



Interpreting the Book of Isaiah: Yahweh's Changeless Purpose in the Changing History of Zion*

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What is "prophetic" preaching? In the decade of the sixties it was in vogue to exhort one another to have the courage to be prophetic. Courage was surely necessary because the general notion of "prophetic" meant to be against the establishment and all that it represented. Inasmuch as most congregations had substantial ties to the establishment it was well-nigh impossible to prophesy against the powers that be without at the same time striking people who were parishioners. But was it prophetic if its only distinguishing marks were an anti-establishment stance? And what is the difference between preaching protest against the establishment and preaching partisan politics?

*The essay which follows was written by Lee Snook on the basis of an extended discussion of these texts with colleagues. Frederick Gaiser served as the exegete for the group, introducing the texts and directing attention to crucial issues. Margaret Madson participated as the pastoral interpreter, joined by Donald Wisner and David Tiede.

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Prophetic preachers of the Old Testament, as in the case of Isaiah, did offer theological interpretations of the civil affairs or the secular events of their time. We who interpret these prophets for today can scarcely do less than propose a theological way of reading contemporary history, but, as we shall see, it is not sufficient to suppose that being against those in authority is genuinely prophetic. The outcome of prophetic interpretation may be to get more of us "involved" in the public events of the day, but on which side? The radical "left" prophet calls us to oppose the policies of the national leadership, and the radical "right" prophet comes to the defense of American's divinely ordained role in history, and *both* will call upon the prophetic literature for exemplars. Neither the left nor the right can derive unqualified support for either understanding from the Book of Isaiah.

From the First Sunday in Advent until Epiphany eight, the lectionary will present the interpreter with fourteen different pericopes from the Book of Isaiah. Four of them are from Proto-Isaiah, four from Deutero-Isaiah, and five from Trito-Isaiah, and the other from the difficult to locate Isaiah 35. The sequence of their appearance does not follow the sequence of the canonical chapters, and so the somewhat distinctive theologies of the three "Isaiahs" will be scrambled. This scrambling of the order will make it difficult to develop, week by week, a sustained and coherent study of how the book of Isaiah unfolds its complex theology of Israel's relationship with Yahweh.

Throughout the entire book, however, the main characters remain: Yahweh and the people of Yahweh. Others come on and off stage during the narrative, including the several figures who play the role of the narrator, Yahweh's spokesperson. First there was Isaiah, the son of Amoz, who prophesied in Judah prior to the Exile; then there was the writer who was with the exiles in Babylon as they anticipated release; and finally we hear from the writer(s) who ministered sometime in the post-exilic period of Restoration. What is constant in their various views is the steadfastness of Yahweh, and although each of them holds fast to Yahweh's unchanging purpose or strategy, each also offers a distinctive proposal for how Yahweh adapts the divine tactic to suit the changing historical circumstance. Yahweh never breaks the divine commitment to the chosen people even when it is necessary to use different tactics. Interpreters of Isaiah will need to be mindful of the changing contexts in which the Lord, who has chosen these people, works out the divine determination, one way or another, to redeem them.

The order in which the lectionary draws the lessons from the several portions of the Book of Isaiah does not follow the historical sequence, and so interpreters of these lessons may be hard pressed to be both honest to the shifting historical context and helpful to the pluralistic context today.

I. THE PROPHETIC USE OF THE ZION TRADITION

In our conversation preparing for this article, Professor Gaiser reviewed the role of the Zion tradition in Israelite history and the significance of that tradition for the Isaiah material. In a real sense this tradition ties together all of the texts for these three upcoming seasons, either by explicit usage or by implication. It is ex-

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PLICIT in seven of the passages (2:1-5; 35:1-10; 52:7-10; 62:10-12; 61:10-62:3; 60:1-6; 49:13-18) and seemingly implicit in at least three others (7:10-17; 49:1-6; 58:5-9a). The Zion tradition also relates to those passages that reflect the Messianic tradition (11:1-10; 9:2-7). The Zion tradition is an important key to the message of all three of the Isaiah portions and can help us interpret Isaiah for today.

Some present day "prophetic" preachers might be shocked by the implications of the Zion tradition which is so integral to the Isaiah literature. At the outset it might be useful to retrieve some of the shock by imagining a contemporary parallel.

