sequence so that readers and hearers will process the book in that sequence. An important part of the sequence is the material commonly called the Gentile oracles found in chapters 13–23.

The Creator of all things made ancient Israel his very own covenant people. He made himself the God of Israel. Yet this God of Israel is not some parochial deity, concerned only about Israel. The God of Israel is the Lord over all nations, and all nations are accountable to him. Hence Isaiah devotes a lengthy section to non-Israelite nations.

Chapters 13–23 are organized into ten sections with the genre label “burden” (מִלְחָמָה) marking the start of each section:

14:28–32 Burden (of Philistia) 21:11–12 Burden of Silence (Edom)
(20:1–6 Narrative of Action Prophecy)

It is possible to see the arrangement of these ten “burdens” in different ways, but the most convincing approach sees them as two series of five. In each half the first “burden” refers to Babylon and the fourth to the covenant people of God, namely Northern Israel and Jerusalem. The third “burden” in each series—Moab and Arabia—speaks of fugitives seeking help (16:2–4; 21:14–15). Each series depicts the covenant people of God as surrounded in all directions: Babylon to the north; Philistia and Tyre to the west; Moab and Arabia to the east; Egypt and Edom to the south.
The prose narrative about Isaiah’s action prophecy in chapter 20 occurs in the middle and functions to identify God’s key weapon of judgment for the nations referenced in both halves. That key weapon is the king of Assyria with his army. Note that “the king of Assyria” mentioned in 20:6 is the “strong king” of 19:4 and the “betrayer/devastator” of 21:2.

**Key Themes Fulfilled by Christ**

In chapters 13–23 the Holy One of Israel through his prophet Isaiah announces that he will bring judgment upon the Gentile nations. Generally speaking God enacted these announcements through the Assyrian army and its conquests during the days of Isaiah. This material reveals key themes that I wish to highlight and show how Christ is their ultimate fulfillment.

**Yahweh Alone Exalted Against All Human Pride and Glory**

Jesus repeatedly emphasized that in the eschatological kingdom of God the last will be first and the first last. With these types of statements, Jesus was echoing a key emphasis of the Old Testament, including the book of Isaiah. God opposes all human efforts at self-glory. The nations of the earth are very much characterized by self-glory and pride. They want to be honored by others. Through Isaiah God announces that one day he will dishonor them and put them to shame. Isaiah’s Gentile oracles begin and end on this note and stress it throughout. We see it explicitly mentioned in the opening Babylon oracle, the concluding Tyre oracle, and in the middle parts in the Moab oracle and the Arabia oracle:

And I will make the pride of the presumptuous ones cease, and the haughtiness of the terrible ones I will lay low . . . And Babylon, the beauty of kingdoms, the splendor of the pride of the Chaldeans, will become like God’s overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah. (Is 13:11, 19)

We have heard of Moab’s pride—very proud—his proudness and his pride and his excess; his prattle is not right. Therefore Moab wails for Moab; all of it wails. (Is 16:6–7)

Within a year like the years of a hireling, then all the glory of Kedar will come to an end. (Is 21:16)

Who planned this thing against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants are princes, whose traders are the honored of the earth? Yahweh of hosts planned it, to profane the exaltation of all spendor, to make trivial all the honored of the earth. (Is 23:8–9)

Already now Yahweh is exalted as Isaiah saw the exalted King and heard the seraphim praise him, “Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of Hosts” (Is 6:1–3). What is true
already now, and recognized in the liturgy, will one day become visible and manifest to all the world. Not the nations but Yahweh of Hosts alone will be exalted and worshiped (Is 2:11–17). What applies to Yahweh of Hosts in Isaiah also applies to Jesus of Nazareth. In the words of the great Carmen Christi of Philippians 2:

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name which is above every name, in order that at the name of Jesus every knee bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:9–11)

**Christ as God in Zion**

In times BC, God located his gracious presence in the temple in Jerusalem. There he made himself available and accessible to people. There he was with his people and for his people. There he would bless them through the Aaronic benediction. There he would atone for their sins through the sacrificial system, although only in a preliminary sense, pointing to the all-sufficient sacrifice of the Messiah. There people could come into this presence with prayer and praise. In the fullness of time this tabernacling God became flesh and now tabernacles among us. Jesus of Nazareth is this God with us.

Yet, how did the nations respond to the God who dwelt in Zion? Typically they responded by opposing Zion and making war against Zion. First, in 735 BC the Damascus-Samaria coalition attacked Zion in order to depose King Ahaz (Is 7:1–6). Then, in 701 BC, Assyria campaigned against Zion. Rabshakeh, the Assyrian officer, appealed to Zion to surrender to Sennacherib or face certain destruction (Is 36–37; 2 Kings 18–19).

What is true according to John’s Gospel was also true in BC times. The world opposes Christ and his church. “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before you” (Jn 15:18). The nations opposed Zion and sought to destroy or at least control Zion. Nevertheless, the Creator of all, who made Israel his own people, protected his Zion. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Not Zion but the enemies of Zion will be defeated.

Isaiah frequently announced both the reality of the nations’ hostility to Zion and the promise of God’s protection. One example occurs in Isaiah 14:24–25:

Yahweh of Hosts has sworn, saying, “Surely just as I intended, so it happened, and just as I planned, so it, it will stand:8 to break the Assyrian in my land, and on my mountains I will trample upon him, and his yoke will turn away from upon them, and his burden will turn away from upon its shoulder.”

Assyria came into the land of Israel and trampled upon Yahweh’s mountains. In response Yahweh promises that he will trample upon Assyria.

In Isaiah 17:12–14 Isaiah offers a classic expression of the nations’ hostility to Zion and Yahweh’s promise to guard his Zion:
Woe to the roar of many peoples, who roar like the roaring of the seas. And to the rumbling of nations, who rumble like the rumbling of mighty waters. Nations rumble like the rumbling of many waters. But he will explosively blast it, and it will flee afar at a distance, and it will be chased away like chaff on mountains before wind, and like a whirl before a storm. At the time of evening, now look! terror; before morning, it does not exist. This is the portion of our plunderers, and the lot for our despoilers.

The nations ceaselessly roar and rumble with their anti-Zion schemes. Yet the God who dwells in Zion blasts with his breath and they are chased away like chaff before the wind. In the evening, terror; before the morning, they no longer exist. This is the destiny of those who seek to plunder and despoil Zion, as Isaiah affirms on behalf of Zion. At the time of Isaiah the classic instance of this sequence was the sudden defeat of Assyria in 701 BC. As Isaiah 37:36 puts it:

And the angel of Yahweh went out and struck down in the camp of Assyria 185,000. And they (=the Jerusalemites) arose early in the morning, and behold, all of them were dead corpses.

While the nations wage war against Zion, the God who dwells in Zion defends his Zion.

Isaiah stresses that there is no refuge, no lasting security outside of Zion. Ancient Jerusalem was used to receiving ambassadors and messengers from other nations who wanted Jerusalem to join their anti-Assyrian alliances. Isaiah strongly opposed every attempt to find refuge in human power, the military might of other nations or in one’s own efforts at self-security. Isaiah 20 records an action prophecy of Isaiah playing the role of a defeated Egyptian and Cushite captive forced to go into exile. When Egypt and Cush are defeated, then the people of the Levant will realize: “Look! So is our focus to which we fled for help to be delivered from the presence of the king of Assyria! And how shall we ourselves be rescued?” (Is 20:6).

Both Egypt and Cush will not save them from Assyria (cf. Is 30:1–5; 31:1–3). Nor will Jerusalem’s efforts at strengthening its own fortifications avail (Is 22:8–11). They can find refuge only in Yahweh who dwells in Zion, as clearly stated in Isaiah 14:32, “But what should one answer the messengers of a nation? That Yahweh has founded Zion, and in her the afflicted of his people will find shelter.” For Isaiah, outside of Zion there is no shelter and security. So also according to the New Testament, there is eternal refuge only in Jesus Christ. Apart from him and his church there is no salvation. As the old Latin saying puts it: “extra ecclesiam nulla salus est.”

Because Zion is the center of the world, one day tribute will be brought to Zion. The nations will offer their praise and wealth to the God who dwells in Zion. Isaiah emphasizes this centripetal force of the God who dwells in Zion. For example, after the God of Israel displays his power and suddenly defeats Assyria, a powerful and much-feared nation like Cush will bring tribute to Yahweh in Zion:
In that time tribute will be brought to Yahweh of Hosts, a people elon-
gated and made bare, and from a people feared from that one and further,
a nation of line-upon-line and subjugation, whose land rivers have divided,
to the place of the name of Yahweh of Hosts, Mount Zion. (Is 18:7)\textsuperscript{11}

Already in BC times one occasionally sees the centripetal movement of nations
coming to honor the God in Zion. For example, the Chronicler notes that when
Assyria was suddenly defeated at Jerusalem in 701 BC, “many were bringing gifts to
Yahweh to Jerusalem” (2 Chr 32:23).

With the coming of Jesus the promise of a centripetal movement opens up into
a full flower. Beginning with the visit of the Magi and throughout the New Testa-
ment era we see the Gentiles coming to worship the God who dwells in Zion. The people
of many nations are offering themselves and their wealth to Christ. For two thousand
years Isaiah’s promise has been fulfilling itself. Today’s Gentile Christians are part
of the fulfillment. At the same time we look forward to the future consummation of
Isaiah’s promise, when “the kings of the earth bring their glory” into the eschatological
new Jerusalem, into the presence of God and the Lamb “they will bring the glory and
the honor of the nations into it” (Rv 21:24–26).

\textbf{Christ as Israel Condensed into One}

Isaiah’s accent on God in Zion is to be connected to Jesus Christ. Another way
to relate the Old Testament to Christ is to see Jesus as Israel reduced to one, or con-
densed into one. Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, repeats Israel’s history and fulfills that history
on a deeper level. As applied to Isaiah, the connection would be this. Just as Israel was
put to death by means of the exile and then restored from exile, so also in a greater
way, Israel’s Messiah was put to death and restored again. We can view this correspon-
dence from two different perspectives. Prospectively God arranged the experience of
ancient Israel so as to foreshadow the future Messiah, and retrospectively God had the
Messiah re-experience in a deeper way what ancient Israel experienced.

Isaiah repeatedly announced God’s coming judgment against Israel. Israel will be
destroyed and go into exile. Exile for the nation was tantamount to a death sentence. And
in fact, exile came. Already in Isaiah’s day most of the people were deported by Assyria.
Northern Israel was exiled in 732 BC and its capital of Samaria in 722 BC. The towns of
Judah were exiled in 701 BC. Isaiah also announced that Jerusalem itself would be exiled
by Babylon, and that came in three stages: 605 BC, 597 BC, and 587/6 BC (Is 39).

Nevertheless, exile would not be the end of the story. Isaiah also announced
that God would restore Israel from exile. An example of this promise is given in Isaiah
14:1–3. Isaiah 13 announced that God would destroy the city of Babylon because of its
pride. Then the beginning of chapter 14 presents another reason for Babylon’s destruc-
tion, so that God could restore Israel from Babylonian exile:\textsuperscript{12}

For Yahweh will show compassion to Jacob, and he will again choose
Israel, and he will settle them upon their own soil. And the alien will join
himself to them, and they will attach themselves to the house of Jacob.
And peoples will take them and bring them to their own place, and the house of Israel will possess them on Yahweh’s soil for male slaves and for female slaves; and they will become captors to their (former) captors, and they will rule over their (former) oppressors. And it will happen in the day when Yahweh gives rest to you from your pain and from your turmoil, and from the hard slavery with which there was slave work done by you, that you will lift up this similitude against the king of Babylon . . .

God promises to rescue Israel from their pain and harsh slavery and to bring them back to the promised land.

God began to fulfill this promise with Israel’s return from exile in 539 BC and under Ezra in 458 BC. But I would argue that the ultimate fulfillment of this promise came with the resurrection of Christ. As Israel condensed into one he was exiled in a far greater way. He was put to death and even abandoned by God as he bore the sins of the whole world. But on the third day God raised him bodily from the dead and brought him back to the land of the living, never to die again. Thereby God definitively restored the true Israel, Israel condensed into one. Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, went through the same experience as Israel, only to a greater degree. With his resurrection and exaltation the tables have been turned. The one who had been captive and ruled now has become the captor and ruler over all, even over death itself. Announcements of Israel’s exile and restoration find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

**Christ as the New David**

Isaiah promises a coming Davidic King who will rule with righteousness. This future King will rule over all nations, not only Israel. Isaiah illustrates this universal rule in his Moabite oracle. Isaiah 15 pictures the land of Moab in complete disarray with survivors fleeing the devastation. Then at the beginning of chapter 16 (vv. 2–5) Isaiah depicts some Moabite refugees seeking shelter in Zion:

*And it will happen that the daughters of Moab at fords of the Arnon will be like birds fleeing a scattered nest. “Give counsel. Exercise the office of judge. Make your shade like the night in the midst of noon. Hide the outcasts. The one fleeing, do not reveal.” Let my outcasts sojourn in you. Even Moab—become a hiding-place for him from the presence of the devastator.*

When the oppressor has ceased, (when) devastation has ended, (when) they are finished from the earth namely, everyone who tramples, then will be established a throne with steadfast love, and one will sit enthroned upon it in David’s tent with trustworthiness, a judge and seeker of justice and one very swift at righteousness.

The Moabite survivors flee and appeal to Zion to protect them (vv. 2–3). To this appeal God himself responds by saying to Zion, “Let my outcasts sojourn in you” (v. 4). Why should Zion shelter Moabite refugees? Because in the future, God will establish a throne in Zion upon which will sit a new and greater Davidic King who will rule
with steadfast love and trustworthiness, who will seek justice and will be swift at righteousness. That includes providing safety from wicked oppression.

Here in the midst of announcing judgment against Moab Yahweh refers to the coming Messianic King. The promise of the future Davidic King relates to the future of Moab and all the Gentile nations. Just as Isaiah foresees all the nations flowing to Yahweh in Zion, so he also foresees them flowing to the future Davidic Messiah. Isaiah 11:10 states this clearly: “And it will happen in that day, the root of Jesse which stands as a banner for the peoples, to him the nations will inquire, and his resting place will become glory.” Gentiles will seek the King from the line of Jesse, a new and greater David. It is well-known that the New Testament sees Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of these promises of a coming David. For example, in Romans 15:12 Paul quotes Isaiah 11:10. On the basis of that citation and others Paul reaches this conclusion:

For I say that Christ has become a servant of the circumcision for the sake of the truth of God, in order to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for the sake of his mercy. (Rom 15:8–9)\textsuperscript{14}

For the last two thousand years we see the fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise. Moved by the Spirit, Gentiles from all nations have been coming to Israel’s Messiah.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Moses and the Prophets. When studying Moses and the Prophets it is important that we see the connection with Christ. There are many ways to see that connection. Here I focused on three ways that apply to Isaiah’s Gentile Oracles in Isaiah 13–23: seeing Christ as Yahweh in Zion, as Israel condensed into one, and as the promised David King. In the words of Jesus: “You search the [Old Testament] Scriptures, because you yourselves think to have eternal life in them, and they are they that bear witness concerning me” (Jn 5:39).

Endnotes

1 James Voelz suggests the phrase “condensed into one.”
4 For a good discussion, see J. A. Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1993) 131–134.
5 The Assyrian army as the key weapon is also named in 14:25 and 23:13.
6 All translations are by the author.
8 The change from perfect (“so it happened”) to imperfect (“so it will stand”) might simply be poetic variation. But in light of Isaiah 7:7, where both verbs are imperfect, perhaps the shift is more significant. I take the first clause as referring to a past event, the defeat of the Damascus-Samaria coalition, and the second clause as referring to a future event, the defeat of the Assyrian army.
“Outside the church there is no salvation.”


12 The κύριος-clause at the beginning of 14:1 is most naturally taken as a causal clause, “For.” Note that the Masoretes joined 14:1–2 with 13:1–22 and began the new paragraph with 14:3.

13 Masoretic accents place “Moab” with the second clause in v. 4.

14 See Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 875–878. Moo notes that the “truth” or “faithfulness” of God and the “mercy” of God are often paired in the Old Testament (דבש / דבש).
Will Just Any “God” Do?
Isaiah’s Answer for the Question of Theological Pluralism

William Carr

Why the Question?
As soon as Adam and Eve sinned (Gen. 3), the human race began to be confused about God: who he is and what he is like. Adam’s answer to God’s “Where are you?” showed already that he no longer knew God: “I heard your voice in the garden, but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid” (Gen. 3:10). In the Apology, Melanchthon explained the confessors’ intent in Article II of the Augsburg Confession, on Original Sin: “We wanted to show that original sin also included these maladies: ignorance of God, contempt of God, the absence of the fear of and trust in God, and the inability to love God.” If there is any kind of impulse toward recovering knowledge of God, will just any “God” do?

Surveying the American Landscape
In America today, ambivalence disguises agnosis. In 1998, Frank McCourt, author of Angela's Ashes, told Life magazine, “I don’t confine myself to the faith of my fathers anymore. All the religions are spread before me, a great spiritual smorgasbord, and I'll help myself, thank you.” The notion that there are many gods, or many paths to a singular god, is widely held in the U.S., and reinforced by the principle of religious toleration. The incessant insistence on tolerance can wear us down, so that a commitment to the “one God” and “one Lord” of the Nicene Creed is harder to maintain. We begin to accept the idea that there is “one God for me, another one for you.” Will just any God do?

Twenty years ago, Harold Bloom insisted that “most Americans . . . are closer to ancient Gnostics than to early Christians . . . We are a religiously mad culture, furiously searching for the spirit, but each of us is subject and object of the one quest, which must be for the original self, a spark or breath in us that we are convinced goes back to before the Creation.” Just over ten years ago, in God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture, one essay considered the religious pluralism of The Simpsons: “Although the program thrives on satire, caricature, and irony, it does so with a keen understanding of current trends in American religion. The Simpsons implicitly affirms

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an America in which institutional religion has lost its position of authority and where personal expressions of spirituality have come to dominate popular religious culture.”

Another essay examined the role of ritual, including the use of “props such as incense, flowers, vestments, animals, food, and coins.” The practice of setting up impromptu shrines of candles, stuffed animals, flowers, and messages, to memorialize victims of accidents or criminal actions, often accompanied by vigils, has perhaps never been absent from American religious culture, and yet it seems to have morphed from a “may” to a “must” rubric—it has become a necessary element of proper mourning. In addition, certain sports have taken on a para-religious character, especially football. Its stadiums are its “temples.” Ritual activities, including tail-gating, body painting with team colors, headdresses, “the iconic use of favorite player numbers,” cheerleaders and dance teams, chest-bumps, high-fives, and other “liturgical” features contribute to the religious atmosphere. The combination of personalized religion and religion-like ritual is potent.

A recent browse of the shelves in one local, public library branch turned up still more recent titles announcing searches for God, searches of God, efforts to reconcile science and religion, seeking God in science, in politics (is Jesus “red” or “blue”?), how to be secular (and how to witness to seculars), and how to be spiritual. Bloom’s assertion, that “no Western nation is as religion-soaked as ours,” still fits. Americans are seeking hard for God, whether to embrace him or exclude him, once they find him. Will just any “God” do?

Surveying the Biblical Landscape

The question is real, but it is not new. The Old Testament makes it clear that confusion (agnosis) continued and even increased among the people whom God created and, later, called to be his own. Almost all of the problems that Israel faced had to do with whether and how they knew, or didn’t know, God, especially, how they sorted him out from “other gods.”

Torah (Pentateuch)

The books of Moses are the formative narrative of the Old Testament, and so we need to spend a little extra time with them.

