

“A Blessing in the Midst of the Earth:” Traveling the Prophetic Highway in Isaiah

By Sigve Tonstad

Before heading down the prophetic highway in Isaiah, let me come clean on my own background and presuppositions. I do not believe that studying Isaiah needs an excuse, but if an excuse were needed for one who is not an Old Testament scholar, mine might be the notion of Isaiah as “the fifth gospel,” a book whose voice is pervasive in the New Testament and whose influence on Christian theology may be as great as any of the gospels in the New Testament.¹ I say ‘might be’ advisedly because the New Testament appropriation of Isaiah is not what has stirred my interest in his book. Isaiah entices me in his own Old Testament voice – his own voice beckons me – quite apart from his influence on the New Testament.

As to presuppositions, I will state two. First, the notion that most of this book should be read on the assumption that it addresses a specific historical situation contemporary to the author is a position I find unpersuasive.² I do not deny that Isaiah has anchoring points to historical events at the time of its composition. Often, however, the historical referents are elusive. Isaiah’s imaginative vision reaches beyond emerging realities at the time of its author, at times levitating high above the troubled realities of history.³ Second, the question of authorship, dominant as it has been in Isaiah studies, will not be of much concern in the present context because it is the text and not its author that will be our focus. Moreover, the theme of our text features in all the three divisions that many scholars see in Isaiah (19:18-25; 49:6; 56:1-8). Whether this is evidence of the prophet Isaiah’s own hand or of a series of

* This article was published in *Spectrum* 34 (2006), 46-53.

¹ John F. A. Sawyer, *The fifth gospel: Isaiah in the history of Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

² Cf. Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39* (Trans. R. A. Wilson; OTL; London: SCM Press, 1980), 105; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 317.

³ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah. Chapters 1-39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 374.

exceptionally attentive students in a ‘school’ lasting several centuries, another resilient theory relative to this book, or of the ubiquitous redactor, yet another staple of compositional criticism, is a moot point. Were a school of Isaiah to have existed, it is of interest mainly by setting an impossibly high standard for those engaged in the field of education.

I. The Text

Let us begin, then, by reading the text:

On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.

On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them.

The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord *on that day*, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage (Isa 19:18-25).

1. First Impressions

Imagining that most readers need a little time for the message to sink in, let us hear what some scholars have taken away from the text by way of a first impression. André Feuillet calls this passage “the summit of religion.”⁴ J. Wilson, working on how to turn this text into sermon material, is afraid that alien elements in the text will lead people to miss its

⁴ André Feuillet, “Un Sommet Religieux de l’Ancien Testament. L’oracle d’Isaïe, XIX (vv. 16-25) sur la conversion de l’Égypte,” *RSR* 39 (1951), 65-87.

exceptional message. “Will you believe me when I tell you that no more astounding words than these have ever been spoken or written?” he asks.⁵ W. Vogels says that while commentators differ widely with respect many things in the text, they agree on one point: the text offers a perspective of reconciliation and inclusion that is unequalled in the Old Testament.⁶

The impression of these scholars and initiates is likely to be confirmed by our own: The text does indeed seem to deconstruct fixtures of alienation and enmity. It rises above divisions long deemed to be irreconcilable. It offers a hitherto unimaginable prospect: the arch-enemy and arch-oppressor uniting with wayward Israel in worship of the one God, united, indeed, precisely on the point where division has been most insurmountable.

2. Close-up of the text

When we take a closer look at the text, the details then emerging become even more intriguing. Let us consider point by point some of the most distinctive features.

i.. “On that day”

Five times in this text we find the phrase “in that day.” This phrase, as well as many specifics in the text, is quite damning to interpretations that attempt to anchor the content to emerging political realities at some point after the Exile. The repeated use of this phrase, heralding ever more surprising reconfigurations, makes it plain that “the prophet sees these events as occurring in the end times, or at least at the point where God takes decisive action in world events.”⁷ Not only is the perspective eschatological. It is also drawing up a vision so contrary to convention and expectation that it presupposes a dramatic, supernatural

⁵ J. Wilson, “In That Day. From Text to Sermon on Isaiah 19,23-25,” *Interpretation* 21 (1967), 66.

