



Liberty to the Captives: The Divine Job Description?

FREDERICK J. GAISER

A well-known Anglican collect for peace begins, “O God, the author of peace and concord, to know you is eternal life, to serve you is perfect freedom.”¹ The notion of service as “perfect freedom” sounds odd, perhaps, to the modern reader, but it echoes an important feature of the greatly diverse reflections on slaves and slavery that run through the Bible, quite literally from Genesis to Revelation.

On the one hand, we are called, like Paul and Timothy, to be “slaves (δοῦλοι) of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:1; cf. Eph 6:6), but on the other, our own slave is none other than that same Christ (Phil 2:7; cf. Mark 10:45)—which then sets us free to be slaves of one another (2 Cor 4:5).

This combination is what led Luther to announce his famous paradox: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”²

Once more, odd—yet oddly profound. Things get more problematic, however, in other slavery texts, where there is both good news and bad. On the one hand:

¹*The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury, 1976) 99. Older prayer books use the more traditional language: “whose service is perfect freedom.”

²Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 344.

God’s very first promise in the Bible is to bring Israel out of Egypt. The theme of liberation begins there and runs through the entire Bible, becoming a definition of who God is and what God does. To meet God the Lord is to meet God the Liberator.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.... (Exod 20:2)

But on the other:

Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior. (Titus 2:9–10)

Would most today agree that a totally subservient slave—a literal one—was “an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior”? Probably not. Apparently, as with so many matters addressed in the Bible, we will have to develop some kind of canon within the canon regarding texts on slavery in order to allow them to speak properly to this generation. They may still challenge us as well as providing comfort, but at least the challenge will be about the right things, not a defense of a defenseless institution.

TO PROCLAIM LIBERTY TO THE CAPTIVES

Liberty in Jesus' Sermon

Jesus' first sermon in Luke will be a good place to start, allowing a consideration of our theme in both Old Testament and New Testament perspective. As we know, Jesus read an Isaianic text (which includes elements of both Isa 61:1–2 and 58:6)—

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18–19)

—and then he added his brief but powerful sermon, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Surprisingly, it does not appear to be this remarkable claim that produces the unrest among the hearers. Indeed, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (4:22). It is not until Jesus indicates that Isaiah's “good news to the poor” and “release to the captives” applies to those outside of Israel (4:25–28) that the people are “filled with rage” and try to throw him off a cliff (4:28–30).³

One would have thought the claim itself would have been objectionable enough, for it apparently assumes both that the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus—including, as we see in Jesus' claim, the spirit of prophecy⁴—and that “the

³For a brief introduction to this passage, see Matthew Skinner's comments at “Resources: Passages” under *Luke* in *Enter the Bible* at www.enterthebible.org (accessed October 20, 2010).

⁴The holy spirit of prophecy, according to rabbinic tradition, had been “stored away” and was unavailable in the postexilic community. See R. E. Clements, *God and Temple: The Presence of God in Israel's Worship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 126–127.

year of the Lord's favor" has arrived. For Israel, this would have been the Jubilee Year (Lev 25:8–17)—the fiftieth year, when land was restored to the original owners and slaves set free. Everything will be made new, says the prophet in Isa 61; everything will be restored. The status quo is overturned; the poor and the oppressed are given a new beginning. Jesus announces that nothing less than that is happening now in his life and ministry. If one had to become a slave, the Year of Jubilee would have been a good time to do it. If a slave needed an advocate, Jesus would have been a good one to have around.⁵

Liberty in Isaiah's Gospel

The primary text from which Jesus preaches (Isa 61:1–3) stands precisely at the center of what has been called the nucleus of the material known as Third Isaiah (chaps. 60–62). This is the section that sounds most like Second Isaiah, picking up its themes of comfort, renewal, and glad tidings. With its first-person announcement (“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me”), the text echoes the grammar, tone, and content of the two central Servant Songs in Second Isaiah (“The LORD called me before I was born” 49:1; “The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher” 50:4). These, along with 61:1–3, seem to be autobiographical—the “I” being the prophet himself. This prophet/servant/representative of Israel announces what God is doing in the times of crisis during and following the exile: bringing out “the prisoners from the dungeon; from the prison those who sit in darkness” (42:7).

If one had to become a slave, the Year of Jubilee would have been a good time to do it. If a slave needed an advocate, Jesus would have been a good one to have around.

In 61:1–3, the prophet defines the completeness of this work by describing it with seven infinitives: to bring good news to the oppressed; to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn; to give them a garland instead of ashes. This sevenfold mission marks not only the center of Third Isaiah, but the center of what God has been up to throughout the Old Testament.

