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Glorious Zion, our Mother: Readings in Isaiah

(Conspectus, or Abridged)

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• SUMMARY

The author gives a series of readings from four parts of Isaiah (49:14-23; 54; 65; 66) based on sermons given at the FEET conference, Altenkirchen, August 2000. There is an unshamed use of the New Testament to clarify the theological meaning of the Zion tradition as found in these prophetic texts. Issues arising include: the church and the state; the benefits of the salvation

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• ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Autor bietet Auslegungen zu vier Teilen des Jesajabuches (49,14-23; 54; 65; 66), die auf Predigten basieren, die im August 2000 auf der FEET-Konferenz in Altenkirchen gehalten wurden. Das Neue Testament wird ungeniert zur Erhellung der theologischen Bedeutung der Zionstradition, wie sie in den Texten begegnet, herangezogen. Unter den Problemkreisen sind: Kirche und Staat; die Vorteile der angebotenen

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• RÉSUMÉ

Ce texte reprend de manière abrégée le contenu d'études bibliques données à la conférence de l'AETE à Altenkirchen, en août 2000, sur quatre sections du livre d'Ésaïe (49.14-23 ; 54 ; 65 ; 66). H. Blocher n'hésite pas à faire appel au Nouveau Testament pour éclairer la signification théologique de la tradition de Zion telle qu'on la trouve dans ces textes. Au fil du texte, il aborde les thèmes suivants : le rapport entre l'Église et l'État, les bénéficiaires du salut (És 54) qui était annoncé au

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'THE JERUSALEM that is above is free, and she is our mother' (Gal 4:26, NIV): when the Apostle identifies New Testament believers as the

offered (Is 54), as prophesied in Isaiah 53; the permanence of grace; a definition of 'joy'. The present people of God should take note of the fulfilment of prophecy already among them and not despair. Zion may feel abandoned and barren yet in her believers find comfort. Through detailed exegesis certain promises are shown to be addressed to Gentiles rather than to diasporic Jews as some recent scholarship would argue.

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Errettung (Jes 54), wie sie in Jes. 53 prophezeit sind; die Permanenz der Gnade; eine Definition von 'Freude'. Das gegenwärtige Gottesvolk soll die sich bereits unter ihnen vollziehende Erfüllung von Prophetie registrieren und nicht verzweifeln. Zion mag sich verlassen und unfruchtbar fühlen, aber Glaubende finden in ihr Trost. Durch detaillierte Exegese wird gezeigt, dass einige Verheißungen an Heiden gerichtet sind und nicht an Diaspora-Juden, wie in Teilen der neueren Forschung gesagt wird.

* * * *

chapitre 53, le caractère permanent de la grâce, la nature de la joie. Le peuple de Dieu d'aujourd'hui doit prendre note de la part des prophéties déjà accomplies et y puiser encouragement. Zion peut parfois se sentir abandonnée et stérile, et pourtant trouver du réconfort en considérant les croyants. L'auteur se livre à une exégèse détaillée pour montrer que, contrairement à ce que pensent certains spécialistes de nos jours, diverses promesses du prophète concernent les non Israélites, et non pas les Juifs exilés.

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citizens of the glorious City of Promise, when he quotes, in the next verse, from the later prophecies of Isaiah (Is 54:1), we should not miss the clue in

our reflections on the church – these should not proceed in isolation from the background and preparation of Old Testament prophecy. And no one will deny that the latter part of Isaiah’s book offers us the richest development of the ‘Zion’ theme. Our Scripture readings, accordingly, have selected aspects and segments of that development, keeping an eye for ecclesiological relevance.

It is a striking feature of Isaiah’s composition that passages on the Community (Zion) usually follow those on the Servant. Oracles which depict the individual Servant and his work often end with what may be called, after F.F. Bruce, ‘connecting links,’¹ bridges between them and their contexts; J. Alec Motyer uses the word ‘tailpieces’ (and ‘confirmatory comment’) for the same²; the theme of the Community is to be discerned either in those verses or in those which follow and into which the ‘tailpieces’ lead. We shall thus consider, as our first two ‘lessons,’ the passages that follow the two longest Servant ‘Songs,’ Isaiah 49:14-23 (the connecting link, part of the second Servant Song, being 49:7-13, picturing the New Exodus along the desert road), and Isaiah 54, which Motyer even considers as the ‘tailpiece’ of the fourth, the major, Servant Song, 52:13-53:12. Chapters 65 and 66 will then provide our last two passages; Motyer, again, sees them as the tailpiece to the last oracle concerning the Anointed Conqueror, who corresponds to the Servant, the main figure in the last section of the book.³

We aim at *canonical* truth, and more essentially so than even the approach of so-called ‘canonical criticism’: drawing on New Testament illumination of meaning and obeying the analogy of faith as our guide. Since the purpose of our readings is also devotional, we shall excuse ourselves from technical argument and references; we shall not discuss alternative views – and we beg those who belong to another hermeneutical school (especially the dispensationalist one) to bear with our definite orientation; hopefully, they may accept something of our proposals under the category of ‘secondary application’ (their suggestion in several cases of New Testament quotations of the Old).

