

11-25-2017

## Abundance by Grace and by New Social Relations in Isaiah 55

Mercedes L. García Bachmann

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

García Bachmann, Mercedes L. (2017) "Abundance by Grace and by New Social Relations in Isaiah 55," *Consensus*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol38/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

## Abundance by Grace and by New Social Relations in Isaiah 55

Mercedes L. García Bachmann<sup>1</sup>

This year the Lutheran World Federation celebrated its twelfth assembly (Windhoek, May 10-16, 2017), taking the chance for a global commemoration of the Reformation. A team of scholars involved in the LWF study on Lutheran hermeneutics and on its final document were invited to write and present the assembly's Bible studies.<sup>2</sup> This writer chose Isaiah 55 in the context of the LWF's theme "Creation—Not for Sale."<sup>3</sup>

The LWF uses the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 to highlight the paramount significance of the Bible for the Church and for the life of every Christian. The Bible presents the Word of God to our world as the word of life for all human beings, who are in manifold ways involved in guilt and threatened by powers that diminish life and lead to death.<sup>4</sup>

Reaffirming the values of both the biblical witness itself and hermeneutical processes that would identify God's word in it (in my particular case, a Lutheran, Latin-American, feminist hermeneutic), I turn now to Isaiah 55 and invite my readers to come with me to this banquet. Meals play a key role in any culture and they are also source and symbol of socio-economic power struggles. A second reason for selecting this text is the dearth of bibliography on this chapter in general (treated mostly within Isaiah 40-55, not by itself) and on verses 1-3a in particular. Finally, the prophet's call to drink and eat for free makes a wonderful starting point for a reflection on the Reformation's significance in a world where even *sola gratia* is on sale.

<sup>1</sup>Ho! Everyone who thirsts: come to the water/s, come! and whoever has no money: come, buy grain and eat! come, buy wine and milk, without money and for a no-cost. <sup>2</sup>Why do you weigh silver for what is no-bread, and your toil on what does not satisfy? <sup>3</sup>Listen carefully to me, and eat something good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live (vs. 1-3a)<sup>5</sup>

### A short introduction to the chapter

A short introduction to the chapter may help set us on the same path. Isaiah 55 closes the block usually identified as Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40-55). In both extremes

---

<sup>1</sup> Mercedes García Bachmann is the Director of the Institute for Contextual Studies of her Church and Adjunct Faculty at LSTC.

<sup>2</sup> The study process included four consultations on the gospels of John and Matthew, the Psalms, and Paul, and a final statement called "*In the beginning was the Word*" (Jn 1:1): *The Bible in the Life of the Lutheran Communion. A Study Document on Lutheran Hermeneutics* (Geneva: LWF, 2016), [https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2016/dtpw-hermeneutics\\_statement\\_en.pdf](https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2016/dtpw-hermeneutics_statement_en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Mercedes L. García Bachmann, "A Free and Glorious Offer of Plenty for All who Thirst for God's Grace," in *LWF Twelfth Assembly, Windhoek, Namibia, 10-16 May 2017: Worship, Bible Studies, Hymns*, ed. International Worship Planning Committee (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2017), 74-78.

<sup>4</sup> "*In the beginning was the Word*" (Jn 1:1): *The Bible in the Life of the Lutheran Communion*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Translations are mine unless otherwise stated. Verse 1 is textually corrupt, thus making it necessary to "smooth" it in translation.

of Deutero-Isaiah there are imperatives: “Comfort (plural), O comfort my people!” (40:1); “Listen carefully to me! Incline your ear! Come to me!” (55:2). This is just one example: more than ten imperatives are uttered in Isaiah 55:1–3a! There are, likewise, other common threads running throughout these chapters and more broadly throughout the whole book, as recognized by several scholars.<sup>6</sup>

The chapter may be divided into two units (vs 1–5; 6–13), three (vs 1–5, 6–11, 12–13) or even five units (vs 1–3a; 3b–5; 6–9; 10–11; 12–13). Division is based on the change in person (for example, starting from an “I” who calls “come to me” to an unknown group of servants in vs 1–3, to the reference to the cypress and the myrtle as memorials of God in v. 13, all in the third person) as well as on change of theme: invitation to a free meal; a new covenant; a call to repentance; a shift from desert to forest.

