

## **COMMENTARY on Is. 61: 1-2**

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;*

### **Spong, one of Jesus scholars reports about Jew's Babylonian exile:**

- In 587 BC, Babylon invaded Judah. Everything these people valued was gone.
- Jerusalem, God's special city, was a pile of stones.
- The Temple, God's earthly dwelling place, was laid waste.
- The priesthood, their sacred customs, their creedal statements, all were lost.
- The Babylonians executed the King's sons in his sight and then gouged out the king's eyes.
- The Jewish population was totally transported to Babylon.
- None of the Jews would ever see their homeland again, nor would they ever worship in their holy city again.
- The Jewish nation had come to an end (2King 24, 25). Their nation was no more.
- Descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob were once again aliens and homeless wanderers on the face of the earth. There was no hope of return. They were in exile.

### **According to Walte Brueggeman,**

This unit contains the coming reversal of the fortunes of Jerusalem and the coming abundance and prosperity of Jerusalem. It includes the cruciality of a human agent who will undertake and enact the intention of Yahweh; <sup>1</sup> a human agent who is authorized to do Yahweh's deeply transformative work in the community of Yahweh's people. We do not know the identity of the speaker; we may assume it is a poetic figure who exercises immense theological authority, enough authority to transform in decisive ways the circumstance of the community of emerging Judaism. The instigator of the human vocation here undertaken is Yahweh: Yahweh moves, summons, and authorizes what is to follow. Two figures are used for this authorization: (1) Yahweh's spirit, Yahweh's authorizing force that has the capacity to work a radical newness, the same spirit that blew back the power of chaos in Gen. 1:2 and the waters of the Exodus in Ex. 14:21 now blows upon his human agent (see 42:1). (2) Yahweh's anointing dramatically, sacramentally designates the human agent by a public gesture of authorization. <sup>2</sup>

The authorization is followed in verses 1b-4 by three rhetorical uses. First here is a series of infinitive verbs to inventory what this empowered human agent will do: to bring, to bind up, to proclaim, to release, to comfort, to provide, to give (vv. 1b-3). All of these actions are powerful ministries to the weak, the powerless, and the marginalized to restore them to full function in a community of well-being and joy. We may especially notice two features of this series of transformative verbs. <sup>3</sup> First, the lead verb "to bring good news" is the verbal form of "gospel."

This is a dramatic announcement of Yahweh's newly gained power that is a harbinger (전조) of the reorganization of public life according to the will of Yahweh. This is "evangelism" that has concrete, public effect. The one anointed is to "gospel" the world of Judaism. The second observation is that the series of transformation verbs culminates in the double formula "the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance." Scholars in general agree that this is a reference to the practice of the jubilee year

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 212.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 213.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 213.

authorized in Leviticus 25, when all properties lost in economic transactions will be restored and returned in order to permit a stable, functioning community. Thus the series of verbs is taken to be an announcement of the jubilee.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of emerging Judaism, the point may be the restoration of land, security, stability, and well-being to *the community as a whole* of Jews too long in jeopardy, that is, a community-wide restoration. Or if postexilic Isaiah should be drawn toward the economic circumstances of the community reflected in Nehemiah 5, then perhaps we may anticipate a reordering of the *internal economics of the community*, an adjudication (심판, 중재) of the social relationships between haves and have-nots. Either way, the announcement and evocation of jubilee are good news- Yahwistically based - about the rehabilitation of life out of impoverishment, powerlessness, and despair.<sup>5</sup>

These verses are of special interest because they are quoted by Jesus, according to Luke 4:18-19, as the inaugural vision of his ministry. In that Lucan narrative, it is reported that the radicality of the proclamation evoked such hostility among listeners that they sought to kill him (vv. 29-30). There is no doubt that a vision of jubilee - that is, a profound hope for the disadvantaged - is shockingly devastating to those who value and benefit from the status quo. Sharon Ringe, *in Jesus, liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology*, has forcefully suggested that this announcement is a clue and signal for the entire ministry of Jesus, a radical undertaking of the reordering of human community.<sup>6</sup>

Thus our verses seem to be situated between Leviticus 25 (a torah vision of jubilee) and Luke 4:18-19, where the vision is taken up in the ministry of Jesus. Isaiah 61:1-4, however, is not directly an anticipation of Jesus. Rather, it concerns the concrete issue of a community in trouble, and it proposes a transformative response out of Yahweh's resolve. The proclamation is something of a test case for the way in which the Old Testament holds together *theological vision and concrete economic practice.*<sup>7</sup>

The second rhetorical device is a series of three "instead" in verse 3. The terse series of "instead" is a radical transformation of communal attitude and condition, made possible by the proclamation and enactment of jubilee: "garland ... ashes; gladness ... mourning; praise ... faint spirit." The three parallel moves from negating grief and despair to jubilant celebration. In context, the transformation is from powerless indebtedness to the restoration of dignity and viability. In Christian extrapolation, the transformation is given the shape of crucifixion and resurrection whereby "your pain will turn into joy" (John 16:20).<sup>8</sup>

As consequence of such restoration, the emerging community that benefits from the gospel of jubilee will have the capacity and resolve to rebuild, restore, and repair the ruins of Jerusalem. Thus in the end, he gospel powered by the spirit is a restoration of a viable economic community in a reorganized city, the redemption of public life.<sup>9</sup>

### **According to Friesen**

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 214.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 214.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 214.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 214.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 215.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 215.

The clauses name groups burdened by hardship. The only exception to this is the fourth clause, which proclaims *the year of the Lord's favor* (61: 2a).<sup>10</sup>

Central to the proclamation of a Jubilee year in Lev. 25 is the notion of liberty for Israelites who have experienced loss of land and other economic hardship. Is. 61 as well, liberty has a central place in the proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor. But beyond this specific reference to liberty in Lev. 25 and Is. 61, there is an emphasis in both texts on a general amnesty for the impoverished and downtrodden.<sup>11</sup>

Hanson has pointed out that Is. 61:1-3 in particular renews the message of the servant in Is. 42 for its own time and place (223-24). In Is. 42 and 61 the servant is presented as a pattern of Spirit-filled confidence in God, for the individual and the community, living out the call to be God's agent of redemption.<sup>12</sup>

### **According to Hanson,**

The identity of this Servant is inextricably tied up with commitment to God's will, a commitment to be present as an agent of God's mercy to the broken and the oppressed and as one announcing that after years of mourning the time has arrived in which God will restore the conditions of justice and peace that characterize God's reign.<sup>13</sup> ... A spiritually healthy community would be a community dwelling in a secure and productive land, and this involved brick and mortar...By placing God's justice and mercy at the heart of the rebuilding project, the Servant enables the community to reach the highest purpose possible for any human group, "to display [God's] glory (v.3).<sup>14</sup>

Those who had been humiliated by being deprived of temple and home and forced to serve foreign masters were to be served by the very ones who had subjugated them. ...They would "be called priests of the Lord, ... ministers of our God," thereby fulfilling God's promises to Moses on Mount Sinai.<sup>15</sup>

### **According to McAfee Brown**

Is. 61:1-3 indicates a "reversal." "Reversal" is that those who have been conditioned to expect bad news to continue are now promised good news. Things are going to change. Isaiah backs up his claims with examples. "The brokenhearted," instead of being further pummeled by life, will have their wounds bound up; they will be healed. The "captives," instead of being still more tightly constricted, will be liberated. The "prisoners," instead of being denied parole, or having their sentences further extended, will discover that the prison doors are open, and they are free.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ivan D. Friesen. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Isaiah 40-66* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), 386.

<sup>11</sup> Ivan D. Friesen. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Isaiah 40-66* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), 387.

<sup>12</sup> Ivan D. Friesen. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Isaiah 40-66* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), 387.

<sup>13</sup> Paul D. Hanson. *INTERPRETATION: A Biblical Commentary on Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 224.

<sup>14</sup> Paul D. Hanson. *INTERPRETATION: A Biblical Commentary on Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 224.

<sup>15</sup> Paul D. Hanson. *INTERPRETATION: A Biblical Commentary on Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 225.

<sup>16</sup> McAfee Brown, *Reclaiming*, 34-35. McAfee Brown also claims: "Those who experience reversals will become *oaks of righteousness*, planted by God. Oaks are noted for being durable and large and strong, in contrast to weak reeds or tiny trees that can't survive heavy winds or bad weather. For the afflicted and those who mourn, the gift of new beginnings is given without any strings attached. But when God promises to make us oaks of righteousness, a task is imposed. If we truly to be oaks of righteousness, we are to participate directly in creating new conditions for others. *We are to be the instruments through whom God brings about the reversals.* This text doesn't just give us a promise, it gives us a series of marching orders. The agenda that is laid on the oaks of righteousness. 'They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations (Is. 61:4)'. The ruling *imperative* is equally strong. The verbs Isaiah marshals: "build up ... raise up ... repair." Those are verbs that are meant to describe us. We are not to sit back and wait for God

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to do all that. We are to be the ones *through whom* God does all that. To the degree that God has effected reversals in our lives, we must work to effect reversals in other people's lives." McAfee Brown, *Bible*, 37.