

## Palm Sunday C Reading I

[Is 50:4-7](#)

The Lord GOD has given me  
a well-trained tongue,  
that I might know how to speak to the weary  
a word that will rouse them.  
Morning after morning  
he opens my ear that I may hear;  
and I have not rebelled,  
have not turned back.  
I gave my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who plucked my beard;  
my face I did not shield  
from buffets and spitting.

The Lord GOD is my help,  
therefore I am not disgraced;  
I have set my face like flint,  
knowing that I shall not be put to shame.

Jerome Biblical Commentary

(b) ISRAEL IN DARKNESS (50:1-11). While the earlier chapters frequently spoke of suffering, the words moved in a strong spirit of hope that very soon prison doors would open and darkness would become light (40:2; 42:7). Dt-Is now speaks with a spirit of resignation, even with a tone of reproach. In ch. 50, there occurs the third song of the Suffering Servant, and, in comparison with the first two, the darkness is heavier, the persecution more violent. Most scholars limit the poem to vv. 4-9. Because of the compact unity of this chapter, we must admit that the song has been carefully knit into the fabric of the whole chapter. The first part of the chapter follows the style of two questions and a statement (1b, 1d, 1f; 2c, 2e); the same device continues within the song (8b, 8d, 8f). **1-3.** The exile certainly revealed a separation between Yahweh and his spouse, Israel. God addresses himself to both his spouse and the Israelites, who consider Israel or Zion their mother. According to Dt 24:1-4, a divorced woman who has remarried can never be reconciled with her former husband. Because God is anxious to bring back Israel as his beloved spouse, he must never have divorced her (54:6-8; 61:4-5). Dt-Is again manifests a dependence upon earlier prophets; Jer 3:8 tells of God's rejecting the northern Israelites, and Ez 16 relates God's decision to expose Judah to shameful treatment. Dt-Is, however, mildly tempers their words.**2.** God, by his Word, was always coming to assist Israel. From the thought of redemption and the struggle against sin, the Prophet turns to God's might in drying up the sea and destroying its monstrous symbols of sin (Pss 89:10-11; 104:7; Is 51:9-10). We also hear echoes of the plague stories of Ex (Ex 7:18-21).**3.** These lines either reveal the shadow of sin and suffering or introduce a great theophany (Ex 19:16-19; 2 Sm 22:9; Na 1:3-6).

**38** **4-6.** The third Servant Song opens with the statement that God's word is the source of salvation. **4.** The Servant must first be a disciple, prayerfully receiving God's word, before he can presume to teach others. Cazelles emends the difficult text: "My Lord Yahweh has given me

a disciple's tongue, the trial of stammering. It is a tired man whom a divine Word awakens in the morning. He awakens my ear in the morning to hear as disciples do..." (H. Cazelles, *RSR* 43 [1955] 53-54). Like the prophets before him, the Servant, too, is ignored and even maltreated (Am 7:10-17; Mi 2:6-10; Jer 20:7-18). If the Servant is the collectivity of Israel, then the suffering people are deaf to the saving Word of God that is being spoken (or fulfilled) through their suffering. Within the Israelite community, however, there are saintly men like Dt-Is who obediently listen to God's Word and yearn to speak it to others.**6**. It is not easy to determine whether the Prophet himself was persecuted. His willingness to open the messianic kingdom to Gentiles may have been thoroughly unacceptable to the Israelite community. The first repatriates in Palestine rejected any help from foreign groups, like the Samaritan in rebuilding the Temple (Ezr 4:1-5; Mal 1:2-5), and they were not disposed to countenance a missionary apostolate to Gentiles (cf. Jon). At times Mt 5 depends upon these lines (cf. D. M. Stanley, *CBQ* 16 [1954] 398-99).**7-9**. The Prophet reverts to courtroom terminology (ch. 41); this style enables him to present a direct confrontation of good and evil, God and Israel; he can employ the powerful moods of question, answer, charge, and declaration. **7**. *I am not disgraced*: This word is from the same root as "buffet" in the preceding verse and provides strong contrast. *face like flint*: The phrase is frequent in prophetic preaching (Jer 1:8, 18; Ez 3:8-9; Lk 9-51).**9**. The second half of v.9 meshes with v. 3; this fact, according to Cazelles, helps us to piece together the original form of ch. 50 before the Servant Song was inserted into it (Cazelles, *op. cit.*, 16-17). It is also a fitting conclusion to the song. Because clothing is frequently a substitute or metaphor for the person (Jb 13:28; Mk 5:28), the Servant's enemies will disappear like moth-eaten cloth.**10-11**. All faithful Israelites must walk in darkness—they have no other choice—and like the Servant, they must still believe.**11**. If they rely on the light of their own ingenuity, they will collapse on a painful bed of their own making.