Who are addressed by these imperatives, all plural masculine (therefore, all finished with a “u” sound, such as *lĕkû*, *šibrû*, *’iklû*)? Since this is not made explicit, readers can interpret the commands in different ways, depending on how they perceive the chapter’s structure, its multiple voices and pronouns (“you” singular, “you” plural, “I,” “they”), and the connection to other sections of the book of Isaiah. While an isolated reading of the chapter might involve anybody in the invitation, some scholars tie it to 54:17, thus limiting the invitation to YHWH’s servants. Reading chapter 55 in close connection to chapter 54 might seem at first sight restrictive, in the sense of limiting God’s grace to God’s servants (v. 17c). Yet, there is no need for us to restrict God’s offer. For, as Paul Hanson notes,

The only requirement is hunger and thirst. The previous chapter has prepared us to hear this as more than a gratuitous statement. The echo of the Song of Hannah, recognizable in the call to the barren, desolate, and abandoned in 54:1–6, and its reiteration in the Magnificat remind us of the banquet scene where God ‘has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty’ (Luke 1:53). ... It is a reminder that those who disdainfully refuse to come to a banquet open to all, and who turn instead to the more elegant company of the few enjoying special privilege, belong to those who “spend [their] money for that which is not bread, and [their] labor for that which does not satisfy (Isa. 55:2).<sup>7</sup>

Just as there is no explicit indication of the addressees, the identity of the one offering free food is also concealed. Traditionally three interpretations are given, namely: the subject is Lady Wisdom (as in Proverbs 9),<sup>8</sup> a king (as in ancient Near Eastern sources; see also Esther 1, Lk 14:1–24),<sup>9</sup> or the prophet is imitating a street merchant.<sup>10</sup> There is a

<sup>6</sup> One of the first examples is Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, *Isaiah’s Vision and the Family of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); see also Kirsten Nielsen, *There Is Hope for a Tree: The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989); Andrew T. Abernethy, *Eating in Isaiah: Approaching the Role of Food and Drink in Isaiah’s Structure and Message* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1995), 177 (brackets in original). Additionally, the immediately previous words, *nĕ’um yhwĥ*, “YHWH’s oracle” (54:17) close an oracle, thus signaling a new beginning at 55:1.

<sup>8</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Isaiah Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 269, also quoting Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 281.

<sup>9</sup> Richard J. Clifford, “Isaiah 55: Invitation to a Feast,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and Michael O’Connor (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, 1983), 28–30. Joachim Begrich, *Studien zu Deuterocesaja* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938) 59–60 was, according to Clifford, 27, “the first scholar systematically to work through Second Isaiah with the then-new tools of form criticism.”

<sup>10</sup> Childs, 433.

fourth possibility: that the identity of the speaker be “Zion/Jerusalem ... calling the people to come ... It is she, the woman as the representation of the city, who is giving the invitation to the banquet, not Lady Wisdom or any goddess.”<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that many interpretations take the host to be a woman, be she divine, human, or the city.<sup>12</sup> To the close association of women to water and wells in the Bible we may add the notable use of female imagery in Deutero-Isaiah, thus making it very likely that the author would have imagined a hostess in this feast.<sup>13</sup>

### An Offer of Free Drink for the Thirsty, Free Food for the Hungry

To the original audience (and to all the following ones, even though we are not explicitly concentrating on them) diverse images were available as this invitation was heard, depending on their familiarity with wisdom, the sacred, the market – and with thirst itself. For, as they heard it, they probably recalled not only those who, literally and figuratively, had offered them water but also situations of want in their lives.

What would someone give for a glass of water on a hot day? How much would you or I pay for it? Experiences abound of water price rising exorbitantly in catastrophes, under the pretense that the market regulates itself according to demand. In reality, the few who have any control over market prices, such as vendors who happen to have goods in stock, profit from the tied hands of the most needed people. What may seem as individual greed, however, is just a symptom of a larger crime, which is the appropriation of natural resources either for private use or for waste in pursuit of other resources, such as minerals or oil. According to Richard Hughes,

The United Nations (UN) has projected that by 2025 approximately one third of the world’s population will be living in regions of absolute water scarcity, and two thirds may have extreme water stress (UNESCO Water Newsletter No.180 2007). Water scarcity means that the volume of water extracted from rivers, lakes, and aquifers is so great that existing water supplies cannot satisfy human and ecosystem requirements. More precisely, water scarcity is present in situations when water availability falls below 1000 cubic meters per person per year ([Vandana] Shiva [*Water Wars*, Cambridge: South End Press] 2002: 1). Water stress occurs when water consumption surpasses 10% of renewable freshwater sources ([Meena] Palaniappan and [Peter H.] Gleick [“Peak Water,” in *The World’s*

<sup>11</sup> Klaus Balzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40-55* trans. Margareth Kohl, ed. Peter Machinist (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 468, referring to H. C. Spykerboer, “Isaiah 55,1-5: The Climax of Deuteroisaiiah. An Invitation to come to the New Jerusalem,” in *The Book of Isaiah*, ed. J. Vermeulen (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), 357-359.