Throughout the United States there are a number of "high places," virtual shrines which represent to broad segments of the American people some important beliefs, values, memories, and hopes. These beliefs and hopes are "secular" to be sure, but without them we would find it much more difficult to cooperate and to order our lives as one people out of many: *e pluribus unum*. Our shrines are essential to our shared life and transcend party differences. They point to something like a religious dimension to our nation as a people united by a common secular faith variously understood. A short list of such shrines might include the Lincoln Memorial, Valley Forge, the Pentagon, Gettysburg, Disneyland, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Wall Street, the Statue of Liberty, and Pearl Harbor. Such are the "high places" and anyone who would hold a prominent public office in this nation is obliged to show respect and homage to the high places in order to give testimony to his or her allegiance to the various beliefs and values within our pluralistic society.

Now one of the common assumptions of the present day “prophetic” stance is that the “high places” represent false religion and should be opposed. They are shrines of “mere civil religion.” Again, during the sixties prophetic-minded clergy would join others in Washington, D.C., and protest at the Pentagon. None of them would have considered consecrating the Pentagon by using it as a house of worship in the name of God. (Indeed they were horrified that other clergy would accept invitations to preach at another shrine in Washington, the White House.) One typical interpretation of the prophetic stance, then, has been to believe that God would not be caught dead in one of the “high places.” Yahweh does not dwell in “high places.”

These reflections from recent American experience may now help us to appreciate the transformations of Old Testament theology which followed Israel’s adoption of the “high places” of Canaanite religion. As Professor Gaiser reminded us, it was King David’s brilliant decision (2 Sam 6) to bring the ark of the covenant into the Jebusite city of Jerusalem and thus to blend the high places of the cosmogonic religion of Canaan with the ark tradition of older Yahwism. What was originally *David’s* politically shrewd device to consecrate the high places by introducing the ark into Jerusalem is assumed by Isaiah to be *Yahweh’s* own decision. Yahweh now *does* dwell in the high place, Zion, and so the holy mountain becomes synonymous with the chosen people themselves.

An important implication of the prevalence of the Zion tradition in prophetic literature, then, is that prophetic judgement and criticism can never be a simple denunciation of the secular or the so-called “mere civil religion.”

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Yahweh chose the Hebrews, brought them to Canaan, and then freely adopted the high places of the civil religion from which to rule.

“For the Lord has chosen Zion;
he has desired it for his habitation...” (Ps 132:1)

Indeed the Lord rules from Zion, not because of David’s political decision, but because Yahweh had chosen it to be so. The political, the secular, the civil religion and all other complexities of history are now less decisive than Yahweh’s choice.

By the eighth century B.C. Proto-Isaiah used this tradition much more than previous prophets. God is present in Zion. But the presence of Yahweh in the national shrines of the civil religion, if one might put it that way, does not oblige the prophets merely to acquiesce to the civil authority. Instead Isaiah, son of Amoz, uses this tradition—indeed transforms the Zion tradition—in order to

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speak to the political realities of his day. Assyria to the north, having already annexed the Northern Kingdom, is threatening little Judah, and Judah’s king is tempted to make military alliances in order to shore up the national security. No prophet who flatly denounces civil religion will be consulted by the civil authorities, but Isaiah clearly has direct access to the king. Isaiah, in other words, uses the Zion tradition (a rough equivalent to civil religion) in order to

criticize-on theological grounds-the proposed foreign policy of seeking alliances with Egypt.

II. THE “PAGAN” ORIGINS OF THE ZION TRADITION

The Zion tradition grows out of ancient Near Eastern mythology in which the notion of a holy mountain is pervasive. It is on the high mountain, where earth and sky meet, that one is to find the gods. Uncontrollable events take place there: volcanic eruptions, and fierce storms, and lightning—all of which are understandably associated with the deities. Similar allusions find their way into the Psalms, as in Psalm 18:7-8:

Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.
Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.