When Luke's Jesus chose this text (along with 58:6) to push for God's deliverance of those outside the nation of Israel, he chose well. Although there are many strands in Isa 56–66, many of its texts—including those used for Jesus' sermon—stress God's overflowing grace and radical inclusivity. The introductory verses to Third Isaiah understand this well, inviting even foreigners and eunuchs to

⁵For more on Jesus and this text in the context of Luke's Gospel, see Eric D. Barreto, “To Proclaim the Year of the Lord's Favor” (Luke 4:19): Possessions and the Christian Life in Luke-Acts,” in *Rethinking Stewardship: Our Culture, Our Theology, Our Practices*, ed. Frederick J. Gaiser (Saint Paul: Word & World, Luther Seminary, 2010) 65–76.

join the “outcasts of Israel” who were being gathered by God, following the exile, into a new people with a new future (56:1–8).⁶ Reestablishing ritual order, including the regular and important days of fasting that came into being following the Babylonian catastrophe, would be insufficient. The fast that God desires, our prophet notes, is the one that continues the message of liberation that has defined God from the beginning, a fast meant “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke” (58:6). More than once in its history, Israel had well understood that they were people in bondage, particularly in need of liberation, but now in this time of restoration they will need to see that God’s people are always “outcasts” among outcasts, always in need of liberation, always called to open doors to those previously thought to be beyond the scope of their or God’s concern. This is the message that the hearers of Isa 58 had not laid to heart (“Why do we fast, but you do not see?” 58:3), and it remains the message that the hearers of Jesus’ sermon could not accept.

GOD AS LIBERATOR

Meeting God in the Exodus

According to Exodus, Israel’s very first words to God as a nation were their groans and outcries out of slavery in Egypt (Exod 2:23), and God’s very first words to this people (after introducing himself to Moses) were these: “I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters....I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians” (Exod 3:7–8). This is where Israel learns for the first time the name Yahweh (“the LORD”) and, more, learns who Yahweh is by learning what God promises and what God does. Yahweh’s very first promise is this: “I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt” (3:17). Israel’s first exposure to God the Lord is to God the Liberator.

This definition of Yahweh continues and develops throughout the Old Testament. It does indeed seem to be what God does and who God is—so much so, in fact, that it becomes the heart of the “creed” that Israel came to recite in its thanksgiving worship:

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have

⁶For more on this, see Frederick J. Gaiser, “A New Word on Homosexuality? Isaiah 56:1–8 as Case Study,” *Word & World* 14/3 (1994) 280–293.

given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house. (Deut 26:4–11)

as an act of worship, the confession calls both God and Israel’s past history into the present, enabling Israel anew to be the liberated liberators that God called them to be

As creeds do, this confession of faith defines who God is and how the people of God understand themselves. God is a liberator who hears and responds to people in need; God’s people, who were once aliens and outcasts, owe their lives and all they have to this God and, as a result, can offer their praise and their substance to God and welcome other “aliens” into their worship and into their houses.⁷ “Such a confession,” notes R. E. Clements, “defines the Being of God in an oblique manner by affirming and recalling those actions through which God had become known and accessible to Israel.”⁸ As an act of worship, the confession calls both God and Israel’s past history into the present, enabling Israel anew to be the liberated liberators that God called them to be.

The Liberator in History, Law, Worship, and Eschatology

The God confessed in that creed is announced and celebrated throughout the Old Testament. Just a few of the many examples must suffice here:

In Israel’s *history* the hope and experience of liberation took front and center, of course, in the time of exodus and exile. The exodus tradition, as we have seen, introduces the liberty to the captives motif and gives it its primary impetus.

Some six centuries later, Second Isaiah makes extensive use of that tradition to describe the new liberation of God’s people from Babylonian captivity. God’s servant is called to be “a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon” (Isa 42:6–7). God “will send to Babylon and break down all the bars” (43:14). Through Cyrus, God will “open doors...level the mountains...break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron” (45:1–2). “In a time of favor,” God says to the prisoners, “‘Come out,’ and to those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves’” (49:8–9). “Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter Zion” (52:2). This passage then goes on to make the exodus connection explicit: “For thus says the LORD: You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money. For thus says the Lord GOD: Long ago my people went down into Egypt to reside there as aliens; the Assyrian, too, has oppressed them without

⁷There has been considerable scholarly debate over the dating and significance of this text in Israel’s tradition history, but little dispute about its character as a confession that stood at the heart of Israel’s worship.

⁸Ronald E. Clements, “Deuteronomy: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 480.

cause” (52:3–4). Therefore, God will intervene now to bring the people out of Babylon. In this, Israel and the nations will know once again that “it is I who speak; here am I” (52:6). Liberation identifies Yahweh as God. It is who God is.