⁶ W. Vogels, “L’Égypte mon peuple – L’Universalisme d’Is 19,16-25,” *Biblica* 57 (1976), 494.

⁷ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 374.

intervention. In this sense “on that day” is “the Day of God;”⁸ the day when God’s purpose is revealed and made a reality.

ii. Strange things in the land of Egypt

Strange things are said to happen in Egypt “on that day:” “five cities in the land of Egypt ... speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts” (19:18); “there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt” (19:19); “the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians” (19:21); the Egyptians “will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them” (19:22).

Surely this is a scenario that stretches our mental capacity to the limit, entirely unexpected and without precedent. Historically, Egypt is the oppressor of Israel. Egypt is the prototype enemy, the epitome of oppression and arrogance. In Jewish self-understanding, existence is predicated on the decisive deliverance from Egypt. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” God says at the founding occasion at Sinai (Ex 20:2). Again and again in the Old Testament mention of the land of Egypt comes with the qualification of Egypt as “the house of slavery” (Ex 13:3, 14; 20:2; Deut 5:6; 6:12; 7:8; 8:14; 13:5, 10; Josh 24:17; Judg 6:8; Jer 34:13; Micah 6:4). Egypt is a stable reference point as Israel’s polar opposite, the perennial enemy of God and the good. This view of Egypt does not only relate to the past. In the Book of Isaiah itself Egypt is a present menace and nowhere more so than in the verses immediately preceding the text we are considering here (Isa 19:1-15). Indeed, hostility to Egypt is said to be such a characteristic feature of Isaiah that the great Isaiah scholar Hans Wildberger takes the dramatic turn of heart toward Egypt that is found in this text as evidence that Isaiah cannot have been the author.⁹

⁸ Wilson, “In That Day,” 69.

⁹ Hans Wildberger, *Jesaja 13-27* (BKAT 10/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 730-731.

And yet, from the very first intimation, cracks appear in notions forged by injury and fortified by memory: “there will be five cities in Egypt that speak the language of Canaan” (19:18). These five cities are not five Israeli settlements, *diaspora* Jews, as many commentators would have us believe, reflecting their presuppositions as to the time of its composition.¹⁰ For the five cities to speak “the language of Canaan” would not be much of a feat if their inhabitants are Jewish in the first place. If, however, the cities are genuine Egyptian cities and the people speaking the language of Canaan are Egyptians, something great is stirring in the land.¹¹ Coming together on the level of language, speaking the same language, as it were, signals a giant leap forward in the direction of reconciliation and mutual understanding. Add to this that the language spoken is the cultic language of Israel, and the sense of a new bond is further enhanced. Calvin takes this to prove that “by such a language must be meant agreement in religion.”¹² Still more amazing, if J. Alec Motyer is correct, the expression ‘the lip of Canaan’ “reflects the beginning of a return to the state where ‘the whole earth was one lip’” (Gen 11:1).¹³

Sensing a paradigm shift from the beginning, it does not matter that there is no agreement as to whether the number five is a small number, a significant number or a symbolic number. Any number or even the smallest number means that the impasse is broken and that something unprecedented is happening. Weighing the options more carefully, it is likely that the prophet is beginning to tell us that the leading city is Egypt is part of the five because,¹⁴ in the very next verse, he proceeds to say that “there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt” (19:19). If five is a small number, a mere

¹⁰ Cf. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, 105; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 317.

¹¹ Vogels, “L’Egypte mon peuple,” 500; Sawyer, “Blessed be My People Egypt,” 59; Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 376-378.

¹² John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (trans. William Pringle; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1850; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 69.

¹³ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 168.

