I. Text

9 This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. 10 For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

Isaiah 54:9-10, NRSV

II. Introduction

To say that the people of Haiti have lived a precarious and tumultuous history is an tremendous understatement. This country of nearly 9.8 million people has endured many years of corrupt government officials, extreme poverty and hunger, catastrophic natural disasters and unfathomable violence. The people of Haiti have lived in exile on many complex levels, and the message of exile and return in the book of Isaiah can offer them hope and further form their identity as children of God. Through a brief exegesis of Haitian immigrants and refugees and an exegesis of Isaiah 54:9-10, I will articulate some connections between the Haitian experience of exile and return through hope in the stability and goodness of God’s covenantal promises.

III. Haitian immigrants: “The Refugees Nobody Wants”

In January 2001, I had the opportunity to travel to Port-au-Prince, Haiti with a group from my church. A few months before the trip I had a conversation with a friend who had worked for several years for the Coast Guard in South Carolina.
When I told him that I was headed to Haiti, he reacted with disgust, asking why I would want to go to a place with such “poor, smelly, and dirty” people. He told me stories about the Haitian boat people that he encountered during his time of service. He told me how he and other men would board the boats, hose the people down, and then either send them back on their way or detain them for questioning. As a 16 year old, I was both struck and disgusted by the way this man spoke of the Haitian people. How could anyone see their plight and not empathize or feel heartbroken over it? How could our government let its military treat Haitian refugees as animals?

Years later, I have come to discover just how prevalent is this type of “dealing” with Haitian immigrants. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the first wave of undocumented Haitian boat people, estimated around 25,000 people, entered the United States seeking asylum.\(^1\) In the early 1990s, another 10,000 or so Haitians arrived by boat.\(^2\) And in the last 10 years there have been approximately 1,000-2,000 Haitian boat people detained for asylum interview by the Coast Guard.\(^3\) According to the January 15, 2010 congressional report on the *U.S. Immigration Policy on Haitian Migrants*, “at least five federal agencies now handle Haitian migrants: DHS’s Coast Guard (interdiction); Customs and Border Protection (apprehensions and inspections); Immigration and Customs Enforcement


\(^2\) Ibid., 4.

\(^3\) Ibid., 1.
Undocumented Haitian immigration to the United States has been viewed by government officials as a prevalent problem with regards to national security, in addition to economic and social complications.

Haitians are often singled out and discriminated against over and above immigrants of other countries. Thissen notes that during the surge of boat people from both Cuba and Haiti in the early 80s, “the Haitians were treated much worse than the Cubans. Cubans were considered refugees, free to be with their families and friends while their asylum claims were processed, but the Haitians were rounded up and put in detention centers." The stories of their journeys mirror other immigrant groups in many ways, but their experiences are also drastically different.

For instance, Haitian boat people who could pay a smuggler to help them get into the country often paid anywhere between $500 and $1800 a person. The journey is often much more dangerous than that of other immigrant groups as they typically are on small boats and navigating at night. Many Haitians die on this journey from drowning, or sometimes from lack of food and water if they have run out and do not arrive when they expected to. Finally, although some Haitians pay smugglers to help them, often that includes only navigation. Thissen notes,

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4 Ibid., 8.
When smugglers were used, they did not provide all the services offered by the coyotes at the Mexican border (places to stay, inner tubes, vans, trucks to take them to final destinations, etc...). All the Haitian smugglers did was pilot the boats. When the Haitians reached Miami, they were left alone to find their way.\footnote{Ibid., 116.}

In addition to these circumstances, Haitians in America, specifically Miami, experience much discrimination as they are mostly uneducated, non-English speaking (many undocumented) immigrants who are living in bilingual (English and Spanish) Miami.\footnote{Margarita A. Mooney, \textit{Faith Makes Us Live: Surviving and Thriving in the Haitian Diaspora} (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 57.}

Haitians experience exile on so many levels, it is difficult and complicated to even begin to briefly describe. For Haitians still living in Haiti, exile comes in the forms of economic and political oppression. Their history is so steeped in corrupt leadership which has often sabotaged any chance the country had of regaining stability. For those who are afforded the opportunity to travel to the Dominican Republic, Cuba, or the United States, the economic advantages are minimal at best. But they endure further discrimination and “otherness.” And for any Haitians who leave the country and return at some point, they are often met with disdain by their fellow Haitians.