Isaiah 49:14-23 – Surprised by Grace

As a consequence of the work of the Servant whom God sends to lead back and gather Israel (Is 49:5), in connection with the New Exodus (vv. 8ff), the prophet brings to the people *comfort from Him who cannot deny himself*.

Zion is found in low spirits, she seems to suffer from an abandonment syndrome (Is 49:14). Her despondency is her reaction to the Babylonian exile – which Isaiah, according to traditional conviction and in the words of Ecclesiasticus (*Sir*) 48:24, ‘through a mighty inspiration’ (*pneumati megalō*) ‘saw’ as future, so as to be able to ‘comfort those who were mourning in Zion.’⁴ The city lies in ruins after

3 the terrible sieges of 597 and 587 B.C. (v. 19a): Zion is bereaved and barren (v. 21), she has been deprived of the protection of her God and of her population, together with the God-given institutions which were supposed to channel the blessings of life. Our relationship to ‘Zion’ allows us to extend, beyond the first historical reference of the words, their pertinence to other trials and depressing conditions of God’s people. We are warned that only ‘through many hardships’ are we to move into the Kingdom (Acts 14:22). More specifically, does not this pair, ‘bereaved and barren,’ come easily to mind when one considers the present state of the Christian church in Western Europe? Has the Lord forsaken us? We do sympathise with Zion’s complaint.

The prophet does not resort to cheap optimism: ‘Just cheer up!’ Actually, the Servant himself was tempted by discouragement (Is 49:4). Mysteriously, there seems to be a law that requires that all human expectations be ruined before divine comfort can break through (Is 6:11ff; Dan 12:7). Then is the God of comfort revealed, the Faithful One, who cannot forget those he has chosen, to whom he has bound himself irrevocably. He remains faithful for he cannot deny himself (2 Tim 2:13). Can a mother forget her baby (Is 49:15)? Even if she did . . . Admirable realism of Scripture, so free from current stereotypes about the maternal ‘instinct’! Scripture knows that, in the sinful state of humankind, even that instinct may be disfigured, repressed, reversed. It does happen. But never with the Lord: he remains ever faithful in his tender, motherly, care of his own.

‘See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands . . .’ (Is 49:16a). George Adam Smith sharply comments that God has done on himself what he has forbidden by law⁵: Leviticus 19:28 proscribes making cuts or gashes or putting tattoo marks on oneself! This is not the only place. In Isaiah 50:1, God cancels a divorce which he did pronounce, and in Jeremiah 3:14,22, he breaks the Deuteronomy 24 rule and offers to take back the repudiated wife (see vv. 1 and 8). Of course,

it is metaphorical language, but with a deliberate provocation. The intention is to reveal the stupendous 'excess' of grace, *beyond mere law*.

The Lord's faithfulness shows Zion she is not bereaved, and a singular blessing goes with it that remedies to her barrenness: *a multitude of unexpected children*. The prophet describes the afflux of new children, streaming into Zion from every corner of the earth.⁶

The emphasis falls on surprise: 'Where do these come from?' Zion *did not bear them* (v. 21). Are, then, these unexpected children only Israelites 'according to the flesh' returning from their places of exile? A mere remnant was to return, *šəàr yàšuv* (Is 10:21f; cf. 7:3), 'one from a town and two from a clan' (Jer 3:14). Are then the Gentiles here the mere carriers of the new sons and daughters? The characteristic word and image is used which is found in Isaiah 11:10, the 'banner of the peoples,' with the promise that the *nations* would seek the Branch of Jesse, would rally to him, and so it is interpreted in Romans 15:12. This agrees with the so-called 'universalistic' strain in the book of Isaiah (see 2:2f; 19:18-25; 42:6d; 44:5; 45:22; 49:6). The unexpected multitude consists in children not according to the flesh but to the Spirit. Zion receives them not of nature but of Grace. Surprised by grace.

This is Zion our mother. Not allegorically, but *heilsgeschichtlich*.

Restored Zion will not only adopt swarming myriads of Gentile citizens (fellow-citizens with the saints), she will receive *authority over all kingdoms*. Kings and queens will provide assistance and nurture to Zion's children and will bow before her in acknowledgement of her dignity (Is 49:23).

The only literal fulfilment *so far* may be observed in the history of the church, however corrupted and distorted the form of this allegiance has been. The thorny issue of the relationship between church and State is near at hand . . . Isaiah's prophecy is not explicit enough to settle the matter. It is noteworthy that a parallel prediction in Isaiah 60:14 is interpreted in Revelation 3:9 of the conversion of antichristian Jews who will be converted to Jesus and will recognise that the church in Philadelphia is the beloved City of the Lord. Yet, we may not ignore the stimulus, here, to a renewed reflection on the political dimension of church life.

The main concern of our text is the universality of the Lord's recognition and glory: 'And all flesh shall acknowledge that I am the Lord, your Sav-

iour and your Redeemer' (Is 49:26b) – all flesh, geographically and otherwise. It entails for Zion and for us, the adopted children of Zion, that we reject the 'ghetto' mindset, that we disown a dualism between the spiritual realm and the pursuits of cultural ends. It entails what may be called the 'catholicity' of the church: that is the ability to embrace the whole gamut of human interests, including arts and sciences and politics. Zion may claim Terence's famous words: *Humani nihil a me alienum puto*.