It seems reasonable to say that, on a human level, the significance and implications of the events of Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection prompted the writing of the Gospels, including their “back stories” (the records of Jesus’s birth, teaching, and ministry, and the conflicts, which culminated in his passion). I think it is reasonable also to say, analogously, that the significance and implications of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt prompted the writing of the books of Moses, including the “back stories” in Genesis. One of the complications in reading the Gospels is recognizing what characters in the stories do not know, but readers do know, because the narrator
(storyteller) tells them (us). The same complication applies to reading Genesis, as part of the overall narrative of the exodus.

In Exodus 3, God discloses his name to Moses: Yahweh. In Exodus 6, however, when Yahweh reassures Moses, who has been rebuffed by Pharaoh and rejected by the Hebrews, that he will indeed deliver the people in accordance with what he has said, he declares his identity again, “I am Yahweh,” but also acknowledges that, while he had “appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as ‘El Shaddai,’ [by] my name Yahweh I was not known to them” (Ex 6:3). But the name Yahweh occurs 165 times in the book of Genesis; what gives?

We do not know by what means Moses received the back stories recorded in Genesis, from creation through the patriarchs and Joseph. He could have received them by immediate revelation, or he might have gathered them, as traditions, from the people. If the latter, it looks like he, as narrator, is incorporating the name Yahweh into these traditional stories, in order to make clear that the God of the fathers is, and was from the beginning, Yahweh. A question that arises in either mode of reception is why his use of “God” and “Yahweh” is not more uniform, e.g., why he uses only יְהוָה in the creation narrative of Genesis 1, but אֱלֹהִים in Genesis 2. Genesis 4:26 reports that “calling on the name of Yahweh was begun,” but does not indicate who began to call or how the name Yahweh came to be known. Where the “narrator” speaks, this seems an “easy” explanation.

Interpretation becomes more difficult when characters actually speak the name Yahweh. Eve is first, when she celebrates the birth of Cain by exclaiming, “I have gotten a man with [the help of] Yahweh” (Gn 4:1). At the end of the chapter, however, at the birth of Seth she says only that God (זְקַנִי) has given her another seed (Gn 4:25). The use of the name Yahweh does not adhere consistently to any clear pattern. Characters use the divine name, whether or not they are expressly part of the line of promise, e.g., Lot (Gn 19:14).

Yahweh “introduces” himself four times in Genesis: in Genesis 17:1 (to Abraham) and 35:11 (to Jacob), he calls himself “El Shaddai,” the name by which he says he was known in Exodus 6:3. In Genesis 15:7, however, he says, “I am Yahweh, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit.” This form, especially, anticipates (echoes?) the formula at Sinai, “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of Egypt . . .” (Ex 20:2). In Genesis 28:13, Yahweh declares to Jacob, “I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham, your father, and the God of Isaac; the land on which you are lying I will give to you and to your offspring.”

So, what might we think about all this? The books of Moses, as Torah (instruction), are at least as “catechetical” as they are “historical” or “legal.” In compiling the Genesis back stories, Moses makes sure it is clear that when the patriarchs encountered God, they were encountering Yahweh, even if they didn’t know him by that name. The reader is left with no ambiguity, even if the unevenness of the use of the divine name in the discourse of the characters suggests that their knowledge of God was, in some fashion, ambiguous.

Fast-forward through nearly 400 years of biblical silence (from the end of Genesis to the beginning of Exodus). In the run-up to the release from Egypt, Israel is
to pay attention to what Yahweh will do, because through his acts “they will know that I am Yahweh” (Ex 6:7). Egypt, also, will come to know Yahweh, by their experience of the same works, but for them these will signify his wrath (Ex 7:5). Though the Hebrews’ predicament gets worse before it gets better, through the plagues, by which God makes a distinction between Israel and Egypt, especially the final solution of the slaying of the firstborn, and through the deliverance at the Red Sea, to the utterance at Sinai, “I am Yahweh, your God . . .” the people of Israel have begun to know God. They experience his commitment to them—he provides the emblem of his presence (tabernacle) and the means of reconciliation (sacrifices and offerings)—but they begin also to experience his dead-seriousness about righteousness (golden calf, Baal Peor). Through wandering and rest, discipline and deliverance, they have the “patriarchal word more sure” (compare 2 Pt 1:19).

In Deuteronomy, then, one of the main concerns of Moses’s sermons is that Israel will remember and not forget God (e.g., Dt 8). They have known him through his provision and protection throughout the wilderness wanderings, and that track record is to ground their continuing reliance on him.

Former Prophets

In his final address to Israel, Joshua draws a line-in-the-sand: he puts before the people a choice whether to serve the gods of their forefathers across the [Euphrates] river, or the gods of the Amorites, whose land they have taken and are to possess, or Yahweh (an option that he has “hidden” in the conditional clause, “if you think it’s a bad idea to serve Yahweh, then here are the remaining options”). He doesn’t elaborate; he already had reminded them that the LORD had kept his promises; not one had failed (23:14). The choice should be a “no-brainer,” and the people respond accordingly (Jo 24:16–18). In the period of the judges, however, the situation deteriorated not simply because the people disobeyed laws, even God’s laws, but because “there arose another generation . . . who did not know the LORD or, also, the work he had done for Israel” (Jgs 2:10); increasingly, “everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes.”

In the transition from the judges to the monarchy, the sons of Eli were characterized as “sons of worthlessness” (יְבִלָּאִים יִרְשִׁי, sons of Belial), because “they did not know the LORD” (1 Sm 2:12). Once the monarchy is established, and alongside it the office of prophet, however, the books of Samuel and Kings do not express as explicitly the lack of knowledge of Yahweh. Instead, it is the actions of the kings that demonstrate whether they know God or not, with David as the benchmark.

Latter, or Writing, Prophets

What is implicit in the narrative of the historical books (Former Prophets) is explicit in the Latter Prophets. Since the focus of this essay is on Isaiah, we’ll begin with the “minors” and work to the “majors.”

Hosea uses verbal and nominal forms of the root יִדְרֹד 20 times—fewer than any of the “Major Prophets,” but more than twice the next largest number (9 in Zechariah) in the minors. Israel as promiscuous bride does not know that it is from Yahweh that she receives grain, new wine, and oil (Hos 2:10 Heb; 2:8 Eng.). When God woos her
in the wilderness, Israel will once again know her faithful husband Yahweh (2:22 Heb; 2:20 Eng.). Yahweh has a case against Israel, because truth, loyalty, and knowledge of God are non-existent in the land (4:1). God knows Ephraim/Israel, but they do not know him (5:3-4). What Yahweh wants from his people are loyalty and acknowledgment, not sacrifices and burnt offerings (6:6).

In Ezekiel, of 99 occurrences of the root יד, 38 are in the phrase “they will know that I am Yahweh” and another 31 are in the phrase “you will know that I am Yahweh.” Each of these occurs in a pattern similar to those in Exodus 6:7 and 7:5 (see above): when Yahweh performs a particular act, for weal or woe, it will produce knowledge that the One who announces such things is Yahweh. In Jeremiah, verb forms of יד occur 74 times; in 13 of them, Yahweh, or his way or ordinance, is the grammatical object. Three more occurrences point to the lack of knowing God by describing how the people have pursued “gods which they have not known” (Jer 7:9; 19:4; 44:3), instead of the God who knows them and has continually made himself known. Seven times יד is used to announce that the people will be exiled to “nations that you have not known” (5:15; 9:16; 10:25; 14:18; 15:14; 16:13; 17:4), in deliberate contrast to the land in which God had placed them to live as his people. יד occurs three times; however, only one of these applies to the matter at hand: In Jer. 22:16, Yahweh declares that doing justice and righteousness is the knowledge of God.

More than any of the others, however, it is the prophet Isaiah who addresses the matter of knowing and knowledge. One of the main concerns of the book of Isaiah is to address precisely this issue, to help Israel answer the question: “Will just any ‘God’ do?”

Knowing and Knowledge in Isaiah

The book of Isaiah has resisted efforts to lay out its train of thought. There are, however, certain themes that help a reader make sense of the book, as a book. The theme of knowing God, which we have sketched above as an important ingredient in a biblical (OT) theology, offers one way of organizing one’s reading of Isaiah. It emerges very early, in the familiar passage: “An ox knows its owner, and an ass the trough of its master; but Israel does not know; my people do not understand” (Is 1:3).

The people’s lack of knowledge and understanding appears in two ways, which produces two kinds of hearers of the prophet’s message. One kind domesticates God by presuming on his grace and failing to acknowledge his justice. The person who lives this way ignores the reality that Yahweh, though he forgives “iniquity and transgression and sin, will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex 34:7). To these people the prophet declares woe, because they “call good evil, and evil good” (Is 5:20), because they render lip-service to God instead of worship from the heart (29:13; also 1:10–15). They think they know God—that his irrevocable call means irrevocable blessing—and so are complacent about God, who will not be tamed.

The other kind of agnosis does not presume too much; in fact, it presumes too little. The one who lives this way fears that God’s mercy has been exhausted—and this can be a function of his will or his power. They hear the same indictments as the first group, and they know they are true. They are afraid that the God of justice has rendered his verdict—guilty as charged—and that there is no reprieve. They hear the
prophet declare that Yahweh rejects (or has rejected) his people (Is 2:6), and despair whether he can ever again look with favor toward them. To them the prophet speaks words of comfort and deliverance (e.g., 11:16–12:2; 14:1–2; etc.). These words, of course, are the ones we tend to appropriate into our lectionaries, the familiar words of a son to be born (9:2–6), of the shoot from the stump (remnant) of Jesse (11:1ff.). When we teach or preach them, we should pay close attention to their contexts, because we need to observe the contrasts between what the generally complacent populace of Judah was to hear and what the concerned remnant needed to hear.

In the first part of Isaiah, viz., chapters 1–39, the prophet speaks more to deny hope to the complacent, and in the second part, viz., chapters 40–66, more to give hope to the despairing, but his two kinds of proclamation to two kinds of audience are present throughout the whole. The condition of both kinds of people, the complacent and the despairing, is encompassed by the commission Yahweh gives Isaiah: they all will “hear and hear, and not understand, will see and see, but not perceive” (Is 6:9). The vocabulary of knowing is not prominent in the first part of Isaiah; if knowing is to take place, it must do so by way of the threats and promises of Yahweh, which, when they come to pass, (will) signify his character and thus make him known, if one has eyes to see and ears to hear. On the other hand, the vocabulary of knowing erupts in chapters 40–48.14

Isaiah 40–48

Isaiah 40:1–11 is one of the most familiar passages in the OT. The announcement of comfort begins in God (v. 1), spreads to the voices (vv. 3, 6) and then to the “heralds” (v. 9). The notion of what comfort is or entails also undergoes development: it starts as release from “hard service” and guilt and sin (v. 2), shifts to the promise of seeing the glory of the LORD (v. 5); continues by affirming the certainty of God’s word (v. 8). But the essential content of comfort is God himself: “Behold your God!” (v. 9). The LORD [who is] God comes with irresistible might, but also with incomparable gentleness (vv. 10–11).

While we must always reckon with the reality of a remnant in Judah, who do know and believe in the LORD, the more widespread problem of not knowing remains. The question that Moses anticipated—when I tell the people, “The God of your fathers has sent me” and they ask, “What is his name?” what should I tell them (Ex 3:13)—is the same in every generation. Each new generation needs to be taught, and where a present generation does forget, it needs to be re-catechized. In the Large Catechism, Luther asked: “What does ‘to have a god’ mean, or what is God?” His answer:

A ‘god’ is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.15
Isaiah 40–48 never wanders far from the insistence that Yahweh alone is God—not just Judah’s God (or Jacob’s or Israel’s), but the only God, the God of all nations, the God of all times and all places. These chapters offer a commentary on the First Commandment, with two main arguments:

1. there is a rhetorical acknowledgment of the possibility of other gods, but the evidence is that Yahweh acts and the other purported gods cannot, and so the exclusiveness of Yahweh is asserted;

2. the people of Yahweh have been the beneficiaries of his acts, and so can know (should know) that his past faithfulness warrants trust in his future faithfulness.

Rhetorical questions are an important feature in the language of these chapters, and they range from the general—e.g., about fundamental characteristics of a god—to the specific—e.g., about activities for which the only answer that makes sense is Yahweh. There are questions that invite reflection on ordinary experience, recall of prior knowledge or tradition, and questions that accuse. The questions become less frequent as we move through the section.

The first set of questions has to do with the characteristics of a god, what a “candidate” for God must be able to exhibit. Israel 40:12 asks questions about natural phenomena that are beyond man’s capacity to know comprehensively. A god as “large” as a god should be, will be able to “measure” the total of these things—to hold the world’s waters in his cupped hand, to span the heavens between the tips of the thumb and little finger of his spread hand, etc. Verses 13 and 14 pose questions about the very order(ing) of things—“justice” here, for example, is more than a jurisprudential notion. The response to these questions tells us, for the moment, what the answer is not: It is not “nations,” (i.e., worldly powers), which are a “drop in the bucket” and “dust,” which a real god, the true God, can easily sweep away (vv. 15–16). And if the power of nations is of no moment, what other criteria can be used to confirm, and signify, the existence of a god? An idol? (40:17–18). That a god fashioned by man can be counted as God is dismissed as absurd (40:19–20).

Into this answer vacuum comes a “logical inference” question: Don’t you know—and the accompanying questions emphasize that this kind of knowledge is basic, background knowledge, “from the beginning”—that a god must transcend the order of the world (be above the earth and larger than the expanse of the heavens); govern, not be governed; control space (earth and the heavens) and time (the duration of nations, their rising and falling), not be controlled (vv. 21–24)?

The language turns personal in verse 25: “To whom [what] will you liken me, that I should be like him [it]?” The speaker is “the Holy One,” an abbreviated version of the form of address that is almost exclusively Isaiah’s: “the Holy One of Israel.” The answer points, first, to the creation of the stars, that “the Holy One” knows their number and names (v. 26). If the Holy One, Yahweh, knows the stars, in their vast array and number, then he also knows the “way” and the “cause” (הָעֵדַּות) of his people to the same degree (v. 27). They are not overlooked. Yahweh is eternal, the Creator of all things, unlimited as to his understanding, indefatigable: he is therefore reliable, and hope in him is secure (40:28-31).
This knowledge of Yahweh is the goal of all the questions and answers and exhortations that are spoken in the chapters that follow. Several “themes” continue to be deployed:

The Worthlessness of Idols

Isaiah 40:19–20 posited the “idol” (יהֵלֹק, yeholq) as an answer to the question of the likeness of God, but the rejection of the possibility is subtle. This is not yet an all-out assault on the concept, but the hearer/reader has an invitation to infer. The underlying value of the materials can vary: one person can afford gold and silver, another only wood. Even in the case of the former, the gold is an overlay; the object designated for consultation is not pure. The kind of wood is important; it must not rot. It also must be worked—planed, sanded—so that it will not wobble or topple. The same concerns are raised in 41:7. Workmanship in the manufacture of a god must go through “quality control”: hammer work and soldering must be approved. “Nails” (or pegs) keep the finished work in place—perhaps, on its base.

The most thoroughly executed argument against idols occurs in Isaiah 44:9–20: “All who fashion idols are רֹמאָ, which ESV renders as “nothing.” But רומא signifies more an emptiness where something should be (thus, Gn 1:2, רומא רומא, describes something doubly void, doubly empty, until God utters the creating word). The one who makes an idol is “empty-headed,” not because his work is not “profitable”—the craftsman actually might make a profit from selling his work—but because his work is of no benefit: it can do no work. Craftsmen are only human; by definition, they cannot make gods.

Still, they try: the iron smith wears himself out (44:12). The carpenter measures carefully, works patiently. The form of his carving is human—this god is only an extrapolation of man. But his material is, first, fuel, and his priorities follow Maslow’s pyramid: he must warm himself and cook his food, then he can satisfy his need for a god (44:15). If the reader didn’t catch it the first time, it is repeated: Half of it he uses for fuel and cooks on it. With the rest he fashions a god and prays to it (44:16–17). The “commentary” on this process echoes the announced responses to Isaiah’s preaching: “They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes . . . and their hearts . . .” (44:18; compare 6:9–10). It does not dawn on the craftsman what an absurd process he has performed, that the “god” he holds in his hand is a lie (44:20).

The non-sense of fashioning a god for oneself continues: One must carry his or her god, because the god cannot move by itself (45:20; 46:7). Idols of every sort are discredited.

What are the “idols” we fashion? Perhaps we do not manufacture figurines and call them gods—perhaps, in some cases, we do—but we construct other objects out of precious metals (or strong ones such as iron, steel, and titanium), out of wood, and today out of even more exotic materials—carbon nanotubes, anyone?—and we accord them a place in our lives that should be reserved for and filled by God. We exchange the truth about God for a lie, and worship and serve the creature instead of the Creator (Rom 1). The religious pluralism with which we contend is not simply an institutional one but, as in Isaiah’s Judah and Jerusalem, a contest for the heart and mind.
“Trust not in princes; they are but mortal.”

Isaiah 40 had dismissed the nations as drops in a bucket and dust on scales (40:15–17) and their leaders as nonentities (40:23). They are no better than idols; they too are 无力. As the idols cannot operate without an “operator,” neither can the nations or their princes. They do nothing on their own, but are superintended by someone; the only question is “by whom?” And there is no discussion of other answers; it is the LORD alone who does this. It is not simply the immediate question of “who stirs up the one from the east?,” who rampages through the region now?, but also the historical question of “who has done this from the beginning?” (41:2, 4a), and God himself answers, “I, Yahweh, the first and with the last, I am the one” (41:4b).

“Israel, my servant, Jacob . . . the offspring of Abraham” (41:8) can feel secure against his enemies, because those enemies “will be put to shame and confounded” (41:11). They will be turned back, because “I, Yahweh, your God, hold your right hand. I, I am the one who says to you, ‘Do not be afraid, I shall help you’” (41:13). This God, Yahweh, orders the affairs of all nations. He is the one who gives victory to the one “from the east” and the one “from the north” (41:25). Yahweh also will be the one who takes them down. Babylon rises and, especially, falls (43:14; 46:1–2; 47). Cyrus will succeed, but only because Yahweh has anointed him, chosen him to perform what he (Yahweh) wants to accomplish “for the sake of his people” (45:4). And so it is Israel’s God, also, who subjects them to looting and plundering (42:24), but who will be the one who restores them, by calling them back from everywhere they will have been scattered (43:3–7).

There is, of course, no direct line that can be drawn from Old Testament Israel to twenty-first century America; however, on the principle that God accepts “in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right” (Acts 10:35), one can infer that God acts “for the sake of his people” wherever they live. And we, as people of God who live in the U.S., are not excepted. We trust, not in the vacuous god of American civil religion, but in the God who showed himself, in the biblical narrative, to be the Lord of all nations. We are tempted continually to think that the government will protect us and provide for us; after that, we can attend to God, according to our religious preferences. The Isaiah texts remind us that governments rise and fall (in our context, are voted in and out), to which we should add that markets also rise and fall. But there is no fluctuation in God’s devotion to his people.

“The word of our God will stand forever.”

The significance of Israel’s God as a speaking God is reiterated throughout Isaiah 40–48. It begins somewhat obliquely, in the rhetorical question, “Has it not been told you from the beginning?” (40:21), because “by whom” is not immediately and directly answered—there are some gaps that the reader is invited to fill, as were the people who first heard the preaching of this word. In chapter 41, however, the implicit is made explicit. The gods of the coastlands, who are invited to assemble “for judgment,” (i.e., to settle something), are challenged to speak: to make a case, to lay out proofs, to explain what has taken place, or to predict what will happen. But they cannot, and their silence is, indeed, deafening—they are “less than nothing” (41:24).

