

Consensus

Volume 13

Issue 1 *Perspectives on Evangelism/Fundamentalism/
Neo-Conservatism*

Article 10

5-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Riegert, Eduard R. (1987) "The dismay of God at the viciousness of evil," *Consensus*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol13/iss1/10>

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The Dismay of God at the Viciousness of Evil

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Text: Isaiah 52:3–6

Do lessons ever go past you? I don't mean "in one ear and out the other", but whoosh!... right past you or over you? I suspect this one did. If you did notice it perhaps you noted that it is from Deutero-Isaiah and chalked it up to that prophet's "it's the end of the Exile" promises—and that's kind of nice, here in Epiphany [Daily Lectionary].

Listen again:

- ³ For thus says the Lord, "You were sold for nothing and you will be redeemed without money."
- ⁴ For thus says the Lord God, "My people went down at the first into Egypt to reside there, then the Assyrian oppressed them without cause."
- ⁵ "Now therefore, what do I have here," declares the Lord, "seeing that my people have been taken away without cause?" Again the Lord declares, "Those who rule over them howl, and my name is continually blasphemed all day long."
- ⁶ "Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, 'Here I am' " (New American Standard Bible).

The text is located in Deutero-Isaiah, but is it in fact Deutero-Isaiah? Let's clear away some brush so we *can* hear it, this day in Epiphany.

It's clearly a collection of bits of prophetic sayings, and not original with Deutero-Isaiah.

For one thing, it is not Exilic. It speaks of going down to Egypt and being hospitably received there as guests: "My people went down... to reside there" (vs. 4). It speaks of being

oppressed thereafter by *Assyria*, whereas Deutero-Isaiah has his hands and his mind and his spirit full of *Babylonia*.

For another thing, it's not Deutero-Isaiah's interpretation of the Exile. That the Lord's people "were sold for nothing" (vs. 3) and were "taken away without cause" (vs. 5) renders their oppression undeserved; yet if Deutero-Isaiah is clear about anything it is that the Exile was caused by unfaithfulness and disobedience: by *sin*, in a word.

For a third thing, it's not Deutero-Isaiah's theology of God. God for him is very much "in charge": he has "measured the waters in the hollow of his hand", "marked off the heavens", "calculated the dust of the earth"; the Lord "sits above the vault of heaven": he "reduces rulers to nothing"; he is "the Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 40). But in these verses God is dismayed: "What do I have here?" he exclaims, as if surprised; he is taken aback by his people being "taken away without cause".

So the collection of sayings is an intrusion here. Except for verse 6. It is likely Deutero-Isaiah put the collection here because of verse 6: "Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, 'Here I am.'" It carries Deutero-Isaiah's own indomitable expectation: the indomitable expectation that the Name, the holy Name, will be manifested *some day!*

Our temptation, of course—we who are celebrating Epiphany!— is to say, "*We have seen that day; we live in that day!* And the Name has been made manifest to us: it is not only 'Here I am' but (oh glory!) 'Emmanuel—*God with us!*'"

True, of course. *But don't say it so glibly!*

My wife and I were at a carol-sing party in Advent. Mrs. B. was there. She's a spritely lady in her 80s, and a wonderfully adventurous world traveller. But she was solemn and subdued this party night.

"I used to be a religious person. Very religious. But now I am not."

She had been to Prague, that lovely city. But that was not what she wanted to talk about. She had, this time, been to see the Nazi death camps. "We sing 'Christ the Savior is born'." she said. "We tell the Christmas story: 'Unto you is

born a Savior'. But who's been saved? What's been saved? It was *Christians* who ran the death camps!" Her anguished eyes wavered. "I used to be a very religious person. The Jews at least didn't talk about having a Savior."

Then she asked me point-blank, "Can you explain that?"

There came an instant chill to my heart, and prickles on the back of my head... There is the horror of it: *Christians* did it! You see, if you go too glibly from Isaiah 52:6, "my people will know my name in that day", to Bethlehem and "Emmanuel, God with us" you can set the stage for Holocaust: the death camps flourished under the banner, "*Gott mit uns*", "God with us". Maybe it's better to *hope* for a Savior than to court the arrogance and superiority of "to you is born a Savior".

But Mrs. B. has her eye on me... is waiting for me to speak to her profound disillusionment...

"Well, first of all [ah, the analyzing academic!] the Holocaust was a profound disillusionment for the Jews, too. For it was a time for God to act, to send Messiah to come to save them. And God didn't. They too find it hard to be religious after the Holocaust. Have you read any of the material by Jewish writers who survived the Holocaust?"

Mrs. B. shakes her head.

What am I trying to tell her? That she isn't the only one to be disillusioned to the point of unfaith. So don't wallow in it. Let it *provoke* you. Maybe your concept of God needs unmasking. Maybe your concept of God is only a British-Canadian view of *Gott mit uns*. Maybe verses 5 and 6 are the expression of some profoundly disillusioned soul who discovered the dark side of *Gott mit uns*; discovered the utterly radical power and presence of *Evil* and so came to a radically different concept of God: *God surprised by the sheer viciousness of Evil, dismayed and taken aback by it*. "What do I see here?" says the Lord. "My people have been taken away... *without cause*." *Yes!* That is the sudden utter viciousness of *Evil*. That is true darkness. That is Holocaust. "Those who rule over them howl, and my name is continually blasphemed all day long." God lamenting! God dismayed! *Yes!* That is Holocaust.

And this also. God works in the *midst* of *Evil*, like yeast in dough: "in that day my people shall know my name." (That

very day of vicious horror?) "... In that day I am the one who is speaking. 'Here I am.'" Was this a text upon which Deutero-Isaiah meditated, and from which he finally drew his radically different picture of God in chapters 52 and 53—God, the Suffering Servant?

Then I gave Mrs. B. the only real words I had.

I told her of the Rev. Frank Chikane of the Apostolic Faith Mission, South Africa. He spoke to us 18 December 1986. He is one of the founders of the United Democratic Front, which is an umbrella organization for various groups which are working for the liberation of South Africa. He is therefore a *traitor* in the eyes of the South African government.

He has been imprisoned five times; he has been on a "hit list". He has been tortured for 50 hours; the interrogators came in shifts. The white man who oversaw those 50 hours of torture is a deacon in the white congregation.

That, he said, is what Christianity has brought us. Christians, he said, are our enemies, who hurt us.

Disillusioned?

He was going back, he said. Likely to be killed. But he was going back.

Curious, isn't it? The one who has most cause to be utterly disillusioned with Christianity—far beyond any disillusionment suffered by Mrs. B.—yet finds the gospel a driving imperative and an indomitable expectation: "In that day...." Yes! That day is and will come.

In the meantime: "I will go back, and I will die." And then he lifted his head. "Jesus did not come to die; but the evil was so great he could not live!"

"Now, therefore, what do I have here, seeing that my people have been taken away without cause?... Therefore my people shall know my name: *the Man of Sorrows. Here I am. Behold the man!*"