In \textit{Immokalee’s Fields of Hope}, Thissen recalls an interview with a Haitian man who left Haiti: he said, “A lot of Haitians have more respect for foreigners and white people than for those of us who left,” he told me. “They think we pick up money from the floor here in the U.S. They think money grows here, like leaves on
the trees.”9 This contempt that Haitian immigrants receive upon returning to the country makes their journey “home” feel like further exile. They are “the refugees nobody wants.”10

Finally, most recently the January 12, 2010 earthquake has further complicated and magnified the sense of exile the Haitians experience. Now many have experienced extreme grief at the loss of family and friends, destruction of their homes, and additional displacement. What does good news for the people of Haiti look like in the midst of such disaster, suffering, grief, and death?

**IV. Isaiah 54:9-10: Yahweh’s Lovingkindness and Covenant of Peace**

The book of Isaiah, with its themes of exile and return, provides an important framework for the hermeneutic of the Haitian people, specifically the diaspora, both immigrants and refugees. Verses 9 and 10 of chapter 54 will be considered here.

Isaiah falls into the genre of biblical prophecy, and its identified author is Isaiah son of Amoz. Wiersbe notes, “he began his ministry near the close of the reign of King Uzziah, or about 758 B.C.”11 There have been many approaches to identifying authorship of this book. One of the most prevalent, which Tremper Longman, III notes, include the Traditional approach which attributes authorship to one author for the entire book.12 Also, the Critical approach attributes authorship to two authors

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9 Thissen, *Immokalee’s Fields of Hope*, 133.


(one for chaps. 1-39 and one for chaps. 40-66), based on the identification of two historical settings in the text, varying theological emphases, and notable differences in language & style. Still others demarcate chapters 56-66 as a third part of Isaiah.

Regardless, chapter 54 falls into the wider literary context of the second half of Isaiah which is largely about the theme of return. Cuellar notes, “central to the biblical idea of diaspora is that the pain of exile never can be final, but may be ameliorated through return.” Return is an essential part of the theology of Isaiah, as it reverses and restores conditions of the exile. It is the part of Isaiah’s theology which gives hope to the exiled people.

Chapter 54 immediate follows one of the suffering servant poems (52:13-53:12). The audience of this book would have read this poem and understood some of the sacrificial language that Isaiah uses to convey the enormous amount of suffering the servant would undergo. Chapter 54 itself explicates the future glory of Zion: barren women shouting for joy (vs. 1), no need to be afraid or fear disgrace (vs. 4), the Lord calling back His people (vs. 6), the Lord’s unfailing love and covenant of peace present (vs. 10), rebuilding of the city (vs. 11-12), no more tyranny or terror (vs. 14), and vindication from the Lord (vs. 17), among others.

In light of chapter 54, the suffering servant poem would perhaps elicit a feeling of solidarity for the people in their suffering, coupled with the hopeful


14 Gregory Lee Cuellar, Voices of Marginality (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 5.
message of redemption and exaltation in 54. Brueggemann states, “…consider Jesus, wherein humiliation equals crucifixion and exaltation equals resurrection and ascension.”\(^{15}\) Though, as Brueggmann notes, Jesus is not “on its horizon,” this passage certainly provides context for thinking about the categories of suffering and exaltation, exile from God and return to identity in Him. The following chapter (55) continues some of these themes of redemption: imaginative, poetic renderings of God’s everlasting promises. Eating, buying wine and milk without money (vs. 1), putting trust in the Word of the Lord (vs. 8-11), and joy and peace in the Lord and His covenant (vs. 11-13).