Who did declare all things “from the beginning”? Yahweh.
The LORD announces “new things... before they spring forth” (42:9). He had “held [his] peace,” but no more (42:14). He confronts the people with the fact that he has oppressed them because of their sins (42:18–25), but he also reassures them that, as he has called them by name, he will be with them, to deliver them (43:1–7). His words will become deeds, and his people will be his “witnesses.” They will see (and experience) and know and believe that Yahweh is God, and there is no other (43:9–11): he “declared and saved and proclaimed” (43:12). More than a third of the occurrences in Isaiah of the speech formula, “Thus says the LORD,” appear in Isaiah 43–48. He declares his commitments, his intentions; his speaking establishes him as the only real (and true) God.

Confidence in the word of God to be fulfilled is grounded in the word of God already fulfilled. In creation, he spoke and all things that are, came to be—the heavens stretched out, the earth also, filling it with everything that sprouts and grows, including its inhabitants (e.g., 42:5; 44:24). The “old (former) things” count, but the “new thing(s)” will surpass the old.

Isaiah 46:5 reprises the question of 40:25: “To whom will you compare me?” There is no comparison: all other “gods” are frauds. Yahweh challenges the reader:

Remember this and stand firm; recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other. I am God, and there is none like me, who declares the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My counsel will stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.” . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it (Is 46:8–11, ESV).

Will just any “God” do?

In this all too cursory examination of Isaiah 40–48, we have encountered four “themes” which are key to settling the question of whether just any God will do:

• Yahweh asserts repeatedly that as the creator he is, by definition, greater than anything in creation (40:12–14). Moreover, as he points out, also repeatedly, the fundamental fallacy inherent to any god of human manufacture is that such a god cannot be greater than the material of which it is made, or than the one who fashioned it.

• Yahweh calls attention repeatedly to his continuing involvement in, and control of, world affairs. The theo-political environment in the Ancient Near East is usually described in local, parochial terms: particular gods are associated with particular nations, and have no real influence outside their borders. Contests between nations are tantamount to contests between gods: conquer a nation, and you conquer its god(s). But Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel—which means he is Israel’s holiness, and he is to be honored as holy in Israel—insists that whatever happens, wherever it happens, even when it brings adversity to his own people, he has directed it (40:23–24; 41:2–4; 42:1–4: 43:3–7; 44:25–28; 45:1–4; 46:10–11).
• A god must (be able to) communicate. Only the God of Israel has done so; the idols of the nations have not—and cannot.

What about us? The pattern of reassurance of the exclusiveness of Yahweh as God, and the comfort it brings, remains the same for us as it was for the people to whom Isaiah preached. And yet we have “the prophetic word made more sure” in the Incarnation of Yahweh’s greater Servant, his Son, Jesus. His life among us and his death and resurrection for us, which we have seen through the testimony of the apostolic witness, not only fulfills promises that God has previously spoken, but also grounds our confidence that the promises that remain to be fulfilled will be kept too.

In the signature essay of the collection God in the Dock, C. S. Lewis wrote that:

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. [Man] is the judge: God is in the dock. [Man] is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, [man] is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.

Sixty-four years have passed since Lewis wrote his essay, and I am not persuaded that man is “quite a kindly judge” but, instead, rather more hostile. But the situation Lewis describes remains the same: God is in the dock. What Isaiah 40–48 portrays, however, is that God put himself there. Yahweh is in the dock and examines himself. You too can read the “transcript.”

Endnotes

6. And team owners insist that their teams’ stadiums maintain “top-tier” status, in relation to other teams’ stadiums—“our temple must be at least as lavish as another’s”—the cost of which is to be borne, at least indirectly, by the fans, through public funding and tax incentives.
As we are aware, God announces his name as “I am who I am” (יהוה יהוה יהוה). As I quip to students, the reason why this first-person form becomes the third-person הוא is to avoid having to answer the question, “Who is your God?” by saying, “I am.” But, I admit, my explanation has no theological foundation, only a grammatical one.

This number is the result of a search using “Accordance.” By my reckoning, 69% (114) of these instances occur in the “voice” of the narrator, 27% (44) in the voices of characters, but in “descriptive speeches” — the characters are talking about Yahweh, his acts or his nature; characters address Yahweh five times (3%); and there are two instances in which Yahweh identifies himself as Yahweh (Gn 15:7 and 28:13).

Whether immediate or mediate revelation, inspiration remains intact.

The other two occurrences are of note, however: At Jeremiah 10:14 and 51:17, the prophet announces how God created all things by his wisdom and understanding, but “every man is a dolt when it comes to knowledge; every smithy is a dullard in relation to the idol, for his molten image is a deception and there is no breath in them.” In the first instance the prophet’s sarcasm is directed against Judah; in the latter, to/of Babylon.

Of 75 verbal forms of the root הור in Isaiah, 30 (40%) occur in chapters 40–48, and four of the nine uses of הור are in these chapters.

LC, Ten Commandments, 1–2 Kolb-Wengert, 386.

The following list does not indicate each question, but the verses in which one or more questions occur: Isaiah 40:12–14, 18, 21, 25–26, 27–28; 41:2, 4, 26; 42:19, 23, 24; 43:9; 44:7, 8, 10, 19-20; 45: 9–10 (11 may also be a question, depending upon one’s analysis of the verb ), 21; 46:5; 48:6, 11.

Science probably will disagree, and yet while we know more, we do not yet know all.

The use of נא rather than נוא seems significant here. The two questions in v. 18 are more impersonal; the line of reasoning at this point has to do with how one chooses a god at all.

“Holy One of Israel” 26x in Isaiah (1:4; 5:19, 24; 10:20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19; 29:23 [of Jacob]; 30:11, 12, 15, 31:1; 37:23 [parallel 2 Kings 19:22]; 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3, 14; 45:11; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5; 55:5; 60:9, 14); 2x in Jeremiah; 1x in Ezekiel; 4x in Psalms “Holy One” 4x in Isaiah (10:17; 40:23; 43:15; 49:7); 2x in Hosea; 2x in Habakkuk.; 1x in Job; 1x in Psalms; 2x in Proverbs; 1x in Numbers (denoting a man); 4x in Daniel (indefinite).

See JPS Tanakh, which treats the ה in יִשְׁמַע as a ה of comparison, where the thing compared is a blank, “nothing.”

43:1, 14, 16; 44:2, 6, 24; 45:1, 11, 14, 18; 48:17.

C. S. Lewis, God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 244.
Preaching from Isaiah 56–66

R. Reed Lessing

Introduction

Those who preach from Isaiah soon discover that it is different from most books in the Bible. Genesis, Exodus, Samuel, and Kings contain stories that chronicle creation, the fall, and Israel’s history. The Gospels frequently introduce narratives and parables where good and bad characters are easy to discern. Paul typically presents theological truths in neatly-wrapped packages.

Isaiah, however, is different. The book is a long and winding road with many twists, turns, and about-faces. Even though textual blocks are linked vis-à-vis allusions, parallels, and citations, the prophet’s complexities and ambiguities often leave preachers confused and frustrated.

And in Isaiah 56–66 this is even more so. This section of the book is at once familiar and unfamiliar. Some oracles are well known, such as “Arise, shine your light has come” (Is 60:1), “The Spirit of Lord Yahweh is upon me” (Is 61:1), “Who is this coming from Edom?” (Is 63:1), and “Behold, I will create a new heaven and a new earth” (Is 65:17). But for the most part, Isaiah 56–66 is an unknown section in a very bewildering book. No wonder pastors are reluctant to preach from these chapters.

But this means ignoring fifteen readings in the LSB Three-Year Lectionary. They are as follows: Isaiah 56:1, 6–7 (A, Proper 15); Isaiah 57:15–21 (A, B, C, Pentecost Evening, Monday); Isaiah 58:3–9a (A, Epiphany 5); Isaiah 60:1–6 (A, B, C, Epiphany); Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11 (B, Advent 3); Isaiah 61:10–62:3 (B, Christmas 1); Isaiah 62:1–5 (C, Epiphany 2); Isaiah 62:10–12 (A, B, C, Christmas Dawn); Isaiah 62:11–63:7 (A, B, C, Wednesday in Holy Week); Isaiah 63:7–14 (A, Christmas 1); Isaiah 64:1–9 (B, Advent 1); Isaiah 65:1–9 (C, Proper 7); Isaiah 65:17–25 (C, Easter Day); Isaiah 66:10–14 (C, Proper 9); Isaiah 66:18–23 (C, Proper 16). To overlook these pericopes is to miss out on many of Isaiah’s transformational law and gospel insights. So what can be done to make these texts more preachable?

For us to boldly and accurately preach from Isaiah 56–66 we must become more familiar with: (1) the theological nature of these chapters; (2) the two groups in this section; and (3) the destiny of Yahweh’s servants in the book of Isaiah, along with the

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pivotal texts of Isaiah 57:1 and 65:8. Considering how the New Testament appropriates the prophet’s last eleven chapters will give us additional preaching confidence. Finally, four sample sermons—available at www.concordiatheology.org—offer a hands-on demonstration of how the ideas in this article are applied in preaching from texts in Isaiah 56–66.

Reading Isaiah 56–66 Theologically

When crafting a sermon from Isaiah 56–66, the first problem preachers encounter is the section’s lack of historical specificity. Unlike chapters 1–55, in Isaiah 56–66 the prophet does not mention any dateable people or events. Christopher Seitz rightly maintains that this section of Isaiah “is so bereft of concrete historical indicators,” that “proposals as to historical and social location are extremely speculative.” Consequently, we should read chapters 56–66, not in light of supposed reconstructed historical situations, but in the context of the book of Isaiah. Seitz encourages interpretations that do not depend upon “a Babylonian prophet and Palestinian disciple model of interpretation.” P. A. Smith likewise admits to the “lack of clear and reliable information relating to the early period of Persian rule.” And Chris Franke argues that theories suggesting a Jerusalem postexilic origin for chapters 56–66 are only possibilities remaining to be demonstrated. Therefore, when preparing a sermon from Isaiah’s last eleven chapters, it is not helpful to embrace the idea that the prophet is addressing Judeans who returned from exile in Babylon.

While it is true that Isaiah 40–55 extends historically beyond chapters 1–39, this is not the case with chapters 56–66. The last section of Isaiah, rather, circles back to unite the previous parts theologically. Isaiah 56–66 needs to be read as a literary and theological reflection on Isaiah 1–55, and not as a historical address to Israelites in Persian Yehud.

Since the late eighteenth-century, though, many biblical scholars have been agnostic, or worse, antagonistic, toward a theological reading of the Bible. History and theology, they have argued, are separate disciplines, thus the needs of the Christian church have been frequently ignored by the critical academy. As time goes on, however, historical criticism is saying more and more about less and less, while the theological reading of texts is gaining ground.

This is good news for those seeking a conservative and Christological approach to Isaiah 56–66. A reading of the prophet’s last eleven chapters along these lines is concerned with the text’s final form and not earlier presupposed versions. It does not discount historical and literary facets of passages, but it primarily sees texts as sources of divine revelation and theological truth. As such, theologically reading Isaiah 56–66 is really an old-school approach that was practiced by the church throughout most of her history. After an exile of several hundred years, a churchly view of the Scriptures is coming back into the limelight.
A theological reading of Isaiah 56–66 reads these chapters with a hermeneutic that locates the life, death, resurrection, and second advent of Jesus as its focal point. It identifies the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the God and Father who raised Jesus from the dead. Isaiah’s last eleven chapters, then, testify to the restoration of all things through Yahweh’s Messiah, Jesus who is the Son of God. This reading employs the “rule of faith” as it is understood through the church’s three ecumenical creeds. Looking at the last eleven chapters of Isaiah in this way asks the question, what do we see when we read them through the creeds that we would not otherwise see?

And the answer is singular. We see in Isaiah 56–66, like no other place in the Old Testament, the challenges and glories, the lows and the highs, of Christ’s church. These chapters show what life is like now in the community of the Suffering Servant and what it will be like when he appears “a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb 9:28).

For example, the oracles in chapters 60–62 are primarily eschatological, so it is incorrect to argue for a specific historical setting based upon the city’s walls (Is 60:10), the existence of ruins (Is 61:4), or a period of forsakenness (Is 60:15; 62:4). Isaiah’s oracles about the Divine Warrior (Is 59:15b–20; 63:1–6), the new heaven and new earth (Is 65:17–25), and the final destinies of believers and unbelievers (Is 66:7–24) are likewise eschatological and do not indicate when Isaiah composed them or to whom they are specifically addressed. Smith is correct when he writes, “Thus the whole unit of chapters 56–66 is eschatologically oriented, so it is difficult to find any information in these messages that points to an identifiable historical date for the actual audience that first heard these messages.” Isaiah 56–66 points to the last days that are signaled by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17), even as they take up the question, “who will participate in this new order?”

Therefore, preachers should not only understand these chapters within their intertextual connections with Isaiah 1–55, but also see their fulfillment in Christ as well as in the church he founded. Edgar Conrad confirms this interpretation. He argues that the word חזון, vision, in Isaiah 1:1 signals a prophetic book that is composed for later audiences (cf. Is 29:11–12, 18). Understood in this way, Isaiah 56–66 envisions God’s end time community that is present, proleptically, in the prophet’s oracles. It is displayed historically for the first time in the book of Acts. Isaiah 56–66 is therefore a vision oriented towards the painful break between Judaism and Christianity that is narrated in the New Testament.

The Two Groups in Isaiah 56–66

Since the book of Acts is the primary grid we want to employ in our interpretation of Isaiah 56–66, then it is important to recognize that the prophet is addressing two rival groups. It is easy to read Isaiah 40–55 and conclude that “Abraham’s seed” (Is 41:8) is equivalent to the Servant’s seed (Is 53:10); that being Abraham’s descendant is tantamount to being included in Yahweh’s new community that issues forth from the life, death, and resurrection of the Suffering Servant. Chapters 56–66, however, radically refute this belief. A purebred Israelite may be on the outside while a for-
eigner, indeed, even a eunuch, may be on the inside (Is 56:1–8). As early as Bernhard Duhm, scholars have realized that a major problem in Isaiah 56–66 is an internal one.\textsuperscript{13} Believers are beset by schismatics.\textsuperscript{14} Chapters 56–66 therefore avoid all collective designations because it is not possible to equate “Israel” with “Yahweh’s people.” Or, to import Pauline terms, “For not all who come from Israel are Israel” (Rom 9:6). Election is by promise, not by the flesh. As such, Isaiah 56–66 divides “Israel from Israel.”\textsuperscript{15}

The major theological tension is no longer the dichotomy between Israel and the nations (e.g., chapters 1–55), but an internal conflict between the servants, the seed of the Substitute Servant, (Is 53:10) and apostates whom the prophet calls the offspring of an adulterer and children of deceit (Is 57:3–4).\textsuperscript{16} Israel can no longer be synonymous with Yahweh’s people. Rather, it has to be defined by its relationship to the descendants of the Suffering Servant.

Throughout much of Isaiah 56–66, the prophet addresses the apostates with law and gospel, holding out the hope that they will repent and live. But Yahweh will not contend with them forever (Is 57:16). At the root of the problem is idolatry. The three oracles addressing this sin are in Isaiah 57:3–13a, 65:3–5, and 66:3–4. These texts describe apostates participating in Baal and Molech worship. What is deceptive is that these same people guarded Torah regulations to the degree that they kept the Sabbath, fasted, and made offerings; but they ignored the oppressed, the poor, and the needy (Is 58:6–7, 9b–10). Enmeshed in idolatry, their lives were consumed with delusions as they followed their own ways (Is 56:11; 57:10). Their leaders are called “watchmen” (Is 56:10) and “shepherds” (Is 56:11), but they are this in name only.

The socioeconomic level of these apostates appears to be upper class; they are the “haves” who ignore the “have nots” (Is 58:6–10). They ostracize others on the basis of the dubious argument that “I am too holy for you” (Is 65:5). These apostates place unholy obstacles before the believing remnant (Is 57:14) and put a yoke on their necks (Is 58:6, 9).

The believing remnant in Isaiah 56–66 is primarily called Yahweh’s “servants” (Is 56:7; 63:17; 65:8–9, 13–15; 66:14). Synonymous terms include the following: (1) those who take refuge in Yahweh (Is 57:13b); (2) people who are crushed in spirit (Is 57:15); (3) those who are redeemed, holy and righteous (Is 60:21; 61:3; 62:12); (4) people who grieve over Zion (e.g., Is 61:2; 66:10); and (5) those who “tremble at his [Yahweh’s] word” (Is 66:2, 5). They are the offspring of the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:10); their righteousness comes from him (Is 53:11; 54:17). This community is centered upon Yahweh’s holy city and mountain; both designate the temple mount in Jerusalem (e.g. Is 56:7).

This group was outcast (Is 56:8; 57:1) and had little or no power within the larger whole (Is 57:15; 66:2). It was rejected (Is 66:5), perhaps because the remnant included eunuchs and foreigners (Is 56:1–8). But these people were the true Israel (Is 65:8–16). They had been made righteous through the work of the Substitute Servant and were therefore his chosen people (Is 65:9, 15, 22). They loved Jerusalem (Is 66:10) and clung tenaciously to the first commandment as evidenced by the ongoing critique of idolatry in Isaiah 56–66 (e.g., Is 57:3–13a; 65:3–7; 66:3–4).
The Destiny of Yahweh’s Servants in the Book of Isaiah

Yahweh promises many offspring to his faithful Servant (Is 53:10). In chapters 56–66 the single Servant becomes a plurality of servants.17 Though by no means blameless, this faithful remnant has sincerely repented of their transgressions, lives in obedience to Yahweh’s Torah, and anticipates the fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision.

These servants are accounted righteous by faith and called “Yahweh’s servants” (Is 54:17). To describe the servants of the Servant as righteous is fitting—a form of the word צדקה or צדק occurs forty-six times from Isaiah 54:17 to the end of the book. For instance, those who mourn in Zion will be made glad and be called “oaks of righteousness” (Is 61:3). Like a decorated bridegroom, the servants will be “robed in righteousness” (Is 61:10). And Yahweh will cause their “righteousness and praise to spring up” before all nations (Is 61:11). But what does the future hold for these righteous servants? They are forever bound together with the Suffering Servant. How is this so?

Isaiah 57:1 plays a key role in the interpretation of Isaiah 56–66. The sudden transition from chapter 56 to 57 is surprising, yet what joins Isaiah 57:1 with Isaiah 56:9–12 is that the abrupt departure of the Righteous One and his followers comes because of the apostate leaders’ complacency and incompetence. They thought that Isaiah’s preaching was mere saber-rattling (cf. Is 30:11–12). Yahweh was no longer real for them. “After all,” the unbelieving overseers reason in Isaiah 56:12, “isn’t this how you get by and have some fun along the way?”

While the unfaithful shepherds look in vain for satisfaction as their lives spiral out of control (Is 56:9–12), there in their midst is the Righteous One—the Good Shepherd—and he gathers his sheep (Is 56:8) so that they are safe from oppression and violence. This contrast between the Faithful Shepherd and the reprobate hirelings anticipates the final separation of the two groups in chapters 65–66.

The elliptical nature, as well as the change from a singular person to plural and back to singular, makes Isaiah 57:1 difficult to understand. This much, though, is certain; the Righteous One and his followers share a similar destiny. Note the following chiasm:

A The Righteous One is destroyed
B But no one takes it to heart
C Men of covenant loyalty are taken away
B’ No one understands
A’ The Righteous One is taken away

What are we to make of this? First, “the Righteous One” is the same person as Yahweh’s “Righteous Servant” (Is 53:11). The lament that no one takes his death to heart refers to the Fourth Servant Song. “One despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering and acquainted with sickness. And like one before whom the face should be veiled, despised and we held him of no account” (Is 53:3). Second, the destiny of the many is bound up with the Righteous One. Isaiah clarifies these connections in the Fourth Servant Song when he writes that the Substitute Servant, who is the Righteous
One, imparts his righteousness as a gift to the many (Is 53:11; 54:17). Within Isaiah 56–66, this group is the faithful remnant who, just like their leader, is persecuted and abandoned. The head and the body constitute one entity. The Servant’s offspring face suffering and rejection. Both share the same destiny. Just as the Servant perishes, so the faithful are gathered to their death (Is 57:2).

