63:1-6  God’s Day of Vengeance and Redemption

Chapter 63 begins with a short vignette. Someone, possibly a watchman, sees someone coming from the capital city of Edom. Asked who he is, he replies, “It is I” (63:1), indicating that he should be readily recognizable. Asked about his red-stained garments, he replies that it is the blood of those he killed. Further, they were killed in a day of vengeance (63:4). He was appalled that no one gave support (63:5), but his own strength sufficed.

This is clear enough as a narrative, though somewhat elliptical, but the relevance to its context in Isaiah takes some interpretation. Before we get to that, though, we consider this as poetry, which will explain the otherwise puzzling reference to Edom. There is a double play on words which was highly regarded in literature of the time, though rather less so nowadays. Edom sounds like the Hebrew word for “red”, while Bozrah sounds like “winepress.” This wordplay emphasizes the blood-stained garments, and the common metaphor of treading grapes in a winepress, in reference to God crushing his enemies.

Isaiah frequently speaks of the need for God to provide justice by punishing those who have opposed him. Further, when God decides to act, his victory is assured, for none can stand against him. But there is more here. God is mighty in battle, but he is mighty to save (63:1). The time of his acting was the day of battle (63:4), but it was also the year to redeem. God’s ultimate goal is saving his people, and indeed saving all nations. Defeating God’s enemies is required by justice, but it is simply one step in the process of salvation.

The passage notably lacks a direct identification of who this warrior might be, but most commentators seem to assume that God is in view (as the NIV heading indicates). Motyer\(^1\) gives what seems to be a minority view, that the warrior is the servant of the LORD (42:1), more recently referred to as the anointed one (61:1). In practice, there seems to be little difference between the views: The victory is God’s but he has chosen to win it through his anointed servant. And this makes sense of the lack of support encountered (63:5), for the servant was despised by men. And in addition, the entire point of the new thing that God promises is that he will do for men what they could not do for themselves.

63:7-64:12  Israel’s Prayer

There is widespread agreement among commentators that 63:7-64:12 is a unity; there is less agreement about its form. It is of course a poem. – most of Isaiah is – but what kind of poem? I believe that the most helpful way to look at it is as a prayer – and as prayer of a particular type, a prayer that would represent the best of Israel. It is the prayer of someone who looks at the situation in post-exilic Jerusalem and sees the need for God’s help, knows why help should be expected, and is genuinely troubled that this help is delayed.

On the other hand, this is a prayer that deliberately excludes much of the insight that Isaiah’s prophecy might have provided. It makes no explicit reference to the new thing that God is about to do. Further, it oversimplifies the complex issue of God’s corrective punishments by omitting the intention of disciplining – again as might be expected in an actual prayer. I find the prayer all the more moving for its human limitations.

63:7-14  Praise

The prayer opens with a declaration of the intention to praise; the praise is to be grounded in Israel’s history, the deeds for which he is to be praised (63:7). There seems to be a reference to the exodus: God became their Savior (63:8) and he redeemed them (63:9). Moreover, God’s actions are described in intimate, personal terms: In all their distress he too was distressed... he lifted them up and carried them. These past actions, in the days of old, should have been testimonies as to what God could and would do in the present.

But past testimonies did not always suffice. God was seeking a particular response from Israel: He said, “Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me” (63:8). Instead, God’s people grieved his Holy Spirit (63:10). And God’s reaction was decisive: he turned and became their enemy. As noted above, this was truly Israel’s perception, but it leaves the disciplinary purpose unstated.

However, the prayer continues by stating that God’s discipline had the desired effect. Whereas before testimonies from the past did not suffice, now his people recalled the days of old (63:11). The focus of the prayer here is explicitly on the central event of the exodus, when God brought them through the

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sea; God divided the waters before them (63:12); God led them through the depths (63:13). God’s glorious arm of power reflects the actual language of the Song of Moses (Ex 15:16).

The prayer also speaks of things that were not a part of the traditional exodus narrative, but which in hindsight we see must have been true at the time: God set his Holy Spirit among them, and they were given rest by the Spirit of the LORD (63:14). The prayer even touches on matters larger than Israel: in rescuing them, God gained for himself everlasting renown (63:12; see also 14).

63:15-64:3 Petition

The prayer then turns from praise to petition. God is asked to look down from heaven and see (63:15). But what is God asked to see? The same situation that has distressed Israel for generations: Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us. The prayer is very clear on some points. The past testimonies prove that God can act. However, the nation’s present situation indicates that God is choosing not to act, and the prayer questions why this is so. The reference to Abraham (63:16) indicates promises that were apparently not being fulfilled. Enemies have trampled down [God’s] sanctuary (63:18), but they have not been called by [God’s] name (63:19). Israel has been called by God’s name, and expects God’s rescue.

The prayer even hints that God himself is responsible for the problem: Why, LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? (63:17) I view this as deliberately naïve. Isaiah certainly understands the role that hardening of the heart plays in God’s plans, but here he is expressing the anguish of someone who does not understand, or at least understands less well, and who sees his expectations about life after the exile unfulfilled.

In chapter 64, the nature of the petition changes, from asking for God to understand what is troubling Israel, to asking God to act. The description of this action seems very general at first: come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you (64:2). But the prayer has something very definite in mind. God coming down would make the mountains... tremble (64:1). And how can this be known? Because of the testimonies of the days of old, in this case the Sinai narrative (64:3; see Ex 19:18).

64:4-7 Confession

At this point, the prayer turns from petition to a statement of God’s character, though one still relevant to the topic at hand. There is no God other than Yahweh, and he acts on behalf of those who wait for him (64:4) – the very thing the prayer has been asking for. And next comes confession, which embodies an understanding of the delay of salvation that was so troubling earlier in the prayer: when we continued to sin against [your ways], you were angry (64:5).

Confession in turn leads to the obvious question: How then can we be saved? The problem is that men are simply incapable of saving themselves: all our righteous acts are like filthy rags (64:6). Again we have to emphasize that Isaiah knows more than the prayer is saying. Much of the middle third of the book is devoted to that problem and its solution. Salvation is the new thing that God has promised, and will accomplish through his servant, who will take upon himself the sins of his people and defeat death.

64:8-12 Final Appeal

The final section is an appeal “for God to remember two things: he is the one who brought Israel into existence, and they are now in misery and shame.” The prayer makes no reference to God’s new work, but does show Israel at its best. It begins with an acknowledgement of God’s role, and submission to God’s plan: We are the clay, you are the potter (64:8). But having submitted, the prayer then asks for mercy: do not remember our sins forever (64:9). And only then, the prayer ends with a reference to the specific situation of those who returned to Jerusalem, to the specific reason that God’s people feel that they have been abandoned: Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned with fire, and all that we treasured lies in ruins (64:11). Humanly speaking, the final question is irresistible, and profoundly touching: After all this, LORD, will you hold yourself back? Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure? (64:12)

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