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**Isaiah 56:1, 6-8: An Outsider’s Pilgrimage to Prayer**

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Imagine a trumpet bleating atop the highest peak to announce the gathering of all the peoples of the world. This is not just any gathering, like a U2 concert, or an Inauguration, or the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, but a great convention of the world for joyful worship of the Lord. Isaiah’s vision of salvation culminates in an international gathering of prayer. Prayer! What’s more, this gathering for prayer signals God’s deliverance! A radical deliverance, indeed. Even within a world of military zones, sectarianism, poverty, social injustice, and ideological fissure, Isaiah opens our eyes to a most unlikely international gathering: outsiders’ pilgrimage to prayer.

Isaiah’s vision for the gathering of foreigners holds significance on several levels. First, it is politically bold. God is calling non-Israelites into his sacred house. Second, it tells a spiritual narrative. The pilgrimage does not come easily, rejection awaits. Third, the vision challenges strict notions of religiosity through the power of prayer. Isaiah was making progressive theological claims for his day.

**Historical Context: Gathering Israel, Gathering Foreign Nations**

The historical context for Isaiah 56 sheds light on the idea of gathering. From 587-516 BCE, the Israelites endured a Babylonian forced migration (exile) and were thus scattered throughout the neighboring nations. Distressed by the loss of homeland, Israel’s prophets encouraged the exiles with visions of a gathering and return. So for example, Isaiah 43:5-6 proclaims, “I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, ‘Give them up,’ and to the south, ‘Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth.’” Isaiah, in particular, made that vision even more powerful by reminding the Israelites of their national story. In that story, God gave Hebrew slaves their own land after rescuing them from Egyptian oppression. Isaiah invokes this old story of gathering Israel to bring hope to the exiled Israelites. A return to homeland involved hope that God would act on their behalf again. This is often called the “Second Exodus.” The exiles would be drawn out from the nations and gathered in their homeland.

By the time our passage was written, the prophet explains that the Second Exodus had already taken place. Isaiah 56 is usually dated to the post-exilic period, when some Israelites had already returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (516 BCE). Hence, for Isaiah, the great gathering of Israelites had come to pass. The Second Exodus from the nations had taken place. The national foundation story of the Exodus promised that Israel could rebuild its national life, once again.

However, Isaiah 56 is not about a return of the Israelite exiles. Isaiah 56 promises that every person who calls on the name of the Lord will be gathered. The vision extends the promise to foreigners (as well as the eunuchs in v. 4 and the outcasts of Israel in v. 8.) Israel’s great gathering invites outsiders to come in. Thus, all people “joined to the Lord” are now invited to God’s earthly house of worship. The scene is one of outsiders on a pilgrimage.

**1. A Political Gathering**

Isaiah’s vision is all the more radical when considering the political status of these people “joined to the Lord.” Among those gathered, for example, there may have been Ammonites or
Moabites; People from among Israel’s often enemy neighbors. Staying with this example, Israel fought against the Ammonites and Moabites and other such enemies during the period before the monarchy (e.g., Jdg 11-12). These sour relations continued to induce wars during the Davidic dynasty (e.g., 2Kgs 3.) Israel’s prophets preached against these nations in the “oracles against foreign nations” (e.g., Ezek 25.) Hence, the Hebrew Bible shows a clear history of antagonism and hatred between Israel and the “foreign nations.”

Because of the antagonism, this is a politically charged gathering. It may be hard to appreciate this at first. Disney and Hollywood exert so much force over our imaginations, it is practically instinctual to picture something like the scene in the Lion King, when all the adorable and colorful animals converge for the lion’s birth. We mollify the gathering of the Animal Kingdom in order to romanticize zoological unity. By contrast, Isaiah’s gathering is politically unlikely. Imagine illegal immigrants, nations at odds, and refugees crossing strict military borders on pilgrimage towards prayer. Imagine a Western person having to cross into Iran or North Korea (typically unwelcoming of Westerners) heading towards a house of worship. There are border crossings going on in this vision. Border crossings that work against deep-seeded political and national identities.

2. A Spiritual Pilgrimage
Second, Isaiah’s pilgrimage of outsiders suggests a spiritual narrative. The pilgrimage towards prayer is riddled with rejection and challenges. The plight of those gathered may be imagined from within the context of third Isaiah (chs. 56-66.) In these chapters, we hear hints of their plaintive cry. So in Isa 63:16, outsiders express their sense of alienation, “you [Lord] are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name.”

In the historical context, the post-exilic reconstruction was marked by disputes about foreigners. Indeed, foreigners were not well-received by these early Second Temple communities. Returning to our example from above, we hear that Moabites and Ammonites were singled out and removed from among the “people of Israel” (cf., Neh 13:1-3). Third Isaiah may have been speaking about the seeds of this antagonism towards foreigners when he states, “Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter” (Isa 59:14.) In other words, despite being joined to the Lord, the outsiders face social exclusion.

Recognizing this plight, the experience of being excluded, helps to shape a spiritual narrative for our pilgrims. When the institutions and people in power withhold membership, the pilgrimage of outsiders requires courage, strength, character, perseverance, etc. Third Isaiah offers a bold vision of God’s work on pilgrims’ behalf. Se we hear encouragement such as, “prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people’s way” (Isa 57:14). The obstructions on the pilgrimage require God’s power.

3. A Religious Vision
Isaiah’s vision of international gathering has profound implications for how we understand religion and religious identity. The common denominator of these people who are “joined to the Lord” is a house of worship and prayer. For anyone who has worked in ecumenism or with
interfaith communities, decisions about a common house of worship or how to engage the divine with prayer are not simple. Indeed, Isaiah does not provide any detail about how this will work. These details are left to the imagination. However, the vision boldly claims that prayer can unite people of faith in God. Indeed, prayer is the hope to which God’s pilgrims travel. People united before God in prayer: this is the eschatological hope of the faithful.

Who are these pilgrims? Such a question only draws out our speculations. Global Christianity is alive and kicking. So are global monotheistic religions, which would include Judaism and Islam. Have other religions joined themselves to the Lord? To what extent does this passage push our boundaries about religious orthodoxy? It certainly gestures towards the cultural richness involved in worshipping the Lord. However, it also opens up the question of religious identity and institutional affiliation. At least according to Isaiah 56, God’s deliverance of the world is revealed through the pilgrimage of outsiders.