<sup>12</sup> According to Clifford, 28-29, 33 n. 5 the Ugaritic legend of Aqhat includes a banquet by Goddess Anat in which she offers one of her human guests life in heaven in exchange for his vow. Clifford also relates these texts to Lady Wisdom’s invitation to a banquet in Proverbs 9 (29-30). These examples support his contention that Isaiah 55 is an invitation to a banquet related to a sanctuary, whereby life abundant is offered together with water: “As has been learned from the parallel passages, the life which is offered is life *with* the deity.” (32). Besides Goddess Anat and Lady Wisdom, we have Spykerboer’s suggestion (n. 9) that Jerusalem is the hostess.

<sup>13</sup> Sean McEvenue, “Who was Second Isaiah?” in *Studies in the Book of Isaiah: Festschrift Willem A. M. Beuken*, ed. J. Van Ruiten and M. Vervenne (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 213-222, proposed a female Deutero-Isaiah. Even though his proposal has not received much echo, the abundance of female images is noted by several scholars. See also Sarah J. Dille, *Mixing Metaphors: God as Mother and Father in Deutero-Isaiah* (London: T & T Clark, 2004). In examining the application of the Davidic covenant to the whole people (vs. 3b-5), Hanson, 179 recalls also Deutero-Isaiah’s radical reworking of the images of the servant and the anointed one. Witherington, 272, speaks of “the offer of the same sort of promises to the nation as had previously been offered to David,” rather than such promises being transferred.

*Water 2008 – 2009*, Peter H. Gleick, ed.; Washington, D.C.: Island Press] 2009 [1–6]: 1).<sup>14</sup>

To this already bleak projection one may add several current examples of water pollution, increasing desertification of land, and droughts once thought to be cyclic, which refuse to subside. Deutero-Isaiah's invitation to go for free water is, then, a political program. Not only that: it is a theological program as well (both cannot be easily distinguished):

While the world is shouting at the poor, "Go away" – especially you the masses with no money or collateral, you who are not known or have no connection with those on top of the power structures—the Word of God is calling all who thirst for justice and peace. Here God's grace is at play versus the harsh and merciless capital which chases millions away to the rubbish dumps of this world, while the very few are filling their pockets with the wealth derived from the resources at all. Come and do not go away! This calling overrules the rejection by this world. The 'go away' pronounced by those with capital power against the poor, lead to death; God's call to all of us to come leads to life in all its fullness.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that not two nor three, but five elements are mentioned (and that three of them are beverages) is one of the prophet's ways of showing God's superabundant grace. Thirst and hunger, produced by long droughts in the "land of milk and honey," are well attested in the Hebrew Bible and loomed always large on the horizon. To be able to enjoy water, milk, wine and bread – and for free! – is certainly extraordinary.<sup>16</sup>

By addressing the audience as the [*cāmē'*, thirsty] in 55:1, a sequential reader is invited to recollect how thirst has been a metaphor for a longing for change. By offering [*mayim*, water] to such people, the sequential reader would call to mind images of water turning deserts into paradises and making travel through previously impassible terrain into an all-you-can-drink-and-eat luxury tour. This would certainly foster hope. The audience is now being asked to respond to these images through this invitation.<sup>17</sup>

In Isaiah 55, water comes for free to anybody who is thirsty. Water and also grain, milk, wine, and fat (v. 2). The "Mediterranean triad" that sustained human life is thought to have been composed of grain, olive oil, and wine.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Richard A. Hughes, *Religion, law, and the present water crisis* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Zephania Kameeta, "Bible Study: Isaiah 55:1-2," in *Liberated by God's Grace*, ed. Anne Burghardt (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, no date), 96.

