

God's Non-Violence in a Vengeful Civilization

Isaiah 56-59



Context - Transition from 2nd to 3rd Isaiah

Chapters 1-39: Judah two centuries previously. Author was the prophet in the 8 century BCE.

Chapters 40-55: people in Jerusalem or Babylon when Babylon was about to fall - 2nd Exilic poet.

Chapters 56-66: the concerns of the Jews as they return to life in Jerusalem in subsequent decades.

When?

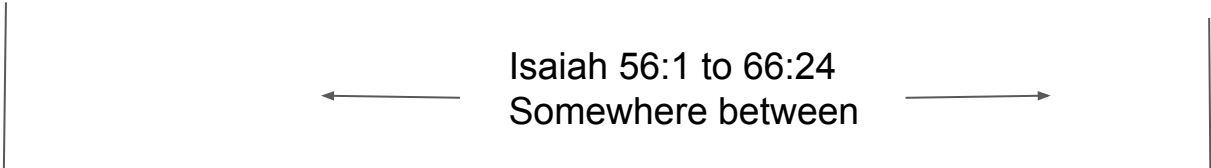
520 - 516 BCE

- Rebuilding of temple
- Time of Haggai, Zechariah

444 BCE

- Restoration of the Torah community
- Time of Ezra, Nehemiah

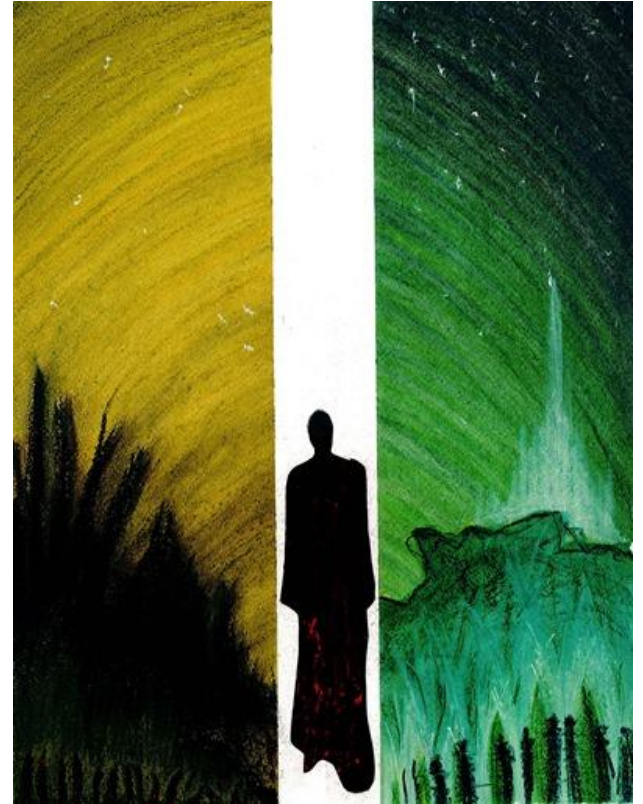
Isaiah 56:1 to 66:24
Somewhere between



Context - Back Home

In 538 BCE, Cyrus issued an edict allowing the Jews to return to their homeland. A part of the community returned to rebuild and restore their customs and institutions. Here was a new chance to fulfill their destiny to be God's witness to the world.

Instead, the community experienced drought, crop failure, and inflation. Isaiah 56-66 occurs during severe hardships, enmity between rival groups in Judah, leaders who looked after personal gain, and a court system riddled with corruption. It was thought that their trials were the result of disobedience and not building God's house.



The Text

This third wave of texts re-articulates the core of Isaiah's theology in yet another situation of faith - a theological crisis of the formative years of Judaism after the Jews' return to Jerusalem.

"Chapters 56-59 give evidence for the emerging disputes that will dominate the shaping of Judaism. In these chapters, we may identify remarkable ethical claims, an insistence that Judaism must practice a Torah obedience that transcends self-protective punctiliousness." (Bruggeman)

There is a focus on

- 1) Justice
- 2) Inclusiveness
- 3) Generosity



1) Imperative for Justice

56 This is what the Lord says:

“Maintain justice
and do what is right,
for my salvation is close at hand
and my righteousness will soon be revealed.

2

Blessed is the one who does this—
the person who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it,
and keeps their hands from doing any evil.”



Next slide:

“Isaiah 56:3-8 seeks to enact the imperative for justice in 56:1-2 by an insistence on a large inclusiveness of the community, presumably an attempt to counter and resist narrow exclusivism.” (Brueggemann)

2) Inclusiveness

3

Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say,
“The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.”
And let no eunuch complain,
“I am only a dry tree.”

4

For this is what the Lord says:
“To the eunuchs who keep
my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant—

5

to them I will give within my
temple and its walls
a memorial and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will endure forever.



6

And foreigners who bind themselves to the
Lord to minister to him,
to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without
desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—

7

these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.”

8

The Sovereign Lord declares—
he who gathers the exiles of Israel:
“I will gather still others to them
besides those already gathered.”

3) Generosity - Neighbourly Needs

6

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?”