¹⁴ The textual *Vorlage* is divided as to whether the named city is *ir ha-heres*, ‘city of destruction,’ or *ir ha-cheres*, ‘city of the sun.’ 1QIs has *ha-cheres*, ‘city of the sun,’ and this is one example where the Qumran discoveries show their influence on modern translations of the Bible.

five “is able to accomplish great things,”¹⁵ and if it is symbolic, it serves to convey “the radical nature of the turn.”¹⁶

iii. Egypt and the metaphor of Israel’s Exodus experience

The text becomes stranger still when we tune our ears to hear the echoes of textual antecedents in Isaiah’s vision. Lo and behold, do we not hear Israel’s exodus experience recapitulated?¹⁷ Only this time Egypt, the erstwhile oppressor, is cast in the role of the oppressed. Echoes of Exodus ring insistently. When the Egyptians “cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour, and will defend and them” (19:20c; cf. Ex 6:6; 3:8). A new Moses arrives on the scene, but this time he is commissioned to lead the Egyptians to freedom. “Just as Israel was saved through a mediator, Moses,” says Vogels, “so he will likewise send to Egypt a liberator, a kind of new Moses.”¹⁸ “What is remarkable is that now the God of Israel will respond to Egypt’s cry of deliverance and will send a savior to rescue as he once had done for the oppressed Israelite slaves,” writes Brevard Childs.¹⁹

The Egyptians have also been oppressed. They also need deliverance. To Egypt comes the promise that “the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord on that day” (Isa 19:21a) just as it was said to Israel that “you shall know the Lord” (Ex 6:7) at the time of the original exodus. As a result, the Egyptians “will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering” (Isa 19:21b), recalling that Israel’s exodus, too, centered on the right to worship and offer sacrifices (Ex 3:18). Thus, the reconfiguration that sets up a new role for Egypt does so according to the pattern of the elect people of God. Isaiah predicts an exodus experience for the Egyptians, too.²⁰

¹⁵ Vogels, “L’Égypte mon peuple,” 501.

¹⁶ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 377.

¹⁷ Feuillet, “Un Sommet Religieux de l’Ancien Testament,” 65-87.

¹⁸ Vogels, “L’Égypte mon peuple,” 506.

¹⁹ Brevard Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 144.

²⁰ Vogels, “L’Égypte mon peuple,” 506.

And the vision has not yet reached its zenith. “On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians” (19:23). Assyria has not been mentioned until now, but its mention at this point only adds quantity to what is already qualitatively in place. Assyria, too, the other great enemy of Israel in the Old Testament, is included in the reconfiguration. Perhaps the most frightening and cruel of all the conquerors ravaging the Near East,²¹ Assyria belongs as a full partner in the new worshiping fellowship. The highway that is in view drives home the point because a highway “is a favorite metaphor in the book for the removal of alienation and separation (Isa 11:16; 33:8; 35:8; 40:3; 49:11; 62:10).”²²

iv. Reconfiguring the elect

Language that used to be exclusive for Israel, the chosen people, is now extended to Israel’s sworn enemies. “On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage (Isa 19:24, 25). God’s people, reconfigured and reunited along the prophetic highway, “a blessing in the midst of the earth” (19:24)! This is the ultimate goal of the vision. The other nations do not become Israel; but they have the same status in a trinity of equals. Unity is not achieved at the expense of diversity as though diversity in itself precludes a meeting of minds and hearts. Importantly, the other nations “are not to be subjects of Israel, and in virtue of so being, objects of Yahweh’s regard,” writes George Buchanan Gray, “they are to be as directly related to Yahweh as Israel itself.”²³ This, however, is no loss to Israel because recognition of Israel was never the main point. Israel’s calling was to become a blessing in the earth, a

²¹ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 320.

²² John Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 380.

