

Ancient Truths

By Donne Hayden

A few years ago I bought a second-hand book titled *The Bible According to Einstein*, a lengthy scientific explanation of evolution told in Biblical language. What I remember most is a rather startling statement in the Introduction:

. . . the moral beliefs of today virtually coincide with the moral beliefs at the time when the Holy Bible first came into being. Other holy books, such as the Koran, the Veda and the Upanishads, contain similar moral principles. It appears that the fundamental moral truths were discovered and written down in holy texts thousands of years ago. These truths are as valid today as they were then. What was right and wrong 3000 years ago is, to a close approximation, what is right and wrong today. *The lack of evolution of moral doctrine is surprising. Almost every other aspect of human life has changed enormously during this period. This suggests that moral doctrine might be universal and absolute.*¹ [emphasis mine]

Truth may be universal and absolute; truth is undeniably very, very old, and “what was right and wrong 3000 years ago ... is right and wrong today.” Here is an example: “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever; that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation is among possible events . . .” Who do you think said this? Desmond Tutu? Jimmy Carter? No, neither of those; Thomas Jefferson wrote this comment on slavery in a 1782 essay. But I can see its essential truth today in relation to the discrepancy, for instance, between the American lifestyle and the Haitian lifestyle: “considering numbers, nature and natural means

¹ *The Bible According to Einstein*, Jupiter Scientific Publishing Company, 1999. An odd and fascinating book which I am glad to loan anyone who wants to read the scientific understanding of evolution in Biblical language.

only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation is among possible events. . . .” It is conceivable that in some post-apocalyptic future, scrappy and resourceful Haitians could survive while spoiled, soft-living Americans died of starvation. Having a good life “situation” ourselves right now, we are made uncomfortable by Jefferson’s suggestion that because God’s “justice cannot sleep forever,” we may someday find ourselves at the bottom of the wheel of fortune. Yet Jefferson’s statement simply expresses an ancient truth from Scriptures: “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

I’ve been thinking about fairness and justice this week, in part inspired by the news that Bill Gates and Warren Buffett and 40 other billionaires have agreed to give half their fortunes to charity, illustrating one principle of something called “Sabbath Economics,” which is based on early Jewish thought, and involves, among other things, a voluntary redistribution of wealth. While reading about “Sabbath Economics,” I found a reference to passages in Isaiah, which I hadn’t read in a long time. As I read Isaiah 58, I was impressed, as often happens when I read the Bible, with how *contemporary* this ancient writing seems, how pertinent to our 21st century selves. What was true about fairness and justice 250 years ago when Jefferson wrote (or 3000 years ago when Isaiah was written) is, “to a close approximation,” what is true about fairness and justice today. Fairness and justice are what God asks of us throughout the Scriptures and in all the teachings of Jesus. I was so intrigued by the language in Isaiah 58 about fairness and justice that I postponed my search for information about Sabbath Economics and focused instead on this chapter from the Old Testament.

The book of Isaiah is one of the longest books in the Bible, and was “the only complete scroll” found among the 900+ scrolls discovered in 1947 in a cave near the Dead Sea in Israel. These “Dead Sea Scrolls” date from 150 BCE to 70 BCE, so the scribes who copied and

preserved them were copying from sources handed down for centuries before that; these are ancient writings.

A little history and context. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are attributed to a prophet who lived in the Kingdom of Judah during turbulent times, from around 720 BCE to 687 BCE. Prophesying over a period of 50 years through the reigns of four kings, Isaiah conveyed God's (Yahweh) displeasure at his people's idolatry, cruelty and injustice, and predicted doom for all who rely on their own power (kings and nations included) and who ignore God's laws as revealed in the Torah (the first five books of what we call the Old Testament). Isaiah's prophecies apparently upset King Manassa so much that, in 687 BCE, he had Isaiah "cut in two by a wooden saw."

