Isaiah 37:21-29: The Transformative Potential of a Public Metaphor

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In “The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic,” I have explored Israel’s life of prayer, worship, and ethical reflection as “a conversation behind the wall.” In that conversation, Israel, without explanation or apology to anyone else, engages in conversation about its own fundamental loyalty to Yahweh and its derivative, distinctive identity in the world. I have argued that this unexplained, unargued conversation is essential to Israel’s faithful life in the world. Israel could not exist without such a distinctive conversation. Moreover, I have suggested that in our Euro-American context of moribund Christiandom, such a “conversation behind the wall” is now crucial for the church, in order to recover and reconfess the church’s foundational loyalty and distinctive identity in the world.

I used the term “sectarian” for that conversation. I intended to affirm that the community of faith must have its own speech and cannot articulate its loyalty or its identity in speech that must be immediately available to and assessed by outsiders. It is that speech which is so crucial in the biblical community, and so neglected in the established church. I suggested that this “prior conversation” is a main concern of the contemporary educational, liturgical, and proclamatory enterprise of the church as it seeks to recover faithful vocation. Such a “prior conversation” permits the community of faith to begin with an alternative epistemology, distinctive from the governing rationality of our culture.

To be sure, there are costs in the notion of “sectarian.” The term suggests a withdrawal into a private sphere of social reality. In this paper, I will explore the way in which such a “prior conversation” may contribute to a “second conversation” “on the wall”, i.e., a conversation faithful people have with others, a conversation in which the sectarian categories of conversation have no special claim or privilege.
Our focal text of Isa 36-37 (2 Kg 18-19) characterizes an encounter between the Assyrian negotiators and the intimidated Judean king, Hezekiah. They meet at the wall of Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah retreats into the city behind the wall, to pray to Yahweh and to consult with the prophet, Isaiah.

1. Israel's conversation "behind the wall" is shaped by and in the service of a "public metaphor," namely, covenant. Two generations of scholarship, derivative from Mendenhall and Baltzer, have shown that covenantal language in ancient Israel is not expression in a religious idiom but is rather akin to the language of power relations in the international arena in the Ancient Near East. Israel seems to have decisively broken from the conventional language of religion and has preferred a political mode of discourse. Israel's primal speech of covenanting (rooted in Sinai) concerns governance, sovereignty, public order, public policy, public possibility, and the sanctions that go with such social transactions. Thus the dominant metaphor of Israel's faith is from the outset public and not narrowly Israelite. But at the same time, this metaphor, even if borrowed, is given concrete substance by Israel from its understanding of the distinctiveness of Yahweh, the Lord of the Exodus. Israel's peculiar discernment of public issues is derived from and informed by Israel's peculiar discernment of who Yahweh is, remembered from the Exodus narrative and articulated in covenant language. The dominant metaphor is profoundly public and not the property of a sectarian community. But it is public in a very specific way, because the metaphor is filled with Israelite experience. I shall argue that education in this tradition is to nurture people in this peculiar public metaphor.

In the idiom of this public language of covenant, the preferred metaphors for Yahweh are king, judge, and warrior. Israel conversely is cast in the role of vassal, suppliant or accused, and recruit or benefactor of Yahweh's power. These metaphors govern and shape Israel's "rules of speech." This is Israel's foundational speech. Israel has no prior speech that is religious, private, spiritual, but its speech is always public, political, and social. This preferred speech shapes the conversation behind the wall.