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## **“And YHWH saw and was displeased”: Mediation as human responsibility (Isaiah 59)**

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Zusammenfassung:

Isaiah 59 stellt JHWH als göttlichen Krieger dar, dessen machtvolle Waffe Recht und Ordnung herstellt, obwohl sie zunächst Zerstörung, Elend und Tod bringt. Der Text legt dar, dass diese göttliche Intervention Folge des Mangels an menschlicher Mediation sei. Dieser Beitrag analysiert den Text und bringt einige weitere Interpretationsmöglichkeiten ein – wenn es nur Mediationen gäbe.  
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### **Introduction**

This article's subject arised by chance, divine inspiration or psychological conditioning, as one prefers. It arised from the latest invasion to Iraq by the reigning Empires and from the UN flagrant failure to mediate. Isaiah 59:16 states that God looked and saw none to mediate. Lack of mediation is, then, the subject matter that links this chapter of Isaiah to this particular time in history.

A word about where I stand may be necessary. While “First-”, “Second-”, and “Trito-Isaiah” are almost unavoidable terminology and there is worth in it, I also welcome literary, rhetorical and structural analyses that point to the book's unity, even if comprised of previous materials. As O'Connell points out, “the patterning of literary subunits within Isaiah's overall design makes it difficult to imagine that its overall design should be accounted for as the product of accretion under (three or more) separate hands. ...The pervasiveness of the triadic and quadratic framing patterns is such that it virtually precludes the likelihood that prophetic materials were admitted to the book except under the development of such a structural patterning.”<sup>1</sup>

Through reader-oriented approach, Katheryn Pfisterer Darr has likewise called attention to the pervasive use of figurative language related to God's family throughout the whole book.<sup>2</sup>

In my own context, Severino Croatto is one of the scholars who has written most about this book. He uses the classical jargon of “First”, “Second”, and “Third” Isaiah, though pushing for a “Fourth Isaiah”, the redactor/s – indeed, the author – of the whole book.<sup>3</sup>

An additional reason for stressing the book's unity, rather than its constituent previous sources, is the fact that the chapter we will study may be seen as a replication in small of the whole book's problems. As the first part of Isaiah is filled with accusations of sin, so is the first part of the chapter. As the second part of the book proclaims God's redemptive actions through God's messiah, the Persian king Cyrus, so does the second part of chapter 59. Finally, as the last section of the book of Isaiah reflects on the recurrence of trouble in the community, the same can be perceived in verse 20. Here the use of "those who (re)turn" implies also those who have not or do not turn from their evil, thus implicitly recognizing trouble in the community.<sup>4</sup>

I should now turn to Isaiah 58-59, which form a five-stanza poem.<sup>5</sup> For the sake of brevity, however, and because that is where this poem finds its resolution, I will only deal with chapter 59 and not even with every verse of it.

Most commentaries find some kind of concentric structure for chapters 59-64. Although details differ, their overall outlook is somewhat like this:

59:1-15a	lament on behalf of / accusation against Israel
59:15b-21	YHWH's intervention (= Divine Warrior)
60-62	promises of salvation
63:1-6	YHWH's intervention (= Divine Warrior)
63:7-64:12	lament on behalf of Israel

### **Isaiah 59**

The first thing to be noted about this chapter is its changes of addressee from second to third to first plural (masculine in Hebrew), all in direct speech, and then change to indirect speech. Verses 1-8 continue the long list of accusations against Israel started in the previous chapter. It is YHWH or the prophet that addresses the people directly; then the people (or the prophet on their behalf), respond with a lament/confession of sins (vv. 9-15a). Accusations are made through the use of images taken from the body (hands, fingers, feet, mouth), the animal world (vipers, spider web, pidgeon, bears) and the household (clothing).<sup>6</sup> Everything points to a people in a situation of anomia, lack of social order or blatant impingement of law: social, political, economic, institutional, religious disorder or chaos. One of its worse manifestations is the lack of credence of the whole juridical system. When those who are responsible for law and order, for impartiality and equity are bought: who can feel safe? I am not speaking of ancient Israel only, I am speaking of the world today, of my country, my continent and also of

international fora, which only take care of their own interests and twist international law and order as it pleases them.