7

Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

8

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness^[a] will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.



“In 58:6-8, the text makes an argument for faith that is focused on neighbourly needs in a generous and concrete way, clearly an advocacy to counter self-indulgent worship. The advocacy of both inclusiveness and neighbourly needs is an important ethical passion in emerging Judaism.” (Brueggemann)

A Mix of Ideals

In some ways the reshaping of Judaism is going back to fundamentals (sabbath, doing good) and in some ways it is becoming progressive (opening the community to foreigners and eunuchs).



How do we Handle the Contradictions?

Deuteronomy 23:1-4

List of those excluded from the law:

1 No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord.

2 No one born of a forbidden marriage nor any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation.

3 No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation. “

VS

Isaiah 56:3-8

God will not exclude eunuchs and foreigners

3 Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say,
Lord say,

“The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.”

And let no eunuch complain,
“I am only a dry tree.”

4 For this is what the Lord says:

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,

who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—

5 to them I will give within my temple and its walls

a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters;



I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.
6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord
to minister to him,
to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—
7 these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.

How do we Make Sense of it?

I always thought that there was a general trajectory from violence towards peace in the Bible and that the story represented the people of Israel's changing/maturing view of God over time.

But Crossan points out that there is much violence in the New Testament as well!

Crossan suggests there is a heartbeat rhythm of a revelation of God's ideal and humanity's distortion of it. An **assertion** and then a **subversion** as humans revert to the normalcy of civilization. (How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian - Crossan)



A Few of Many Examples of the Rhythm:

Assertion (Radicality of God)	Subversion (Normality of Civilization)	Re-assertion (Back to the Ideal)
Jesus in Sermon on the Mount	Jesus in Revelation (second coming)	-
Paul demanding that Philemon free his slave	Paul in Colossians - slaves obey your earthly masters	-
Isaiah & Micah: beat swords into plowshares	Joel - beat plowshares into swords	-
Sabbath (distributive justice)	Deuteronomy (retributive justice)	Isaiah 56 - 59 (justice, inclusiveness, generosity)

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The Ideal of the Sabbath (Assertion of Distributive Justice)

What did Sabbath originally mean?

- 1) Slaves freed
- 2) Debts liquidated
- 3) Land rested

Every year there was an attempt to re-assert God's ideal of distributive justice.

If every Sabbath year could not accomplish the divine dream of distributive justice, maybe it could be accomplished every fiftieth year.



Subversion- Experience of God Filtered through Culture

“When human beings imagine a relationship with divinity, they must work with metaphor, model, and matrix. This holds for everyone, everywhere, every time. But what metaphor is chosen, what model is preferred, and what matrix is available are crucial elements of identity and destiny.” (Crossan, 72)

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For example - What is the history behind the retributive justice in Deuteronomy?

Hittite Model of Covenant (1300s-1200s BCE)

“As Suzerain, the great king of Hatti bound subordinate vassal kings to him by sacred covenants sworn before multiple mutual gods whereby those subordinates invoked on themselves divinely sanctioned curses for infidelity and blessings for fidelity.” (Crossan)

The Hittite Empire lasted from the 1700s to the 1100s BCE... The formal components and structures of these Hittite-style covenants became traditional across the ancient Near East during the succeeding centuries.

This model thus became the dominant image of the relationship between God and Israel when the Hittite Empire reached its height in the 1300s BCE.



Assyrian Model of Covenant (700s BCE)

“The **Hittite** style model emphasized past *History* even more than future *Sanction* as a primary motivation, with reminders of what the suzerain had done for the vassal rather than threats of what he might do against him.” (Crossan)

Also, sanction is evenly balanced between curses and blessings.

The Assyrian Empire dominated in the 700s BCE.

“The **Assyrian** style treaties multiply *Sanction* exponentially, usually containing curses without any blessings.” (Crossan)
Crossan proposes that the Deuteronomic tradition accepted the contemporary Assyrian style sacred treaty as its ongoing understanding of God’s covenant with Israel.



Reassertion- Back to the Ideal?

Is the acceptance of the foreigner in Isaiah a re-assertion of the sabbath ideal after a subversion within the Deuteronomistic tradition?

Ideal **asserted** in the sabbath
(distributive justice) - ideal **subverted**
in the Deuteronomistic tradition
(retributive justice) based on the
Assyrian view of covenant (700 BCE) -
ideal **re-asserted** in Isaiah 56 (justice,
inclusiveness, generosity; 520 - 444 BCE).



Subversion in Isaiah?

Is it too much to suggest that maybe some of the versions of God in Isaiah are versions that have been distorted to views that align with civilization and culture?

“The tension is not between the Good Book and the bad world that is outside the book. It is between the Good Book and the bad world that are both within the book.” (Crossan)

“I think, once again, that we Christians must read both traditions, accept and follow their divine assertion, understand and not follow their human subversion, and appreciate the biblical honesty that retained that full dialectic of yes-and-no, expansion-and-contraction, vision-and-negation.” (Crossan)



Where else do you see this cycle occurring in Isaiah?

How do we address this cycle of ideal and realism in our own lives?