Isaiah 54 – Assured of Peace

Isaiah 54, among obvious bonds of kinship with the previous passage, unfolds even more emphatically the promise of Zion's miraculous children. But the chapter adds, as a new feature, the contrast between the Two Women, the one who reaped the privileges and honour of motherhood, who could look down on the other one, and the woman who was barren and bereaved. Biblical stories spring up in our memories. We remember the rivalry of Hannah, yet her husband's beloved, and Peninnah (1 Sam 1), and of Rachel and Leah, the unequal sisters. We remember the founding father's household, Abraham's. Isaiah 54:3 brings to mind the promise made to Abraham about Sara and her offspring (Gen 17:16; cf. Gen 28:14, also echoed by Isaiah, and Is 51:12 already). It does not bewilder us, therefore, when we read that the Apostle discerned the Sara/Hagar pattern in Isaiah 54, and plainly identified Hagar with the earthly, legalistic, Jerusalem and Sara with our mother (Gal 4).

Isaiah 54 also follows Isaiah 53 . . . There is an essential link with the IVth Servant Song, the prophecy of the Servant's vicarious chastisement, atoning sacrifice, and subsequent triumph – which he shares with the 'many' (*hàrabbîm*). Calvin did not miss the connection: 'After having spoken of the death of Christ, the prophet passes on with good reason to the Church: that we may feel more deeply in ourselves what is the value and efficacy of His death'; and G. A. Smith, who quotes Calvin's statement, adds perceptively: 'It is the *seed* and the *many* whom chapter liv reveals.'⁷ This link may help us to receive the message in a spirit of marvelled gratitude and personal appropriation.

Never more. Beginning in verse 4 (Is 54), the Lord speaks the language of emotion, both burning and tender, to assure Zion that she will never suffer again rejection. She was like a widow, deserted and distressed, '*azûvâ* and '*asûvâ* (v.

6). The exile meant the loss of the three pillars of the Old Dispensation: the loss of the land, of the throne and of the Temple. It is remarkable that God does not dwell on the rightful motives of his wrath. He sounds as if he had forgotten them – almost. He concentrates on soothing and healing the wounds that still hurt, instilling peace and confidence in the storm-battered one. There is a time for targeting guilt, and there is a time for pure consolation . . .

What guarantees the promise ‘never more’ is the force of the Lord’s conjugal passion. Two words are repeated for emphasis in verses 7-10, ‘tenderness’ (root *rhm*, vv. 7,8,10) and ‘constancy, benevolence, leal love’ (*hesed*, vv. 8,10). God is moved – he is deeply involved in the relationship – and he remains immovable in his love, more unchanging than the obvious symbols of immutability, the enduring mountains and hills (v. 10). This paradoxical combination is the basis of our confidence, the foundation of our peace. Everything would become radically precarious if God was subject to change in himself, if he were similar to the fickle gods of the heathen or the minus god of Process theology and kindred ‘open’ doctrines. But he would be a stranger, unable to comfort us, if he were not able, somehow, to be affected by our own suffering.⁸

If Galatians 4 warrants us drawing a line to ecclesiology, how are we to interpret the oath ‘never more’? The first *šō’ā*, that of A.D. 70, shows that the promise was not made to the earthly Jerusalem. It must be read in the perspective of the New Covenant (Heb 8:13 is seldom given its proper weight: it tells us plainly that the time of Jeremiah’s prophecy, the time of the Exile, signalled the agony of the Old Covenant as such, which was marked as obsolete, *pepalaiōken*, by the Word of God, doomed to disappear).

The promise ‘never more’ belongs to the newness of the New Covenant, *unlike* the one contracted in the Sinai desert (Jer 31:32). Of the New Covenant church, Jesus says that the gates of *hades* shall not prevail against her (Matt 16:8). Under the New Covenant, judgement is a thing past, behind us, and God himself ensures that all the children of his holy City shall know him personally and persevere to the end. This may be called the *infallibility* of the church.

No weapon against you. Attacks there will be, however, weapons forged against Zion, sharpened accusations (Is 54:15,17). Ours is a time of attacks upon Christendom (not in Kierkegaard’s sense,

which was a defence of true Christianity): the biblical tradition is openly denounced and charged with the capital sins of restrictions of individual freedom, self-fulfilment, tolerance and pluralism, the gods of this age.

All attacks will fail and the guns of hatred misfire. God controls what is happening, both the making of weapons at all stages and their unmaking (Is 54:16). Not only his passionate tenderness and constancy: his *sovereignty* is the foundation of our peace. We can rest and work with assurance because of what God is, because he IS.

But what of the contradiction of experience? Do we not see that the enemy’s weapons prove dreadfully effective, that attacks work awful damages and cause many to fall – even among evangelical theologians? The answer is the usual answer, because it is true: the promise is for faith and hope. The import of the promise is eschatological; at the End, we *shall* see, and say: ‘All is well and all is well and all manner of things is well.’ And of the total victory, we enjoy the earnest already, on this side of the veil. We do see the *tokens* of final triumph: remarkable answers to prayer, improbable deliverance, *souls saved*, and also supernatural wisdom in the apologetic rebuttal of current lies. The gates of death prevail not. God maintains his Seven Thousand witnesses, some conspicuous, some hidden, also in our own days.