One of the most poignant images in this poem is that of Truth falling on the street and being unable to get into the household. Like those elderly people who have difficulties walking on the streets, or like little children learning to walk, who easily bruise their knees, Truth falls, unable to reach behind the walls and gates of the houses, unable to unmask family violence, unfaithfulness, and other “private” maladies...

Truth cannot do her work, neither in the public realm nor in the domestic realm, for the whole system is corrupt. In fact, when social structures and mechanisms are corrupt, domestic affairs and relationships cannot go right either, because there is a social component of the relationship that does not depend on our own actions nor on our good will.

In the midst of verse 15 there is a sudden change. Now the subject is YHWH. The structure is repetitive and its effect, powerful:

v.1-3            Accusations against Israel (violence, social injustice, want of fair institutions)

v.4-15a        Israel’s confession (use of images)

v.15b-16:

<sup>15b</sup> And YHWH saw and he [*sic*] was displeased<sup>7</sup>  
that (there is / was) no justice / judgment

<sup>16a</sup> And he [*sic*] saw  
that (there is / was) no man  
and he [*sic*] was desolate

that (there is / was) no intercessor / mediator

<sup>16b</sup> and his [*sic*] arm saved / gave him [*sic*] the victory

<sup>16</sup> and his [*sic*] justice / righteousness, she raised him [*sic*]

v.17-19        Description of YHWH’s actions against Israel (military imagery)

<sup>20</sup> And there will come to / for Zion a redeemer

and for those turning from transgression in Jacob, YHWH’s oracle.<sup>8</sup>

All actions are YHWH’s or YHWH’s instrument, such as YHWH’s arm and justice in v. 16b. First, there are four verbs denoting feelings or impressions: YHWH saw, was displeased, saw, was desolate. All four have the same form in Hebrew, imperfects with *waw* consecutive in 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular.

These realizations have to do with lack of persons or institutions that would bring about justice and righteousness amongst God’s people: no justice, no man, no mediator.<sup>9</sup>

These realizations bring YHWH to have to act on YHWH’s own, since there is none to do it for God among the people. Thus, verbs follow that denote actions. Not only verbs, but military images, such as “put on garments of vengeance”. These actions lead into the promise or description of a redeemer or deliverer (Hebrew **גאל**, v. 20).<sup>10</sup> It is not clear whether the coming of a deliverer is the culminating action of the series or whether “a deliverer” functions as a kind of summary to the actions described in the preceding verses. What is clear is that all these actions have no other agent than YHWH, and that they will imply violence, bloodshed and portents –all because “there is no justice, no man, no mediator”.

The construction is set in parallel not only because of identical verbal forms, but also because of the “כִּי” constructions. The Hebrew particle **כִּי** has several meanings, such as “that”, “because”, and “namely.” What is important here is the way in which the poet has set the message, the way the resources used to help convey meaning.

(He [ <i>sic</i> ] saw, was displeased □	Saw □	was desolate □
that no justice / judgment	that no man	that no intercessor / mediator
כי אין משפט	כי אין איש	כי אין מפגיע

Interspersed with the verbs of feeling are reasons for those feelings. The three are built in the same manner:

- ❖ the particle **כִּי** introduces the reason for the feeling;
- ❖ the particle **אין** indicates absence of an object or person; and
- ❖ the lack itself, where the object changes.