Yahweh must finally intervene (Is 59:15b–20) and deliver his Servant’s offspring (Is 59:21) who are oppressed by the apostates within the community. Salvation for the faithful is spelled out in chapters 60–62, while Isaiah 63:1–6 confirms that Yahweh will defeat all who oppress his people. Isaiah laments over Yahweh’s absence (Is 63:7–64:12). The prophet complains that Yahweh had not come down to address Israel’s plight even as he wistfully wonders, “Will you be silent and afflict us forever?” (Is 64:12).

In Isaiah 65:1–66:24 Yahweh responds to the prophet’s prayer. He makes it clear that the community cannot continue in its present state. Irreconcilable worldviews divide the people in two. Yet Yahweh’s decision to sever the remnant from the apostates is gradually introduced in chapter 65. Instead of beginning with an abrupt rupture, Isaiah 65 announces judgment upon the evildoers who are addressed in the third person through Isaiah 65:6. Then the text changes to second person plural suffixes in Isaiah 65:7. Yahweh will not pardon those who have fallen away from the faith; rather, he will repay the idolatrous faction in full (Is 65:6–7).

When divine judgment strikes the community, it will not be complete (Is 65:8). Yahweh will spare a remnant. Abraham’s query to Yahweh is pertinent here. “Will you destroy the righteous with the wicked?” (Gn 18:23). Yahweh’s answer is “no.” “If Yahweh the God of armies had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah” (Is 1:9). New life comes from the old community. A shoot will burst forth from Jesse’s burned-out stump (Is 6:13; 11:1a). Indeed, “a branch from his roots shall bear fruit” (Is 11:1b). These promises of a Davidic Messiah imply a messianic community as well. God preserves a remnant chosen by grace. Isaiah 65:8, then, is the interpretive key to the prophet’s lament (Is 63:7–64:12) as well as to chapters 56–66. Not everyone in the community is guilty of the sins cited; e.g., Isaiah 56:9–12; 57:3–13a; 58:1–5; 59:1–15a; 65:2–7.

Isaiah 65:13–14 makes this clearer. The sought-after favor in the prophet’s lament (Is 63:7–64:12) is granted, but only to the remnant who are Yahweh’s servants, a term employed for the faithful seven times in the book’s last two chapters (Is 65:8, 9, 13 [three times], 15; 66:14). Synonymous terms in this section include “seed” (Is 65:9, 23), “my chosen” (Is 65:9), “my people” (Is 65:10, 18, 19, 22), those who are humble and contrite (Is 66:2), the trembling at Yahweh’s word (Is 66:3, 5), Lady Zion (Is 66:8), and Jerusalem (Is 66:10). These people respond in faith to the Suffering Servant’s ministry (Is 55:6), saying “amen” to him (Is 65:16).

While Isaiah 63:17 could be understood that all Israelites are servants, Isaiah 65:8 clarifies the issue. Only those who refuse to participate in social sins and pagan rites belong to Yahweh. This specification becomes even clearer in Isaiah 65:15–16 where divine judgment and salvation cut the community in half. The good grapes are spared (cf. Is 27:2–6), while the bad grapes are separated out for judgment. While Isaiah’s
Song of the Vineyard depicts wholesale destruction (Is 5:1–7), there are some good grapes after all. The entire cluster is not condemned. There will be a remnant comprised of the Servant’s offspring (Is 53:10) who embrace the gift of righteousness by faith (Is 54:17). Only these humble and contrite servants (e.g., Is 57:15; 66:2, 5) will inherit the New Jerusalem described in Isaiah 60–62; 65:17–25; 66:22. On the other hand, the apostates are destined to live forever outside of the city where “their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched” (Is 66:24). “Undeniable grimness sits alongside unimaginable glories.”

The New Testament’s Appropriation of Isaiah 56–66

The struggle of the true Israel that permeates the last eleven chapters of Isaiah foreshadows the debate in the New Testament. John the Baptist addresses the same problem: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (Lk 3:8). The true descendants of Abraham are believers in Jesus. “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29). In Isaiah 56–66 the prophet announces the same idea. The true Israel of God consists of the Suffering Servant’s offspring (e.g., Is 53:10; 59:21; 65:23; 66:22).

Isaiah 56–66 therefore is a vision oriented towards the painful break between Judaism and Christianity that is narrated in the New Testament. While most of Isaian scholarship is dubious because of its fragmentation of the text and its refusal to tolerate the notion of predictive prophecy, chapters 56–66, in fact, announce both God’s coming judgment upon Judaism as well as the birth of Christ’s church. “Out of old Israel there shall arise a new and glorious, and finally, a spiritually perfect Israel.”

Isaiah 56–66 takes part in a transformation of the name “Israel” which Paul crystallizes. “Israel” had become ambiguous in the first century AD. Who belongs to it was up for grabs. The apostle asserts, though, that “Israel” is now defined by those who embrace new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus (e.g., Gal 6:16; Phil 3:3). This definition allows for Gentiles to be incorporated into the community, which is a major message of Isaiah 56–66 (Is 56:1–8; 66:18–21).

Isaiah 56–66 therefore exerted a great influence on Luke, Paul, and other New Testament authors who sought to understand why Jews, in large part, rejected the Suffering Servant while Gentiles so readily embraced the gospel. These inspired authors saw in Isaiah 56–66 a framework that portrays Judaism and Christianity in conflict, along with God’s decision to take the kingdom from his ancient people and give it to those who produce fruit (e.g., Mt 21:43; cf. Is 65:8).

The clearest example of this Christian interpretation of Isaiah 56–66 comes from Paul’s exegesis of Isaiah 65:1–2 in Romans 10:20–21. He applies these words to the Gentiles, “I allowed myself to be sought by those who did not ask [for me]. I allowed myself to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here I am, Here I am’ to a nation who did not call on my name” (Is 65:1; cf. Rom 10:20). Paul then understands the next verse to be God’s description of Jews who reject Christ. “I hold my hands outstretched all day, to an obstinate people, those walking in a way [that is] not good, after their thoughts” (Is 65:2; cf. Rom 10:21).
While Luke’s Gospel reflects Isaiah 40–55, Acts transitions to record the life of the Servant’s offspring in Isaiah 56–66. Baptized into the Righteous One, his offspring also must face suffering and rejection (e.g., Acts 9:16). Believers share their Savior’s destiny. Just as he perishes, so the faithful are gathered to their death (e.g., Acts 12:2). The servants of the Servant (Is 54:17; 56:7) follow their master. Just like Isaiah 57:1, the head (Jesus) and the body (the church) constitute one entity; so much so that Jesus asks Paul, “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?” (Acts 22:7; 26:11; cf. Acts 9:5).

Conclusions

At first glance, it seems as though Isaiah should have ended his book with chapter 55. What more can he say? Yahweh will stir Cyrus to get Israelites out of Babylon (Is 41:2; 44:28; 45:1). The Suffering Servant will die and rise again for the sins of all (Is 52:13–53:12). Lady Zion will be restored with her children in pristine beauty (Is 54). And Isaiah 55:13 is like a benediction when the prophet writes, “Instead of the thorn a cypress tree will go up. Instead of the brier a myrtle tree will go up. And it will become for Yahweh a name, and an everlasting sign that will not be cut off.” The pinnacle of these prophecies is the announcement that “the many” (Is 52:14, 15; 53:11, 12) are declared righteous (Is 53:11) and then reconstituted as Yahweh’s “servants” (Is 54:17). But what will life be like in the Servant’s new community?

Isaiah 56–66 makes it clear that the Servant’s servants will live in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. They will be rejected just like their master (Is 57:1). These chapters describe the faithful remnant that is aggressively confronted by a community of idolatrous apostates. Yahweh must finally split the community in two (Is 65:8) and this points to the division brought by Jesus. Far from being a clumsy appendix to the book, then, Isaiah 56–66 is the prophet’s logical conclusion to the ministry of the Suffering Servant. In the last eleven chapters we witness the rejection of Judaism, the birth of the church, and the final vindication of the Servant’s offspring in the New Jerusalem.

Endnotes

1 This article is adapted from the Concordia Commentary series title, Isaiah 56–66, by R. Reed Lessing © Concordia Publishing House, forthcoming in 2014.
3 To quote Grace Emmerson, “The material is too disparate, and its origins too obscure, to justify the historical approach. It is ultimately its final literary form which must concern us” (Isaiah 56–66 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992], 71).
4 Anchor Bible Dictionary, 3:506.
7 Yet, this is exactly what even some evangelicals encourage. Note John Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 11. However, Oswalt also writes, “That these chapters [Isaiah 56–66] may have been addressed especially to conditions that would prevail after the return from exile in the years after 538 is less important than that they are written to show how the theology of ch. 40–55 fits into that of ch. 1–39” (Isaiah 40–66, 11).
8 This implies, then, that there is no sharp break between chapters 55 and 56. Seitz writes, “It is quite possible that chaps. 40–55 treat different aspects of the restoration of Zion than do chaps. 56–66, which demonstrate
special interest in the requirements for membership in God’s Zion. But then the sharp distinction drawn between these sections on historical grounds falls away. The distinction becomes thematic and theological, and it does not necessitate separation along Babylonian/Palestinian, exilic/postexilic, or visionary prophet/disillusioned community line” (Anchor Bible Dictionary, 3:503).

9 E.g., Daniel Treier, Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Stephen Fowl, Theological Interpretation of Scripture (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009); Kevin Vanhoozer ed., Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). Commentary series include the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; the Two Horizons New Testament Commentary; and the Concordia Commentary Series.

10 Smith, Isaiah 40–66, 520.

11 Brooks Schramm concurs: “Many of the concerns that surface in Third Isaiah are the very same concerns that shape the whole of Isaiah” (The Opponents of Third Isaiah: Reconstructing the Cultic History of the Restoration [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995], 43).


13 Bernhard Duhm, Das Buch Jesaia (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892), 418.

14 The rupture in Isaiah 56–66, however, does not begin in these chapters. The antagonism commences subtly in chapters 40–55 and then picks up momentum (Is 40:27–31; 42:18–20; 43:22–24; 45:9–11; 46:12–13; 48:1–2; 50:1–3, 10–11). Israelites are enmeshed in idol worship (e.g., Is 40:27; 44:9–20; 49:14) so Yahweh responds by rejecting his servant nation (chapter 48) and installing a Substitute Servant (Is 49:1–6). Yet there is no doubt that throughout chapters 40–55 God is addressing his people as one group, called Jacob and Israel, Zion and Jerusalem. At the end of the section, the people are reconstituted as “the servants of Yahweh” (Is 54:17).


16 The nations in chapters 56–66, unlike those in chapters 1–55, are not a major part of the prophet’s preaching. For example, when Edom appears in Isaiah 63:1–6 it has been depoliticized and stands as a cipher for all of Yahweh’s enemies that include unbelieving nations (e.g., Is 59:18 “islands”) as well as the wicked apostates (Is 66:6, 15–17).

17 For a fuller discussion, see Lessing, Isaiah 40–55 (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 76–90.


HOMILETICAL HELPS
Some texts don’t need sermons. What more needs to be said about love than the praise that the apostle lavishes on it in 1 Corinthians 13? Perhaps nothing more needs to be said, but showing love within the body of Christ as it lives in the present day is far easier said than done. The context makes it quite clear what the love encouraged by the apostle looks like. 1 Corinthians 13 (introduced by 12:31) is strategically placed in the center of Paul’s teaching on “body” and “gifts” in Corinth. Some of the baptized in Corinth acted as if they had “no need” for others (12:21), thereby destroying the unity of the body. In chapter 14, some were acting as if their personal “manifestation of the Spirit” was for their own benefit and not for the “building up the church.” The fundamental problem among the gathered baptized in Corinth was self-serving behavior caused by self-important attitudes and self-referential thinking. The apostolic solution is “love.” All else is temporary, whether prophesying (14:1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 22, 24 31, 39), knowledge (8:1, 7, 10, 11), or tongues (12:10, 28; 14:2, 4 etc.), but in contrast to all three of these self-focused activities, “love never ends” (13:8). So the love encouraged in the body of Christ is not some kind of internal, emotional “good feeling” when we think of someone or something. Above all, it abhors living for self. Rather, “love” in 1 Corinthians 13 is active, righteous living for the good of the sister and brother in Christ.

We, however, are perhaps a bit confused by “love.” “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” I say “I love you” to my wife, to my daughters, and to my mother, but “love” means different things in each case. I also “love” pepperoni pizza, and I “love it” when the Chicago Cubs win. We “fall into” and then “fall out of” love. We have many definitions for the word “love.” You’ve no doubt also heard the urban-legend definition of “agape love,” usually defined as a perfect, Godly love distinguished from “philial love” and “erotic love,” allegedly on the very precise definitions of the different Greek vocables. However, no language is that precise, and in the NT there is considerable overlap between ἀγαπη and φιλια/φιλεω (cf. Jn 13:23 and 20:2, where the “disciple whom Jesus loved” is loved with both words). Rather than basing a definition of love on a bare vocable, context determines what the word means. Paul defines love in 1 Corinthians 13 first by what it does not look like (13:1–3) and then by what it does (13:4–7).

The crescendo of the “hymn” is 13:7, which in most English translations unfortunately sounds hopelessly blind and foolish: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Paul’s use of παντα, however, does not focus on the content of what is borne, believed, hoped, and endured, but on the limitless action of the verbs. A better understanding is “Love supports without limits, trusts/is faithful without limits (see Gal 5:22 for a parallel use of πιστευω), hopes without limits, never gives up (cf. Jn 13:1, “Jesus loved them to the end.”). The point is not, as is implied in most translations, that love is “blind.” Rather, love is without bounds and is permanent, the point made in the next section (13:8–11).
Perhaps skipped over in our zeal to encourage the right kind of love is the eschatological focus of the chapter, laid out in this conclusion. The reason that “knowledge” and “prophecy” and “tongues” do not strengthen the body as much as love is that they are partial, temporary, and incomplete in the present age. We (the church) “know in part” and “prophecy in part” because we are not yet “perfect.” And when the perfect comes, the restoration of all creation on the last day, then the limits and ephemerality of knowledge and prophesying—of any human speaking—become obvious. Then, and only then, will we know as we have been known. On that day knowledge will no longer be necessary; all that will remain is love. God’s love for us, and our love for his body, the baptized.

The problems of self-seeking and puffing-up pride in Corinth are blown away like the chaff when held up to the light of love. What the apostle calls for in the body of Christ is no less than to live as if the last day has already come. On the last day, what one has done for oneself will not matter, so why would it matter now? The knowledge that one possesses, no matter how impressive, is still only a thimbleful compared with what will be made known on the last day. But love is love. It will be shown fully on the last day, and unlike knowledge and prophesying, it can be shown fully in the church today by those who live in Christ.

You, as a preacher, cannot create this kind of love in your people. You cannot force them to show it. It happens only when the Spirit kills the old man and the new man, daily, rises to love God and love neighbor. And, by the Spirit of Christ, this does, indeed, happen. The main preaching challenge is to do as the apostle did. Paul exposed that which was “not love” in Corinth (knowledge, prophecy, self-serving; 13:1–3). What is “not love” among the baptized that you serve? Where is self-seeking happening even in the body of Christ? Second, what does love look like, in contrast to our notions of feels like (13:4–7)? Here, specifics might help the congregation put flesh on love. Finally, remind your hearers that they are already the body of Christ; they have been “fully known,” and that the love they do brings a small piece of the future kingdom into the present, in Christ, who embodies love (13:8–11).

Jeffrey Kloha

Transfiguration Sunday • Hebrews 3:1–6 • February 10, 2013

Goal: That the hearers are more confident in the hope we have in the One deserving of all glory.

The writer to the Hebrews wants us to have confidence, and the courage to stand strong in our hope. A confidence that doesn’t back down in the face of opposition. A courage that shows no fear. A confidence that will accept the danger that goes with the hope we have. A courage to make things just. All because of the hope we have. We are to stand tall with confident hope.
Yes, confident hope. But what are we hoping for? Just what is this hope that we stand tall for, with courage and perhaps danger? Our hope is that we will go to be with Jesus when this life ends. We hope with confidence that when our body lies asleep in a grave we will rest with blissful assurance that Jesus will keep us safe.

But hope doesn’t stop there. Hope looks forward even further. Hope looks to a day to come that makes all things new once again. We are hoping for Jesus to return on the last day. Our hope is that Jesus will come back and make everything right again. Our confident hope is that on that glorious day our bodies will return to life, transformed in such a way that sickness and pain will never be able to touch us again. On that incredible day, all injustice and evil will be done and gone. On that day all of creation will rejoice as death and decay will disappear.

Just think, on that day of resurrection, bodies alive once again with taste buds that surprise you with flavors you didn’t know were possible; fingertips that feel the wonder of love in holding a hand or touching a face; smells that intoxicate you; sounds touching your ears of music, birds singing, people talking, words that make your heart burst with joy. And our eyes will see colors that make the 128 crayons in that yellow and green box way too few for the beauty of this world recreated to reflect God’s glory. This last day resurrection of our bodies and this world is what we confidently hope for.

But that confidence is threatened. Confidence stands tall in the face of opposition. Courage means danger is just around the corner. What opposition? What danger?

[In this section I suggest a series of quick examples of how Christians around the world and in this country are being persecuted, ridiculed or attacked.]

When we see these attacks on believers, it shakes our confidence. Courage is needed, but standing tall and calling attention to our hopes in Jesus is frightening. “Boast in our hope,” the writer of Hebrews says, but it’s easier to slink away to the safety of silence, of not making any waves.

It’s a good thing we don’t have to face all those dangers alone. We are never alone in this call to be confident in our hope, courageous in the face of whatever threatens our faith.

The writer of Hebrews encourages us to consider Jesus. He wants us to look carefully and think long and hard about Jesus. He wants us to fix our minds on Jesus.

Then he compares Jesus and Moses. Jesus is worthy of greater honor. Moses was just a servant. Jesus is the Son. Moses lived in God’s house. Jesus built it. Moses was just a man. Jesus was man and God. Moses died and could lead his people no more. Jesus died and . . . rose again. [Since this is Transfiguration Sunday, I suggest describing the transfiguration to show that Jesus is greater than Moses.]

We are not alone when it comes to confidence and hope. Consider Jesus. Walk up to his empty tomb and look at what he can do. Fix your minds on his glorious body risen from the dead. Our confidence comes from Jesus. Our hope is in Jesus. Think long and hard about what Jesus has done for us and promises to do for us. Stand tall in the hope that only Jesus can give.
But that’s not all. The writer of Hebrews also says that Jesus is the builder of a house. The house? It has a firm foundation. It stands against attacks and threats because Jesus builds it. What is this house? The church.

Jesus does not leave us alone. He gives us each other to stand courageous and confident. A phrase has become popular the last few years. “I’ve got your back.” It means you’re not facing a threat alone; others are there for you. And you’re there for others. We’re in this struggle to stay confident and courageous together. We have each other’s backs.

In the church, Jesus brings us together to face the threats to our hope and faith. Here he gives us his word to give us confidence and courage for the facing of this life. Here Jesus is present in the Lord’s Supper to bring us together as the communion of saints, a family united together in this building called the church, so that we have each other’s backs.