²³ George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah*, I-XXVII (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), 341.

conduit of God's redemptive intervention (Gen 12:2). This commission has now been fulfilled in a spectacular manner even though Israel must acknowledge that Egypt and Assyria, the former enemies, are partners in her vocation. If this seems unsettling to one accustomed to occupy the limelight alone, there is comfort in the thought that God is not eclipsed. "For although from this time forward there is to be no essential differences between the nations in their relation to God, it is still the God of Israel who obtains this universal recognition..."²⁴

3. Obstacles

This message is so contrary to expectations that it was and is bound to run into obstacles. Indeed, on a par with the miracle that these ideas were ever conceived is the wonder that they have been preserved for posterity. If Augustine had prevailed in his discussion with Jerome as to which version of the Old Testament should be the Bible of the church, Augustine defending the Greek version, Jerome the Hebrew text, the most amazing part of the text might have been lost in our Bible. The translators of the Septuagint could not swallow the notion that the enemies of Israel were to be included in God's mercy in this way and on a level indistinguishable from the elect people of God. And so we read in the LXX quite a different text and quite a different message. There, God's solicitous care is for the exclusive benefit of Israel, reducing Egypt and Assyria to mere geographic locations housing a smattering of *diaspora* Jews. That is, all the three parts of the threesome are ethnic Israelites. "In that day shall Israel be a third among the Assyrians and among the Egyptians, blessed in the land which the Lord of hosts (hath) blessed, saying Blessed is my people that is in Egypt, and among the Assyrians, and the land of mine inheritance, Israel" (19:24, 25, LXX). *With* Egypt and *with* Assyria in the Hebrew text and thus joined together in worship of the one

²⁴ Franz Delitzsch, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2 vols. (trans. James Martin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), I:368.

God have become *among* the Assyrians and *among* the Egyptians in the LXX, and the blessing rests only on the Israelites that are *in* Egypt and *among* the Assyrians.²⁵ If ever a translation proved that a translation is also an interpretation, this text could be Exhibit A. The LXX text certainly deserves to be seen as a “tendentious revision,”²⁶ more likely intentional than accidental and probably justified on the assumption that Isaiah cannot have meant what he actually says.

II. Application of the Text

What shall we do with this text today? How shall we read it? Does it have any meaning in our time and in our context? Does Isaiah’s prophetic highway offer hope that divisions may be overcome despite diversity, even despite hostility, or does it set up parameters that make us, too, uneasy, looking for a way to restore the blueprint to its traditional shape – as did the translators of the Septuagint?

Read as predictive prophecy expecting a literal fulfillment, there never was a time when this vision materialized. The enmity between these nations continued unabated until their end. In fact, so little has changed that the enmity continues until today virtually in literal terms. There is no highway from Cairo to Mosul that courses through Jerusalem, only a huge concrete wall arising in the immediate vicinity of the Holy City as a telling metaphor for entrenched alienation, insecurity and fear. If the political landscape reveals a world split apart, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn described it in his speech to graduating Harvard students in 1978, it is no less divided now even though the fault lines in the geopolitical crust shifted after the fall of Communism. Moreover, if ethnic and political divisions remain, these cracks are dwarfed by the religious fault lines. More than any other factor religion seems to be the

²⁵ See Arie van der Kooij, “‘The Servant of the Lord’: A Particular Group of Jews in Egypt According to the Old Greek of Isaiah,” in *Studies in the Book of Isaiah. Festschrift Willem A. M. Beuken*, eds. J. van Ruiten and M. Vervenne (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 390-396.

²⁶ Wilson, “In That Day,” 83.

generative force of conflict in the world. Religion stands out as the most fissile material of our time, ready to blow up in our faces at a moment's notice, the element about which there will be no compromise and no common ground. This reality, too, flies in the face of our text because it envisions longstanding enemies united precisely in worship, in their perception of, in their devotion to, and in their appreciation for, the one God. "Together they form a *single* new and permanent people of God," says Otto Kaiser of the three peoples in Isaiah's vision.²⁷ It is thus constituted, united on the level of religious belief and practice that this trinity is to be a blessing in the midst of the earth. Whatever we hear the text saying or make it say, it envisions religion as a blessing to humanity; it does seem to know of a brand of religion that has the capacity to bring reconciliation in the place of hatred and conflict.