It is hard to say whether this particular construction should be seen as in relation to other sections of the book. Apparently, E. Young was the first one to note a similar construction in Isaiah 40:1-2 (three **כִּי** phrases) and to see chapters 40-66 as their development.<sup>11</sup> A search for this type of construction with **כִּי** in the book of Isaiah only, reveals that it is extremely common and thus cannot be used as proof of anything. The negative particle **אין** is also extremely common in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>12</sup>

Now a few words regarding the verb “mediate”. In Isaiah 59:16, the participle masc. active *Qal* of פָּגַע is used, thus denoting the agent of an action with no particular time allocated to that action (at least in Spanish, this Hebrew tense can be translated by a present, participle, present continuous, or past continuous verbs, or by an adjective). In *Qal* it means “to meet, encounter, reach”, thus the causative participle (*Hiphil*) “the one who encounters, meets, reaches; interposes.”<sup>13</sup> In *Hiphil* – the conjugation that interests us here – it appears twice in Jeremiah, in relation to Jeremiah’s intercession so that YHWH will treat well Israel (15:11), and also in Jeremiah 36:25, where the sons of Josiah’s officers plead with King Jehoyaqim that he would listen, rather than destroy, God’s words dictated to Baruch.<sup>14</sup>

In Isaiah, it appears twice in the fourth Servant Song. In Isaiah 53:6, the subject of the verb (the one who causes the action) is YHWH laying on the servant the iniquity of us all (פָּגַע *Hiphil* perf. masc. sg.) Verse 12 of the same Song is more fruitful for our analysis, as the servant is said to carry the sins of many and make intercession for transgressors (פָּגַע *Hiphil* impf. masc. sg.).

Finally, we should consider verse 20 of our chapter, where the fifth stanza of this poem comes to its end. Verse 20 is designed as a synonymic parallel between Zion and those (re)turning from transgression in Jakob. What is unclear, as it occurs often with parallels, is how meaning is achieved between the remaining parts of the verse. Literally, the verse states:

<sup>20</sup> And	for Zion	a redeemer
and	for those (re)turning from transgression in Jakob,	YHWH’s oracle

The usual way of considering its meaning is to supply a verb such as “there is / there will be,” or “(will) come” to both semicola, thus stating that a redeemer will appear, someone bringing deliverance to God’s people. The text leaves open the question whether this redeemer is the culmination of the process initiated by the Divine Warrior, once God’s arm has acted, or whether the promise of the redeemer is a summary of the actions depicted in the previous verses.

At any rate, it is clear that, first, there is an assessment of evil and injustice on God’s part, followed by statements of God’s feelings and reactions to that situation; then, there is the realization that, although society suffers visibly (no

justice), no “man” would do anything about it (no mediator). There is, then, God’s decision to act on God’s own terms, which, in light of the figure of the Divine Warrior, means action against the enemy on behalf of Israel, with no human contribution to this battle; not any action, but violent action ending in great destruction.<sup>15</sup>

Now, let us pause for a moment and contemplate another possibility. Instead of violent destruction, involving people and nature, why not imagine earlier action that would prevent so much destruction? It is true, there are people and structures that would not change, no matter how many opportunities are given to them. For these types, utter destruction is the only way to stop. Not everyone is like that, however. When given an opportunity, many people, especially God’s believers and seekers, would take the chance to live a better life – at least, that is what this writer (too optimistically?) would like to believe!

Optimism aside, this much is also clear from the text: that God’s actions, depicted in military imagery and stemming from the Divine Warrior myth (v. 17-19) are prompted by God’s realization that there is no human agent to bring about change for good: “And YHWH saw and he [*sic*] was displeased that (there is / was) no justice / judgment. And he [*sic*] saw that (there is / was) no man; and he [*sic*] was desolate that (there is / was) no intercessor / mediator.” In other words, had there been “justice”, “man” or “intercessor” –instances or persons perceived as lacking in verses 15-16 –, Divine Warriorship would not have been necessary.

What would be this mediator’s identity? Commentaries do not get deep into this issue.<sup>16</sup> In a sense, it is an idle question, as the text deals with the one who *is not*, rather than the one who *is* mediator between God’s plan and the reigning social (dis)order amongst God’s people. We can think, however, that together with the realization of its lack, there is at least a certain idea of whom or what is being missed.