God as liberator becomes significant also in the rationale behind God’s laws. Why keep the sabbath, according to Deuteronomy? Unlike Exod 20:8–11, where the motivation is the divine rest on the seventh day of creation, Deut 5:14–15 relates sabbath to the exodus, emphasizing it as a day of liberation for all workers, male or female, human or animal, Israelite or alien, because “you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.”

*in Leviticus, the theme of liberation becomes explicitly an
imitatio Dei—an imitation of the work and person of God*

In Leviticus, the theme of liberation becomes explicitly an *imitatio Dei*—an imitation of the work and person of God: “For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:45). This will mean that “you shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt” (Lev 18:3); instead, “you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:34). The freeing of the slaves in the Jubilee Year is to be done because “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God” (Lev 25:38). Finally, the promise of life and liberty that comes through observing the law comes because “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect” (Lev 26:13).

The liberation theme, embedded in history and law, becomes a central theme of Israel’s *worship* as well, where it becomes even more a “timeless” definition of God, building on, but moving beyond, the particulars of historical events:

Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land. (Ps 68:5–6)

From heaven the LORD looked at the earth to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those doomed to die. (Ps 102:19–20)

In Ps 107 release of captives becomes a defining element of God’s steadfast love, which is the recurring theme of this psalm at its beginning and end and several times in between (vv. 1, 8, 15, 21, 31, 43):

Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons....Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress; he brought them out of darkness and gloom, and broke their bonds asunder.

Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love....For he shatters the doors of bronze, and cuts in two the bars of iron. (Ps 107:10–16)

Though many of these images reflect the language of Second Isaiah, describing God's liberation of the exiles from Babylon, God's action here loses (or goes beyond) historical particularity to become one of four stereotypical aspects of God's work (alongside feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and rescuing the endangered) that define who God is and what God's steadfast love looks like.

Drawn into liturgy, increasingly a mark of God's very person, the notion of liberation begins to take on *eschatological significance* as well: "Praise the Lord!" sings the psalmist, "who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down" (Ps 146:1, 6b–8). These same themes are seen as a sign of God's renewal of all things in Isa 35:5–7, and they are picked up in the gospels as indicators that Jesus is "the one who is to come" (Luke 7:18–22). Ezekiel describes the messianic kingdom like this:

The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. (Ezek 34:27)

Again, to see liberation is to know the Lord—now and always.

OF BONDAGE, POLITICAL AND BEYOND

According to the Bible, as we have seen, "Liberator" defines who God was, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. As a central theme of biblical faith, it is not surprising that God's liberation must take on forms of captivity with spiritual and metaphorical significance as well, extending beyond political bondage to describe everything that oppresses the human—and, indeed, that enslaves the earth itself.

That happens, for example, in Judaism where the liberation theme of Lev 26:13 becomes a part of the typical grace before meals: "May the All Merciful One break off the yoke of exile from our necks and allow us to walk at full stature to our land."⁹

We see the movement from liberation back to bondage in 2 Esdras 2:1 (probably first-century C.E.); despite political liberation, Israel falls captive to their own disobedience: "Thus says the Lord: I brought this people out of bondage, and I gave them commandments through my servants the prophets; but they would not listen to them, and made my counsels void." Something like this may, in fact, already be going on in Isa 61:1–3, at least if we work from the traditional scholarly dating of Third Isaiah. Interestingly, in these verses the prophet proclaims "liberty to the captives" to those who have, in fact, been just recently freed from Babylon. The

⁹Cited in Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 184.

temple remains in ruins, however, and life in Jerusalem is bleak. Is this why the mourners need comfort? Is this why they need to hear good news again? Are they in danger of slipping back into a bondage of the spirit that might be worse than political captivity?

In present worship, many Lutherans confess “that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves”¹⁰—a line that echoes themes close to the heart of the New Testament gospel. In John, Jesus announces that “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” and proclaims himself the ultimate liberator: “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34–36). As the argument here makes clear, even if complete political freedom were possible, there remains still the profound bondage to sin that distorts everything. Paul, too, realizes that we will be slaves “either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness” (Rom 6:16). Christ, says Paul, has already come to free us from that bondage to sin and death (Rom 6:1–11), and Christ will come to free even creation itself from “its bondage to decay” (Rom 8:21). God the liberator is out for it all: political prisoners, spiritual prisoners, and all creation. We might paraphrase: no one is free until all are free—where freedom includes everything and anything that holds anyone or anything captive.