All your sons divinely taught. Zion’s walls, from foundations up to battlements are made of precious stones, unmixed with viler material (Is 54:11f): the whole population of the City is being taught directly by God (v. 13a). It was not so in Old Testament Zion: only a ‘remnant’ had the knowledge of the Lord, many were still ‘uncircumcised in heart’ (Jer 9:26). The perspective that New Covenant Zion will be characterised by purity of membership is dear to Isaiah; it is hinted at in 4:3, since all survivors, whose names are written in the book of life, will be ‘called holy’ (compare the LXX here, *hagioi klēthēsontai*, and Rom 1:7, *klētois hagiois*); in 35:8, no unclean person will travel the New Exodus highway; in 60:21, then will all the people be righteous. It is confirmed in the New Covenant ‘charita,’ Jeremiah 31:34 (hence the ‘infallibility’ of the church).

Our Lord Jesus himself quoted from Isaiah 54:13, ‘They will all be taught of God,’ in his discourse on the Bread of Life (John 6:45). He referred the teaching to the secret *vocatio* through which the Father draws us to Christ, the Son and Saviour. He did not introduce thereby some form

of speechless mysticism but he pointed to God's initiative in the most intimate depth of our inner beings. Yet the mysterious operation that makes us the people of glorious Zion, that constitutes the church, is not restricted to the first moment of life in the messianic age. Paul also broaches the theme as he tells the Thessalonians that they have been *theo-didaktoi* regarding brotherly love (1 Thess 4:9).

The love that binds our hearts in Christian love fulfils the Isaiah 54:13 prophecy! Because of God who goes on teaching us in his own ways, because of God who holds the whole world in his hands and loves us with tender and unchanging love, great should be our peace! Great *is* our peace!

Isaiah 65 – Created Anew

The concluding chapters in the book of Isaiah offers a sustained contrast between the two categories, God's elect and the reprobate, his servants and impenitent sinners (e.g. 65:13ff). Chapter 65 starts with that opposition: vv. 2ff denounce the self-willed people who will soon face divine retribution; v. 1 tells the wonder of amazing grace towards Gentiles who had been left to their own ignorant ways, for ages and ages.

Of course, the vast majority among modern scholars will perceive no contrast between vv. 1 and 2, and consider that the addressee in v. 1 is the same as in v. 2, stubborn Israel, with the same complaint expressed (so also NIV). But we rather follow J. Alec Motyer, Joseph Addison Alexander . . . and the apostle Paul, whose exegesis of the passage in Romans 10:20f is one of the plainest in his epistles.

Here are some of the arguments. 'I was found' (v. 1) would hardly be adequate for rebels and their fate (the parallel verb, 'I revealed myself,' [NIV] *could* be understood of 'objective' revelation before closed eyes, but, probably, it also involves subjective reception as does 'I was found'). Even more difficult for the modern interpretation is the clause 'a nation that did not call on my name' (NIV). Did not Israel call on the Lord's name? Isaiah 48:1, though a rebuke, states 'You take oaths in the name of the LORD and invoke (*yaz-kirú*) the God of Israel' (NIV).⁹ And 'a nation that did not call . . . ' is already a *modified*, easier, text, for the Masoretic reading is passive (pual), *qôrâ*, 'that is not called.'¹⁰ In the passive form, the phrase means 'belonging': it is used for Israelites in Isaiah 43:1 (*niph'al*) and for nations when incorporated into the messianic kingdom in Amos 9:12 (quoted

Acts 15:17). This Masoretic reading should not be dismissed lightheadedly: *lectio difficilior*. It was maintained by Jewish scholars despite their embarrassment with it. The great Rashî, of Troyes, tried to get around the difficulty: They treated the Lord as if they were not called by his name; David Qimhi saw that one could not wander so far from the text and he suggested that the Israelites were unwilling to be so called – a hypothesis wholly at variance with historical fact, as Alexander, who quotes from the Rabbis, observes.¹¹ Billerbeck cites the great haggadist R. Tanhuma bar Abba (c. 380 A.D.) who applied Isaiah 65:1a to Rahab the harlot and Ruth the Moabitess, and he thinks that the LXX, though it reads an active participle (*qôrê'*), also presupposes a reference to Gentiles.¹² Paul's exegesis is not devoid of support!

There obtains a symmetry between Isaiah 65:1-2 and the conclusion of the conclusion, 66:22-24, with the two categories contrasted in ultimate destiny.¹³ The message of that dominant antithesis is the complementary truth of 'catholicity': division, also, occurs, as a result of human choice (faith or obstinate defiance), and, deeper than human choice, as a result of divine choice, since it is God who causes to find him those who did not seek me: 'You would not seek me if you had not found me already.'¹⁴ In line with our main theme, however, we now concentrate on the blessing promised by the God of Amen (Is 65:16) to Zion and her children.