#### Haydock's Catholic Commentary

**Ver. 1. Away.** Such a one could not be received again, if she had taken another husband, Deuteronomy xxiv. 3. Some explain this of the captives. But God restored them to favour. It seems rather to relate to the reprobation (Calmet) of the synagogue, which will never again become the true Church, (Haydock) though many of Israel will be converted, Romans xi. 25. --- *Sold you*, as a father might do, Exodus xxi. 1., and Matthew xviii. 15. St. Ambrose (Tob.[Tobias?] viii.) inveighs against such cruel parents, as the Christian religion had not then entirely repressed this inhumanity. (Calmet) --- God rejected the synagogue, not out of hard-heartedness or want, but because of her sins. (Worthington)

**Ver. 2. Hear.** My spouse had gone after other lovers. The people refused to hear the prophets; and the priests were become as corrupt as the rest, when the city was taken

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*RSR Recherches de science religieuse*

*CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly*

by the Chaldeans and by the Romans. (Calmet) --- *Sea. Babylon*, chap. xxi. (Haydock) -  
-- I could work the same miracles, as I did when Israel came out of Egypt.

**Ver. 4.** *Weary.* Isaias speaks in the name of Christ, whose words carried conviction and comfort along with them, John vi. 69., and vii. 46. (Calmet) --- *Wakeneth.* Literally, "lifteth up." *Cynthus aurem*---*Vellit.* (Ec. vi.) --- *Hear,* or obey. (Haydock) --- Christ preached more powerfully than Isaias, and continues to do so by his pastors. (St. Jerome) (Worthington)

**Ver. 6.** *Spit.* The greatest indignity, Job xxx. 10., and Deuteronomy xxv. 9. Yet this was the treatment of our Saviour, Luke xviii. 31., and Matthew xxvi. 67. (Calmet) --- "The great Grotius, (I wish he were great in explaining the prophets)" applies this to Jeremias. (Houbigant)

**Ver. 7.** *Rock.* Christ heard the accusations of his enemies unmoved, as he had not been afraid to blame the conduct of the Pharisees.

**Ver. 10.** *Light.* The faithful are exhorted to take courage, while the Romans will destroy the rebellious Jews, (ver. 11.; Calmet) and the wicked shall dwell in hell *fire.* (Menochius)

#### Daily Study Bible Series (non-Catholic)

In chapter 50 the order of the dialogue is reversed: *first* comes the salvation oracle introduced by "Thus says the Lord" (vv. 1–3), and *second* the prophet's response on behalf of his suffering people (vv. 4–11). This rather personal or autobiographical poem is the third of the so-called "Servant Songs", discussed in connection with 42:1–4 (see further at 52:13).

The oracle is addressed this time to Zion's children, rather than Zion herself as in the previous chapter, and introduces two more images. *First*, God is Zion's husband, but he had never divorced Zion: no irrevocable "bill of divorce" had been drawn up (Deut. 24:1–4; Mark 10:2–4); separation was only temporary. *Second*, God had never sold them into slavery, like some desperate debtor. The final step in a man's downfall was when he had to sell his children to pay off a debt (2 Kings 4:1; Neh. 5:1–5). But God has no debts, no need to borrow, no creditors. So neither of these two irrevocable steps towards breaking the relationship between God and his people had been taken. Their sufferings were temporary, and, what is more, a deliberate part of God's plan to punish them, to discipline them for their "iniquities" and their "transgressions" (v. 1). They were proof that he cared for them in the same way as a father who must sometimes discipline his son (Deut. 8:5).