If a holy mountain is the dwelling place of the deity, then all the great issues must take place there: creation and chaos, defeat and victory, judgement and truth. When the Hebrews took up residence in Canaan the question of the survival of Yahwist religion among the Canaanites’ fertility religion was primary. The Zion tradition, as developed in Israel, involved a blending of the two views of God’s relation to the world: (1) The view of God as related to a people who are nomadic escapees from slavery in Egypt, and (2) the view of God as related to a place, a holy mountain. In the first view, represented by the movable ark, God’s primary task is not fertility and reproduction but protection of the chosen people. Yahweh moves with the people in order to be their protector, guide, and redeemer. In the second view, represented by the mountain, the holy place, God will surely be in that place no matter who occupies the land, for God is the creator. Fertility and blessing are the primary tasks of God. The distinctions between these two views of God’s relation to the world are distinctions of emphasis, for it was never the case that Yahweh of the ark had no concern for blessing, or that Canaanite religion was indifferent to redemption.

The principal source, then, of the prophets’ reference to Zion is not their historical experience of deliverance from bondage, but it is taken over from the religion of Canaan. What is first reported as a political coup by David in his drive to consolidate the kingdom has emerged here in Isaiah as a theological assertion. The same God who had freely chosen the children of Israel and had brought them to this land has now freely chosen to make Zion the dwelling place of the Most High.

These Isaiah texts will begin to appear in Advent when the annual anxiety about the secularizing of Christmas begins to rise in the hearts of pastors. Syn-

cretism is assumed to be the bane of Christian efforts to keep Christmas pure and unsullied by commercial or secular interests. In planning Advent liturgies, one is hard put to hold off the premature use of Christmas hymns, but these same hymns are already heard in department stores and on the airwaves. Their Christ-centered content may be totally lost in such secular uses, so that commercial preparations for Christmas, and Christmas Day itself, may have become in practice a “pagan” celebration. Indeed, the period of Advent in our culture is now a time for

shopping and public charity, and as such it has become a time for fertilizing the American economy. Christmas is what makes many businesses show a profit each year; it has reproductive power in the economy, and even the churches' budgets benefit from these annual fertility rites. But is it all bad? Certainly not if we take our clue from the prophetic use of the Canaanite mythology to affirm the presence of God even in civil religion.

If Yahweh is free to choose Zion for Yahweh's habitation, is God not also free to choose what has become a secular season? We ought at least to think about what our nation would be without its annual secularized Advent/Christmas before we confuse our clerical anxiety with prophetic indignation. The interpretation of Isaiah will demand of us both a disciplined attention to the texts and an imaginative reading of the now secular season of Advent/Christmas.

III. PERICOPES FROM THE BOOK OF ISAIAH—A SELECTION

Three texts from the Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany seasons will demonstrate the various uses of the Zion tradition in the Book of Isaiah. In order, they are found in Proto, Deutero, and Trito-Isaiah.

Advent I: Isaiah 2:1-5, Zion Established

We have already set the context for this passage. Assyria is threatening from the north; a proposed alliance with Egypt will allegedly secure Judah from a fate similar to Israel. Isaiah has the ears of those in power. This is the word spoken concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain
of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come and say:
“Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem,
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Whether this text is original with Micah, Isaiah, or a third source, it is clear that the point being made here fits with Isaiah's theological comment on Judah's proposed foreign policy. Now that Yahweh has come to dwell in Zion (Jerusalem), it is here that the future of humanity lies. Here, now, is the Law (Torah). Here now is the Word of Yahweh (*dabar*). Here now is judgement (*mishpat*; cf. 2:3-4). All of the traditional modes of divine mediation—prophet, priest, and

king—are now here in Zion because of Yahweh’s free choice to make this place “the house of the Lord.” Because Yahweh is now here in Zion nothing is lacking, and so this mountain will be the highest of all the mountains (2:2), and all humanity will be drawn to it because of the presence of Yahweh (2:3). The world is watching this place, this Zion, and will take its clues from what goes forth from Zion.

Isaiah’s opposition to the policy of bolstering national security by making treaties is theological. That is, such a move would betray a lack of trust in the presence of God in Zion. A nation that is so blessed with sound instruction (the law of Yahweh) and with the Word of the Lord (God’s gracious promise) and with true judgement (righteousness) does not need anything else and has nothing to fear from Assyria. In fact, to seek an alliance with Egypt would mean a lack of trust in what has been established by God in Zion, and where that faith is lacking so also are law, word, and judgement lacking.