I heard a story about a young girl who had lost her hand. She was so self-conscious about her deformity that she didn’t want to leave her house. Finally, her mother convinced her to go to church. It would be one of her first outings since losing her hand. Her mother called her Sunday school teacher to let her know what was going on. But for some reason the teacher couldn’t make it at the last minute and a substitute teacher stepped in. She wasn’t aware of the young girl’s fears and handicap.

During the class, she asked the children to make the church with their hands. You know, you turn your fingers upside down and interlock them and say, “This is the church.” Then you raise your index fingers and say, “This is the steeple.” Then you open your hands and say, “Here are all the people.”

But the girl only had one hand. A boy in the class saw what was happening. He went over to her and gave her his hand. Together they made the church. On this day, that young boy was there for the girl. He had her back. She wasn’t there alone.

We’re here together. We have each other’s backs. We are Jesus’s building, his church. He is with us and is our hope, our hope now, when we die, and for that great final day of his return. With that, the writer of Hebrews says, we are people with confidence and courage, boasting of our hope to a world that needs such hope.

Glenn Nielsen

Lent 1 • Romans 10:8b–13 • February 17, 2013

Notes on the pericope

This pericope is a portion of Paul’s lengthy discussion of the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles in his letter to the Romans. At this point in the discussion, Paul is explaining how the Jews, who pursued righteousness, could fail to attain it when Gentiles, who did not seek righteousness, were justified. The reason is that the Jews did not pursue righteousness through faith, but rather a righteousness based on the law and therefore by works. The reason they did not pursue the righteousness of faith is that
they “stumbled over the stumbling-stone,” namely, Jesus Christ (9:30–33). Paul further explains that the righteousness pursued by the Jews was all their own, not God’s, even it had been based on the law. Why? Because “Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (10:4).

In the pericope, Paul explains the implication of Christ being the end of the law. Not only does this show decisively that justification is not by works of the law (already shown in earlier chapters), but it also means that all who believe in Jesus will attain righteousness and obtain all the blessings of the righteousness. As Paul put it: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (10:9). There is no distinction any longer between Jews and Greeks, not only because the law has come to an end but also because Jesus the Lord is Lord of all, and he gives his riches to all who call upon him.

Two features in this passage are worth some attention. The first is that Paul relates what one says with what one believes. Confession and faith go together here. We see this not only in vv. 9–10, but also in the two passages quoted from Isaiah and Joel. With Isaiah Paul says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame,” and with Joel he says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” The connection between confession and faith, moreover, goes along with the way Paul identifies Jesus: as Lord. Belief in Jesus works itself out in acknowledging him as Lord and calling out to him as Lord.

The second feature is God raising Jesus from the dead. Why would Paul specify belief in this? Why not his death on the cross? Of course, belief in his resurrection implies that he died, but Paul’s mention of his resurrection fits well with this discussion in at least two ways. First, it goes along with the ascription of lordship to Jesus. While Jesus had not only spoken of his lordship but also shown it by his signs and wonders, his words and deeds led to his rejection by the Jews and his crucifixion. But God raised him from the dead, thus vindicating Jesus as Lord. Second, it goes along with the conviction that Christ is the end of the law. A key reason for rejecting Jesus is that he did not always keep the law. For example, he touched the unclean and worked on the Sabbath, and these aroused the anger of the Jews, who killed him. But, once again, in raising him from the dead, God vindicated Jesus and showed that he is the end of the law.

Notes for preaching

My suggestion for preaching is to focus on the basic message of the passage—salvation for all who believe—and to take advantage of the immediate context. This context brings out how the Jews failure to attain righteousness was the result of rejecting Jesus. Since this pericope is for the first Sunday in Lent, it makes good sense both for textual exposition and liturgically to deal at length with the rejection Jesus endured. If one were to pursue this suggestion, then an obvious goal would be to strengthen the hearers’ confidence that the Lord will save them and all who believe in him.

This kind of sermon would first explain what Paul was doing. He was explaining the odd outcome that Jews, who had pursued righteousness, were unjustified while Gentiles, who never had pursued righteousness, were justified.
Next, explore the reason that so many Jews were not justified. In a nutshell, the reason was Jesus. For many Jews, Jesus was a stumbling block, and this is why he was crucified. Here is the opportunity to explore how Jesus was a stumbling block to the Jews and was rejected by them. Since Paul is contrasting the righteousness of faith to the righteousness of the law, it would be fitting to highlight the ways in which Jesus showed that he was “the end of the law,” and how this brought about his rejection and crucifixion.

After this comes the resurrection: God raised Jesus from the dead. This vindicated Jesus as the Son of God, as the Christ, as Lord. It showed conclusively that righteousness before God came through him—by faith in him. It also makes sense of Paul when he says: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” And this, in turn, assures those who believe in Christ today that righteousness and salvation are theirs.

At this point, the preacher could deal with the challenges that his hearers encounter. One challenge would be the temptation to pursue a righteousness of one’s own. The Jews did this in their way, but contemporary hearers have their own ways. Another challenge would be the fear that one’s own unrighteousness might negate the righteousness of God. The preacher might allay this fear by reminding hearers that Gentiles who weren’t even seeking righteousness attained it, and so do all who believe in Jesus the Lord, for “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Joel P. Okamoto

Lent 2 • Philippians 3:17–4:1 • February 24, 2013

Introductory thoughts

“Walk this way,” Mel Brook’s Igor the hunchback said (from the movie Young Frankenstein). Following in his footsteps, Doctor Frankenstein imitated his awkward gait. Children imitate their parents, sometimes to their parents’ pleasure, sometimes to their embarrassment. Models of faithful following of Jesus are significant parts of the Holy Spirit’s bringing up God’s children in the way that they are to go. “Συμμιμηταί!” Paul wants us to be. We never imitate alone since God saw that it was not good for us human creatures to be alone. We learn to follow Paul’s example in walking Christ’s way in the family, the congregation of his people.

Notes on text

1. Part of Paul’s example involves us in learning to cry the right way, and to cry because of—and even on behalf of—our enemies. He shed tears not in anger, nor disgust, nor indignation, but in outright sorrow for people whose God is their belly. And that from a man who usually appears to us unlikely to shed tears! The enemies of the cross glory in their own shame because the way in which they think about reality (φρονούντες) focuses their lives on what they experience on earth (ἐπίγεια). Imitators of
Paul have learned to think about reality in a mature (τέλειος) fashion, that is, a fashion that fulfills God’s goals for his earthly creatures (Phil 3:15). Tears are a gift from God for those who do not think Christ’s way. They flow from eyes and minds freed by Christ’s death and resurrection to imitate Paul and the Lord himself (Lk 19:41). Only those who know tears of joy because of what Christ has done for us can pray on behalf of their enemies with tears.

2. Paul contrasts those who imitate him with these people who hasten toward their own destruction. He describes the orientation of his imitators in terms of where their ears, eyes, and hearts are pointed. Indeed, the earthly country and the this-worldly culture in which we live are gifts of the Creator of earth, countries, and cultures, and he happens to be our Father. This earth is the Lord’s, and he shares it with his children. We dare never abandon country or culture to the squatters, whose end is destruction, but must continually bear witness to our claim that this vineyard earth really belongs to our family (Mt 21:33–44). Nonetheless, Paul here insists that our citizenship is in heaven: God our Creator has planted the feet of his human creatures firmly on earth, but he wants us to have our heads in the clouds; that is, to have the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5, 1 Cor 2:16). For our identity papers were issued in baptism, and our orientation is toward God’s throne. He commands our ultimate loyalty. He is coming from heaven to reclaim us as his own. He reclaims us for living on his earth, in the callings to which he has called us, and does not want us to be longing for escape from the privilege of serving him by serving his creatures here on earth. But he does want us to be longing for him, and for his return, which will consummate all his plans for us.

3. Paul reminds us that we are on our way, not to destruction, but to new bodies. He does not promise escape from the body but its re-creation (1 Cor 15). An old design, a new model. He speaks of a body that rises, ascends, to another way of thinking about reality, Christ’s way of thinking (Phil 2:5, 1 Cor 2:16). This text is not a discussion of whether this earth is to be renewed or left behind on the last day; it is a proclamation regarding the proper orientation or direction of our minds, a call to living in trust in the one who recreates us through his own death and resurrection.

4. The verb στήκω is derived from ιστήμι; Paul uses it as an invitational command or imperative invitation to recognize that Christ’s people have in him a place to stand that is firm because it is grounded on the very action of God. The Creator has come in human flesh as Jesus of Nazareth to recreate his fallen human creatures. Because he has done this, we have the solid ground of Calvary and Joseph’s tomb under our feet. From Calvary we can see forever; through the tomb we see all the way to God’s throne. Secure in Christ, we can afford to shed tears over those who are racing toward their own destruction, and we can care for God’s earth, for our country and our culture, with heads in the clouds and hands on in the midst of his creation.

Possible approaches to preaching the text

This text provides such rich provocation for thinking about what Paul’s message means for us today that any one of the above four points can be woven into a sermon. In each case the ideas of imitating Paul, which is living in Christ’s footsteps in newness
of life, as our baptisms have recreated us to do (Rom 6:4), should provide the basis for weeping, and/or caring for creation with a heavenly mindset, and/or looking forward to our fulfillment in resurrection, all the while standing firm while walking Christ’s and Paul’s way.

Robert Kolb

Lent 3 • 1 Corinthians 10:1–13 • March 3, 2013

In our text the Apostle Paul is addressing the issue of how we live as brothers and sisters in Christ in this evil age. His concern is with those (both in Corinth and in our own day and places) who claim to “possess knowledge.” “This ‘knowledge,’” he says, “puffs up, but love builds up.” And then he continues, “If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God” (1 Cor 8:1–3).

He has already talked about several issues of concern, and will discuss others, but here, for now, the apostle wants us to think about the grace of God. He calls his readers to remember what the “wise” can so easily forget, the fact that God’s grace and gifts put us (and all who believe) into a personal and responsible relationship with him. God’s grace and gifts, revealed in Jesus’s death and resurrection, do not shield us from sin, or keep us from sinning, and nor do they insure that we will not be judged.

Ancient Israel is a reminder of this truth—and here Paul makes a masterful, Spirit-led move: God’s people of the New Testament cannot ignore the example of his dealing with our ancestors in the faith, ancient Israel. Israel experienced the same fullness of God’s grace in action, that Christians have experienced in our baptism, as they passed through the Red Sea. And they too were fed with a spiritual (supernatural) supper given by the Lord; theirs was manna and water designed to sustain them physically and spiritually in the wilderness while ours is the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. What great and marvelous gifts they are.

And still they fell, still they sinned, and still they provoked the judgment of God because they thought that they knew better than he. “This knowledge puffs up,” and leads us into sin. “But love builds up,” (8:2) and leads us into service. It strengthens the church which is as fractured in our day as was the church of Corinth in Paul’s day. Love causes us to reach out to “all who have gone astray,” as we prayed in today’s collect, “and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of (his) word” (collect for Lent 3).

From Israel’s history the new Israel of the church can learn: “let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (10:12). Not that we, as Christians, should live in fear or terror; we know that our faithful God remains protectively in charge of our lives. St. Paul writes: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability” (10:12, 13).
But the warning stands; we live in a world of sin where we daily confront idolaters, sexual immorality, grumblers, and even those who abuse the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood. We dare not allow ourselves to be affected by these temptations.

For that we have Jesus whose suffering, death, and resurrection have redeemed us from death and destruction. For that we have his Spirit who leads us into all the truth. For that we have one another, the body of Christ into which we have been called, with whom we celebrate God’s love, where we eat and drink the Savior’s body and blood: the cup of blessing and the bread that we break to which Paul directs our attention in the verses that follow our text. So, once again, it is all about Jesus and his love. What better emphasis could there be for Lent 3? To him be the glory.

David Wollenburg

Lent 4 • 2 Corinthians 5:16–21 • March 10, 2013

New Creation, New Identity

In this reading, Paul employs two dominant themes: 1) new creation and 2) reconciliation. Are these the same thing? Or does reconciliation correlate with justification, while new creation correlates with sanctification? Or is there some other distinction being made here? I would suggest that new creation and reconciliation are two ways of saying the same thing. The homiletical suggestions I offer arise from the question of how these two themes go together.

Starting from the end of the passage, we read, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). This is the kind of passage Lutherans are comfortable with. It describes Jesus as a sacrificial victim, fulfilling the sacrifices of the Old Testament, and consequently bestowing righteousness upon us.

But does this mean that salvation is essentially a matter of bookkeeping? Are we saved when God makes a correcting entry in his ledger on account of Christ? This seems to be, at least implicitly, the image that is behind much Lutheran preaching on God’s forgiveness. Perhaps that is because this image does make it clear that salvation is accomplished by Christ, not by us. That point, however, does not exhaust the biblical witness about the forgiveness of sins.

Paul is working with a different set of images to describe Christ’s sacrifice. He starts by saying, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). The Greek is more emphatic than the English translations are: εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις (“If anyone is in Christ—new creation!”) I take the liberty of adding an exclamation point here because the lack of any connecting words highlights the term new creation, suggesting that this is the key term in the pericope.

What would it mean, then, to understanding reconciliation under the heading of new creation? I would suggest that homiletically, these themes can be combined with
the concept of a new identity. Our identities are determined by what God says of us. He created us by speaking, and he recreated by speaking as well. When God reconciles us to himself by forgiving our sins, he is not employing an accounting trick, but he is giving us a new identity. We are a new creation because he says we are.

A new identity brings with it a new way of looking at the world. Paul says, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer” (2 Cor 5:16). “According to the flesh” (κατὰ σάρκα) is best taken adverbially to modify the verb regard. Regarding Christ “according to the flesh” does not mean recognizing his human nature. Rather, it means thinking of him in a worldly way.

One way the sermon might be developed is to unpack our new identity in Christ by showing how it makes a difference in how we view Christ or others. Paul mentions a number of examples of this in the verses preceding our text. He speaks of being of good courage in the face of the burdens of life (2 Cor 5:1–10). He also speaks of the heart being more important than outward appearances (2 Cor 5:12). It would also be appropriate to bring in examples that are specific to the hearers of the sermon.

This text is valuable to Lutheran preachers because it gives us a more expansive understanding of the forgiveness of sins. The more expansive view is later echoed by Luther in the sixth chief part of the Small Catechism: “Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”

David R. Maxwell

Lent 5 • Philippians 3:(4b–7) 8–14 • March 17, 2013

Paul’s “putting out of mind the course already covered and straining toward the goal that lies ahead” (Phil 3:13), warns today’s preacher not to forget that the race is not over. Philippians 3:4b–14 offers its own beautiful way to convey that warning, with an emphasis on the present straining toward the future. This is a necessary reminder for all Lenten pilgrims, so that neither the 40 days nor the 3 become nothing more than a celebration of the past. I suggest we summarize the contrasts in the text as three pairs. For a cryptic title, I propose “2KX3.”

“2KR” has become a symbol around here for the doctrine of two kinds of righteousness. The contrast of competing righteousnesses lies at the heart of our pericope, but looking toward the beginning and toward the conclusion, we find two other examples of “two kinds” of something, thus my title: “2 Kinds Times 3.”

Two Kinds of Confidence

We should not misread verses 4b–8 as a statement of how wrong Paul once was. The first four things Paul lists are things not of his choosing, given him by birth, and therefore by God. That these are good gifts, even spiritual advantages, Paul will acknowledge elsewhere (e.g. Rom 3). In 3:3 Paul refers to the saints as the “real circumcision.”
Even though the persecution of the church cannot be regarded as a God-given advantage, Paul still values and encourages zeal that leads to action.

Paul uses some of his strongest—and most offensive—language to show that he has not simply found something to “frost the confidence cake.” All that old confidence is discarded, not augmented, not improved. There are two kinds of confidence; the difference between them is Christ. Not only Paul’s misguided zeal and his wrongly defined righteousness, but even his noble birth and membership in the covenant, all this is rejected as a basis for confidence. There is nothing in himself, by birth or by effort that can allow Paul to stand confidently and claim to be right before God. All that “stuff” is now worthless when it comes to true confidence before God.

The knowledge of Christ, Paul’s “personal acquaintance” with his Lord Jesus Christ, surpasses all other causes for confidence. No longer is Paul confident because he has given his best for God; he now knows that God has given his best for Paul in Christ Jesus.

Two Kinds of Righteousness

Verses 9–11 trace the contrast between Paul’s two kinds of righteousness, one based on conformity to the law and another based on faith in Christ. The latter is not simply the best and “Christian” example of the former. The contrasts are clear: “my own” vs. “from God,” and “from the law” but “firmly founded on faith—a faith in Christ.”

Two Kinds of Pursuit

The third contrasted pair will save us from living in our “salvation history” past. Before Paul finishes with this new righteousness, he is already speaking of the resurrection—and how he longs for it. The “straining forward” of the whole pericope (a straining forward throughout Philippians) is clearly and powerfully expressed in verses 12–14.

Why two pursuits? Paul here uses the same verb he had used for his persecution of the Christians. Formerly, he was “pursuing” them with all his might, hoping to purify Israel and show himself to be a faithful servant of the God of the covenant. Now, he is “pursuing”—with everything he is and has—the goal of full knowledge of Christ, of the experience of the power of his resurrection, through participation with Christ in his sufferings. Paul does not pause to look back to see how far he has come, to find confidence in all that his forefathers have accomplished, to gauge how close he is by how much he has already run; all his energy, all his concentration, all his hope has but one goal: Christ. For the sake of Christ. Because of Christ. In Christ. To gain Christ. The goal is Christ.

Jeffrey A. Oschwald
The epistle lesson for the Sixth Sunday in Lent/Palm Sunday (series C) is the famous Carmen Christi of Philippians 2:5–11.

Because verses 6–11 display poetic hymn-like qualities, Greek editions rightly present them as a poem. It consists of two halves of equal size: verses 6–8 (10 lines—90 syllables) and verses 9–11 (9 lines—91 syllables). The first half narrates how Christ Jesus humbled himself to the lowest degree possible, and the second half narrates how God the Father exalted Jesus Christ to the highest level possible.

While the meaning of the poem is much debated among scholars, the traditional Lutheran interpretation remains exegetically the most convincing. (All translations are by the author.) The entire poem deals with Jesus the God-Man, the human Messiah (“Christ”) of the line of David. The one person Jesus in his human nature existed and continues to exist “in God’s form.” By virtue of the personal union his “being equal with God” in all respects such as majesty, power, and authority pertained to his human nature (genus maiestaticum). If Paul had simply referred to Christ’s divine nature, he would have simply said “being God” and not “being equal with God” (cf. Col 2:9; 1:19).

Jesus did not consider this equality something to exploit to his advantage. On the contrary, Jesus “made himself nothing by taking to himself the form of a servant/slave, becoming in the likeness of ordinary men and being found by others in fashion as only a man.” During his public ministry he did not appear in his Transfiguration majesty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). Rather, people generally thought he was only a man, a prophet but not God in the flesh (e.g. Mt 16:14). He humbled himself by becoming obedient to God even to the humiliation of a Roman crucifixion. While being equal with God, he obeyed God as God’s servant to the max (cf. Heb 5:7–8).

Because of this, God “highly exalted him and gave him the name which is above every name.” Jesus humbled himself, but he did not exalt himself. God his Father exalted him—the Greek uses an intensive form, God “hyper-exalted him.” One day everyone will confess, either gladly and willingly or unwillingly, that this Jesus of Nazareth is the exalted “Lord over all,” not only as God—which is true by definition—but also as Man (cf. Eph 1:21–22). This will be “to the glory of God the Father.”

