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(With quotations from Thomas M. Raitt's A Theology of Exile, Fortress Press, 1977)

The prophecies of Zephaniah, as is true with all the prophets of Israel, speak not only to the present condition and immediate future of the nation, but also its eschatological future and end. So one is warned of the Babylonian judgment then pressing at the door but at the same time an intimation of a similar judgment that is future, bearing many of the same aspects, but having wider implications for all the nations as well as Israel itself. What remarkably distinguishes the latter from the former, are statements of finality, of annihilatory devastation followed by miraculous recovery and return by a remnant of the survivors and then an enduring, never-again-to-be troubled peace and security and a world-recognized glorification and honoring of the nation formerly despised and ill-treated. That such conditions are yet unknown to Israel indicate that they are yet future.

The pattern of Biblical prophecy, invariably includes a severe condemnation of Jerusalem's depravity and debasement—a reflection of the nation's total, now irremediable condition. This invites a fierce and extensive judgment, but as Zeph. 3:8 indicates, the same is intended to other nations ("The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger" NIV). Israel's surviving remnant who also "trust in the name of the Lord" (v.12) is assured of an abiding safety ("never again will you fear any harm... Do not fear O Zion" vv. 13-16) as the recently experienced sorrow and despair ("do not let your hands hang limp") is forever abolished.

This judgment alive in the recent memory of the surviving remnant is described as a "punishment" (v.15) inflicted by the "enemy" who are then judged by God for their oppression (v.19). God Himself then gathers "the lame" and the "scattered" (v.19) "from the most distant area imaginable" ("beyond the rivers of Cush", v.10, see NIV note). That this ingathering is to be distinguished from that of the pre-judged Israel, 1948-93 [time of this writing] is signified by the frequently repeated eschatological phrase "at that time"; (vv. 19, 20; see also "On that day" vv. 11,16); that it is performed exclusively and supernaturally by God Himself [To distinguish it from the Zionist effort that preceded it?] by the emphasized "I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home" (v.20); to altogether verify that all this is yet future [but not distant in my expectation] is the mention of undeserved honor before all the world ["I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth"—the antithesis of present Israel's reception by the nations today] as God's own exclusive work "before your very eyes" (v.20).

What is remarkable and needs to be pointed out in the Redemption preaching of the same prophets that had announced the judgments, is that "forgiveness is promised... utterly without suggestion that it had the people's repentance as its precondition. This was a different kind of faith than was required to accept Judah's death." [In my opinion exactly the same!] "Now, with no empirical basis that Judah would ever be enabled to return from Exile, with no real moral transformation among the chastened but disheartened survivors of the Exile, they began to promise God's deliverance... out of the mouths of the two prophets [Jeremiah and Ezekiel] who had so rigorously denied any hope of escape from judgment" (pp. 106-7)!

Raitt enumerates the distinctives of this unprecedented prophetic declaration:

1. "There is a remembrance of the time of judgment" [as recent in the experience of those now obtaining deliverance].
2. "God gives to the people or creates in them a new capacity to respond to him [A new heart I will put within you]".
3. Knowing God and obeying God "is specified as another goal of the divine intervention".
4. "God restores their fortunes [and] returns them to the Land".
5. "The saving act involves repentance and turning toward God not as a prerequisite but as a consequence. The divine initiative: 'his I will' comes prior to the mention of any human initiative" (pp. 116-7). God's gracious initiative is unconditional as it must be, for what condition can a devastated Israel supply? (While we were yet sinners "dead in transgression and sin" CHRIST DIED FOR US).

Thus, "the mercy of the deliverance did not ignore the integrity of the judgment. In other words, this was perhaps the way that early deliverance preaching was shown to be distinct from false prophecy." "Jeremiah and Ezekiel trusted God unto death—the death of their state, the death of Judah's historical mission, the death of their countrymen. They trusted God's goodness, justice, and His effective plan for history [my emphasis as it is so critical for prophetic consciousness of the Endtime Church] as they faced the abyss. And they did not promise what, if anything, was to come afterward (i.e., when they proclaimed the judgments). Judah was asked by them to accept its end, on faith, without assurance of anything beyond" (p.103). God alone

must be that assurance and that faith alone is true faith when that death is the death of one's own previous views and assurances about God! It is as if to the degree that we honor and accept unbegrudgingly the judgments, to that degree also do we 'see' and have the privilege to proclaim the Restoration. Perhaps this is exactly what is at stake in making prophets prophets [i.e. the Church the Church!], not only to see, not only to proclaim, but by that proclamation to establish it!(Ez.37) As with the prophet Samuel (a deliverer for Israel in time of extremity, because he did not allow the word of judgment to Eli to fall to the ground), neither will He allow our word to fail—even that final and ultimate word that raises the dead from their graves—if we do not withhold the earlier words of judgment!