What, then, is the prophetic word for our nation? What word might appropriately be derived from this and similar texts? One might wonder, initially, if a congregation is the proper audience for this message, which in Isaiah’s context was directed at the rulers. A congregation of believers hearing this text interpreted does not consist of rulers. But does it? In the civil order of Judah, the people were subservient to the king. In the civil order of our nation, the principle is reversed. The *people* rule, and the politicians or office holders are, in theory, subservient to the people; the government is administered in their name by office holders. Isaiah had the ear of the king, the ruler of Judah. Pastors have the ear of the people who share in the self-rule of our nation which is (divinely) blessed with a (secular) faith in the democratic process. These people/rulers have a right to hear this word from the Lord reminding them of this blessing. To lose faith in this blessing of God is also to forfeit our strength by frantically wasting our resources in idolatrous weapons instead of using them justly in the service of people.

Christmas Day¹: Isaiah 52:7-10, Zion Comforted

Proto-Isaiah, as we have just noted in the Advent text, used the Zion tradition in order to urge the king not to put any trust in Egypt because, with Yahweh dwelling in Zion, there was no need. An alliance would be a mark of distrust, of rebellion. “Woe to the rebellious children,” says the Lord, “who carry out a plan, but not mine...who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking my counsel, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow Egypt!” (Isa 30:1-2). Instead, “thus says the Lord God...‘In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength’” (30:15). When one recalls the Zion theology which informs this advice, it is clear

¹The Christmas lessons are repeated in all three of the cycles. This lesson is intended for the major service of the day.

that this is not apolitical quietism. Isaiah is hardly passive, but he actively presses the king not to try to manipulate history or to control God. Yahweh may be present in Zion but will not merely endorse *anything* that comes out of Zion. Instead, if the king were not so anxious about national security, he would see that the true strength of Judah was in the character of its national life as marked by justice, hope, and sound law. Today, If we the people/rulers really believed that, we would see to it that our servants—the office holders—would support first of all that which makes

our nation truly strong: its character, its commitment to justice, and its openness to all the people. All other forms of strength (arms, economy, technology) are secondary.

For a time Isaiah's theology prevailed. No alliances were made. And Assyria, under Sennacherib, was indeed defeated in an attempt to take Judah. The theology of Isaiah was vindicated. But the defeat of Assyria exposed Isaiah's theology to a dangerous misunderstanding, an over-reaction. What was certain for Isaiah was that Yahweh was present in Zion and that Judah's strength, therefore, was her trust in the presence of Yahweh. But now there arose the dangerous notion that this very divine presence made Judah inviolable. The presence of Yahweh is assured, but it is no guarantee against defeat, especially if the people simply take Yahweh for granted or treat the worship of the Lord as if it were a good-luck charm for warding off disaster.

Babylon eventually overran Judah, and her people were taken into captivity. The new prophet for this quite different circumstance has a different message but it is the same Yahweh who comes to comfort those in captivity. Isaiah 52 should be read in reference back to the opening of Deutero-Isaiah, chapter 40. What is called for in that earlier chapter is delivered in chapter 52. In chapter 40 there is the anxious yearning for good tidings, for some word of release from Mount Zion. The expectations of chapter 40 are answered in the Christmas morning lesson:

How beautiful upon the mountains

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are the feet of him who brings good tidings,
who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good,
who publishes salvation
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (52:7)

So here comes the promised messenger. Even his feet are beautiful. And what is the message? Yahweh still reigns, the same Yahweh who was present back in Jerusalem in the former days. But now it is not the character of the people in whom God's word and judgement and righteousness hold sway; God reigns to deliver them but not by means of the law, word, and judgement which they had known among them when Assyria was defeated. A different means, an alien means of deliverance, is at hand: Cyrus!

How can this be? Why was it *not* appropriate to depend on the alien Egyptians as a handy way for God to help them back in Jerusalem; yet now in Babylon the deliverance will come through the alien Cyrus? Because Yahweh, earlier, had chosen to make Zion the divine habitation in Jerusalem and had not chosen Babylon in the same way. Was Yahweh gone? In a real sense, yes, but Yahweh was busy nonetheless defeating the chaotic forces, according to Deutero-Isaiah:

Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces,
that didst pierce the dragon?
Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,
the waters of the great deep...? (51:9-10)

If Yahweh is to rescue the captives in Babylon, something other than the mediated presence of

Yahweh (through priest, prophet and king) will be required. The *strategy* or purpose of God has not changed. Yahweh is still determined to redeem these chosen ones, but now a different *tactic* is required. In Jerusalem the tactic was Yahweh's mediated presence which informed and strengthened the character of the people. Those mediations are largely absent in captivity, and a different tactic is now required. *What* God wills for this chosen people is fixed. God is determined to redeem. *How* God acts to redeem is contingent, but nevertheless a different, unexpected tactic is still good news (Isa 52:7), even if the tactic is alien to everything the people had known in the former days.