Sermon Idea

“The Lowest and Most Exalted Man”

During Holy Week and the Easter season you will see the Philippians hymn take place with utter clarity. See how Jesus of Nazareth, who could control the weather and raise the dead, did not use his divine power to his own advantage but allowed himself to be arrested, tried, whipped, mocked, and even crucified as a common criminal on a Roman cross. Then see how God the Father highly exalted this same Jesus of Nazareth so that now he exercises all of his divine power in, with, and through his human nature. See how this man is Lord and now rules over all things to the glory of God the Father. See the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth and rejoice; it was all for you.

Paul R. Raabe
From time to time novels have appeared which depict the ramifications of the discovery of alleged archeological evidence that the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ never took place, such as *When It Was Dark* (in the early twentieth century) or more recently Dr. Paul Maier’s theological thriller *A Skeleton in God’s Closet*. They raise the question of where we might turn for light in the darkness which would come upon the world if this central tenet of Christianity were given up by those who hold it. St. Paul in his day had to deal with a radical group within the congregation at Corinth which said that there is no resurrection of the dead (v. 12).

By this bold denial these Corinthians were rejecting the raising of the bodies of the dead, as is clear from Paul’s line of argument against them in vv. 35–49. They seemed to know about Paul’s teaching of a spiritual resurrection (Eph 2:1, 4–6; Col 2:13), the raising of the spirit from the death of sin and unbelief by conversion already in this life, although they misunderstood and distorted it in a puffed up, self-serving way, not guided by apostolic teaching (1 Cor 4:8). But they had commingled the general Greek cultural denial of physical resurrection (see for example Acts 16:18) with Christian beliefs. We do not know exactly what the corrupting line of influence was—possibly Epicurean, or Stoic, or simply a belief in disembodied survival of death. Most likely the final result resembled the teaching combated by Justin Martyr in the next century, held by “some who are called Christians . . . who say that there is no resurrection of the dead and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven.” In any case, in this sermon we will see what light St. Paul used for the darkness which inevitably stemmed from this denial which has plagued the church from his day to ours.

Suggested Outline

**Jesus Christ, the Second Adam**

I. He redeems from death, which is the curse of sin (vv. 19–22)
   A. Sinners are condemned to death. God intended that the human beings he created live in his service and be forever blessed. But Adam, the first man, became separated from God by sin (Gn 2:17; Gn 3:1–19), and all his descendents have been born into his sinful condition and its curse of death (vv. 21–22; Rom 5:15–16). The alienation from God leading up to and continuing after physical death is also called death in Scripture (e.g., Eph 2:1, 5; 1 Jn 3:14; Jn 3:36)—these are parts of the terrible curse of death. But the grace of God longed for the sinner’s reconciliation, deliverance from the curse, and restoration to life in everlasting fullness, and Jesus came to bring all this about (Mt 1:21; Jn 3:16; 10:10). But if the dead really do not rise, Christ also is still dead (v. 13) and the Christian proclamation is empty and all our faith in him is useless (vv. 14–17). For a dead savior is no savior and cannot
give life, and we then are to be pitied, as our hope crumbles (vv. 18–19).

B. But Christ is risen, the apostle assures us (v. 20), bringing light for this gross darkness. He has risen as the representative of sinful human beings and the new head of the human race, the Second Adam through whom benefits come to the new and restored humanity (vv. 21–22, 45). Paul declares his resurrection as a fact (v. 20) on the basis of what he has said earlier in 1 Corinthians 15. He has said (vv. 3–4) that Christ’s death and resurrection as the true and sure Redeemer is fulfillment of scriptural prophecy (cf. Is 53:5–12; Ps 16:8–11); and he has said that the fact of this fulfillment has been confirmed by eyewitnesses of the risen one (vv. 5–8). As the Second Adam he sacrificed himself as the representative of sinful mankind and procured forgiveness and bountiful benefits for the whole race of which he is the new head. This is not a vain and unreliable hope for lost sinners (v. 19) but the basis for steadfast confidence and rejoicing in victory (vv. 57–58). He rose as the head of the restored race, having gained benefits in which we may share (Jn 14:19).

II. The Second Adam is the firstfruits of the harvest of God’s redemption (vv. 23–26).

A. Those who belong to Christ will share in the harvest of which he is the firstfruits. But Paul does not say in 1 Corinthians that all belong to Christ, acknowledging their need for a Savior and trusting in him. The non-Christian world is condemned, and even some professing Christians and communicants are impenitent and will be condemned with the world (3:16–17; 5:4–13; 11:27–32; 15:34). Paul’s teaching is that all the dead are to rise (Acts 24:10–15), but not all will share the benefits of the risen one (2 Thes 1:7–10). That is, he follows his master’s teaching (Jn 5:28–29). Thus his “all” in v. 22 refers to all who trust in Christ.

B. The risen Christ is the Second Adam, who came to restore what the first Adam lost for himself and his posterity by the corruption of body and soul. Therefore the glorious resurrection of the body at the second coming will be the climax of that restoration and redemption. The Spirit-led children of God eagerly wait the redemption of their bodies (Rom 8:23). And if the Corinthians who denied the bodily resurrection held the position—as some commentators think—that Jesus’s body rose but no one else’s will, this absurd inconsistency would also be incompatible with St. Paul’s understanding of the redemptive significance of his resurrection—i.e., “Could the head rise and leave his members dead?” (LSB 741). Christ’s kingdom (basileia) in the sense of
his royal power—used to put an end to all the enemies of the people—being restored, will also subject death, and its disruption of the human being, as the longest enduring of these enemies, to this destruction. Then the Redeemer will hand over the kingdom in that sense by presenting it to his Father as a spectacular sign of “mission accomplished” (vv. 24–26). But the kingdom in the sense of his royal power—used for the purpose of continually showering benefits and gifts upon those in fellowship with him—will never cease (Lk 1:33; Is 9:7; Dn 7:14).

Tom Manteufel

Endnote

Easter 2 • Revelation 1:4–18 • April 7, 2013

Textual Considerations
The number seven (ἑπτά) has been understood to denote completeness. Interpreters differ, however, as to whether the “seven spirits” in verse 4 signify the Holy Spirit and provide a reference to the Holy Trinity. Louis A. Brighton agrees with the Trinitarian understanding in his commentary on Revelation.1

For a helpful discussion of the meaning of ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (“Son of Man”) v. 13, see Brighton.2

While a preacher could present an extensive interpretation of the vivid, symbolic language of the text, the homiletical task in this instance is to interpret and apply the text in its setting in the church year. Lent has passed with its emphasis on the suffering, crucifixion, and death of Jesus Christ. The joyous announcement “Christ is risen!” has proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his victory over death and the grave.

The text can serve to remind the hearers that there is more to the message and mission of Jesus Christ.

Suggested Outline
Even though we have—according to the church year—passed through Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, the mission and message of Jesus Christ did not end with his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Our text reminds us that his ascension, session, and return in glory follow.

• Jesus Christ “was pierced” (αὐτὸν ἐξεκέντρισε) (v. 7) and did shed his blood (ἐν τῷ αἵματι αὐτοῦ) (v. 5) to free people from their sins (v. 5). He did die (v. 18).
• Jesus Christ did rise from the dead (v. 5). He established the gift of eternal life.
• In addition, Jesus Christ ascended into heaven forty days after his resurrection.
• Jesus Christ is one with the Father and a person of the Holy Trinity (vv. 4–5).
• Jesus Christ is reigning as king (v. 5). He is in control of all things. He “has made us a kingdom and priests to God the Father” (v. 6). (Ex 19:6 is in the background. Another application of the Exodus passage to the lives of New Testament believers is 1 Pt 2:9–10.)
• Jesus Christ will return in glory. “Behold, he is coming with the clouds” (v. 7). [He proclaimed this message even before his death on the cross (Mt 24:30).]
• Jesus Christ’s message to John is a message to all believers as they contemplate his second coming: (Μὴ φοβοῦ· ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἐσχάτος) “Fear not, I am the first and the last.”
• Jesus Christ said that he has “the keys of death and hades.” He conquered death and the grave.

According to our text an expanded mission and message of Jesus Christ is that he suffered, was crucified, died, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, reigns as King, builds his church on earth, and will return in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Arthur F. Graudin

Endnotes

1 Louis A. Brighton, Revelation (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 41–43.
2 Ibid., 54–55.

Easter 3 • Revelation 5:1–14 • April 14, 2013

Preliminary Considerations

For a serious study of our text there is no better place to turn than Professor Louis Brighton’s commentary Revelation.1 Readers are encouraged to consult it. This text and the other appointed lessons (Acts 9:1–22; Psalm 30) for this day focus on the theme, “The Big Picture.”

Notes on the text

The season of Epiphany engages the church for the celebration of the gospel for all people with a specific focus on mission to the Gentiles. Easter is the demonstration of God’s decisive victory over sin and death, and the overcoming of every evil, in the person of Jesus Christ. Revelation (chapter 5) is the eschatological manifestation of the glory and grace of God. The mystery that has been hidden for ages has now been fully revealed incarnationally in God’s decisive action in Jesus Christ; in this big picture
Christ reigns supremely and the whole creation, in heaven and on earth, rejoices in that reign and joins in praise and thanksgiving to God.

Revelations 5 opens up a magnificent, glorious scene; the big picture of a realized eschatology where all things fall into their proper place. The redeemed of God from every tribe and tongue and nation (v. 10), and the entire created order in heaven and on earth, under the earth and on the sea (v. 13) worship the only true God who rules in eternity. This pericope is attestation of Christ’s finished work. The Lamb of God was slain, and he has with his blood ransomed for God a people from all over the world. They are now for him a kingdom and a priesthood. Only the Lamb who paid the price with his blood is worthy to open the scroll. The mood is set for a heavenly celebration. The scroll is now open and the song goes on. (Note that in v. 9, the ingressive/inceptive present translates as “they began to sing and continued to do so without ceasing.”) Under the lordship of Christ, the church celebrates. The Lamb, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, rules from the center (5:5, 6). In him the Gentiles will hope (cf. Rom 15:12).

Acts 9:1–22 is also a customary reading for the observance of St. Paul’s conversion, January 25. Paul has spoken so vociferously of his “former life in Judaism” (Gal 1:13), when he perhaps knew the Messiah only in part. Brought up in the Pharisaic customs and practices, Paul was so zealous for the patriarchal traditions in obeying the law that, when compared to his contemporaries, his record was spotless to its most minute detail. Even as a teacher of the Law, Paul had only a limited vision of God and his counsel. Then he knew his mission only in part. He thought the killing of Christians paid homage to the one true God. The big picture began to emerge for Paul on the “road to Damascus.” He was breathing murderous threats on Christians, the true followers who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah.

Now the big picture emerged for Paul. His targets, whose lives he was committed to ending, were followers of Jesus, the very Son of the God he was so zealously intending to serve. Persecuting them was indeed persecuting the Lord (Acts 9: 4, 5). The vision he received transformed his life and called him to a new mission. Paul was now God’s chosen instrument to proclaim the whole counsel of God in Christ’s name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the children of Israel. Until the end, Paul was committed to this mission, as the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13), proclaiming Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2) as light to the nations (Acts 13:47; cf. Is 49:6).

According to Brighton, the ultimate purpose of Christ revealing the content of the scroll to John and to the church is to strengthen the church’s faith and to encourage her to remain faithful to Christ amidst all the sufferings so as to attain the promise of everlasting glory. “That faithfulness,” says Brighton, “involves carrying out the mission Christ has given to her.”2 The Son of David set apart Paul so that, in Christ’s name, he may bring salvation to the ends of the earth (Acts 13:47; 28:28). This is the big picture of the church of every age.

To be sure, as in every age, the church of Jesus Christ amidst suffering, particularly for the sake of the gospel, it is privileged to proclaim. In Paul’s own words,
some may be proclaiming Christ out of envy and jealousy, many times adding to, and sometime subtracting from, the full revelation in Scripture. Some add to it captive philosophy and empty deceit while others are drawn to human traditions and the elemental spirits (Col 2: 8). There is no famine for this in our culture either, whether in the form of the New Age, or pluralism, or numerous other spiritualities. In terms of “restoring” God’s kingdom (Acts 1:7), even devout Christians employ human calculus to figure out its imminence or transcendence.

Actually, the full picture of Christ for all eternity, his mission and his care for all is a little picture, from beginning to the end. It is that of the Lamb and his blood. In one word, it is the cross, the Cross! Wherever Christ is proclaimed thus, there is repentance, life, and salvation.

Victor Raj

Endnotes
1 Louis A. Brighton, Revelation (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999).
2 Ibid., 139.

Easter 4 • Revelation 7:9–17 • April 21, 2013

Behold the Host

Apocalyptic literature is not confined to Christianity, of course. So with a text from the Apocalypse or Revelation of St. John it is important to understand its place at the end of the New Testament, and in Christian thought. In popular parlance, apocalyptic literature is seen today as a revelation of some impending end God wills for the world and time itself. Civilization will cease through a catastrophe while some higher, esoteric knowledge will reveal the roadmap for survivors to arrive at a higher understanding and existence. No small industry has grown up around the rapture racket with various formulae peddled in promise of overcoming the terror of history. We don’t like journeys through the unknown, even if a clear end exists.

Unfortunately for those wanting to decode daily events, St. John’s vision was penned not to decipher our surroundings but to help Christians in his day as they struggled in difficult times and culture. From Rome on down, life was hard with ungodly values hawked by society. Take heart, John says, for this, too, shall pass, and God will hold his own in his hand. The genre understandably displays a mix of pessimism (there will be crisis and persecution) with optimism (but look beyond . . .) as we emerge in a better day.

Apocalypticism is living with a shadow but also with a hope of Christ’s return at hand. Look at Revelation 7. Amid the frightful picture of seven seals being opened, two images of hope are inserted for a kind of “breather.” Though trials come, 144,000 (a mathematical play off Israel’s tribes and Christ’s apostles pointing to all that God will hold fast—a perfect number) come through in verses 1–8. Then today’s text shifts our gaze heavenward where John’s language struggles to capture a scene too glorious for words. Both images cheer us now until Christ comes again.
Palm branches and shouts of acclamation cannot help but hearken back a few weeks to Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem. Hailed as a king (true!), he was nevertheless abandoned, first by the fickle crowds and more seriously by his Father when crucified. No abandonment issues here. Just wave upon wave of praise. Here, as in the previous image, numbers are not literal figures for bean counters but are meant to overwhelm us, endless throngs brought together at Christ’s doing, not their own. Elsewhere in the Scriptures people fall on their faces in part out of fear. Here it is from respect and honor, done in love and joy for love shown them. Someone prostrate is completely vulnerable, open to the one in ascendency and power. But there is no fear here, only comfort and trust.

In verse 14, an elder speaks of white robes that were washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, but being washed white in blood seems incongruous. One might use cold water quickly to get blood out and the stain might not set, but to washing to whiten in blood? And that is hardly the start of incongruities in Christ’s story. From announcement to birth, to suffering and death and resurrection, does any of this make sense as we figure things? Fortunately God does the figuring and also the doing. What do we do? Exactly what the text describes: say thank you loud and long for all eternity. The text’s image of where we are heading is clear. We look forward to it. And we also look around, understanding that there are others to add to the number. The text shows the culmination, but it’s also a mission imperative as through us God seeks others to wash white in baptism and set on the path to Revelation 7.

“Serve” in verse 15 is “worship.” This is no grudging work to be done but rather doxology to be sung (literally on Sunday) and lived, carrying on with what God sends in life, remembering the Lamb who keeps us his. He needs none of what we do but yet invites us to live and work in his behalf, and he is pleased at what comes.

Easter is a few weeks past for this year, but the Revelation text makes plain that the reality of new life is ever-present, now and until his promised return and eternal reign.

Robert Rosin
Introduction: In one episode of the television show The Big Bang Theory, Sheldon expresses fear of dying too early from an illness. So he locks himself in his room and "embodies" his mind in a mobile screen. In our culture we often describe our final hope in terms of escape from our frail bodies when they break down, escape from creatureliness, escape from this world into a non-physical spiritual or rational realm (see also "Q" of Star Trek: The Next Generation).

Our story’s direction: Note how the new Jerusalem is described as coming down from heaven to us. This can provide the opportunity to remind people that the Christian story is fundamentally not a story of our ascent to be with God but of God’s descent to be with us. It is a story where the movement is downward from God to us (see Luther’s hymn: “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come”). The entire story is about a God who comes down to dwell with his people here on earth. Jesus comes down to dwell bodily with his people (Jn 1). And now in Revelation 21, the heavenly Jerusalem comes down from heaven to us. God does not lift us out of creation or out of our creatureliness. Instead, he restores it.

God comes to dwell with us: The heavenly Jerusalem brings the Lamb who will dwell with us here on earth. Here it may be valuable to explore parallels between the garden of Eden, the temple, and the heavenly Jerusalem. The garden of Eden served as a temple where God dwelled with Adam and Eve. So when Solomon built a temple, what did it look like? It reflected Eden. The walls were made of cedar (carved with gourds and flowers) and the floors of cypress. Palm trees, flowers, and pomegranates adorned it (1 Kgs 6–7). And now the heavenly Jerusalem comes down to earth as the permanent dwelling of the Lamb. The garden has become a garden city (note the imagery of Rv 21:9–22:7).

Where God dwells there life flourishes: And what happens when God dwells among his people? The old creation with its corruption to sin, evil, and death passes away. Life and joy take their place. Here one might look ahead to Revelation 22:1–7. Revelation 21:6 already mentions the “spring of the water of life.” Chapter 22 opens with the “river of the water of life” flowing from the throne of the Lamb through the streets of the city. That river waters the twelve trees of life that line the road, each bearing its distinctive fruit in due season and the leaves giving healing to the nations. The new Jerusalem surpasses even Eden. Think of your favorite national park or city and imagine it being incredibly more delightful and beautiful in the age to come.

Conclusion: Ascending to an ethereal realm of white clouds, white robes, and white harps is hardly attractive to the average teenager or young adult. One of the challenges for us is to describe our hope in images that are attractive. Perhaps capturing the imagery of creation can provide some impetus for doing so. We start with the goodness of creation and imagine it infinitely better!

Charles Arand
After celebrating the resurrection of our Lord these past five weeks, the reading from Revelation helps us focus on our own resurrection at the last day. The picture is of the bride, the wife of the Lamb. For a good explanation of the imagery and symbols see the volume on Revelation by Louis A. Brighton in the Concordia Commentary Series.¹

Have you ever watched a movie or TV series, knowing that the outcome would be okay? It gives you a sense of security and hope as you are watching through the bad and almost impossible story line.

Or have you ever read the last chapter of a book, before you start reading from the beginning? I have never done that, but I have heard of people who do. They know the ending before they begin, and they have the ending in mind as they are reading through the plot and development of the story.

In a very real way, God gives us a glimpse of the end, the final outcome—for us, for the church, for God’s enemies, for his entire creation—to help us, comfort us, and strengthen us as we are still going through and living out the details of the story. We get to read the back of the book, the final chapter, and we win! God wins the battle, and we, the church, share in that victory.

And the picture we get a glimpse of is a wedding, but the description is not exactly like the weddings at the end of Disney princess movies. The church triumphant is described as the bride, the wife of the Lamb. In Ephesians 5:25–27 Paul describes how Jesus loves the church, his bride, “that he might present to himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing: but that she should be holy and blameless.” The picture it brings to mind is that of a royal wedding.

But Revelation 21 describes a royal city—Jerusalem—coming down out of heaven from God: beautiful, brilliant, and magnificent. There are twelve gates that are always open, which represent the Old Testament people of God. The twelve precious stones that are the foundation represent the New Testament people of God. An enormous city—a perfect cube. The city has no temple, for God and the Lamb are its temple, the focus and center of all worship. It has no sun or moon for the Lamb is its lamp and the glory and splendor of God shine brightly. And it is always day, there shall be no night.