Indeed, at the final impasse of history, nothing less than a resurrected people will suffice. "Because God's will for the redemption of history can no longer tolerate the imperfection (sic) of His people as His revelatory vehicle, He says: 'I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord'(Jer. 24:7); I will put my law within them'(31:33); 'I will take the stony heart... and give them a heart of flesh'(Ez. 11:19)... [in a word], "God takes the initiative to make Israel both want to obey and capable of obeying... the self-determination of His creatures is placed in abeyance as the Creator God works a deliverance in the very heart of man" (pp. 132-3). "[This] redemption has cosmic dimensions. God's act of Transformation is amplified so that God as Creator perfects and refashions all of nature as well as Israel's inner condition... because God has the power to create, He has the power to redeem (p.141). God brings about an eschatological improvement [transfiguration?] in both the human and nonhuman parts of His creation."

This divine intervention, Raitt points out, has no "reason" to commend it... "In human terms, that intervention is not founded upon anything reasonable... God's intervention is its own explanation (p.145).God's initiative, God's prerogative stand alone. The whole thing is God's show (p.146)... Israel's failures do not defeat God" (p.150) Reason enough to see Israel's role as "witness nation" in an entirely other way? It is her failure that is the cause of demonstrating God's ultimate glory and not her success. Where is boasting then? It is abolished!

It becomes increasingly evident that the knowledge of God, as He in fact is, is a critical and strategic matter for Him in His dealings with Israel. Evidently, nothing more challenges and expands or deepens that knowledge than the issue of judgment itself. How do we reconcile the God of love, mercy and kindness with the God who himself performs acts of devastation unto annihilation upon those He calls "My people"? Yet more mind-boggling is that "Jeremiah and Ezekiel combined in their sayings an uncompromising message of judgment and an unconditional message of deliverance... neither negate one another, nor contradict one another." What needs to be asked is "Are the rules by which God operates really changed?"[Israel demonstrating in itself at the end of the age what the world and the church have failed rightly to understand; the centrality of Calvary in the pivotal principle of death and resurrection!] Raitt asks if such messages "move us into a new era for God's plan within history?"(pp. 174-5).

The question of God brings one invariably to the question of man. The two are inextricably joined and the error in the one invariably distorts the view of the other. Raitt therefore rightly asks whether the initiative taken by God toward man to fit him for redemption independent even of the capacity for repentance is not a statement about the "hopelessness of natural man" himself. And it no longer matters what man does, nothing is any longer conditional upon that... God as Creator changes the situation... so that God the Redeemer can act fully. "Deliverance creates a transformation which produces the repentance expected of God's elect... When people are brought to that level, then re-election is possible. But God brings them to that level by himself. God creates both salvation and the preconditions for it, both repentance and the preconditions for it, both forgiveness and the preconditions for it, both a new election relationship and the preconditions for it"(my emphasis, p.178).

"Never before has the Old testament presented such a comprehensive structure of deliverance; never before has it dealt so profoundly with the inner condition of man; never before was deliverance articulated not merely as temporary relief but as a full ongoing plan for the future... Just what can follow the kind of judgment which Jeremiah and Ezekiel preached? Only this can follow. This kind of judgment necessitates this kind of salvation (p.179). It is not enough for God to cleanse [Israel] in an act of forgiveness. God has to deal with their proven and enduring tendency toward waywardness. Perhaps in this respect, above all else, the deliverance is truly radical in what it undertakes" (p.181). [What is especially significant for us as Jews who have long presumed to being morally and ethically superior to others is that this creative and redemptive act of God brings a new millennial obedience not on the basis of our "moral achievement, but as a consequence of the act of redemption"(From Frohrer's Ezechiel, quoted by Raitt in a footnote, p.260)] "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things—to whom be glory forever"..

"The forgiveness, therefore, is purely an act of God's intervention, an exercise of his divine prerogative, an assertion of his freedom... Forgiveness is taken out of the sphere of religion and become once again part of the mystery of God. In religion people think they can formulate an understanding of the terms of God's action, the cause and effect relationships, the preconditions of divine favor. But here as in Hos. 11:8-9, God is merciful because he is God. This cannot be institutionalized. The whole deliverance message compels the recognition that God is now recapturing his God-ness, that God is reestablishing his freedom" (p.190).

“The Israel of the future is not the [progressively improved] Israel of the past. It is freed from its sin and changed in order to relate to its God in a new way. In such an atmosphere there can be a new covenant; certainly the old one will not do. [Now] There can be an everlasting covenant (Jer. 32:40; Ez. 37:26 p.199.) [Can we not see that the Millennium demands this permanent and enduring restructuring of the nation’s character and life? Nothing hereafter can be subject to change, relapse, or backsliding. This is not a condition to which Israel—or any—might ever have come by process of change or gradualism. What is required is that radical and total newness of life that could only emerge out of resurrection from death! And that the whole of Israel’s previous history was proof as well as preparation for this necessity. Why haven’t we as the Church seen this?]