The God who was present in Zion and had made Zion the holy habitation is not confined to Zion. "Your God reigns." Your God

has bared his holy arm before
the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God. (52:10)

Deutero-Isaiah thus extends the scope of God's involvement in the secular affairs of all the nations. Although the captives in Babylon had felt estranged from intimate knowledge of Yahweh because of the loss of Temple worship, Yahweh was nevertheless busily at work in the whole of creation. And so when the Lord returned to Zion—now in exile—the good news was that Yahweh had been in charge all along. Isaiah 45 is the decisive passage for this extended view of God's power by which the Lord will redeem the captives through Cyrus. To Cyrus the Lord says:

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I am the Lord and there is no other,
besides me there is no God
I gird you though you do not know me
that men may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is none besides me;
I am the Lord, and there is no other
I form light and create darkness
I make weal and create woe,
I am the Lord who do all these things. (45:5-7)

And so even the woe which brought the people into bondage was God's doing! What was experienced as bad news cannot be *all* bad if Yahweh had been in charge all along! God is the power in everything that happens and now, if deliverance is about to happen, then it must be good news even though this time God—contrary to an earlier tactic regarding the Egyptian alliance—does it a different way. If God chooses to do it through an alien power this time, then it is right because what God does is right. "I the Lord speak the truth, I declare what is right" (45:19).

On Christmas morning it is good to remember and to proclaim the sovereignty of the power of God. Even if the nations may not recognize the Lord's way of coming among people ("I

gird you though you do not know me”) here comes the Lord anyway:

The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God. (52:10)

We must not lose sight of the fact that for the captives in Babylon, God’s bare arm was in the form of Cyrus’s armies. But in Bethlehem, another surprise; the Lord has chosen still another tactic while never forsaking the divine purpose. The bare arm now is a bare baby. And since it is the arm of the Lord there in the manger, *some* kind of power is at work to redeem the nations. Give Herod his due, for he recognized that something was let loose in that stable, some power which, frail as it may have seemed, could not be controlled even by the armies of Rome. *This* Lord, and there is no other, has determined—one way or another—to redeem.

Epiphany: Isaiah 60:1-6, Zion Restored

Gerhard von Rad has observed that the Zion tradition came back to life especially during the restoration period, the time of Trito-Isaiah as well as of Haggai and Zechariah. Whereas in Isaiah 2 it is judgement which goes forth from Zion to all the nations, now in Isaiah 60 it is salvation which is offered to all the nations who will make their pilgrimage to Zion. The fullest development of this theme, writes von Rad, is found in chapter 60, the lesson for Epiphany:²

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you,
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,

²Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65) 2.295.

and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will be seen upon you.
And nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of
your rising...
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. (60:1-3, 6)

Even as far back as the Advent 1 lesson (Isa 2), the picture of Zion was eschatological. Zion was the image of what is to come and an invitation to walk in the light of that image. Now in the closing chapters of the book, and generations after the original Isaiah, the “poet did not miss a chance of giving a magnificent description of the coming of the nations.... Thereafter lawlessness and social oppression will cease. Peace will be the overseers and righteousness the governors in the city of God; the days of her mourning will be at an end.”³ The political metaphors for the coming reign of God are unmistakable.