<sup>16</sup> Carol J. Dempsey, O.P., "From Drought to Starvation (Jeremiah 14:1-9): A National Experience, a Global Reality," in *By Bread Alone: The Bible through the Eyes of the Hungry*, ed. Sheila E. McGinn, Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan, and Ahida Calderón Pilarski (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 51-66; Peter Altmann, "Feast and famine: theoretical and comparative perspectives on lack as a backdrop for plenty in the Hebrew Bible," in *Feasting in the archaeology and texts of the Bible and the ancient Near East*, ed. Peter Altmann and Janling Fu (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 149-178; L. Juliana, Claassens, *The God who provides: Biblical images of divine nourishment* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 43-62.

<sup>17</sup> Abernethy, 131.

<sup>18</sup> Water was not the most general drink because of scarcity and difficulty to keep it fresh when travelling or in hot weather. These difficulties did not attain to wine, which is one reason why scholars think its use was widespread in the Syro-Palestinian area. Milk, on the other hand, is not only the first meal for most newborn children, but it could be obtained in nomadic or semi-nomadic situations (provided people were able to keep a few goats, of course) and made into curd. It should be noted, also, that scholars disagree on

The most notable characteristic of Hebrew poetry is repetition by use of – among other resources—parallel terms and associated word-pairs.<sup>19</sup> Verses 1-4 follow closely this form. On verse 1, there are several parallelisms: “thirst” is paralleled to “water,” and “you who have no money” to “buy grain and eat.” On the next verse, “wine” is paralleled to “milk” and, again, “without money” to “without price or cost.” The gratuitous character of this event is reinforced by the next parallelism, between “spending for what is no-bread” and “working for what does not satisfy.” Finally, on verse 3a parallelism is more difficult to perceive because of its complexity. The first idea is that careful listening to YHWH (or the prophet) leads to eating well and delighting in rich foods. This idea is synthesized in the following line, where opening one’s ears to YHWH’s words leads to life (and v. 3b further expands the idea into a new covenant between YHWH and the people).

But, why speak of buying rather than receiving, when it is free? Is it a commercial transaction or is it a gift? Perhaps the intention is to contrast those who have so far not been able to buy because they lacked silver (v. 1) with those who had had the means to buy: “Why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” asks the prophet on verse 2. Notice should be taken of the special vocabulary the poet selects here. The verb *šābar* (denominative from *šeber* “grain”) is not very common. It appears in contexts in which acquiring food is crucial for survival, and mostly in contexts of social critique against those who take advantage of the ones in need (Prov 11:26; Amos 8:5-6).<sup>20</sup> The majority of appearances occurs in the latter part of Joseph’s story, in which Egyptians and foreigners alike have to sell everything to get food from the clever vizier of Egypt who had, during the seven years of plenty, stored all the available grain (the fact that Joseph forgives his brothers and saves them from hunger only confirms my claim).<sup>21</sup>

Thus, to speak of buying food, *šābar*, in contrast to getting free water, wine, milk, grain, and fat is not like saying “save your money, come and eat for free,” but it is saying, “rather than being despoiled in your situation of need, here there is more than necessary to be restored in your physical hunger and in your thirst for dignity!” The poet does not list the objects that could be acquired but are “no-bread” and “unsatisfying” (v. 2): is it food, as we could imagine from the contrast between verses 1 and 2? Is it luxury items, as those the prophet Amos (3:15; 6:4) criticized by referring to “houses of ivory”? Regardless of what it was that the prophet saw the people coveted, what we are told is that they do not fill the throat (the Hebrew uses the same word, *nepeš*, to refer to the throat which, being fundamental for breathing, *nepeš* refers also to a living being, to the

---

whether wine or beer was the poor’s most common drink for biblical Israel. Peter Altmann, “Food and Food Production,” in *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (New York: Oxford University Press, doi: 10.1093/OBO/9780195393361-0022; Cynthia Shafer-Elliott, *Food in Ancient Judah: Domestic Cooking in the Time of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 138-183.

<sup>19</sup> The following are some examples of word-pairs: a very common one is wine-fermented (or strong) drink (*yayin-šēkār*, Num 6:3). Gen 49:10-11 includes: vine-choice vine (*gepen-šōreq*), wine-blood of grapes (*yayin-dam ʾnābīm*), and “eyes darker than wine-teeth whiter than milk” (*yayin-Hālāb*). Wine and the king’s table (*yayin-patbag*) are paired in Dan 1:5. Although the word-pair grain and new wine (*dāgān-tīrōš*) appears in a few texts (Hos 7:14), the combination of the three words, oil (*šemen*), grain (*dāgān*), and new wine (*tīrōš*) is much more common (e.g., Gen 27:28; Isa 36:17).