Very likely, this question might not have been in Isaiah’s mind. Yet, it is in my mind! While I am unable to find a quick answer to the question of the relation between the three elements lacking, justice, man and mediator, there is at least something that, as a feminist scholar, calls my attention. Why is it “man” (אָדָם) that is missing and not “humanity, human being” (בְּרִיָּה)?

One possibility is that we consider this a question of wrongly-assumed inclusive language, where “man” is intended to mean either man or woman (many translations use “nobody”).

Another possibility is that there be here an echo of other texts in which lack of men in leadership positions is seen as a signal of society’s decay or chaotic status (see for instance, Isaiah 3:12). In this case, “there is no ‘man’” would mean, those who are, according to gender categories, supposed to seek justice and truth in my people’s courts and gates, are not there to do so – or are unwilling to do so.

Yet, there is a third possibility. There are at least a few stories in the Hebrew Bible where mediation by a woman prevents unnecessary blood-spilling. Abigail, wife of Nabal, talking David out of revenge is just one example (1 Samuel 25). She is presented as a woman who, out of common sense and knowledge of the facts of life, openly contradicts her husband’s actions, sides with David, offers gifts, and avoids Nabal’s and his whole house’s slaughter.

Two far more interesting stories are those in 2 Samuel chapters 14 and 20. In each case, a woman is introduced as a wise woman from Tekoah and from Abel respectively. These are more interesting for our discussion because, unlike Abigail, they are no amateurs. They are professional women in charge of the office of political advisor in their towns and often in court. That there was such an office in Israel is also attested by Hushai’s and Ahithophel’s rival counsels to Absalom and Ahithophel’s subsequent suicide when he did not manage to persuade Absalom (2 Samuel 17).<sup>17</sup> That they are called only by their title might imply that this is what was important for their stories, not other data from them.

In the first story, the wise woman from Tekoah is sought to bring David to a change of heart / mind regarding his son Absalom, which she does through a “living parable”, much like that used by the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12) and by clever speech. In the second story, the wise woman of Abel of Beth-maakah appears at her city wall and negotiates a deal with Joab. It is noteworthy that Joab approaches the city wall and talks to her, showing due respect to her and also showing no fear of being ambushed while so close to the wall. Secondly, what she promises (Sheba’s head), she achieves with no challenge from the people of her city. Evidently, she is recognized in her political mediation. Her speech shows also knowledge of tradition, common sense, and justice: “... In the

old times they would say, ‘For sure they inquire at Abel’, and thus they ended (settled) the matter. I am one of those peaceable and faithful in Israel. You seek to kill a city that is a mother in Israel; why would you swallow YHWH’s inheritance?’” (2 Samuel 20:18-19).

From these stories we cannot answer definitely the question concerning the use of “man” instead of “human being” in this text. We might conjecture that, in pre-monarchic times and until David’s time, there might have been a strong tradition of this office being carried by women, at least in the small towns and cities (both stories show the wise women being first located in small towns, not in court, contrary to Ahithophel and Hushai). In the post-exilic period, when there was no court to advise, the practice of having wise men and wise women in the small towns might have been alive again. If this is true, “there is no man” would be related to this lack of official political advise, but not necessarily to lack of women to exercise this office in the small towns.

Be it as it may, in approaching this text, there is a sense of bitterness. Were there human mediations, the Divine Warrior would not need to act; were there mediations, conflict, violence, suffering, and injustice would have been kept at bail before so many people suffer them and die from them. Were there mediations, wars and blood would be spared. There would be time and energy for God’s kingdom, rather than for survival in a hostile, violent, on-the-brink-of-destruction, world. There is a human responsibility – at least, a responsibility calling those who are God seekers, God fearers, God worshippers, God confessors – to take sides in this cosmic battle, to mediate for justice, peace, and human dignity.

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<sup>1</sup> O’Connell, *Concentricity and Continuity. The Literary Structure of Isaiah*, 245-246.

Books that appear in the recommended bibliography are here mentioned only by title.

<sup>2</sup> Pfisterer Darr, *Isaiah’s Vision and the Family of God*.