What a ‘mitzvah’ for Israel herself as “only an ‘everlasting’ covenant speaks to deep psychological anxieties that had arisen over Judas’s life, identity and purpose being rooted in its [experience] of rejection and Exile (p.203). The people are creatively transformed into a new humanity; accordingly a new level of obedience and knowledge of God is required of them and made possible for them. This covenant is therefore inviolable” (p.201). Raitt speaks of “The annihilation of the national existence of Israel” as the necessary preliminary to this Millennial glory. But is it not also for us? Is our unwillingness for ‘annihilation’ (at the Cross) a basis for our rejection of Israel’s? How much does our flesh-sparing propensity blur if not oppose the majesty of God’s destiny for Israel through her own death? Except we have an eschatological [i.e., millennial and eternal] view and expectancy we miss the whole genius of this deliverance. Restoration is set in the context of a Theocratic Kingdom and will be missed by those who miss that. If we ourselves require transfiguration unto a glorified body in order to have part from the heavenlies, what is required of Israel from its place among the nations of the earth?

Our understanding of this mystery is critical to our participation: what was represented and demonstrated by Jeremiah, Ezekiel and other Old Testament prophets must be replicated corporately by the prophetic-remnant Church of the Last days! The prophet is no mere spectator but the agent that brings Israel to her hapless condition through the word of judgment but equally restores her through the word of Resurrection as event! Raitt quotes the distinguished Old Testament scholar, G. Von Rad who sees this:

To my mind, it is far more important to realize that there is this break which goes so deep that the new state beyond it cannot be understood as the continuation of what went before. It is as if Israel and all her religious assets are thrown back to a point of vacuum, a vacuum which the prophets must first create by preaching judgment and sweeping away all false security, and then fill with their message of the new thing (p.212)

What, we must ask, of the prophets themselves who are not above their own messages? Raitt interestingly defines eschatology as “the search for and discovery of a frame of reference to explain events which are not understandable in terms of any previously existing tradition. Within apocalyptic writings we find that world cataclysm, end of history, end of this order, universal judgment are not explainable in terms of conceptions [previously understood] thus the prophet ‘breaks ground’ for a new understanding of the sphere, level, extent and terms of God’s activity” [i.e., = of God Himself!] (p.215). “No one takes discontinuity as seriously as they do, and yet they end up with reaffirmation of hope and purpose for Israel. Let us suggest that this embodies discontinuity in religion, but continuity in God’s power and purpose (p.221)”. [How many of us who celebrate the latter would be astonished to learn that it is exactly our inability to suffer “discontinuity in religion” that keeps us from recognizing Israel’s eschatological hope and even oppose it? So much must the prophet of Judgment and Deliverance be divorced from his own life—let alone his own cherished categories. His death, therefore, must precede Israel’s!] Raitt writes, “Neither the end of God’s plan for redemption and self-revelation in and through history, nor his shift to a wholly new setting outside this history and this world could be understood in terms of any normative Israelite expectations [or ours—Charismatically or Evangelically] before this time, or in terms of any Israelite institutions” (p.220).

“Turning aside to see” so as to ask why was for Moses and remains for us the key to apostolic and prophetic sending. Who will peer into that bush that burns with the judgments of God? He it is who will hear his name called and encounter God anew in the midst of it. Israel, will soon, as then, wait in helpless and hopeless dependency for such a deliverer. It is for this that God waits; Israel is already ‘underway’.

Indeed, “It is hard for a Christian who takes the depth of Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s judgment and deliverance preaching seriously not to see a death and resurrection pattern: the death of human institutions, human alternatives, human possibilities, by an act of totally unmerited and unconditional divine mercy” (p.223) [Perhaps Israel’s own passing through that pattern will fit the nation also to recognize what it has up till now rejected, the death and resurrection of its own Messiah, Lord and God.] Ironically, “Everything which is tragic and a source of self-pity in exile from a human point of view is a source of freedom and celebration from God’s point of view” (p.229). “Exile [judgment, expulsion, defeat, captivity] is the cradle for theodicy and eschatology, death and resurrection, a trusting end and a new beginning. It precedes a second era of creation, a deeper construction out of faith elements that existed previously. The possibility of authentic faith is once again put in front of man... And so, amidst painful change, there is rejoicing for the opening to the future which God has created” (p.230). We will know that we share His view when we share His rejoicing—even in the midst of the judgments and calamities!