

# There and Back Again

## Reading an Exilic Text for the Post 1987 Operation Lallang Malaysian Church



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### Introduction

The task of the paper is to show how an Old Testament exilic text, in this particular case, Isaiah 40-55, can be read in the light of and allowed to speak to a contemporary situation: the post-1987 Operation Lallang Malaysian Church.

### 1. The Post 1987 Operation Lallang Malaysian Context

I begin with a clarification of a few terms. Operation Lallang was the code name used by the Malaysian government in 1987 to refer to the employment of the Internal Security Act (or in short, ISA) to arrest without detention almost a hundred persons. This was not the first time the ISA has been used in Malaysia, as it has its origins during the days of the Emergency in the late 50s to the early 60s when the country was beleaguered with the communist threat. The initial aim of the ISA was to use to detain without trial (up to two weeks) persons suspected of communist sympathies. This was to enable the Government to extract, it hoped, vital information from the detainees as well as prevent them from further contact with their sources. Of late, the ISA has been used for other reasons, for example, to detain without trial persons involved in drug convictions, those involved in the forgery of identity cards and passports, and so on. Hence, the Opposition parliamentarians have been unequivocally vocal in demanding that the ISA be abolished. Their argument was that other laws could be utilised to arrest people under the various categories of offences. To detain a person without trial was against the personal rights of a person, as enshrined in the universal laws of human freedom and dignity.

In a single day in October 1987, the Malaysian Government swooped almost a hundred persons of different races, religions and political persuasions under the draconian ISA. Among the pickups were the usual opposition parliamentarians, including the famous Opposition Leader, Mr. Lim Kit Siang, from the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and a few Malay politicians. However, what was unusual this time was the detention of a number of Christians. Some of them were Christian social activists who were accused by the government of being Marxists in orientation. One of the Christians arrested worked with the Council of Churches Malaysia (CCM) in the Research Unit, one was a University lecturer accused of being involved in evangelism to the Malay Muslims, another was a Baptist pastor similarly accused. Among the detainees were two Muslim converts to Christianity, Joshua Jammaluddin and Hilmy Mohd Noor. For the first time in Malaysian history, Christians were detained under the ISA for crimes of either being Marxists or for attempting to convert Malay Muslims to Christianity or for being Christian converts from Islam. In the past, from the time of independence in 1957, no Christians have been detained under the ISA for such reasons. The church, which always cherished her religious freedom and the choice to propagate the Gospel, found itself antagonised by the Government's action. The Malaysian Church had always thought that it would never be 'touched' by the Government. After all, two of the mainline denominations are registered by an act of parliament, while the majority of the other denominations are legally registered with the Registrar of Societies. Now the Malaysian church was found vulnerable and not even spared from the draconian powers of the ISA.

How did the Malaysian church respond to this national crisis? Unfortunately, it was not too well. The morning edition of the Star national newspaper showed a blackened photo, to protest against the Government's use of the ISA. While the rest of the nation raised a hue and cry against the injustice, the Malaysian church was unduly silent. In the days and weeks that followed, the Malaysian church did not respond in its Christian magazines and publications or local church newsletters with the single exception of the Catholic Asian News (CAN) which openly called all Roman Catholics to pray and hold masses for those detained, regardless of whether the detainees were Roman Catholics or not. The self-imposed muzzled silence of the rest of the Malaysian church was perplexing and baffling. Why did it respond in this manner? Was it purely out of fear? Fear of further repercussions from the Government, which was already emboldened to use the ISA and which, it was felt, would not hesitate to use it again? Was the self-muzzling an act of restraint lest the more vocal prophetic voices within the church lashed out against the Government's actions and caused more harm in that volatile situation? From hindsight, we are better able now to judge the response of the Malaysian church. But at that time, what would have been our response in the midst of the confusion, despair and despondency that had crept into the church?

## **2. Reading the Exilic Text of Isaiah 40-55**

Here is where we come to the reading of the text, from 'there and back again'. Let us go 'there' first, to the biblical text. I have chosen the block of sixteen chapters which make up Isaiah 40-55, which has been commonly accepted as a unified block of material relatively untouched by later redactions. Isaiah 40-55 are some of the most captivating chapters in the Old Testament, speaking as they do a message of salvation to despondent exiles who have lost all hope in Yahweh's deliverance from the Babylonians. Although from a critical viewpoint, the author of these chapters remains an enigmatic figure, Second Isaiah is recognized as a superb author and poet with immense literary gifts of expression. The poetry that he employed scaled new heights as he sought to lift his despairing fellow exiles from their doubts and discontent. This raises some pertinent questions: What made his message so buoyant and hopeful? Was it the poetry that he employed in the hope of evoking a hopeful response from the exiles? Was it the content of the message that he delivered that greatly encouraged them? Underlying his message, was there a rhetorical strategy that gave his poetry a discernible structure and pattern that was so appealing, not just to his fellow exiles but to others? I think the answer is 'yes'. It is a rhetorical strategy which enables the prophet to promote his message to the exiles by first winning their hearing, capturing their attention and then meeting their deepest needs. If this is so, then it may be workable even today, as the church seeks to win the hearing of those who are despairing of and despondent with Yahweh, to continue to capture their attention and to meet their deepest needs with a message that will comfort and bring hope. The relevance of this rhetorical reading strategy for the Malaysian church today deserves further exploration.