Radical, total, newness. New things will be introduced that are contrary to the former things, that is to the painful experience of history. This will be true 'objectively,' for God says: 'The past troubles will be . . . hidden from my eyes' (Is 65:16, NIV); this will be true 'subjectively,' for they will be remembered no more by the recipients of God's blessing (v. 17). The change will transcend any mere repairment, it will affect the roots of being, it will be a *new creation* (v. 17).

'New creation' stands out as one of Isaiah's grand contributions. After possible hints (42:9, and a use of *barâ'* for the 'new things' heralded in 48:6f), and before 60:19f foresees such a newness that sun and moon will disappear from the economy of the universe (the allusion to the Flood in 54:9, symbolic de-creation, may also be mentioned) the theme is unfolded as a development of the New Exodus vision in 51:9-16.¹⁵ The New Exodus reaches such proportions, it is so total and radical, that it is equivalent to a New Creation. In 51:16, the Servant, who is clearly identified by

the opening words 'I have put my words in your mouth and covered you with the shadow of my hand' (NIV, cf. 49:2), the New Moses who is to lead the New Exodus, is addressed as the Agent of that work: 'to plant heavens and to found earth.'¹⁶

One can perceive echoes in the later prophets (Jer 31:22, with the verb 'create'; Zech 14:6f and the 'unique' day) but the main response to Isaiah is heard in the New Testament: in Matthew 19:28, with the 'regeneration of the universe,' and mainly in the book of Revelation (21:1 taking up the words of Is 65) as well as in Paul's epistles. Paul's perspective may even help us to understand the unexpected choice of the verb 'to plant' in Isaiah 51:16.¹⁷ Paul shows that the New Creation is spread over time, it starts with Christ's own resurrection, as the New Adam (1 Cor 15, esp. 20f,45ff), it touches us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17) and we also enjoy its 'firstfruits' (Rom 8:23), though its consummation awaits the end of the age. Thus the *germinal* image is appropriate, which Isaiah was led to use (with the Branch, *semah* of 4:2 and the 'new things' germinating [*tismahná*] in 42:9, and also the verb in 44:4 and 61:11; and the kindred images of the *néser* in 11:1 and of the *yónéq* of 53:2).¹⁸ It must be a process because the object of the New Creation is the Older one redeemed, involving both continuity and transfiguration. And so it to be viewed the church in its relationship to the world: the church is New Creation humankind, implying both her catholicity and her division from the older, rebellious, race.

Creation and joy. Therefore, be glad and rejoice (Is 65:18). In Jerusalem recreated, there will be no more weeping and crying (v. 19). The first part of this last verse shows that the gladness of the people is a sharing in the Lord's *own* joy. We may compare with the New Testament emphasis on joy as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) and as the contents of the Kingdom (Rom 14:17). Throughout the book of Acts, joy is a keynote of church life (2:46; 8:39; 13:52 . . .). It is an ecclesiological determinant.

What does 'joy' mean? Commentaries and dictionaries often fail to elucidate. We suggest that (a) Joy is a *passion*, an experience that one undergoes (whereas 'happiness' is an objective condition; in the sentence 'We were happy, then, but we did not know,' replacing 'happy' by 'joyful' would create nonsense). It implies passivity; it is impossible just to decide to be joyful. This gives the lie to our

illusions of pure self-sufficiency; it witnesses to the 'eccentric' structure of human existence. (b) Joy is a *positive* passion, approved of by our better self, and that can 'count as a fulfilling experience. Thomas Aquinas discerned the component of favourable judgement in his analysis of joy¹⁹ and Spinoza defined it as 'a passion through which the soul grows into a greater perfection.'²⁰ This highlights the dynamic character of our creatureliness: humanity is not fully realised, it may blossom or it may shrivel, it may actualise its potentialities or it may fall into malfunction and atrophy. And it presupposes a scale of values; even Nietzsche was sensitive to the tie that binds joy to eternity: 'Pain begs: Be gone! But every joy wills eternity, Wills deep, deep, eternity.'²¹ (c) Joy is an *expansive* emotion: it fills the person, it swells and overflows. Apart from rare exceptions, joy is an inter-personal or group experience, shared and catching. This again points to the 'eccentric' structure, and a close link with *love* appears. Spinoza, again, defines love as 'a joy that is accompanied by the idea of an external cause'²²; we all know that a good index of love is the joy of the beloved's presence.

Joy is essentially human. The mystery is that it should also be divine (it is the same mystery which we already encountered: God the Immovable is moved).

Victory over evil. One main factor of superabundant joy, and so new, is the total suppression of evil. 'They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain' (Is 65:25, NIV). The reference to the mountain is not restrictive, as if the rest of the world were still engulfed in violence and corruption: the parallel passage 11:9 shows that the whole earth will be filled by the blessing. All frustrations will be forgotten (65:22f); the symbols of enmity will be reconciled (v. 25ab); the curse on the primeval Serpent will be accomplished (v. 25c) – the work of the Devil undone (1 John 3:8).

