

MINORITY IMAGES: THE SERVANT, THE SHEPHERD

Chapter 17

In this chapter, Spong once again demonstrate the pattern followed by early Christians using Jewish traditions. Spong speculates during the celebration of Sukkoth, where they read the scriptures in the synagogues was the source narrative that shaped Jesus' story. The message that "weakness and powerlessness" will ultimately lead to "strength and meaning" has much older source than the New Testament gospels. Spong believes the *servant* or the suffering servant message was drawn from the Book of Isaiah, chapters 40 through 55. Today's scholars, including Spong, believe these chapters to be an addition to the original Scroll of Isaiah during Jew's final years under Babylonian servitude and their subsequent return to Israel, and thus known as the *Second Isaiah*.

The second image Spong describes is the *shepherd* drawn from the Book of Zechariah chapters 9 through 14, also known as the *Second Zechariah*. Both Isaiah and Zechariah references used in the gospels by early Christians relied on Jewish past to provide identifiable references for Jesus' message to the 1st century Jews.

Servant

The traditional Christian understanding of the Bible tells us that Jesus' came to teach, die and resurrect from the dead in accordance to the Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah. Spong disagrees with such claims. The concept of "giving yourself away" as Jesus did was a foreign experience for the early Christians. They could not put together the context of Jesus' message until they made the connection between the Second Isaiah and Jesus' story. Most likely during a Sukkoth session, the early Christians discovered Second Isaiah's message. The narrative of the abused and defeated that makes a spiritual conquest allowed them to make the connection between the prophecy and Jesus. The narrative in accordance to the prophecy was later added to Jesus' story and interpreted by later Christians to be God's underlying plan (or prophecy come true) for Jesus' life to teach, die and resurrect from the dead.

According to Spong, the Second Isaiah starts while the Jews are still under Babylonian control. He sites a pattern in these chapters, going from the God who will bring vengeance (복수) to their enemies, to the God of redemption (되찾기) who will free them from their bondage and finally to the God who will accomplish things, not with power but through weakness and self-effacement (말소).

As evident in the early parts of the Second Isaiah, God is a vengeful God. Spong's support for such views comes from *Isaiah 41:11-13 (NIV)*

11 "All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced; those who oppose you will be as nothing and perish. 12 Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them. Those who wage war

against you will be as nothing at all. **13** For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

According to Spong, this early part of the Second Isaiah shows human justice being projected to God during the time of the Jewish enslavement and suffering under the Babylonians. The Second Isaiah is seeking vengeance and wants God to punish their enemies.

The Second Isaiah moves on from this vengeful God to a redeeming God in *Isaiah 52:7-8 (NIV)*

7 How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” **8** Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes.

Spong believes, when these passages were written it coincides with the rise of King Cyrus and the Persia Empire. People knew of the eminent defeat of the Babylonians at the hands of the Persians. It created a glimmer of hope to those enslaved. These passages were written in anticipation of the Jewish people finding freedom through Cyrus’ army. Spong adds, these passages in fact refer to the arrival of Cyrus in Babylon, not Jesus’ arrival almost 600 years later.

The Second Isaiah’s final transformation occurs when the Jew arrive at their homeland. Several generations have lived in Babylon with stories and illusions of their homeland being more than what it really was in reality. When they arrived, their homeland was a wasteland in ruins. Their illusions of future grandeur, the reinstatement of Jewish dominance in the region died. However, in this somber moment, the Second Isaiah finds new role for Israel. The new role is not to seek power but to accept powerlessness as a way of life in *Isaiah 55:1-5*

55 “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. **2** Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. **3** Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. **4** See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples. **5** Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.”

In these passages, the Second Isaiah points out the material or physical things of the world are not as meaningful as spiritual things. Both Second Isaiah and gospel writers realized a “servant” could not accomplish his duties without undergoing abuse, rejection, persecution and death. This was the reality when the Jews returned home. They were forced to walk the path of a servant under the circumstances. They also realized this was what Jesus taught and the servant narrative was incorporated into to Jesus’ story.

Shepherd

According to Spong, the Second Zechariah had a bigger impact on the memory of Jesus than the Second Isaiah with the addition of its messianic expectation. Traditionally, the Second Isaiah was not a popular reading in the synagogues due to its lack of appeal to the early Jews. It focused on the defeated and the abused. (Remember that they have been defeated by the Assyrians and currently under Roman rule.) However, the later prophets like Ezra, Nehemiah and Zechariah, captured the imagination of the Jewish people with more focus on the rebuilding and purification (or cleansing) of the Jewish nation. These later prophets took what Second Isaiah started to a new level with the addition of messianic messages.

As Second Zechariah expanded on the Second Isaiah's message, the early Christians message also expanded. They too expanded the "powerless leading to strength" story and added the messianic message. Thus the Palm Sunday story and many of the related events link to it becomes critical in linking Jesus as the Messiah. A shepherd's role or the righteous leadership role was projected to Jesus by incorporating the messianic message to Jesus' story.

Spong rejects the claim by traditional Christians that the Palm Sunday story we've come to know where Jesus deliberately (according to the prophets) acted out the suffering and death as the messiah in accordance to the old scriptures. He believes the stories in the gospels related to Palm Sunday are taken from the Second Zechariah to reinforce their messianic claim made by the early Christians. The traditional understanding that takes us from Palm Sunday procession, to the betrayal, to the crucifixion is what the disciples believed after Jesus' death when they read Second Zechariah during the Sukkoth.

In shaping Jesus' story with the existing Jewish consciousness of the time, Spong fears many aspects of the true message is overwhelmed by the mythological aspects. Spong sites "The Five Gospels" by the Jesus Seminar where 84% of the acts and sayings of Jesus were not authentic. Regardless, Spong believes there must have been something so powerful about the Jesus experience that it made the early gospel writers believe appropriate to wrap Jesus around the scared Jewish symbols with messianic expectation and supernatural abilities. Therefore, Spong concludes we must recover the source of the myths, not hang on the myths.

Discussion

1) If Spong's assumptions regarding Jesus' stories are correct, we must study and question the source (Old Testament). If the source is also proven to be mythology, is there a distinction between Christianity and (genuine, not the snake charmer) gurus in India, Buddha,,etc?