Apparently it was not just enough that exiles were released to go back to Jerusalem. The breathless expectation of the surprising rescue by Yahweh through Cyrus must have been more

exciting in prospect than in actual fact. The restoration did take place as promised in Deutero-Isaiah. Von Rad writes:

It is remarkable, however, that the event made no particular impact on its own or on future generations. The return was obviously not accompanied by miraculous events—indeed, those who took part in it did not in any way regard it as a saving event. If they had done so, they would never have allowed it to fall into oblivion as if it were of no particular significance. It was obviously not celebrated as the fulfillment of a great prophetic prediction. Deutero-Isaiah’s prophecies had therefore still to be fulfilled. None the less, Israel’s situation had altered.⁴

Israel was now “back home” as prophesied, and yet the expectations for Zion had remained unfulfilled. This new prophet’s use of the Zion tradition obviously borrowed from earlier prophecies but the altered situation of Israel meant that predecessor prophets cannot be merely copied or imitated. The prophet’s task is the same, however, namely to describe Yahweh’s new tactic for this new situation. There is still the insistence on justice and righteousness (56:1); there is still criticism of the ruling class for failure of duty (56:9), there is still the note of comfort (61:1 “to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives”). But what tactic is appropriate to *this* situation?

“Unlike the pre-exilic prophets,” writes von Rad, “the people with whom Trito-Isaiah was concerned were not outwardly arrogant: rather, they were people of little faith.”⁵ Or, unlike Deutero-Isaiah’s use of the Zion tradition in which Zion will be the *climax* of the prediction of deliverance, the *goal* of a restored Israel, in Trito-Isaiah’s time—when Israel had presumably been restored to the homeland—Zion is the starting point or the place of a new beginning, because “she is Zion unredeemed, still waiting, forced to importune Jahweh, constrained to give him no peace, begging him to give effect to that glorification of the city of God which still tarries.”⁶

³Ibid., 2.295-96.

⁴Ibid., 2.278.

⁵Ibid., 2.280.

⁶Ibid., 2.281.

The text for Epiphany is obviously a rapturous picture of adoring, faithful nations rushing to bask in the light of the restored Zion, eager to give abundant gifts in gratitude and praise to the Lord. The actual situation of life in the old homeland was a complete contrast to the vision of Isaiah 60. Obviously the prophet is here holding out to a lethargic and faithless Israel a divine promise for the transfiguration of Zion which the coming Lord will bring, and although that promise had been delayed, post-poned, not yet fulfilled, it will nevertheless be a world-shaking event. The theme, then, is: “get ready to join the nations.” Of course, for Haggai and Zechariah, getting ready meant preparing and restoring the Temple itself.

In summary, one might say that the prophecy of this period was a theology of hope. That is, Yahweh’s chosen tactic for *this* situation marked by lethargy and diminished faith, was not primarily to use the media of presence, and not to gird an alien king for the rescue of Israel. For this

circumstance the tactic of Yahweh is to hold before Israel a shining hope. What is required to reawaken faith is a promise of what Yahweh *will* do. God, according to Trito-Isaiah, has adopted still another tactic for a new situation while remaining faithful to the divine determination to redeem.

Prophecy in Israel will soon give way, after Trito-Isaiah, to apocalyptic, but there can be little question by now that the prophetic tradition was much more adaptable and fluid than might suit some popular interests, not to mention the systematizing concerns of theologians. Von Rad writes:

The message of every prophet was exactly directed to meet a specific time, and it contained an offer which was never repeated in precisely the same form as it had with the original speaker....Therefore, in the time of Jeremiah...no one could any longer adduce the safeguarding of Zion in the sense that Isaiah had foretold it. The Jerusalem of the day did not recognize the hour; the waves of history rolled over Zion. Deutero-Isaiah's prophecy that Jahweh would lead his people home was valid in that precise form only for the exiles of Babylon. Even Trito-Isaiah could only take it up in a considerably altered form, because the historical situation had altered. Thus, the message of every prophet was closely bound up with the point in history at which it was delivered, and after this point no message could be repeated exactly in its original sense. *This is where creative interpretation begins.*⁷

In the opening weeks of 1984, parish interpreters will need creative imaginations for interpreting the several texts from Isaiah. And the theology of hope found in Epiphany's lesson would be an occasion for speaking of the dynamics of hope in our time when nuclear images of dread and fear seem to dominate the consciousness of many people. We may indeed have a lot in common with Israel after the exile. After all, we live in an established, developed, and—by global standards—prosperous nation. Why are we, then, so despondent about the future? Surely one reason is that we can no longer promise today's children a better future as our parents could, with justification, promise us. We cannot indefinitely satisfy expanding consumer appetites in developed economies like ours and still expect to achieve global justice and international peace.