'Throughout this passage,' Motyer sensitively comments, 'Isaiah uses aspects of present life to create impressions of the life that is yet to come. It will be a life totally provided for (13), totally happy (19cd), totally secure (22-23) and totally at peace (24-25). Things we have no real capacity to understand can be expressed only through things we know and experience. (. . .) one would be but a youth were one to die aged a hundred! This does not imply that death will still be present (contradicting 25:7-8) but rather affirms that over the whole of life, as we should now say from infancy to old age, the power of death will be destroyed.'²³

Even residual sin and death would generate tears, as they always do – but this is excluded (v. 19b). There will be no more harm nor damage. Those who harbour scruples over the literal reading of v. 20b may remember that the imperfect tense in Hebrew does service for conditional, hypothetical (unreal), meaning as well.

Do the children of Zion experience the blessings of Isaiah 65 *now*? Undeterred by paradox, we dare answer: yes. In germinal form, corresponding to the present stage in the process of the New Creation, as ‘firstfruits’ for the ‘inner man,’ they do know the power of the harmony to come. Hereditary enemies reconciled, spiritual sons and daughters never to be lost, toil not vain in the Risen Lord, fruit that will last unto eternal life, and the Devil already defeated: if *this* were not found in the church, might she still be called the church?

Isaiah 66 – Soothed And Sent

The contrast between the two categories along the people, which is carried through into final destiny (Is 66:22-24), would warrant the title ‘slain or sent’ (cf. vv. 16c and 19). Since our focus is Zion and her children, ours will be *soothed and sent* (vv. 11f and 19).

The last chapter in the book introduces new thematic elements: persecution of those who are on the Lord’s side (v. 5); a description of the recipients of divine blessing, ‘those who tremble at his word’ (vv. 2,5, also found in Ezra 9:4) – a reminder of the utmost seriousness with which we are to receive the Word of our Lord and of the sense of awe that is fitting before him, also under the New Covenant: as those who have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the church of the firstborn, we are called to ‘worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God (also) is a consuming fire’ (Heb 12:28f, NIV). Our comments, however, on this composite chapter must be both synthetic and selective.

The prophet dwells on *Zion’s motherhood, again*. There is a renewed emphasis on *comfort*, on tender care, even cuddling or fondling (66:11-12). ‘As a *man* (‘*îš*) whom his mother comforts, thus will I, myself, comfort you’: this literal translation²⁴ brings out the wonderful realism of Scripture. Free from stereotypes, Scripture knows that men also, though they try to hide, stand in need of solace! God in a motherly role will provide it, in Zion. Is it relevant to recall that one of the most successful ‘models’ of the church today is that of

the ‘sharing and caring community’?

Verse 8 (66:8) broaches the topic of the miraculous gift of Zion’s children. ‘Who has ever heard of such a thing?’ matches the surprise of Zion in chapter 49. But there are two intriguing features. (a) There seems to be a difference between verses 7 and 8: in 7 the singular is used, in 8 the plural form; in 7 the child is born *before* Zion’s pains, in 8 as soon as they start; in 7 the maleness of the child is stressed (*zākār*),²⁵ and this insistence is taken over in Revelation 12:5 (*arsen*) for the seed of the woman who was to crush the Serpent’s head, for King Messiah as foretold in Psalm 2, for God’s Son the Victor. It looks, at least, possible that v. 7 announces that Individual’s coming and v. 8 the consequent birth of his miraculous brothers and sisters, ‘the rest of the seed of the woman’ (Rev 12:17), as the sequel of the Redeemer’s: first the head, then the body (it is the proper order in most deliveries!). That would be the mystery inside the miracle. (b) Verse 9 sounds as a rebuttal, as a reply to objections born of doubt or ill-will. If we remember that Zion’s unexpected children are drawn from all nations, and how first-century Jews were slow in accepting the divine move, we hold a telling illustration of the relevance of God’s affirmation: despite human obstacles, he brings his design to fulfilment.

The prophet then reveals the *Remnant’s mission to all nations*. Verses 18ff powerfully proclaim the Lord’s interest in all nations. His concern is a favourable one: he is going to gather them that they may see his glory, that they may hear of that glory of which they have been ignorant (v. 19), that all humankind may worthily worship the Lord (v. 23).

Who are, then, the ‘brothers’ brought from all nations and offered to the Lord (v. 20)? The majority interpretation – old Jewish and modern Christian, including NIV – sees in them Israelites according to the flesh, coming back from their places of exile. But it raises difficulties, which older critical scholars such as Gesenius and Ewald had felt – they adopted the *other* understanding. Apart from the special interest in nations in chapter 66 and in the whole book, we may point to important considerations. (a) Members of the *Remnant* (*pelētīm*) are sent to distant nations to make known to them the fame and glory of the Lord (v. 19a): normally the Remnant represents the saved Israelites (they occupy, therefore, the central location here and are not viewed as scattered among the nations), and the contents of the mission seems

to be for the benefit of the nations involved. (b) The special promise ‘*Even (gam) from them I will take for priests, for Levites*’ (v. 21, most literally) would be strangely worded, indeed, if Israelites were referred to, therefore sons of Levi and Aaron, some of them. Because he sensed the difficulty, David Qimhi himself interpreted the verse of converted Gentiles.²⁶ (c) In the metaphorical sacrifice of v. 20, the ‘brothers’ are the offering and, in the parallel correspondence, the Israelites are the *offerers*. As Odendaal evaluates, ‘the only good sense which can be derived from the lengthy phrase is that the ‘brothers’ belong to the nations.’²⁷ If this is so, the prophecy was exactly fulfilled in New Testament times: Jewish believers, members of the Remnant of Grace, were sent to all the nations and brought back to the Lord the firstfruits of the nations, new brothers and sisters ‘in Christ’ who had not previously heard of the Lord’s fame nor seen his glory. As to the sign of v. 19a, Alexander thinks of the ‘signs of an apostle.’²⁸ Motyer feels quite sure that the sign ‘can only be’ the cross.²⁹ This interpretation, which calls to mind Constantine’s *In hoc signo vinces*, may be more homiletical than exegetical – but, confessedly, the cross is *the* sign of God’s paradoxical glory in human history.