Absent a literal fulfillment of this prophecy in the past and absent the prospect of a political fulfillment in the present, we should nevertheless hesitate before we dismiss the vision as pure Utopia. What we have before us should not read it as a political prophecy or even a religious prophecy but as an inspired spiritual perception, a joining together of what has been wrongfully put asunder. I will make a few concrete suggestions as to ways of appropriating the text in our time.

i. The need for a new paradigm

First, the text proposes a new paradigm. The entity long seen as an enemy and an oppressor also belongs to the elect. According to the view from the prophetic highway, the enemy has also been oppressed and is in need of deliverance. It is not off target to claim that Isaiah's vision theologically anticipates Jesus on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).²⁸ For this option to open up it must first be imagined, paradigmatically; it must be envisioned as a real option, and then the privilege

²⁷ Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, 111.

²⁸ Sawyer, "Blessed be My People Egypt," 68.

must be extended without reserve to those appearing to belong to the opposite side. The stereotype of otherness and enmity must be surrendered when, in God's view of things, there is an exodus planned for the enemy, too, and their exodus is configured along the same lines as for those seeing themselves as more naturally entitled to the privilege. Moving from a new perception of God's intention, the reader is called to see the other side in a new light. Importantly, the new conception demands a new rhetoric. New terms must be adopted and old terminology abandoned if what used to be seen as the evil empire and the axis of evil is actually the elect of God. What is seen as possible from God's point of view, then, must also in some way or other become our intention.

The question may be asked whether human participation is expected for this vision to become a reality. Here the answer depends on how the prophetic ministry is perceived. If we see the prophet's role mostly as a person who predicts and informs concerning matters of the future, human participation need not concern us. If, on the other hand, the prophet is a person who seeks to influence and persuade, sharing a point of view in order to see it adopted by others, then the aim of his ministry is precisely to enlist human participation. To those who have experienced the exodus comes the call to make the exodus experience available to others equally needy.

It is not well known that this text already has introduced a partial paradigm shift in Seventh-day Adventist understanding of mission, especially in the area of Adventist-Muslim relations. The late Robert Darnell, probably the foremost Adventist scholar in Islamic Studies to date, found in this text the theological rationale for a new approach to Muslims. Darnell spent many years as a missionary in the Middle East while also completing a doctoral degree in Islamic Studies. By first hand acquaintance with Muslims he sensed that the traditional paradigm of confrontation was failing, and by acquainting himself with neglected strains of Islam he concluded that the traditional view was untenable. In short,

Darnell advocated a contextualized approach to Muslims, seeing Muslims come to a new understanding of God from within their own context. In doing so, he did not see himself representing a fixed point around which other entities were moving. Rather, his point was moving, too, particularly in the sense that he did see his witness located within an impregnable Fortress Christianity. The witness advocated by Darnell and his small circle of associates in the Middle East was the witness of the itinerant believer, a pilgrim living in tents, joined in dialogue with other believers actual and potential across the lines that divide, whether this divide be ethnic, political or religious.

An attempt to implement is taking place against great odds under the leadership of Darnell's protégé, Jerald Whitehouse. My point in the present context is not to speak for or against the validity of Darnell's inference and application of this text. It is merely to observe that the text in Isaiah represents a dramatic realignment, a new paradigm. A contextualized approach to Islam is a paradigm shift of a similar magnitude, whether or not our text provides the warrant. I shall not hide the fact, however, that the text leaped into my view of the world as a shocking discovery when, many years ago, I heard Dr. Darnell in person invoke it in defence of his project, facing profound misgivings in the Christian community within which he served.

Redirecting attention to another group traditionally seen as an adversary in Seventh-day Adventist tradition, what shall we make of Ellen G. White's counsel, "We should not go out of our way to make hard thrusts at the Catholics"?²⁹ Did she, too, on a lesser scale than Isaiah, see the need for a new perception of things? While Isaiah saw the Egyptians and the Assyrians actually coming together in worship of the one God, it is possible that his vision contributes to creating conditions for the vision to become a reality. Again, turning to Ellen G. White's revised paradigm, "We may have less to say in some lines, in regard to the

²⁹ Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1946), 63.