The metaphors stretch our imagination. The glory and wonder of eternity with Jesus is beyond what words can describe and beyond what our minds could comprehend. But we get a glimpse.

We are the church militant now. We are tempted, and sometimes we fall. We get discouraged, but we should never give up. Our names are written in the Lamb’s book of life, written with the blood he sacrificed on the cross when he died for us. We have the assurance that we are his, having been marked with the cross. He put his name on us in baptism and we belong to him. By grace, through faith in Jesus, we cling to his promises. This glimpse of the end gives us hope and encouragement when times are tough, when we get discouraged, and when things look hopeless.

The Disney princess weddings usually end with “and they lived happily ever after.” I sometimes have wondered how happy everyone would be as they faced the
realities of life. There are conflicts to resolve, children to raise, disappointments to face, and the effects that sin has on our lives as we live in a fallen world. But this glimpse of the bride of Christ does assure us that we will live happily ever after, for we will have eternity to celebrate this royal wedding.

May this glimpse of our future give you hope and encouragement now, in Jesus, the one who is at work within us, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Wally Becker

Endnote

1 Louis A. Brighton, Revelation (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999).

This is a book for which to give profound thanks. It is an unabashedly Christian reading of this portion of the work of the prophet Isaiah. At the same time it is completely faithful to the original meaning of the Hebrew text in its Old Testament setting. The author expresses his purpose in this way:

... this commentary seeks to pay careful attention to the chapters’ literary, historical, and canonical contexts. Isaiah’s use of poetry and emphasis on the Gospel are duly noted. The commentary joyfully sees the prophet’s promises fulfilled and consummated in Jesus Christ and seeks to present this marvelous message in ways that empower a lively and buoyant confidence in our Savior. (5)

It is a pleasure to read the work of a Christian writer on the Old Testament in which a Christian interpretation of the text is neither imposed on the text, nor apologized for, nor dismissed. Instead, such an interpretation is shown to be a natural reading of the text as it stands. As such, this book will be of great help to pastors and teachers who seek to help others to correctly hear the word of God as it speaks to them today.

The first one hundred pages deal with the expected introductory issues, including matters of context, authorship, history of Isaiah studies, historical setting, structure and outline, theology, the Servant Songs, and the use of other Old Testament texts in these chapters. The more than 400 footnotes provide testimony to the thoroughness with which the author has engaged other authors on these subjects. His rugged defense of Isaianic authorship is particularly noteworthy in this day when even evangelicals feel compelled to qualify their commitment on this important point. Likewise, his exploration of the identity of the Servant, concluding that it is an individual whose function is salvation, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, is thorough, well-researched, and clearly argued. Both of these discussions will be very helpful for those who may have felt that intellectual integrity demanded compromise on these points. In the otherwise excellent discussion of the theology of the chapters, there could have been more made of the holiness of Yahweh, given the prominence of the phrase “the Holy One of Israel” in these chapters of the book.

The commentary proper addresses each unit on four levels: first there is a fresh translation; second comes what are called “Textual Notes,” which consist of a detailed word by word discussion of the Hebrew text of the passage, including text critical points as well as grammatical and syntactic matters, word meanings, etc. Third is the “Commentary,” which, after a relatively brief discussion of the entire unit, proceeds to a discussion of the theological truth of each verse in the unit. Finally, there is a rather brief section entitled “Reflections,” in which the author summarizes the theology of the passage and lifts out the enduring truths for our times and indeed for all times. In a representative unit such as 42:10–25 the textual notes account for nine pages,
the commentary for twelve pages, and the reflections two pages. While these proportions vary from passage to passage, they are roughly similar throughout the work. It should be pointed out, however, that “Textual Notes” uses a smaller font than do “Commentary” and “Reflections.” Thus, in terms of word count, the notes have a larger proportion than simple page count might indicate.

Two interesting features of the presentation are cross references that appear in the margin from time-to-time and 15 different graphic icons that also appear in the margin to mark the discussion of key themes, such as the Trinity, the incarnation, baptism, etc. Probably if one used the commentary regularly, he or she would begin to recognize the significance of each of the icons, although at first glance, it appears one would be turning back to the key a good deal. Since there are many cross references in the text, it appears that when there are more than two or three at a given place, they go into the margin.

Clearly, the commentary will be most useful to those who have a good grasp of Hebrew. For those who have such a grasp, the lucid and clear linguistic discussions offer a mine of information, but they will be beyond those with only a rudimentary understanding. In the theological commentary, as in the introduction, the author gives evidence of wide reading, with an impressive variety of authors being cited. The most common dialogue partner is John Goldingay, whose commentary on these chapters, along with The Message of Isaiah 40–55 and his Old Testament Theology, are referred to frequently. The style of writing in the theological commentary is vigorous and sprightly, and the level of theological reflection is engaging. The thoughtful connections with the New Testament are a definite plus. Any reader, with or without a knowledge of Hebrew will be able to benefit from this section and the accompanying reflections. As noted above, the Christian reading of the passages is not forced, but is shown to be the natural trajectory of what the passage says.

From this reviewer’s point of view, there are only a couple of minor defects in the work, and they are somewhat related. First, the unity of thought in the 16 chapters, which the author rightly affirms, becomes rather obscured in the presentation. The emphasis on verse-by-verse discussion, both in the textual notes and in the commentary section, often obscures the larger flow of thought, and one loses sight of where the thought line is taking us. Thus, I could wish for a more continued harking back to how the passage as a whole is functioning in the larger context. There is some of this, but more would be better.

The second issue is related. In the commentary section, though not in “Reflections,” the author’s style is somewhat choppy. Thoughts come thick and fast and their relation to one another is not always clear. The verse-by-verse approach seems to exacerbate this somewhat.

But these issues are minor ones. This is a good book, one that cannot fail to be of great assistance to both the exegete and the proclaimer who wish to be faithful to the meaning of the original text and yet to discover in it the perennial truth that comes to its fruition in Jesus Christ.

John Oswalt
Asbury Theological Seminary
Wilmore, Kentucky
Lex orandi, lex credendi—what is believed is the result of what is prayed, and what is prayed is the result of what is believed. For generations, Lutherans have focused on the gospel, the cross and empty tomb of Jesus Christ, and the pro me of this work that results in the forgiveness of sins. They heard this gospel in the writings of the apostles and the prophets, and they taught and preached from those writings. Other writings were inherited but soon marginalized by the Reformers, writings now called “Apocrypha,” because the Reformers did not hear the gospel in them. Luther’s Bible translation moved them to an appendix. Soon thereafter, Chemnitz laid out the classic Lutheran view on the Apocrypha in response to the Council of Trent’s decree that all “Scriptures” were of the same authority. Over the years, as the heirs of the Reformation focused on Christ and the gospel, the Apocrypha came to be less and less valued. In the last two hundred years they fell out of use and, eventually, disappeared from printed “Holy Bible” editions altogether.

The Apocrypha: The Lutheran Edition with Notes (ALEN) seeks to re-appropriate the Apocrypha for present-day Lutherans. This attractively produced volume, in burgundy binding and in a format matching other products from CPH, offers much that will be helpful to the serious student of the Scriptures, and there is much of value in the edition. Three concerns, however, merit wider discussion. First, at times the value of the Apocrypha for studying the NT is overstated. Second, in its goal of reintroducing the Apocrypha to the Lutheran church, ALEN over-emphasizes the continuity from the OT through the Apocrypha to the NT and downplays the very significant theological discontinuity between the Apocrypha and the normative canon of the Scriptures. This leads to the final concern. With the great theological discontinuity between the Apocrypha and the NT, the volume’s advocacy for wide-scale reintroduction of the Apocrypha into the life of the church, both personally and corporately, should be reconsidered.

Contents
This volume provides a tremendous amount of background material in addition to the text of the ESV revision of the Apocrypha. For example, Surburg’s excellent Introduction to the Intertestamental Period (here inadequately restyled as “The Historical Setting of the Apocrypha”) is reprinted. An extensive “Reference Guide” is included at the end of the volume, which provides many helpful lists of abbreviations, weights, feasts, places, and characters. A brief overview of “The Apocrypha in Lutheran Worship” is included here; the content seems better suited to a journal article than an informational appendix. A glance at the information provided reveals that all the material drawn from the Apocrypha for liturgical use is to be found, not surprisingly, in prayers and sung material, and is drawn almost exclusively from the wisdom writings—again, not surprising, since such literature tends to be poetic and ambiguous. Some alleged relation-
ships, however, are dubious. The Introit for Holy Trinity (“Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity. Let us give glory to him because he has shown mercy to us”) can hardly have come, as ALEN argues, from Tobit 12:6a. One wonders whether it is wise to equate the God of Tobit, who is never described as delivering his people through a messiah, savior, or servant, with the Triune God who makes himself known in Christ.

The most useful contributions of ALEN are the notes supplied with the apocryphal books. This reviewer was grateful to find that the Apocrypha edition does not provide “devotional notes” or “law/gospel application comments”; the notes are primarily historical and lexical in nature. Where appropriate, passages that contradict the canonical books are pointed out. Unfortunately, notes are not provided for the apocryphal writings not used by Rome. Nevertheless, the notes alone make the volume worth space on the pastor’s shelf. Each writing is provided with an introduction, which usually consists of four sections: a summary of the theme, comments from Luther and/ or Gerhard on the book, “challenges for readers” (which list historical fabrications and doctrinal problems found in the book) and “blessings for the reader,” which tend to be rather broad and moralistic (see below). Here one might have hoped for more up-to-date analysis of the setting and themes of the book, especially since vast amounts of comparable literature (esp. the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Pseudepigrapha) were not available to Luther or Gerhard. Nevertheless, if the reader cross-references with the material provided in the volume from Surburg and follows the notes, the most comprehensive tool for analyzing the Apocrypha will be at his fingertips.

A final set of appendices includes very brief notes describing other ancient literature that is helpful for gaining insight into NT background. Some of these are extensive essays that provide comprehensive discussion, such as those on Josephus and Philo. Others are far too brief to be of much use apart from the bibliography (e.g., the OT Pseudepigrapha, rabbinic literature, Nag Hammadi codices). The reader who wants to gain insight into the background of the NT will need to study these materials in addition to the Apocrypha. Indeed, some of these writings are, in fact, more important than the Apocrypha for understanding the NT. While it is helpful to point out that recent discoveries of “lost” or “forbidden” books have resulted in sensationalistic claims, the statement that Fabricius (d. 1736) “had investigated much of this material” (333) is an overstatement.

In presenting these materials, a common refrain is a quote from Luther’s introduction to his translation of the Apocrypha that these writings are not fully canonical but nevertheless “good to read.” The question that has needed clarification ever since is, “Good for what?” What good would result from the baptized reading the Apocrypha? ALEN proposes several. The foreword by Paul Maier (xv–xviii) is perhaps the most helpful essay in the volume, for he acknowledges forthrightly the canonical and theological problem of the Apocrypha and is careful to note that their primary value is in providing “historical evidence which is otherwise quite sparse.” He cautiously describes the relationship to the NT.
as one of providing “seminal concepts regarding the historical (even theological) future,” and they provide background for study of both the NT and the early church. While he notes that “this literature seems so similar to that found in the Bible in both themes and narrative style that it can easily be confused with Holy Writ itself,” this foreword avoids some of the more questionable claims made later in ALEN regarding canonical status, value for devotional and ecclesial use, and influence on the NT. While further discussion of the value of the Apocrypha in the life of the baptized is necessary, here I will suggest three areas for additional conversation.

**Good for studying the New Testament?**

As has become a common practice in other recent publications by CPH, the content of the volume is a mixture of older resources and new material. The incorporation of Surburg’s reliable *Introduction to the Intertestamental Period* is very helpful (many pastors will already have this, or a similar resource, on their shelves). Surburg summarizes the history and theology of the various forms of Judaism prior to the time of the NT, a survey which must include far more material than is found only in the Apocrypha. So the Apocrypha provides only a small portion of the “primary source” material that has already been magisterially digested by Surburg; indeed, the vast majority of readers would have their reading of the New Testament informed better by reading Surburg than by an unguided reading of the Apocrypha. Both are now conveniently provided in one place. Though Surburg’s original goal was to introduce NT readers to its broader historical and theological milieu, here Surburg is used to summarize and introduce what one will find in the Apocrypha. The ALEN notes that Surburg’s book has been “[r]evised” (xliii). A cursory source-critical analysis shows that only light revision has been done, primarily of simplifying sentence structure from the original, adding section headings, and numerous excellent maps, charts, and diagrams. A few dates have been revised, but little in the “historical” section (original edition!) has been altered. One significant change is that Surburg’s “Jews” have become “Judeans,” for which I could not find an explanation in ALEN.

More significant revision of Surburg was made in the section labeled, “Theological Teachings of the Time between the Testaments” (xci–c). Brief summaries of excellent research by Charles Gieschen and Andrew Das have been incorporated. However, a too-brief discussion of “The Law” grudgingly concedes E. P. Sanders’ argument that Jewish writings’ focus more on “covenant and election” than on torah observance, but ALEN seems to insist that Jews were nonetheless legalistic. To be sure, the relationship between torah, covenant, and righteousness in the many forms of Jewish thinking in the centuries before Christ is far more complex than can be dealt with in a few paragraphs. Indeed, some Jewish thought does clearly hold to a form of forgiveness and “atonement” that is earned on the basis of actions (e.g., Sir 3:3 “whoever honors his father atones for sins”; 3:30; Tb 12:9). The ALEN notes in these places properly detail the contradiction with NT teaching. But if the Apocrypha contra-
dicts justification by grace, why is it to be read by the baptized?

*ALEN* claims: “Lutherans recognized that features of the New Testament interacted with the setting and content of the Apocrypha, making these books of special interest to Christians who would correctly interpret the Scriptures in their broader context” (xxii). The same could be said, it must be noted, for the Dead Sea Scrolls, numerous other pseudepigraphical writings from the period before the NT, Philo, Josephus, rabbinic material, etc. In fact, virtually all of these sources of information about post-exilic Judaism are of greater value than the Apocrypha in informing the background of the NT period and in particular the setting for Jesus’s ministry. The argument for the position taken in *ALEN* is laid out primarily on pages 267–268. There, nearly twenty passages are listed where the Apocrypha, it is claimed, have a “constructive formative influence on Jesus and the Early Church.” I checked the *Lutheran Study Bible* for these passages and the available published *Concordia Commentary* volumes to see if so great an influence of the Apocrypha had been noted by Lutheran scholars in the past. Not a single reference to the Apocrypha occurs in any notes in *LSB* at these places, nor in the margins. Furthermore, the commentaries either do not notice any possible parallel/influence or explicitly argue against any influence. For example, *ALEN* claims that Sirach 51:23–27 exerts “possible influence” on Matthew 11:28–30. The *Concordia Commentary* on Matthew, however, argues that Sirach has a completely different teaching than Jesus: “a careful look at the key passage in Sirach reveals that Jesus Christ is not simply an incarnation of the kind of wisdom Ben Sirach advocated. Instead, Christ is far greater and supplants this kind of wisdom . . . If there is a connection, it would be that Christ is greater than the figure of wisdom as presented in Sirach and other extra-biblical writings of the period.” This is not “possible influence”; it is, at best, contradiction of similar thinking. On the other hand, *ALEN* helpfully rejects (or at least does not claim) Wisdom of Solomon 5:17–20 as a source for Ephesians 6:13–17, as others have done. Clearly Paul is citing Isaiah 59:17, not a writing from the Apocrypha.

One disappointment is the volume’s lack of discussion of “messianic expectations” in the Apocrypha and Second Temple Judaism. This is one area where Surburg’s book needs updating. As Surburg notes, the Apocrypha rarely (in fact, “only one reference,” but this sentence was deleted in *ALEN*) discusses “a” or “the” “messiah.” And we now know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that there were many different forms of Judaism with many different understandings of a messiah or, in some cases, several messiahs, or indeed for some Jews, no messianic expectation at all. The Apocrypha does not continue the prophetic hope of God’s decisive action in his Anointed One. There is no messiah in the Apocrypha—let alone one who is crucified and rises from the dead. There is no Suffering Servant. There is no gospel. This is central to the Scriptures, yet absent from the Apocrypha. Here, above all, does a claim that the Apocrypha is “useful” for Lutherans today fall short. One cannot gain any insight into the Jewish background of “messiah” from the Apocrypha; one cannot find the seeds
of that as expressed by the prophets, nor the fruit of that hope in Christ.

The Canonical Question

Since the ambiguous canonical status of the Apocrypha is the primary reason that these writings have fallen out of use in the church, ALEN makes a case for reintroducing them. Brief discussions of canonical issues appear, confusingly, twice: once in the introduction (xxxv–xxxvii) and a second placed between the Roman Apocrypha and the other writings used primarily in Greek-speaking churches (262–264). The former is a brief, helpful overview of canonical issues. While it can be accepted that matters are simplified in brief, dictionary-like essays such as this, unfortunate errors are to be found, such as the statement that “Marcion’s teaching caused the Church to define and defend the books that are in the Bible” (xxxvii), and on the same page the discussion concerning Jerome is only partially true. Statements regarding the canonical authority of the Apocrypha are puzzling, such as this: “Apocryphal books are not typically read in worship services, no do they typically serve as sermon texts.” One wonders why the word “typically” occurs in that sentence.

The second essay on canon focuses more on the Apocrypha. Remarkably, there is scarcely a mention of the Council of Trent’s action (which rejected Jerome’s conclusions), to elevate the Apocrypha to full canonical status. Perhaps even more surprising, Chemnitz’s response to Trent, which is essential for understanding the Lutheran view of the canon in general and the Apocrypha in particular, is absent from ALEN. The result is a false impression that Rome holds virtually the identical view of the canonicity of the Apocrypha as do Lutherans. This could not be more false. There is no mention (apart from the “Foreword,” noted above) of the fact that Trent anathematized anyone who did not accept the full canonical authority of the Apocrypha. In fact, Rome does not use the word “Apocrypha”; for them, these writings are simply part of the Old Testament (as is evident from the fact that in their Bibles these writings are not segregated into a separate section, as Luther did). The implication that Rome now has something of a softer view of the canon, more in line with a Lutheran view, is simply incorrect. Vatican I reaffirmed Trent’s canonical position explicitly, including the anathemas. This position is not undone by Vatican II. It is astounding that the heirs of the Lutheran Confessions and one of the authors of the Formula of Concord, Martin Chemnitz, can produce a volume on the “Apocrypha” and fail to vigorously make clear the gulf that separates Lutherans and Rome on the canon of Scripture.

What does Chemnitz say? Given that the volume incorporates previously published material, it is surprising that a liberal dose of Chemnitz’s Examination of the Decrees of the Council of Trent, a translation of which was published by CPH in the early 1960s, was not included. If I may summarize, Chemnitz has three main conclusions with regard to the Apocrypha, which was the first locus of his work (even though it was not Trent’s first decree). First, the church cannot make authoritative writings which the ancients rejected. Second, the church cannot reject writings which the church universally accepted. Third, “the present
church” cannot elevate those writings which were in doubt to the status of “canonical, catholic, and equal to those which are of the first class”3 (though *primi ordinis* might be better rendered “of the first rank”). In contrast, this volume seems to be walking a tightrope on a very windy day; it wants to encourage a wide-ranging reintroduction of the Apocrypha into the life of the church, liturgically, devotionally, perhaps homiletically, and therefore canonically. In making this attempt it downplays too much the concerns that Lutheran churches have always had regarding the Apocrypha and its teachings.