The first century Jew who worked more than any other (1 Cor 15:10) to bring new children, from all nations, to the Lord described his apostleship in terms that seem to be borrowed from Isaiah 66:21: acting in the way of a priest (*hierourgounta*), with reference to the Gospel, to present the offering of the nations, well-pleasing, sanctified in the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:16). What a joy to discover that Campegius Vitringa (1652-1722) had already discerned the connection.³⁰

The ecclesiological import is clear. Though we do well to heed Peter Beyerhaus’ warning that the saying ‘the church *is* the mission’ is being used to blur the limit between church and world, we cannot insist too much on the missionary mandate of the church: Zion’s children (first from Israel but, in turn, also their adopted brothers from the nations since these come to share the privileges and responsibilities of the ‘saints’) are sent into all the world, to bring back to the Lord new children of grace in ever growing numbers.

The prophet foresees *a regular ministry to honour the Lord’s name*. If the Lord is to take priests and Levites from among Gentile converts, of necessity a ‘change of law’ (Heb 7:12) must take place. In itself, it is literally impossible under

‘fleshly’ regulations, and Hebrews 7 plainly asserts that the Levitical priesthood was abolished. The promise does come true, however, inasmuch this priesthood was a ‘type’ and finds its *fulfilment* in its ‘antitype.’ Christ’s priesthood, though non-Levitical, fulfils the Levitical figures (Heb 9-10). Being priests in Christ, all believers have a share in the antitypical service that answers to Aaron’s and the Levites’; in some respects, however, a distinctive correspondence, in the present economy, may be affirmed of the official ministry in the church – the ministry of prophets, teachers and pastors . . . ‘From them’ in Isaiah 66:21a may point to that special fulfilment and suggest God’s institution of a *regular ministry* among Zion’s children in the messianic age.

The same transposition from type to antitype is valid for the universal worship that is the horizon of Isaiah’s last chapter, in v. 22. Regularity, carefully constructed patterns in rhythmic repetition, seem to be involved in the acceptable worship ‘in Spirit and truth.’ New moons and sabbath being part of the ‘shadows’ that foreshadowed the ‘body’ which came in Christ, we are to understand the prophecy of their Christian antitypes (Col 2:16f).

The Sabbath is the main element in the *inclusio* that Motyer brings out with Isaiah 56:1-8, together with the extension of Covenant privileges and freedom of worship to *foreigners* (56:6-7), so that God’s house becomes a house of prayer for all the peoples.³¹ There is another *inclusio* that encloses the whole book, with the prologue (chapter 1) and the final vision (65-66) responding to each other, as the vocabulary shows.³² The sabbath and new moons of 66:23 echo the ones of 1:13. The symmetry is that of antithesis: between sinful, earthly, Jerusalem, whom the prophet assimilates to Sodom and Gomorrah (1:10), whose offerings and celebrations the Lord abhors (1:14), and Jerusalem re-created, purged of her abominable dross and restored as the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City, glorious Zion our mother, whose liturgies will ever please the Lord.

13 ‘New moon’ is *hodesh*, from the root *hds* that signifies newness; ‘sabbath’ means fulfilment, joyful and active rest on the basis of God’s finished work, the fruit of which we are given to enjoy. *Renewal, fulfilment*: these two notes are the right ones to strike as a conclusion of our study of Zion’s place in God’s purposes. May the church, the pilgrim colony of glorious Zion our mother, know and show the power of that renewal and the earnest of that fulfilment!