Verse 2 rebukes the disbelievers for their lack of faith: when he "comes with might" (eg 40:9–10), can they not recognize him? When he calls to them (eg 40:3–5), can they

not respond? Then comes another brilliant progression of images, piled one on top of the other, from general language about God's saving power ("Is my hand shortened?" 50:2) to gratuitous details from the Exodus story, such as the dead fish on the dry land where the Red Sea had been parted (Exod. 14:22–29; 7:21), and (v. 3) the blackened sky that finally forced the Pharaoh to let God's people go (Exod. 10:21; 19:16; 20:21). "Redeem" (v. 2) is the word translated "ransom" in 43:3. We must remember also that in ancient myth, "sea" and "rivers" were personified as monsters whose spectacular defeat by *Yahweh* was celebrated in the Psalms (eg 89:9–10; 93) and in some Isaianic passages (eg 27:1; 44:27; 51:9–10).

The poem that follows is written in the form of a psalm of trust, moving from lamentation to confidence, like Psalm 11, Jeremiah 11:18–20 and 17:7–13. It is placed here as a comment on the preceding passage (49:14–50:3), where Zion's doubts and fears were answered with a word from God. The prophet now tells us that he has been called to do this for his people: "sustain with a word him that is weary" (v. 4). It has not been an easy role to play: he has suffered pain and indignity at the hand of incredulous and unreceptive listeners (v. 6). But he has not shrunk from his duty (v. 5), confident in the truth of his message and the power of God to help (vv. 7–9). The theme is a familiar one going back to Isaiah's vision in chapter 6, and paralleled in the stories of Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, and the prophets in general (see my comments on 49:1–6 and 52:13–53:12). The language may have been influenced by a Babylonian ceremony in which the king was ritually beaten and humiliated, his beard pulled and his garments torn, before being triumphantly exalted (Zech. 3:1–5 may be another Biblical allusion to this). But the context rules out any royal connection here: the poem is about a prophet's lonely struggle to survive and preserve his integrity in a hostile world.

It also contains a rare glimpse into prophetic consciousness: the prophet Isaiah is "taught" by God (v. 4), awakened (inspired?) and addressed by him as his disciple, "morning by morning", like Ezekiel (Ezek. 12:8). God has "opened [his] ear", that is to say, given him an extra sensitivity to what only God's servants, like Isaiah and Paul (2 Cor. 12:4), can hear: "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter."

The protestation of innocence in verses 5–6 is a conventional part of this type of poem, as can be seen from other examples like Jeremiah 11:19 and 20:7–10.

Verses 7–9 draw on law-court jargon to express the prophet's confidence that God is on his side. Terms like "vindicate", "contend", "adversary" and "declare...guilty" recall trial scenes from earlier chapters (eg 41:21–24; 43:8–13), but here it is the lonely prophet who is the accused, and God his advocate. Two similes beautifully express the contrast between the falsely accused and his adversaries: he is as unbreakable as flint (50:7), they are as insecure as pieces of old clothing infested with moths (v. 9).

A similar contrast is drawn in verses 10–11 between those who listen to the voice of the prophet and those who rage against it. The former are characterized by faith and trust even in dark and troubled times, described in true Isaianic terms (eg 9:2; 30:15); the latter, by rejecting the prophet and plotting his destruction, will only destroy

themselves, like the oppressors in 49:26. Wilful disobedience and arrogance are self-destructive too. In the words of another psalm of trust (Ps. 57:6):

They set a net for my steps;

my soul was bowed down.

They dug a pit in my way,

but they have fallen into it themselves.

The chapter ends with one of the Old Testament texts cited in Christian representations of Hell; 66:24 is another, as is Ecclesiasticus (*Sirach*) 7:17:

For the punishment of the ungodly is fire and worms.

The bitter and vindictive ending to the poem, like the ending of chapters 49, 51 and Psalm 137, is understandable (though not of course excusable), both as a response to extreme suffering, and as a comment on the reality of evil in the world.

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<sup>1</sup>Sawyer, J. F. A. 2001, c1986. *Isaiah : Volume 2*. The Daily study Bible series. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville