



A House For All Peoples?

A Bible study on welcoming the outsider.

by Ched Myers

There have always been two Americas: that of rich and poor, of inclusion and exclusion. The America of inclusion found expression in the ideal of “liberty and justice for all,” and has been embodied whenever Indian treaties were honored, and in the embrace of civil rights, women’s suffrage, or child labor laws. The America of exclusion, on the other hand, was articulated in a Constitution that originally enfranchised only white landed males and has been realized in land grabs, Jim Crow segregation, Gilded Age economic stratification, and restrictive housing covenants.

These two visions of America continually compete for our hearts and minds, not least in our churches. On one side are the voices of Emma Lazarus in her poem “The New Colossus” (“Give me your tired, your poor...”), and Martin Luther King Jr. when he preached “I Have a Dream.” On the other side are those of George W. Bush’s imperial politics and James Dobson’s “Focus on the Family.”

Perhaps the most consistent battleground between the two Americas, from inception to the present, has concerned immigration. Where our churches locate themselves on this political and theological terrain is profoundly consequential.

All social groups establish boundaries—whether physical impediments, such as fences or borders, or symbolic and cultural lines, such as language or dietary laws. Such boundaries can be a good thing, especially when they help protect weaker people from domination by stronger people. More often, however, boundaries function in the opposite manner: to shore up the privileges of the strong against the needs of the weak. It is this latter kind of boundary that characterizes the current U.S. immigration debate and that the Bible consistently challenges.

Torah warns the people not to discriminate against economic or political refugees, since in God’s eyes even Israelites are “but aliens and tenants” in the land (Leviticus 25:23). Instead they are to stand in solidarity with the “sojourners in our midst” (Deuteronomy 24:14). This is later reiterated in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). I want to go beyond these well-known exhortations, however, and examine one text from each Testament that together make a powerful case that the very health of our body politic depends upon our embrace of “outsiders.”

ISAIAH 56:1-8 is the opening stanza of the prophetic oracle sometimes referred to as “Third Isaiah.” The parts of the book of Isaiah known as Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) and Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66) represent the work of prophetic successors to the great eighth century prophet himself: the former during the exile to Babylon, the latter during the “reconstruction” period following the return. These writings arose out of prophetic “schools” (see for example 2 Kings 4:38), in which disciples recontextualized the word and work of their teachers in another historical moment. This is, of course,

what all preachers do every time we try to proclaim the Word in the midst of a given social situation.

Isaiah 56:1-8 is his “invocation,” setting a tone of radical inclusion, envisioning a time when people from all over the world, including ethnic outsiders and other minorities, will be welcomed as full members into God’s house. The prophet reiterates this theme at the close of his oracle as well: “The time has come to gather all the nations and tongues; they shall come and behold my glory” (Isaiah 66:18). This is the “new heaven and new earth” that Yahweh intends to bring about (66:22).

Scholars date Third Isaiah sometime in the first two generations of the exiles’ return from Babylon, between the reconstruction of the temple (circa 515 BCE) and the time of Nehemiah (circa 444 BCE). There were many issues facing those trying to rebuild Israelite society under the imperial rule of Persia. Those who had been exiled to Babylon were the upper classes of Israelite society: priests, managers, the landed aristocracy, scribes, etc. The peasant majority, however—the “people of the land”—had remained behind in Palestine, working the land and scraping out a living, as the poor have always done under any regime. As the elites began to trickle back, they set about trying to re-establish their title to land, social status, and political position.

Clinton Hammock, in a monograph analyzing in detail this social and historical context, argues that these returnees were a mixed bag and included land speculators and carpetbaggers trying to take economic advantage of the new settlements; priests determined to re-establish a cultic center as their power base; ultra-nationalists who saw a chance to rebuild old dreams of sovereignty; and political front men for Israel’s Persian overlords. They all agreed on one thing, however: They would define and lead the reconstruction project.

It is not hard to imagine, then, their conflicts with the existing population over property, politics, and religion, and indeed we hear allusions to this in Nehemiah 4-6. We need only think of the situation of Palestine since 1948, also a struggle between longtime residents on the land being disenfranchised by ideologically motivated and politically and militarily powerful “returnees.”

The strategy of the elites was to purge the “people of the land” by establishing new ethnic purity standards, focusing on shoring up boundaries of marriage and nationality. The Persians were supportive of such measures, as they wanted their colony to be ethnically uniform to better enable their imperial management. Thus Nehemiah forbids future intermarriages (Nehemiah 10), while Ezra goes further, demanding the divorce of foreign wives (Ezra 9-10). This position was likely legitimated on the basis of Deuteronomy 23:1-8, which specifically excluded “from the assembly” males who were not sexually functional, the “illegitimately” born, and foreigners.

It is not hard to understand why the peasants resisted these attempts to exclude them, and Third Isaiah emerged as their advocate. He argues against the position of Ezra and Nehemiah, taking issue specifically with their view that the nation is best protected through purity codes. Instead, the prophet calls for the community to be preserved through ethical behavior: Whoever keeps the Sabbath covenant is entitled to full inclusion. He underlines the point using two “extreme” examples: eunuchs and foreigners.

The oracle begins with a dramatic exhortation: “This is what God says: ‘Defend justice! Do what is right! Then I will vindicate you!’” (Isaiah 56:1). From the outset the issue is justice, defined in 56:2 as obeying Torah, keeping Sabbath, and turning away from evil. The prophet is invoking Sabbath as the heart of Torah ethos, with its twin social concerns to 1) Constrain greed: Everyone must have enough and the gifts of creation should circulate rather than concentrate (Exodus 16:16-19) and 2) Deconstruct poverty: releasing those who groan under the burden of debt (Deuteronomy 15) and allowing the poor to glean the surplus of the fields (Exodus 23:10-12).

But Third Isaiah goes further, addressing those who are being legally and socially excluded on the basis of purity. We hear the voice of those who have internalized this rejection in terms of their self-worth and social prospects: “Let not the foreigner say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’; Let not the eunuch say ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For this is what God says...” (Isaiah 56:3).

The excluded throughout history know all too well the self-hatred that comes with second-class citizenship: black children trying to scrub their skin white, immigrants changing their names, women keeping silent, gays and lesbians staying deep in a destructive closet—all to avoid the contempt of a society that barely tolerates them. But God, writes Third Isaiah, says differently; one commentator portrays the prophet’s rhetoric here as implying a new legal ruling on case law.

The eunuch who keeps the Sabbath covenant will receive “in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (56:5 is a play on the Hebrew word for eunuch, which comes from a root meaning to castrate). The prophet knew very well that eunuchs were, according to Levitical strictures, supposed to be “cut off” from benefits of cult and family life, which would mean their names would also be lost to posterity, an ancient way of rendering someone socially invisible.

Instead, God promises an honored place in the “house,” something better than pride of genealogy or title to land. This is symbolized by a special “monument” and an “everlasting name.” (Playfully, the Hebrew word rendered as “monument” is *yd*, which can also be a euphemism for “penis.”) This is a poignant word to the current debate over exclusion of lesbian and gay people from full status in church and society.

The only people below eunuchs in the social hierarchy were foreigners—and this is exactly who the prophet next addresses. If foreigners follow God and observe the Sabbath covenant, “I will bring them to my holy mountain, and their sacrifices will be acceptable. Because my house will be known as a place where all nations pray” (Isaiah 56:7). This is Third Isaiah’s answer to Ezra and Nehemiah’s culture war on those who didn’t fit the national ideal.

In his view, the Jerusalem temple was meant to be a world house, not a national shrine (as every other temple in antiquity was). Yahweh welcomes whosoever desires to follow the Way, regardless of who they are in their somatic or ethnic identity. Third Isaiah’s perspective did not, however, prevail against the ethnocentric strategy of Ezra and Nehemiah. Indeed, many of those kicked out of the newly proscribed Judean body politic ended up as the despised “Samaritans” of Jesus’ day. But God’s Word did not prove fruitless.

MORE THAN FOUR centuries later, a young Jesus of Nazareth, preaching his first sermon, looked hard at his audience and proceeded to read from the heart of Third Isaiah’s oracle (Luke 4:18 parallels Isaiah 61:1). Jesus may have staked his entire ministry on a reappropriation of this prophetic tradition. He invokes it again at the culmination of his struggle with the public authorities in Jerusalem: In the midst of his dramatic “exorcism” of the temple, Jesus quotes directly from our text: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Luke 19:46 parallels Isaiah 56:7). It was this vision of radical inclusion that animated Jesus’ constant transgressions of the social boundaries of his day: eating with lepers, hanging out with women, touching the impure, teaching the excluded. More than anything else, it may have been what got him strung up.

Jesus most clearly addressed this issue in an oft-overlooked parable found in Mark’s gospel. “There is nothing which goes into you that can defile you; only that which comes out of you defiles you” (Mark 7:15). This teaching is another prophetic skirmish with the social function of the purity code. Mark’s Jesus is defending his disciples’ practice of sharing table fellowship with the “unclean” outsider (Mark 7:1-5) by insisting that “What goes into a person’s body from the outside cannot

contaminate it” (7:18). Mark presents this parable as one whose meaning the disciples must not miss (7:17)!

Jesus is proposing the physical body as a symbol of the “body politic” of the nation (a metaphor employed also by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12). His point—which echoes exactly Third Isaiah’s argument—is that the social boundaries constructed by an exclusionary purity code are powerless to protect the integrity of the community, which can only truly be “corrupted” from within. In what may be at once his most radical and most widely ignored teaching, Jesus rejects all culturally proprietary boundaries that allegedly protect a community from perceived external threats. Scapegoating or excluding outsiders cannot protect us; we must look to our own ethical behavior. “Only that which comes out of you defiles you” (Mark 7:20).

The episodes that immediately follow in Mark’s narrative underscore the point. Jesus’ own male and ethnic honor is challenged in the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman. In the sole gospel instance of Jesus losing a verbal joust, he concedes the justice of this female foreigner’s insistence upon inclusion (Mark 7:24-30). The expanded circle of enfranchisement is then illustrated by the feeding of Gentile multitudes (Mark 8:1-9). Jesus then warns his disciples to “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Herodians” (8:15), which represents the social and political exclusivity that jeopardizes the “one loaf” around which the church is called to gather.

TO BE SURE, issues related to the continuing and often involuntary migration of peoples, and to the geopolitical definition of human communities, are complex in the modern world and deserve our careful reflection and deliberation. But these are finally theological and pastoral issues for Christians, and we must seek to know immigrants and refugees not as statistics but as human beings who endure extraordinary hardship and trauma in their struggle to survive.

And for U.S. citizens, these are issues of national identity. Israel’s ethic of compassion toward outsiders was shaped by its own history of pain: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21). We, too, are a nation of immigrants. Amidst the current culture wars that marginalize immigrants and refugees, then, our churches must choose which America we embrace. To do that we must “hear and understand” Jesus’ teaching afresh (Mark 7:14), and that of Third Isaiah before him. If we refuse to take sides with today’s outsiders, we too are “without understanding” (Mark 7:18).

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