Roman power and the papacy, but we should call attention to what the prophets and apostles have written under the Spirit of God.”³⁰

And yes, as a church we have called attention to what the prophets have said, but has Isaiah been part of the prophetic repertoire? Have we heard and presented this particular prophecy and pondered its implications?

ii. The need for a new theology

As a second point in terms of application, the text proposes a new theology. If anyone seeks to scale back the task, the inclination should be resisted. That is to say, what Isaiah envisions is theologically driven. It is fully and entirely a scenario that represents God’s character and God’s point of view, inviting, in turn, the believer to take another look at God’s character. “In that day,” the text repeats again and again, and “that day” is God’s day, revealing what God intends and what God represents no matter how incurable our divisions or how dismally entrenched our alienation. The text does not describe what is but what God wants; the original and ultimate and undeviating purpose of God’s mind and heart. And the prophetic highway does not end in Isaiah 19 as a project boldly conceived but quickly abandoned. The highway continues throughout the book, as in the stunning vision of inclusion in Isaiah 56, “Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered” (Isa 56:8). Here, too, the action that is described is merely an extension of God’s character. Whether in joining Israel with her enemies Egypt and Assyria as “a blessing in the midst of the earth” (19:24) or in the gathering of the outcasts into “a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7) we see God as a persistent gatherer, reaching out to all God’s alienated sons and daughters. In this sense, as

³⁰ White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 65.

Walter Brueggemann observes with respect to the latter text, gathering “is Yahweh’s most defining verb, Yahweh’s most characteristic activity.”³¹

For religion to become the remedy by which to overcome hatred and division there is need of a profound and pervasive overhaul of theology. For contemporary evidence proving this need, there will not be want of examples. One will suffice, the incident on Orthodox Easter, 1993, when Metropolitan Nikolaj, the highest-ranking Serb Orthodox Church official in Bosnia spoke glowingly of the leadership of Radovan Karadzic and general Ratko Mladic in their presence, with the evident aim of bestowing on them the endorsement of the Church. These leaders are now prosecuted for the crime of genocide, but at that time the highest official of their Church hailed them as worthy examples of what it means to follow “the hard road of Christ.”³² Needless to say, such a view of the road of Christ, expressed by a leading clergyman in our time, lies as far from the prophetic highway in Isaiah as it is possible to come.

iii. The need for a vision of healing

Finally, as a third aspect awaiting appropriation and application, there is in Isaiah’s vision an idea that is rarely noticed or at least an idea that is not given as much emphasis as it deserves. Here, as at numerous decisive junctures in the book, Isaiah resorts to the language of sickness and healing in order to describe what is wrong and what it will take to make it right. The Egyptians “will return to the Lord,” he says, “and he will listen to their supplications and heal them” (19:22; cf. 6:10; 30:26; 53:5; 57:18, 19). This language is not the traditional and favored terminology of orthodox theology. To state it more categorically, this is not the legal language of sin and punishment that dominates theological discourse; it is the medical language of sickness and healing. Isaiah often views the human predicament in

³¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 165.

³² Michael A. Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed. Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 81-82.

medical terms, as here in his view of Egypt. Taking this down into everyday language, there is for us, too, a difference between the person who is sick and the person who is bad. We are likely to relate differently to them, looking at the sick person with compassion and at the bad person with fear, if not with contempt. The bad person goes to jail to be punished while the sick person goes to the hospital to be healed. Intriguingly, Isaiah casts the Egyptians in the ailing category, assuring us that there is a God who will heal them.

Pondering what is to be “on that day,” we find in the text a reconfigured conception of the world, a new theology, and a vision of healing. These are preliminary observations. To the extent that we, too, long to be part of God’s diverse blessing in the midst of the earth, it is to our benefit to pay attention to this exceptional prophet. Traveling the prophetic highway on this occasion has not taken us to its destination, but it is my hope that it will not leave us unmoved.