

SHABBAT SERMON

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In my introduction to our studies at the beginning of this week I referred to the three sets of texts before us: from Genesis, Isaiah and Jonah. I posed a question about each of them that I thought people might like to consider during their studies. I don't know whether any of the groups took up the questions, but it seemed to be a nice way to round off the week by explaining what I had in mind and offering my own answers. For the sake of creating a nice concentric structure I would like to address them in the reverse order, beginning with Jonah. This also offers a personal link to the first Bible Week, because I gave the public lecture on the Book of Jonah fifty years ago. Luckily, I do not have the text, nor can I remember what I wrote or said, so I am spared that embarrassment.

The question I asked is quite simple. In the opening chapter God says to Jonah: 'Rise up, go to Nineveh the great city and cry out against it that their evil has risen before Me.' But, while Jonah does indeed rise up, it is to flee in the opposite direction across the sea to the other end of the world to escape the mission. We know what follows: God sends a great storm; the ship threatens to sink. When Jonah is discovered to be the cause of the storm, he asks the sailors to throw him overboard. The sailors are reluctant but, in the end, do so. The sea calms down and we are told that 'the men feared the Lord with a great fear, made sacrifices to the Lord and vowed vows.' (1:16)

Meanwhile Jonah is swallowed by the big fish and after three days prays to God. Scholars have questioned the authenticity of his prayer, largely, but not entirely, composed of Psalm or Psalm-like verses. They find it odd that it speaks of him being saved, while he is still in the fish – but, after all, he has been saved from drowning. Also, they expect some evidence of repentance on Jonah's part which is seemingly absent. So, they have tended to ignore it as a part of the original narrative. But from Jonah's point of view his prayer seems to be effective as the fish vomits him out onto dry land. But now comes the question: Why does chapter 3 begin with the sentence that the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time if Jonah already knows what he is supposed to do? I think that the answer becomes clear if we take Jonah's prayer seriously as an integral part of the story. Note his final triumphant, spiritual praise of God. 'As for me, with the voice of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to You, what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!' (Jonah 2:10) At which point the fish vomits him out! What has Jonah just offered to do? Make sacrifices and fulfil vows, exactly like the sailors. For all of them this can only mean one thing: a trip to the Temple in Jerusalem. Jonah wants to do the pious thing, but God does not need Jonah's piety, God needs Jonah to fulfil his mission. So, God has to call him 'a second time'.

My question about Isaiah was obviously much more difficult to address. I pointed to the distinction between chapters 40-48 and 49-55 of Isaiah. In the former God's 'servant' is most obviously the people of Israel in exile. But in the latter chapters there is a change whereby the servant becomes an individual within Israel charged with a new task. It is signalled in the second of the so-

called 'servant songs' 'He (God) said to me: You are my servant, Israel, through whom I will be glorified.' (49:3). The servant's response is to complain about the failure of his task so far: 'But I said: I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing.' Nevertheless, immediately he accepts the challenge of being called by God: 'But surely my right is with the Lord and my recompense is with my God' (49:3-4). There follows the new task that sets the servant clearly apart from the rest of the people and opens the universalistic theme that comes to dominate the rest of these chapters: His task is not only to 'raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the offspring of Israel.' Instead it takes on an extraordinary new dimension: 'I will also make you a light of nations, so that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.' (49:6) So who is this servant?

Before attempting an answer, I would like to note the context of the last, 'so-called' 'suffering servant' passage in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Chapter 52 confirms the fulfilment of the promise given throughout chapters 49-55, the triumphal return of the exiles and of God to Zion and Jerusalem. The chapter even echoes the opening of chapter 40 and the messenger bringing good news (40:9) to Jerusalem. 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger of good tidings, that announces peace, the harbinger of good tidings, that announces salvation, saying to Zion, your God rules.' (52:7) The same theme of rejoicing is found in chapters 54 and 55. So why insert here this strange chapter of the trials, suffering and near-death experience of the servant?

My suggestion is one that has often been proposed, but I would like to anchor it in the text. Just before the transition between chapters 48 and 49 God emphasises once more a common theme – that God has always foretold what is happening through His messengers. Suddenly, with no warning, a new figure introduces himself: 'And now: The Lord God has sent me, with His spirit' (48:16). Perhaps the most obvious candidate for the servant is actually the composer of these very chapters, who announces here his public arrival on the stage. The suffering and frustration that he expresses in the servant songs arise because his message of hope, of restoration, falls on deaf ears, and worse still, he experiences rejection and even threats and punishments from the exile community. So, he interrupts the closing passages that show his final vindication as a true prophet of God, by expressing his personal suffering in all its horror. He was despised and ignored, he was the victim of the 'sinful' behaviour of others. Yet he bore this suffering because God supported him. It is the final *apologia pro sua vita* of the author himself, who tells his own tale in the third person of his suffering and ultimate vindication.

My third question was why did God want to create human beings? Perhaps God is a scientist, fascinated by this experiment and wishing to pursue it to its logical conclusion. Perhaps God is an artist, enchanted by the beauty of what this world offers. But how is God to enjoy and experience it? So, God creates these tiny creatures that are God's surrogates, that can explore the world on God's behalf. So, we become God's eyes and ears. Or, perhaps God is lonely, and the very act of saying 'let us make man' brings with it the realisation that there is no one for God to talk to, to plan with, to love. Perhaps, as Eli Wiesel suggested, God created human beings because God likes stories, and our task in life is to provide interesting stories for God.

We have encountered three such stories this week. For fifty years at this Bible Week we have shared with God the stories contained within the Hebrew Bible and the stories that each of us brings to them and to each other in this encounter. Perhaps it is for just such opportunities that God created human beings.

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