The next three centuries in the Middle East saw the rise of the Assyrian Empire, which gobbled up the Northern Kingdom of Israel and reduced the Southern Kingdom of Judah to a client state. This was followed by the rise of the Babylonian Empire which overthrew the Assyrian Empire and swallowed up both Israel and Judah. The Babylonians practiced the "divide and conquer" method of subjugating conquered peoples; first they destroyed the center of Jewish worship—the Temple in Jerusalem—and then the Babylonians scattered all the brightest and best Judeans to the far corners of the empire where they and their descendants remained for the next several hundred years. Psalm 137 expresses beautifully the sorrow and longing the Jews felt during this devastating period of sorrow and exile, which they still refer to as the "Babylonian Captivity." You may recognize the words of Psalm 137²:

¹ By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

² These are the lyrics to Hymn 183 in *Worship in Song*; the song was recorded in the 70s by Don McLean.

- ² There on the poplars
 we hung our harps,
³ for there our captors asked us for songs,
 our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
 they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
⁴ How can we sing the songs of the LORD
 while in a foreign land?
⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
 may my right hand forget its skill.
⁶ May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
 if I do not remember you,
 if I do not consider Jerusalem
 my highest joy.

Although tradition attributes all 66 chapters of the book of Isaiah to the original prophet, modern Biblical scholars see the work of at least two writers and possibly three, based on the following observations. Some events recounted in Isaiah 40-66 (such as the rise of Babylon, the destruction of the temple, etc.) did not occur during Isaiah's lifetime but several centuries later. Also, though Isaiah's name appears fairly often in the first 39 chapters, from Chapter 40 onward, his name does not appear, and the writing in the last section is significantly different in style and theology. For instance, the first 39 chapters warn of impending doom and God's judgment of the misbehaving Israelites, while the last chapters focus the situation of exile, of God's mercy and promise to restore the Israelites to their homeland.³

Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah has some of the most consistently beautiful language in the Old Testament, "probably written by an anonymous poet near the end of the Babylonian captivity . . . a master of sound and music with sweeping visions of mountains collapsing and valleys lifted up."⁴ Second Isaiah, which includes the often quoted "Suffering Servant" passages (Is. 53), is sometimes referred to as "The Book of Comfort," in which Isaiah speaks of deliverance from

³ "Book of Isaiah" *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Isaiah

⁴ *Ibid.*

exile and restoration of Israel, the “Promised Land,” reaffirming that the Hebrews are God’s chosen people, and that Yahweh is truly their God. Though the “Suffering Servant” passages are read by Jews as referring to Israel, Christians see them as referring to the Messiah, i.e., Christ.

So much for the background of this great, inspired work. Listen for the ancient truth in this chapter as I read Isaiah 58. (If you are so inclined, on the benches you will find copies of the Holy Bible (NIV), which I encourage you to take up and follow along). These are words Yahweh has given to Isaiah the prophet to deliver to the people; this passage may refer to the period when Jews were being allowed to return and begin restoration of Jerusalem (520-500 BCE). Apparently, the people followed their rituals conscientiously, doing everything they could think of to please God, including periodic fasting, wearing scratchy sackcloth garments, and pouring ashes over their heads (as an acknowledgement of mortality). But as too often happens even today, the people just didn’t seem to understand what God truly wanted from them. A note in my *Access Study Bible* has this comment: “. . . such deeds unaccompanied by compassion and concern for those less fortunate were meaningless to God. . . . The efforts to restore Jerusalem had focused on externals—restoring ancient buildings and replanting neglected fields—instead of the inner recovery of spiritual health and wholeness. Only a renewal of this inner direction of life could bring about the true rebuilding of the city.”⁵

In an effort to communicate with misguided humanity, God speaks through his prophet, Isaiah, telling him:

1 “Shout it aloud, do not hold back.
Raise your voice like a trumpet.

⁵ Isaiah 58, Note, *The Access Bible*, NRSV, Gail R O’Day and David Peterson, Eds. (New York: Oxford University Press) 1999.

Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the house of Jacob their sins.

2 For day after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.

3 'Why have we fasted,' they say,
'and you have not seen it?

Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?'

"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers.

4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for a man to humble himself?

Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.

11 The LORD will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.

You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.

12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

13 “If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the LORD's holy day honorable,
and if you honor it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,

14 then you will find your joy in the LORD,
and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.”

*The mouth of the LORD has spoken.*⁶

This ancient truth still speak to us today, even perhaps the last part about having a true Sabbath, one day a week when stores are closed we could not indulge consumerism. Not a popular idea in our culture, but how would it change people’s lives? And are we not still called to “do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk” and to spend ourselves “in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed”?

⁶ **THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®** Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society®