⁷Ibid., 2.299-300. Italics are mine.

The Trito-theology of hope is a splendid occasion for interpreters to invite people to re-examine what sort of hopes are sustainable on this little planet. We might discover that Yahweh's demand for justice challenges some of our images, especially those which assume a never ending upward spiral of prosperity for a few. Perhaps if we were genuinely caught up in a vision of equity, freedom, and justice as the foundation for peace, we might then discover that a different image of "quality of life" might emerge—one that does not win prosperity for a few at the expense of poverty for the majority of the earth's people. Images of hope can make a difference in what kind of actual future awaits the human race, and in light of a different hope the lethargy and anxiety which envelop us will recede.

IV. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERPRETING THE ZION TRADITION IN ISAIAH

"This is where creative interpretation begins," is the admonition with which Gerhard von

Rad leaves us after cautioning us that “no prophetic message can be repeated exactly in its original sense.”⁸ The several theologies found in the Isaiah texts are each peculiar to the unrepeatable historical situation for which they were formulated. Any creative interpretation will be accountable to the historical situation, first of all, just as the several writers of the Book of Isaiah were, indeed, offering interpretations of historical events. They did not invent the situation, but they did “read” it a certain way. They had a certain angle of vision or perspective on what was happening. Their own honesty to the history they were living through meant that they could not in any coherent fashion force the same theological interpretation on every historical circumstance. Whatever creative interpretation a contemporary preacher can muster in dealing with Isaiah, it will be disciplined and held accountable to the historical situations from which the Isaiah literature had sprung.

There are some additional factors common to these texts which hold them together, factors which can give some order to present-day efforts at creative interpretation.

1. *Yahweh can be trusted.* Yahweh is worthy of trust. This theme underlies all of the Isaiah texts. Indeed Yahweh alone is worthy of trust because there is no other Lord. The will of the Lord of Israel is that Israel let the Lord have his way with them, and put their trust in the Lord and not in alliances, nor in ceremonies, nor in their own religiousness. God has chosen them and their true strength is in “quietness and trust.” The history, however, is the history of betrayal. Israel was prone to use God’s election in order to tempt God, as though to say, “If God is worthy of trust, then let us trust the Lord to do what we want, or to endorse our plans.” To trust Yahweh is to be ready to trust that Yahweh’s purpose is constant even though the method for achieving that purpose is various. One way or another the Lord’s determined will will be done with Israel. In Isaiah we have a description of some of the ways through which Yahweh’s trustworthy and constant will was expressed.

2. *Prophecies fail, even when based on trust in the constancy of Yahweh’s purpose.* The shifting tides of history overwhelm Israel’s expectations for Zion, again

⁸Ibid., 2.300.

and again. When the prophetic period closed, there was little historical evidence that the prophets had been successful, although their oracles were retained and to one degree or another shaped by the continuing expectations of the people of the Book. Prophecy is a testimony to the faithfulness of God and to the terrible freedom of human beings to live in forgetfulness or neglect or defiance of God’s will for humanity. In that sense, at least, prophecy is truthful testimony, even when prophecy fails.

3. *The failure of faith does not defeat the faithfulness of God, but human failure does affect how and when the promise of God is fulfilled.* The apparent failure of prophecy throws Israel back more and more on the demand for trust in the absence of signs or miracles or the mediating structures. The *fulfillments* of God’s promises are thus pushed more and more into the future or toward desperate apocalypticism. But the original premise of the prophets’ ministry remains: the faithfulness of Yahweh is best seen in history when and where there are those who trust themselves to the Lord and do not use their faith as a ploy to get their own way.

4. *The ministry of the prophets is still a model for interpreters of scripture, a model which does not easily accommodate ideological agendas.* If God’s trustworthiness is *confirmed*

by those who trust the Lord (remembering, of course, that human faith does not *make* God trustworthy) it is human language which can evoke faith. Words and stories and images of hope can still call forth faith and faith can still alter the course of events. In some such way God bends the history of humanity to the divine will. Faith comes from hearing, but not just hearing anybody at all or anything at all. Faith comes from hearing from the faithful, and if we can interpret creatively the words of the prophets, then their prophecies can continue to call listeners to faith, and by their faith God's faithfulness in the changes of history will be known.