Notes

- 1 One may see our Songs of the Servant (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), p. 20.
- 2 *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), pp. 321,389,401,443.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 490 (even from 63:7).
- 4 Ecclesiasticus 48:24f reads: *pneumati megalò eiden ta eschata / kai parakalesen tous penthountes en Siòn / heòs to aiònos hupedeixen ta esomena / kai ta apokrupha prin è paragenesthai auta.*
- 5 *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. II: 40-66 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1890), p. 401.
- 6 We follow the Masoretic Text in v. 17a (as does NIV), *bànyik*, ‘thy sons,’ rather than the Qumran manuscript a and the versions, *bónayik*, ‘thy builders.’ In any case, it is the same root. ‘Having children’ is expressed in Gen 30:3 as ‘being built’ and the two meanings merge in the application to the church: the self-building of the Body (Eph 4:16) is accomplished through the begetting of new children of God.
- 7 *Op. cit.*, p. 421.
- 8 On this topic, we may recall the symposium edited by Nigel M. de S. Cameron, *The Power and the Weakness of God* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990), including our own ‘Divine Immutability,’ pp. 1-22.
- 9 Is 43:22 is no sufficient counterweight. As the note in NIV Study Bible explains, though ‘The Israelites may have brought sacrifices,’ th meaning is that ‘their hearts were not right with God.’ Motyer, *op. cit.*, p. 338, cogently argues that ‘the emphasis in verse 22 requires a translation like ‘Not me did you call.’
- 10 It is unfortunate that the NIV Study Bible (in our edition, published 1985) gives no mention of the fact that it follows the Greek version rather than the Masoretic text.
- 11 Joseph Addison Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983 reprint), vol. II, p.437.
- 12 As quoted (SB 3, that is H.L. Strack & P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vol. III, p. 285) by C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, vol. II* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), p. 540 n.6.
- 13 The book does not resort here to the scheme of the two adverse Cities, which is found in ch. 24-27. Presumably, the reason is that the reprobate in ch. 65-66 are primarily the prophet’s fellow-Israelites (66:5, ‘your brothers who hate you’); the Babylon symbolism, or that of the earthly versus the heavenly Jerusalem one, would have been too complex for effective communication.
- 14 Blaise Pascal, n° 553 in Léon Brunschvicg’s edition of the Pensées.
- 15 51:3 with the reminiscence of Eden, and vv. 6 and 8, which suggest the end of the older universe, provide a preparation for the theme.
- 16 The ‘modern’ rendering which is found in NIV, ‘– I who set the heavens in place, who laid the foundations of the earth, and who say to Zion . . . ,’ in NEB (1970) with a free inversion, ‘. . . its waves roared, that I might fix the heavens in place and form the earth and say to Zion, ‘You are my people.’ I have put my words in your mouth and kept you safe under the shelter of my hand,’ in *la Bible de Jérusalem* 1956 (but corrected in the 1998 edition), ‘when I stretched the heavens and founded the earth,’ in the *Traduction OEcuménique de la Bible*, ‘while planting heavens . . . ,’ is open to serious objections. Grammatically, such ‘translations’ wander far away from ordinary renderings of *lamed* plus infinitive construct (see Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley’s *Grammar*, § 114f-p); if one argues that we have a ‘gerundial’ construction, no example close to the diction of Is 51:16 is offered (we reviewed the examples *ibid.*, § 114o). The two verbs *lintoa’*, ‘to plant,’ and *lisod*, ‘to found,’ must be treated like the third, parallel, one, *lé môr*, ‘to say’; now, it is quite obvious that the Servant is the agent of the saying, since the Lord is filling his mouth with the words! The implied subject of the verbs could be God (with the Servant as the instrument), but it seems preferable to consider it is the Servant, as Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 269, *already* does.
- 17 Many are tempted conjecturally to amend *netoa’* into *netôt*, ‘to stretch.’ But the *lectio difficilior* (which the LXX *etsèsa* supports) is to be retained if it can make sense.
- 18 The interpretation of this clause by the Chief Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz, in his *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1938), p. 836, is worth quoting: “Heaven is here compared to a seed that will grow into a tree, and yield fruit and shelter to the children of men. And Heaven may be planted! (. . .) Israel was chosen and Providentially preserved, in order that through Israel God might plant Heaven – i.e. righteousness and mercy – in the soul of humanity.”
- 19 *Summa theologica* Ia IIae, Q. 11, art. 2 ad 3m: In delectatio duo sunt, scilicet perceptio convenientis . . . et complacentia ejus.
- 20 *Ethica* III, propositio XI, scholium.
- 21 Weh spricht: Vergeh! Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit, Will tiefe, tiefe, Ewigkeit, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, part III, at the end of the section ‘Another Song for Dancing.’
- 22 *Op. cit.*, prop. XIII, scholium.
- 23 *Op. cit.*, p. 530.
- 24 NIV offers ‘As a mother comforts her child,’ an unfortunate departure from the normal meaning of words; it misses the singular beauty of that verse.

- 25 Could there be here an allusion to Gen 1:27, in that New Creation context?
- 26 According to Rabbi Hertz, with the further precision that these proselytes will only assist the priests and Levites in their service, *op. cit.*, p. 951, and adds: 'This thought is quite in accordance with the universalist spirit in Isaiah.'
- 27 Dirk H. Odendaal, *The Eschatological Expectation of Isaiah 40-66 with special Reference to Israel and the Nations* (An International Library of Philosophy and Theology; Nutley, N.-J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970), p. 186; p. 195 n.75 supports our previous argument and comments: 'This is in line with Isa. 19:1-25, Ps. 87.'
- 28 *Op. cit.*, p. 476.
- 29 *Op. cit.*, p. 541.
- 30 As indicated by Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 477.
- 31 Motyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 461f. We may note also the emphasis on the name here (66:22) and there (56:5) and the added brothers gathered in 56:8, 'foreigners that attach themselves to the Lord to serve him' in 56:6, a thought not very far from 66:21 (the verb 'to attach,' *lâwâ*, may be reminiscent of Levi).
- 32 It was brought out by Rémi Lack, *La Symbolique du livre d'Isaïe* (Analecta Biblica 59; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1973).

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