<sup>3</sup> José Severino Croatto, *Isaías 1-39* (La Aurora, Buenos Aires, 1989); *Isaías (40-55). La palabra profética y su relectura hermenéutica* (Lumen, Buenos Aires, 1994); *Imaginar el futuro. Estructura retórica y querigma del Tercer Isaías* (Lumen, Buenos Aires, 2001); “Composición y querigma del libro de Isaías” *Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latino-Americana (RIBLA)* 35-36 (2000) 36-67, esp. 58-67.

<sup>4</sup> Note also that the same word, פִּשְׁעֵי, is used both in 59:20 (for the evil they are to return from) and in 66:24, the very last verse of the book, for evildoers (פִּשְׁעֵי יָם) for whom there will be no place in the community – nor life!

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction in Trito-Isaiah*, 99-101. The five stanzas are 58:1-5, 6-14, 59:1-8, 9-15a, and 15b-20.

<sup>6</sup> Schroer, Staubli, *Body Symbolism in the Bible* has chapters on the heart, throat to soul, belly, head, eyes, ears, mouth, hands, feet, flesh and bones, besides other anthropological and theological considerations.

<sup>7</sup> Translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Pronouns for God are masculine in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Verse 21 closes the whole section 58-59 and is not part of this section; thus, it is not treated here.

<sup>9</sup> I thank Lectio’s editors for calling to my attention Qohelet 9:14-16, where a wise man could have saved the city from its siege; yet, nobody remembered him because he was poor. In the allusion to this wise, yet poor man there is, in the typical pessimistic mood of Qoheleth, a kind of lament for people’s inability to see beyond appearance; quite different is the story in 2 Samuel 20:14-22, where a wise woman (probably neither poor nor rich) saves the city acting as a counsellor (In Judges 9: 53 another woman saves the city by throwing a millstone from on top the tower on Abimelek’s skull!).

<sup>10</sup> אֲרָם is not a redeemer in the sense of Jesus Christ, but a family member, who had the obligation of rescuing a kin sold into slavery, the land inherited by the family if in danger of being lost, the blood of a murdered person, or the name of a man who had

died without children.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Joseph Young (*The Book of Isaiah*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, v.3, 24-25), quoted by Olley, “‘No Peace’ in a Book of Consolation. A Framework for the Book of Isaiah?,” 355, and by Olga Gienini, *El consuelo en el Libro de Isaías. Un estudio sobre la raíz naham en el Libro de Isaías* (Tesis de licenciatura, Universidad Católica Argentina, Buenos Aires, 2003, inédita), 28. Young’s book is unavailable to me.

<sup>12</sup> Amongst the many occurrences of these terms, it is worth noting that also Hosea uses כִּי followed by a threefold אֵין (“there is no ...”) structure: “Listen to the word of YHWH, children of Israel, for/that כִּי YHWH contends with the inhabitants of the land. For (כִּי) there is no truth (אֵין אֱמֶת), no faithfulness / lovingkindness (אֵין חֶסֶד), and no knowledge of God (אֵין דַּעַת אֱלֹהִים) in the land.” (4:1).

<sup>13</sup> Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver & Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968 [1907]), 803.

<sup>14</sup> It also appears in Job 36:32, of YHWH interposing clouds.

<sup>15</sup> Because of space restrictions, we will not discuss here who would be that enemy, or those evildoers who are fought by God. Opinions vary considerably on this issue, even though there is a general agreement that it is an internal strife and not another people that is here alluded to. On the Divine Warrior, see Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 91-111.

<sup>16</sup> Achtemeier, *The Community and Message*, 70-71; Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 200; Emmerson, *Isaiah 56-66*, 19; Croatto, *Imaginar el futuro*, 176. Neither Hanson (*The Dawn*) nor Smith (*Rhetoric & Redaction*) discuss it.

<sup>17</sup> Whybray, “The Sage” 133-139; Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 33-45; Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women*, 58-63; Camp, “The Wise Women” 14-29; Schroer, *Die Weisheit*, 66-73, 80-85.

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