The Lutheran Confessions themselves evidence this concern regarding the Apocrypha. The Confessions cite passages from Apocryphal writings in two places. In one, Tobit 4:10 is cited as an argument by the opponents in Apology IV, but the teaching derived from this passage is rejected. In the other, Onias’s “dream” of the prophet Jeremiah is noted in Apology XXI, though dismissively. The only positive *allusion* to a passage from the “Apocrypha” is in SA 8, where the Kolb/Wengert edition references 2 Esdras 7:68 as possibly in view: “As long as we are in the flesh we will not lie if we say, ‘I am a poor person, full of sin.’” This statement could have been drawn from any number of places, and in fact the popularized revision of the Book of Concord produced by CPH renders the passage quite differently, without noting the reference to 2 Esdras.4 It must be stated, therefore, that the Lutheran Confessions cite the “Apocrypha” only to criticize teaching drawn from it or, in one passage, dismissively. In the Formula of Concord, when the break with Rome is entrenched, the Apocrypha is entirely absent.

The basic problem with any attempt to reintroduce the Apocrypha is that it requires a rose-colored historical lens to filter out the numerous and substantive difficulties that Lutherans have always had with the Apocrypha. In this case, less than accurate statements are made about the Council of Trent, and the Roman view of the canon is misrepresented. Martin Chemnitz is absent (and Jerome virtually so), the early church fathers who did not use the writings receive no mention, neither the absence of the Apocrypha from the Lutheran Confessions and from the Lutheran dogmaticians (and, in particular, the LCMS dogmatic tradition). The repeated argument made in favor of reading the Apocrypha is that it appeared in Lutheran Bibles until the twentieth century. This much is true. But Lutherans, in contrast to Trent, have never relied on exclusively historical argumentation. Simply because a manuscript or a printed edition included a writing should not be taken as evidence of authority or value. Lutherans have always used both historical and theological arguments when dealing with canon.

Furthermore, a more discerning use of the Lutheran dogmaticians should be encouraged, in particular regarding the canon. Robert Preus, in a discussion of the “ranks” of authority within the canon, noted that “the views of the dogmaticians regarding canonicity seem to misunderstand and therefore fail to meet the issues of the question as they existed in the ancient church,” and “their views (starting with Gerhard) show a marked departure from the position not
only of Luther, but also of Chemnitz.”5

In a similar vein, J. A. O. Preus’s “The New Testament Canon in The Lutheran Dogmatics” notes, “Gerhard marks a definite change in thinking among Lutherans on this subject. Because of Gerhard’s great prestige as well as his full treatment of the matter, after his time the dogmatics, while still playing lip service to Chemnitz, for all practical purposes abolished the distinction between homologoumena and antilegomena. This is the state of affairs which continues to the present day. It is quite close to the position of the Romanists and the Reformed” (21). While the intention of ALEN is not to review and summarize a Lutheran view of canon, perhaps such a study would have been helpful prior to its production, so that its results could have been incorporated to aid pastors as they consider introducing the Apocrypha to their congregations.

Good for Devotional Reading?

ALEN is the first attempt in generations to clearly articulate in what way the Apocrypha is “good to read.” One of the few models available to answer that question is Calov’s massive edition of the Lutherbibel, complete with extensive notes for all writings, including the Apocrypha (incidentally, this is the edition owned by Bach and now in the Concordia Seminary Library). This resource was apparently not used, and may have provided a solid hermeneutical footing upon which to approach the Apocrypha. For example, Calov writes in his introduction to the Apocrypha regarding one of the reasons that the Apocrypha is not canonical:

But the Lord God has spoken through the prophets to the Israelite church in the prophetic writings inspired by God and written down, using the sacred language which was known to them and which had been the usual Hebrew language in the age of the prophets. All the prophets testify of Christ, that in his name all who believe in him receive the forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43). Similar testimony, however, one does not find in the Apocrypha. (Die Heilige Bibel vol. 2, col. 701–704)

The framework which Lutherans use to read the Scriptures simply does not apply to the Apocrypha. We read the Scriptures because they testify to Christ; in them we hear his voice and are made into his new creation. The Apocrypha does not testify to Christ; the voice heard there is one of Jewish nationalism (Maccabees, Judith), or wisdom traditions divorced from Wisdom (Sirach). How does a Christian profit from reading that?

A case in point is Bel and the Dragon. The “Blessings for Readers” provided for that book suggests the following approach:

As you read the stories of Bel and the Dragon, rejoice in their wonderful storytelling style. Like Susanna, the stories of Bel and the Dragon read like little detective novels, showing the early development of this literary genre and Christian interest in its development. Also, in the stories of Bel and the Dragon, the Daniel character uses careful reasoning and appeals to evidence in defense of his confession of faith. The writer illustrates the compatible use of wisdom and reason in the service of faith, which sets a wonderful example for believers today. (247)

Apart from the last sentence, this might be a description of the Sherlock
Holmes stories, and with the last sentence, perhaps of a *VeggieTales* video. The “value” of such writings for the baptized seems slight, even if Bel and the Dragon is indeed quite an entertaining tale.

In light of this, one should be hesitant to accept the encouragement to read the Apocrypha devotionally (see xxviii.). The “faith” which the writers of the Apocrypha expressed is not in the God who acts decisively in Christ. Their writings may serve rather as a warning; we should not pray as they did, but should “pray for and to long for the Messiah’s reappearing” (2 Tm 4:8). The provided “Prayer to Abide by God’s Revealed Will” is an appropriate and well-founded prayer; however, the 19-week reading plan is less helpful. It lists a reading from the Apocrypha, followed by a suggested reading from the Scriptures. This seems to reverse the way one should read. More helpful would have been a reading guide for the Scriptures which includes, when appropriate, a reading from the Apocrypha.

*The Apocrypha: The Lutheran Edition with Notes* seems to be two different resources. On the one hand, the volume is an excellent tool for studying the period between the testaments and the ways that the people among whom the Messiah would come understood their faith in the light of their unfamiliar situation. For this purpose the volume is an excellent resource, and deserves the commendations that were sought and received from renowned scholars. On the other hand, the volume seems to be an attempt to introduce the Apocrypha to Lutherans for use devotionally, liturgically, and even for preaching. In this the volume is less successful.

For most pastors, I suspect that study of the Apocrypha with the congregation he serves will not help focus, with laser-like precision, on Christ, his death and resurrection, his reign at the right hand of God, and his coming again. The apocryphal writings will not help his people to live as children of the light in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation. The apocryphal writings do not urge Christ. In the 1960s, Martin Franzmann wrote “Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics.” In them, he helped to clarify the “what” and the “why” of the Scriptures in a generation that was not certain that it could trust the Word any longer. Franzmann concludes with a reminder that is still helpful in our day: “In a word, the radical-Gospel orientation leaves the interpreter open to the usefulness, the profitableness which Paul marks as the distinguishing quality of the inspired Word. And this is the most important point of all; for if interpretation does not lead to and serve proclamation, it is a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal—and the percussion section in the ecclesiastical orchestra is already disproportionately large.”

Jeffrey Kloha

I do my thing and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you, and I am I, and if by chance we find each other, it’s beautiful.
If not, it can’t be helped.
(Fritz Perls, the Gestalt Prayer, 1969)

“Those who believe in Gestalt feel that relationships should never be based on obligation or as a result of the expectation of others. The Gestalt Prayer is also well known for sparking arguments in academic discussions related to personal autonomy and interdependence and it is widely used by the general culture as a creed to live by” (http://fritzperls.com/gestaltprayer/).

Marc Engelhardt does not use Fritz Perls at all, nor particularly the behavioral sciences. This is not necessarily a bad thing, although, obviously, certain streams in the behavioral sciences richly support his opening premise. He does use, in brief brushstrokes, John Locke, David Hume, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and, as kind of a capstone of it all, the American notion of manifest destiny to demonstrate the rise of what he terms “radical individualization” (21). The Gestalt Prayer is a behavioral science example of this and, as a “creed to live by,” forms the context into which Engelhardt attempts to speak. It is almost as if only one half of Luther’s freedom of the Christian, lord of all and subject to none, has taken center-stage while the other half, servant of all, is left behind unless it suits one’s freedom.

Most crucial to Engelhardt’s malady statement is the human propensity to believe that one is self-made, that everything one believes is by choice, and that there should be no barriers (including “authoritative entities, conformity, and popular opinion” [21]) in the way of living out life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Engelhardt uses the ongoing stories of “Jake” and “Nancy” to help the reader see how all this works and the challenges that are involved.

This struggle between togetherness and separateness, between fusion and differentiation, between community and self is important, basic, and vexing. Extreme solutions on either end of this polarity are troublesome. Engelhardt proposes that we are living in a push toward one extreme end of the polarity, radical individualism, and that we need, at minimum, to retreat from the extreme. He would likely not say it this way, but I think this is true to his basic thrust.

At the same time, to move toward an extreme of group total conformity risks political fascism and a kind of narrow religious lock-step way of being that also has considerable difficulties. Thankfully, although Engelhardt does necessarily move some in that direction, he does so to create a balance. Still, his challenge is fairly direct.

He proposes that the image of Jesus as both servant and king helps us. The community of followers of Jesus Christ is one in which the individual “allows a certain community to influence him openly in defining how he interacts with other communities in the Confluence. He read-
ily accepts this influence” (56). No longer in search of communities that the individual customizes to his needs, who he is, is “created and determined by an outside force, something bigger and external to himself, namely King Jesus” (56).

Engelhardt avoids narrow denominationalism, which his position could become if he were to make the case that, for instance, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is the community. Rather, each “stream” of Christianity is a secondary island in the confluence. King Jesus is (or should be) the head of every community. No doubt this can be a controversial position. But it is a necessary one. Formative is our baptism where we are placed in a new relationship with God through Christ and in a new community of Christ’s followers. This is all God’s action.

This leads to a “life of worship” in which, among other things, compartmentalization is challenged. The redemption of the whole world by Christ is central; the discipleship of the follower of Christ to reverse the compartmentalization and see every piece of life as an opportunity for “mission and service.” This requires that an individual Christian be connected with others, growing individually in this connection, but also disciplined and challenged in the community and by King Jesus himself.

We must reclaim the identity of our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, become thorough communicators, break down the walls of compartmentalization, and enable the Church to live out the grove of the Island of the Confluence. (93)

Engelhardt takes on a difficult challenge and writes as “just the start of a discussion that needs to continue” (84). Such a discussion most certainly needs to continue and will, I hope, stimulated by books and reflections such as Engelhardt’s. I look forward to this ongoing conversation over the next years when together we can speak deeply out of our pastoral walks. Places to continue this include http://mengelhardt.wordpress.com/ and http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Island-in-the-Confluence/305794349461809.

We will continue to discover how this intricate balance of Jesus as both Servant and King has worked out as he (and we) is (are) on the island in the confluence ruled and served by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Bruce Hartung


The worthy task of this book is to provide some basic information to religious professionals concerning mental illness. It does that very well using a holistic perspective that brings behavioral scientists and theologians together topic by topic.

Included in the topics are depression, autism, acquired brain injury, and dementia as well as disorders of anxiety, psychosis, personality, substance-use, and eating. Each chapter includes information about the mental illness itself, systemic affects (such as within the family or on caregivers), and theological/pastoral reflection.

The reader can count on a fairly consistent organization of each chapter. First comes a psychiatric approach to
the mental illness with special emphasis on both symptoms and dynamics of the illness. Then comes a pastoral theological response and engagement with what constitutes the illness and the person with the illness, where the resources of the particular theologian’s faith traditions come into play. The faith traditions represented seem to be mainline protestant, with Lutheran (ELCA), United Methodist, and United Church of Christ being foremost. This consistency of organization gives this book more of a sense of unity than is sometimes achieved by other edited volumes. At the same time the contributions of the authors still resonate in their own voices.

A deepening of the pastoral theologian’s responses occurred in many of the chapters as they spoke from their personal experience with an illness or with a family member who experienced an illness. This personal experience tone in the chapters often brought the nature of our humanness forward and, clearly, moved the chapter from a discussion about an illness and people with the illness to a sharing of a personal walk. I am grateful that this approach was taken so that the pastoral theologians could also have, and speak with, their very personal voice.

As editor Albers states in his introduction:

If one is to be ‘wholistic’ in one’s approach to these illnesses, then it is imperative that referrals and conversation flow both ways between medical and religious caregivers, so as to provide the best possible opportunity for all those who provide care to do so in an effective and efficient manner. (5)

It is in this area that the book is most helpful and, frankly, is a model for other books about counseling and care directed to a ministry audience. We are, I believe, past the days when one author can cover the entire waterfront of counseling perspectives for those in ministry. In this volume, clear summaries of some of the very latest information on various mental illnesses are provided by people who specialize in the assessment and treatment of those illnesses. This approach is especially efficient and valuable. In most chapters, a robust bibliography is provided for ministers who want to dig deeper into the literature.

Equally valuable are the very practical suggestions made by most of the pastoral theologians, in addition to the already mentioned sharing of personal experience. William Pray’s reflections concerning acquired brain injury, in this particular case stroke, are illustrative:

We must turn from the language of loss to the language of life. Something is happening in that brain that is in the midst of reordering the world …We find ourselves taking to heart and living through the first lines of Genesis…The language of creation replaces, and transcends, the language of loss, just as it does in life. Our question is not, “What have you lost?” but “What’s it like?” and “What’s happening?” It saddens me that in my experience this most theological of all questions is rarely asked by clergy. They want to be sympathetic and supportive, but they tend not to be very curious. Many are afraid. (189–190)
Pray himself experienced a stroke.

Every once in a while I read something in a book that makes the whole reading worthwhile and changes my thoughts and, I hope, my behaviors. This is one of those “ah ha” readings and moments. There are other very important insights in this book. Among these, but not limited to, is Joretta Marshall’s call for a public theology (78–80) where we educate about mental illness, challenge its stigma, talk openly to break the shame and silence often involved, and be in what she calls the “public conversation” about these issues in health care and in our communities is well-presented.

Christie Cozad Neuger’s seven suggestions for pastors and congregations (54–56) is a comprehensive listing that I hope every religious community will implement.

Some readers from the more conservative churches will, rightly, lament the lack of focus on Christ or on weaving the redemptive aspects of Christ’s work more directly into the responses of the pastoral theologians. It might be too simplistic to encourage those of us from a more conservative tradition to build on the work of this book, but use it well still. I risk that accusation. Use this book well for what it masterfully offers. Engage your theological lens with the material as the writers have done. Implement many of their suggestions, as well as the methodology of their approach.

Bruce Hartung


The title of Crowley’s volume was poorly chosen because there is something very aggressive about her program. Crowley, who is a rhetorician by training, seeks to outline the strategies whereby unbelieving academics may engage fundamentalist scholars in dialogue, where her stated goal is to utilize highly resonant symbols and themes within Christian theology in order to undermine Christian arguments in the context of political discourse. It is on account of the context within which Crowley raises her concerns, public debate and political activism, that the idea of a purely civil discourse takes shape. She wants public debate, such as political discourse, as well as dialogue within the academy, to operate free from any taint of god-talk.

The organization of Crowley’s argument may present some difficulties because it reads a bit disjointed in places. One moment she is discussing apocalyptism to arrive at a definition of particular theological convictions, but by the end of the book has somehow begun to compare Christians who believe in a literal second coming of Jesus Christ with conspiracy theorists and those who believe in UFOs. Part of this disjointedness may be attributed to her interdisciplinary approach, which may be a stretch for her capabilities; not everyone is Hauerwas or Fish. Much of her difficulty in organizing this material must be due to the fact that she was introduced to Christian apocalyptic only three years before publishing this work. Her inexpe-
rience with the depth and complexity of Christian theology, not to mention her complete disregard of church history, puts her at a considerable disadvantage for such an ambitious work.

To understand the organization of Crowley’s argument, the reader will do well to keep in mind what Crowley is afraid of: Christian cultural hegemony. Beginning in the first chapter, Crowley utilizes the research of Christian Smith to posit an American society that is roughly one third “apocalyptist,” which she defines as someone who believes in a literal second coming of Jesus Christ to rapture the faithful to heaven. That description, however broad and problematic for theologians, serves as a working definition for Crowley because it allows her to include dispensationalists like Tim LaHaye, the co-author of the Left Behind series and someone that Crowley labels a “Christian intellectual,” as well as many within merely conservative Christian circles. It should be noted that Crowley makes little distinction between those who believe in a rapture, such as dispensationalists, and those denominations and groups that do not believe in a “rapture” but who nevertheless subscribe to a literal second advent of Christ. The result is that dispensationalists of every stripe are categorized under the same umbrella as traditional Christians of the mainline churches.

The reason that Crowley believes that apocalypticism is problematic is that she supposes such discourse poses a threat to a democratic society. As a rhetorician, Crowley rightly identifies apocalyptic discourse as dualistic in nature: believers vs. non-believers, good vs. evil, etc. What frightens her is the implication that such discourse might have on public debate, as well as the form such discourse might take when put into political action. She rightly identifies Christian fundamentalist belief with the rise of the Christian Right as a political movement and then asserts that apocalypticism provides the major symbols that support a hegemony of the faithful against all other non-believers, be they adherents of others faiths or atheists. Her stated concern is for the preservation of the rights of minorities within a democratic society. Her stated assumption is that Christian apocalyptic paints a cosmology where Jesus Christ is Lord of all and where all those who are not with this Lord are against him, ultimately suffering the consequences of such rebellion. Any pastor will understand the fear elicited within an academic who has neither heard of John of Patmos nor read the text of Revelation, nor the fictional work of authors like Tim LaHaye (before 2003), for that matter. And, to be fair, Crowley is not the only voice of warning regarding those who would understand the Revelation of John in such a way that they believe their actions on earth, including their actions within the American democratic system, might speed the second coming of Christ.

Crowley’s solution to the dualistic nature of apocalyptic discourse, and the American political phenomena that she sometimes fairly and sometimes unfairly associates with fundamentalist Christian doctrine, is to reassert the non-establishment clause of the Constitution. For Crowley, however, the separation of church and state is not a separation of the two institutions but rather of theological talk from any public debate where the outcome will affect national elections.
and policy decisions. To that end, she proposes a strategy that will resonate with many religious persons: she means to convert fundamentalists into liberals. But, as someone readily conversant in the Derridean concept of différance and the post-modernity that arose as a consequence, she understands the power of “us vs. them” rhetoric on believers, of which Jewish and Christian apocalyptic stand as examples.

Her proposed strategy for overcoming difference between insiders and outsiders for those who believe in a Christian apocalyptic is to utilize highly resonant symbols and themes within Christian theology in order to undermine Christian arguments. An example of how this strategy might be employed successfully is Didi Herman’s work in recasting the debates surrounding homosexuality within Christian theological discourse. Crowley notes how Herman carefully, and over a period of roughly forty years, dislodged Christian talk about homosexuality in terms of sin and reestablished the conversation within another Christian discursive economy powerful enough to recast the entire conversation; namely, love. Crowley fails to provide a suggestion of how such tactics might be employed against apocalyptist discourse, such as the political discourse of the Christian Right. But, depending on the reader’s particular point of view, the idea of using the symbols of your opponent’s own system in order to find imagery powerful enough to carry the freight of your own ideas is brilliant, diabolical, or both.

Although most pastors and theologians don’t spend a great amount of time exegeting the worldviews of others, this book is a solid read for those interested in how some in the academy view Christians. And, as this volume is currently required reading for many in universities around the United States, it should take on that same required quality for all involved in Christian higher education.

William D. Miller
ALUMNI REUNION 2013

“Gladly learn, gladly teach, gladly remember”

Concordia Seminary invites graduates, spouses, and widows of class years ending in “3” or “8” to the Alumni Reunion, to be held on the Seminary campus June 4-6, 2013.

Featured events will include an alumni/faculty cookout, a banquet, class gatherings, and a Jubilarian worship service.

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JUNE 4-6, 2013
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