<sup>20</sup> According to John R. Kohlenberger III and James A. Swanson, *The Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament: with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 8690, apart from the verses just mentioned, the verb appears 14 times in Genesis chapters 41-47 and in Deut 2:6.28 (total: 21 occurrences including two in our chapter); the noun appears 7 times in Genesis 42-47 and once in Amos 8:5 and Neh 10:32.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 159. Brueggemann calls it “the bread of the empire.”

“soul,” to one’s self). Acquisition of goods does not end hunger, for only God’s word can satisfy: YHWH “humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of YHWH” (Deut 8:3).

Very shortly it becomes fully clear that the goal of the invitation is the obtaining of life (v. 3), and this is only possible because of the “covenant of peace” through God’s compassions (54:10). Israel is invited to come and listen. What then brings life is the divine word (55:11), which causes the earth to sprout forth in creative abundance. Again the parallel with Deuteronomy is close: “one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (8:3).<sup>22</sup>

The text does not say “go hungry and live from God’s Word” or “you will be fed in the kingdom to come, meantime suffer thirst.” No, on the contrary, what the prophet envisions is a political program that allows everyone to eat richly, but not at the expense of other people or by exploiting creation. Right hearkening to God’s Word means right behavior toward the neighbor (including the non-human world). Isaiah is not speaking in individual terms, but in terms of society, of culture. What does right behavior mean in concrete terms will be developed in the following verses of Isaiah 55: verses 3b–5 speak of a new Davidic covenant, this time between the people and God; a covenant that will also attract other nations to God. Starting on v. 6, God’s ways and human ways are contrasted (vs. 6–11), yet both are necessary, for rain does not produce bread; it produces mud, which eventually allows for the seed to sprout and produce grain. Bread is a human-made product; as such it is a part of culture. The last two verses include the whole of creation in the celebration of God’s great deeds. This time there is a promise rather than a command: “you shall go out in joy.”

Anne Clifford starts her reflections on ecofeminist theology and the current ecological crisis by referring to Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai. Maathai uses the African three legged stool as model for what is required to ensure an ecologically-sustainable world:

The first leg represents democratic space, where rights both human and environmental are respected. Of particular importance is equity, including the balance of power between women and men. The second leg symbolizes sustainable management of natural resources in a manner that is just and fair, especially for people on the margins of society. The third leg stands for forming “cultures of peace,” characterized by the virtues of compassion, forgiveness and justice. The three legs support the seat, which in her [Wangari Maathai’s] conception represents “the milieu in which development can take place” (Maathai 2009, 58).<sup>23</sup>

Though obvious, it is worth remembering that three legs is the minimum necessary to sit on a stool; likewise, respect for human and environmental rights, sustainable and fair management of resources, and cultivation of respect and compassion are minimally required in order to ensure life on our planet. This is one fine actualization

---

<sup>22</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 434.

<sup>23</sup> Anne M. Clifford, C.S.J., “Trees, ‘Living Symbols of Peace and Hope’: Wangari Maathai and Ecofeminist Theology,” in *Confronting the climate crisis: Catholic theological perspectives*, ed. Jame Schaefer (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2011), 339-340.

from an African context; another, North-American example is offered by David Rhoads and Barbara Rossing. They offer five key mandates to guide the church's transformation into ecologically- and justice-minded forms of mission:

- Learn about the degradation of God's creation
- Embrace a Christian ethic that acknowledges the interrelationship between ecological conditions and issues of human justice
- The Bible presents care for creation as fundamental to our human vocation and mission
- Our mission to all creation leads us to see theology in new ways, because how we think shapes how we act
- Earth-care action is integral to the mission of our Christian communities and our spiritual discipline<sup>24</sup>

Salvation means deliverance from evil, from danger, from thirst, from death, from slavery; salvation requires stability, peace and justice to grow, like the trees. The messenger's call to drink water for free and his or her rejection of the unjust food of oppression may be gospel for us, it might be a call to repentance and conversion, or it might be an invitation to new ways of dealing with each other and with creation.

---

<sup>24</sup> David M. Rhoads and Barbara R. Rossing, "A Beloved Earth Community: Christian Mission in an Ecological Age," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 43:2 [April 2016]: 10-15, accessed: 4/20/2017, <http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/20>, referred to by Jan Boden, April 2017 *E-pistle*, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.