If there is a downside to the biblical emphasis on liberation, it is the frequency with which freedom for some requires harm or even death to others. Fine, God leads Israel out of the Egyptian house of bondage and into the promised land, but what of those Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizites, Hivites, and Jebusites that already live there (Exod 3:8)? To be sure, the archaeological data do not suggest that entry into the land required actual holy war (despite the stylized reports in Joshua);¹¹ the biblical story may be rather an idealized way of speaking about the establishment of a new people in a new land with a new God—an action that seeks to banish the oppressive multiplicity of gods that require constant appeasement. But the worshipers of those gods are real. Are they not worthy of God’s liberation?

Fine, God will bring Israel out of Egypt and out of Babylon, but how many Egyptians and Babylonians must die in the process? Later rabbinic tradition sees even God troubled by this notion. “But does the Holy One, blessed be He, rejoice over the downfall of the wicked?” wonders the Jewish Talmud.¹² Then it goes on to say: “When the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea, the Heavenly Hosts broke out in songs of jubilation. God silenced them and said, ‘My creatures are perishing, and you sing praises?’”¹³

¹⁰*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 117.

¹¹See “Holy War,” under the “Introductory Issues” to *Joshua* and “Settlement of Canaan” under “Theological Issues” to *Judges*, both by Mark Throntveit, in *Enter the Bible* at www.enterthebible.org (accessed October 21, 2010).

¹²*The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezikin 5, Sanhedrin 39b*, trans. Jacob Shachter and H. Freedman, vol. 1 (London: Soncino, 1935) 251.

¹³This wording appears in *A Passover Haggadah: The New Union Haggadah*, ed. Herbert Bronstein for the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1982) 48.

In biblical tradition, it seems, God can and will act harshly and decisively to rescue the oppressed, because oppression is real and deadly (whether the oppression of legalistic religion or the oppression of political power)—so much so, in fact, that in the terror of oppression and the ferocity of God’s response, the distinction between slave and free becomes meaningless. Human disobedience can work such havoc that God’s final judgment must tragically be an equal opportunity destroyer, laying waste everything, “as with the slave, so with his master” (Isa 24:2). And in Revelation, the beast, too, is no respecter of persons: the mark of the beast comes upon “both slave and free” (Rev 13:16).

in biblical tradition, it seems, God can and will act harshly and decisively to rescue the oppressed, because oppression is real and deadly (whether the oppression of legalistic religion or the oppression of political power)

The issue is stark, and God will do whatever it takes to set people free. But, still, people die in the process. Finally, to be sure, God is taking us to a world where, in Christ (with our liberation complete), there is “no longer slave or free” (Gal 3:28)—that lack of distinction now being good news rather than bad news. To get to this place, suffering and evil must be overcome; but suffering and evil seem always to have human faces. How will God liberate us (and God’s own self!) from this terrible dilemma? Precisely for this reason, according to the New Testament, Christ took on “the form of a slave...and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7–8). Jesus did not proclaim liberty to the captives from afar; he entered our cells and prison camps—actual and metaphorical—becoming one with us as he followed God’s call to its terrible end in order to win our release. God defeats slavery through slavery, bringing at last full liberation from sin, death, and the devil (Luther’s famous trio). God will do whatever it takes!¹⁴

One last thing, however: we do not honor this hard-won freedom, we do not live in it, if we do not recognize that it is meant for all. To celebrate our own freedom in Christ while ignoring the bondage of others—whether political bondage, spiritual bondage, economic bondage, or the bondage of suffering and illness—is to move back behind the saving work of Christ into a new bondage to sin and death.

Liberation, in biblical perspective, is both gift and responsibility. We learn that again and again, and not least in what we see of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel. “Blessed are you who are poor,” says Jesus (Luke 6:20)—and not just “poor in spirit” (Matt 5:3); “Blessed are you who are hungry now” (Luke 6:21)—and not

¹⁴For a fine description of Christ’s “harrowing of hell” as his victory over our bondage to death even from within death, see James F. Kay, “He Descended into Hell,” *Word & World* 31/1 (2011) 17–26, esp. 20.

just those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt 5:6). Liberation, says Jesus in the aftermath of the sermon where we began, is not just for Israel but for the nations as well (Luke 4:25–29). Finally, in the end, the Messiah suffers and is raised in order that “repentance and forgiveness of sins be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47, emphasis added).

I have noted elsewhere and often that the response to the “How are you?” question in Zimbabwe is, “I am well if you are well.” Since we learn in the Bible that God is quintessentially the Liberator—the Liberator of all!—the only proper response to such liberation is to recognize and confess that “I am free if you are free.” ⊕

FREDERICK J. GAISER is professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. His recent book is Healing in the Bible: Theological Insight for Christian Ministry (Baker Academic, 2010). Gaiser has edited Word & World since 1989.