Verse 9 and 10 of chapter 54 fall at the center of the text. Immediately preceding these verses is a sort of confession on the part of Yahweh that He did cause the exile (vs. 7-8). He says, “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you.”\(^{16}\) Hanson raises important questions for the exile community, “If God is the one who has brought on the catastrophe rather than some dark and evil agent, how can there be hope for release?”\(^{17}\) In an attempt to deal with this theological problem,


\(^{16}\) Isaiah 54:7-8, (NIV)

Hanson maintains that the transformation (i.e., the return) must also originate with God.\textsuperscript{18}

Walter Brueggemann focuses his extrapolation of these verses on the theme of Yahweh’s sovereignty over creation. In verse 9, Yahweh says, “This is like the days of Noah to me...” Brueggemann asserts that “this” refers to the exile and thus Yahweh is linking the causation and pain of the exile to the Flood in Genesis 6-9.\textsuperscript{19} With this likening of the Exile to the Flood, Brueggemann notes that “it is a season of deep chaos . . . caused and authorized by Yahweh . . . and it is about to end.”\textsuperscript{20} Verse 10 continues with the contrast of Yahweh’s lovingkindness and covenant of peace with the mountains and the hills. The Hebrew has parallels in the verb usage here. For though the mountains will depart (עשה ימים, with the root שומש), Yahweh’s lovingkindness will not depart (עשה ימים, with the root שומש). Though the hills will shake or tremble (תומתנה, with the rootموت), Yahweh’s covenant of peace will not shake or tremble (תומת, with the rootموت). Brueggemann observes that this verse conveys that “Yahweh’s promise is more durable and more reliable than is creation itself.”\textsuperscript{21}

One of the most important theological themes and implications of these two verses is that first and foremost God is sovereign. He is sovereign over nature, He is sovereign over the exile community. His promises will remain no matter what obstacles the exile community faces, whether violence and oppression by enemies,

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 170.

\textsuperscript{19} Brueggemann, \textit{Isaiah 40-66}, 155.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 155.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 155.
or even in the face of natural disasters. He desires to give life to His people. This verse may be read on both a poetic, metaphorical level, and also, I would assert on a more literal level. Yahweh can and will indeed keep His promise even when everything else in the world is in ruins, including the very dirt and earth upon which we stand.

This theme of the stability of God’s promises and salvation runs through the entire biblical text. In Genesis 8:21 the Lord promises, “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.” Similarly, in 9:11, He says to Noah, “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” This same sentiment can be found in other places in Isaiah (51:6) as well as in the Psalms (46:1-3).

In the New Testament, the promise of the Lord’s lovingkindness and covenant of peace is seen in various ways. The writer of Hebrews assures his readers of the certainty of God’s promises in 6:13-20, where he reminds his audience of God’s faithfulness in granting to Abraham what He had promised. As we saw in Isaiah chapters 53 and 54, the suffering servant poem (promise of a Messiah to bear the iniquity of the people) precedes the advent of the fullness of the Kingdom (glory of Zion). When read in this light, it is not hard to see how Jesus fulfills this Messianic expectation. As Yahweh promised, the suffering servant would bear the brunt of man’s violence in expectation of the coming Kingdom. Matthew
writes, “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”\textsuperscript{22}

A major component of the return from exile is a re-membering of God’s people into the covenant promises. In chapter 54, Isaiah reminds the exilic community that though they are in dire circumstances, they should not lose hope for the fullness of what is in store for them is not yet completed. What they are presently experiencing is not the final answer. As they return, they will be brought back to their identity as the chosen people. Cuellar asserts, “in addressing matters of faith, the diasporic experiences of exile and return in Second Isaiah can serve as categories for various forms of contemporary social movement such as international migration and cross-border movement.”\textsuperscript{23} There are many connections that can be made between the Judean exilic community of Isaiah and the Haitian experience of exile due to oppression, poverty, and displacement due to natural disaster. These connections will be explored in the final section of this paper.

V. The Trouble With “Return” (3 pages)

A major difficulty that exists in extrapolating what return might look like for the Haitian people is that many of them have little desire to physically return to their “home” in Haiti. Though there is at times an imaginative dream to see the country rise out of the ashes of violence, poverty, and corruption, the reality is for many that if they stay or return there, they will not live. Additionally, as was mentioned earlier, those who do return are often faced with contempt from other Haitians. Where as

\textsuperscript{22} Matthew 1:21, (NIV)

\textsuperscript{23} Cuellar, \textit{Voices of Marginality}, 2.
many Mexicans have a romanticized view of Mexico and the desire to return home
to their families, Haitians often may not have the same sentiments about their
country. This is not entirely true, as there are many immigrants who work very hard
to save money to bring their family abroad from Haiti. And many who are in the
United States working send money home, which both supports their family and the
economy of Haiti. But, as Cuellar reminds us, “The migrant's desire to feel at home
is never fully satisfied because the homeland, frozen in the time of the migrant's
mind-no longer exists.” Whatever romanticized view (or not) of Haiti that the
diaspora holds is not always based in the reality of the homeland.

The major point of connection between the Haitian experience of exile and
Isaiah 54:9-10 has to do with return, but not necessarily in the sense of a physical
return. This passage from Isaiah stresses the stability and faithfulness of God in
His covenant of peace and lovingkindness. In particular, the stability of these things
are is contrasted to very physical, tangible experiences that the Haitians have
recently endured during the earthquake. The mountains actually did depart in some
ways, and the hills really did tremble. Their homes were destroyed, their families
killed or injured. In many ways, it seems there is little to hope for.

The Haitian people have lived very much in a long period of exile that would
find much meaning in the consideration of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. There is
pain, humiliation, death, violence, abandonment, waiting, despair, insecurity, and
darkness in much of Haiti’s history. They are an afflicted people. They live in

\[24\] Ibid., 85.
constant oppression from their own leaders and are discriminated against by countries like the Dominican and United States, which could actually help their situation. And yet despite their life in an extended season of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, there is hope in resurrection. Mooney states, “the Haitians link together in their broken experiences and finding meaning in their suffering that drives them to keep fighting back the darkness and cling to hope.”\textsuperscript{25} Additionally, because many Haitians are also devoted Catholics, they have a deep theology of the incarnation and as a result view “the suffering of Good Friday as always tied to the rejoicing of Easter Sunday.”\textsuperscript{26}

Isaiah 54 ties these two realities together--there is and will be pain, grief, sorrow, and death for the suffering servant and that is tied to the exaltation and lifting up of the servant in the future of Zion. In the midst of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, in the midst of death and abandonment, God's people can trust in His promises that His lovingkindness and covenant of peace will remain. The Resurrection will come. The world will be made new, into what God has intended for His creation.

Return for the Haitian people becomes perhaps less about a physical return to Haiti and more about a return to their identity first and foremost as a resurrection people. It is about holding onto whatever small graces and redemption they find in the midst of the hardship of their lives. For, as Isaiah records, the Lord says,

\textsuperscript{25} Mooney, \textit{Faith Makes Us Live}, 73.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 74.
“In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances, to say to the captives, ‘Come out,’ and to those in darkness, ‘Be free!’ “They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill. They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water.²⁷

It is about understanding that “divine protection is at the root of Second Isaiah’s message of return,”²⁸ and being able to really see God’s protection of His people in the midst of the chaos, violence, and despair.

VI. Conclusion

When I travelled to Haiti in 2001, my group did some work with a church in Port-au-Prince called Vine Evangelical Baptist Church. The church, for the past few years, has been raising money and constructing a new building. The new building is located just blocks away from the National Palace, home to President René Préval. During the earthquake in January, the Palace was nearly destroyed. The Vine Church managed to resist the force of the 7.0 earthquake and remains standing with only minor damage. It had no structural damage whatsoever.

Certainly the “church” in Haiti is not confined within the walls of this building, by any means. But in many ways the Vine Church building, and more importantly the people who gather there each Sunday to worship the risen Christ, serve as a beacon of hope in Port-au-Prince for in the midst of the exile they have experienced as a result of their tumultuous history and are experiencing in displacement from

²⁷ Isaiah 49:8-10, NIV

²⁸ Cuellar, Voices of Marginality, 130.
their homes and families. The message that is proclaimed is similar to the words of the Lord according to Isaiah--the mountains did depart and the hills did tremble, but His lovingkindness has not departed and His covenant of peace will not tremble. This is the good news: those who put their faith in God, who endure Good Friday and Holy Saturday with hope in Easter Sunday, in the Resurrection, shall be a part of the Kingdom where barren women shout for joy, where there is no need for fear of disgrace, where the Lord calls back His people from exile, where cities are rebuilt, where there is no more tyranny or terror, and where God’s people are vindicated and invited to the feast of the Lord.
Bibliography