The whole sixteen chapters of Isaiah 40-55 is a powerful rebuttal to the charges of the exiles against Yahweh. Yahweh's message through the prophet is both one of disputation with the charges brought by the exiles and one of proclaiming salvation to them. The message of the sixteen chapters is in the form of a proclamation of salvation where every lament and charge is answered convincingly on Yahweh's behalf. He refutes these charges by counter-arguments, use of analogies and vivid imagination, and appeals to past events and Yahweh's power in nature. The prophet in delivering Yahweh's message to the exiles also employed various rhetorical devices to heighten the sense of the message: parallelisms, chiasms, metaphors, anthropologisms, and repetitions. The sixteen chapters are not just a transcript of an encouraging speech to the exiles about their hopeful future but also a vision of national restoration. The prophet also made use of strong symbolic language to transfigure

the present historical landscape to the near future. It encouraged the use of a strong imagination to envisage what the future would be and could be like.

### **3. Relevance and Insights for the Church Today in Malaysia**

We now proceed to the 'here', the present reality in Malaysia. Walter Brueggemann speaks of the Exile as a powerful metaphor for communities facing or already in exile. He draws a 'dynamic equivalence' between Israel's exilic situation and that of the church in America today. Thus it is possible to read the American church as being similarly 'in exile'.

It may be correct to argue from analogy, albeit a partial analogy, that the Malaysian church today is similarly 'in exile' although the exile metaphor seems to have little bearing on the situation in Malaysia. What has something that happened almost 2,500 years ago to do with the Malaysian situation? In what sense is today's Malaysian church 'in exile'? The church is basically middle-class, generally well off and prosperous and is not accustomed to seeing herself as being in exile. Yet the church in Malaysia may be considered so, for Exile does not simply need to be a geographical fact but can also be 'a theological decision'. Exile also does not always need to mean being in an alien and hostile environment. There is a debate whether the Jewish exiles were really in 'exile' in Babylon since from Jeremiah 29:5-7, they seem to be better off than what is generally envisaged. We will not enter into this debate but to note that a community can still be in 'exile' even if external conditions are not hostile.

The Malaysian church is a community in an 'alien' environment in the sense that the God it worships is not regarded as the ruling god or power. Consequently, the Malaysian Church is often seen as an 'alien' religious institution, an image it needs to be constantly aware of and to shed. As a minority in a multi-pluralistic and multi-religious society, the adherents of other religions and faiths overshadow it. It is constantly bombarded by definitions of reality shaped by consumerism and materialism that are fundamentally alien to the gospel. The church faces negative propaganda and treatment from many quarters, sometimes including the Government. Increasingly, the future for the church does not seem to be rosy and bright. The church being in exile raises some theological problems. It faces a crisis of faith where Christians question the ability and willingness of Yahweh to act in these present difficult circumstances. In a multi-religious society, which and whose god is in control? Being the God of a so-called minority, can Yahweh really rescue the 'captives from the mighty'? Under Muslim rule in the past, the dhimmi system was applied to non-Muslims. Although the people of the Book (Jews and Christians included) were protected, being a dhimmi implied a second-class citizenry. Can Yahweh ensure a bright future to those who seek to obey him while living in such oppressive circumstances? Will he ensure that the dhimmi system will not be implemented by the Government or whichever political group when it takes over the political reins? Or has Yahweh given up on his people, leaving them to be in exile on their own?

The church's response to these external threatening forces has been to deny, accommodate to, resign itself to or resist them. Firstly, to deny that the church is in 'exile' is to be like the proverbial frog in the kettle slowly being boiled alive, or like the ostrich burying its head in the sand. To deny that the church is in exile does not solve anything. Secondly, to accommodate to the general prevailing socio-economic-political-religious climate often means that the church becomes unaware of its exilic status. One needs to be wary of the guise of religious toleration as it may lead to the demise of the institutional church. In the past, in Muslim-dominated lands, churches stripped of their active Christian witness often met its demise through negative growth. Thirdly, to be resigned is to bring in a climate of pessimism and cynicism within the already depressing socio-political conditions, to lose all hope of the future and possibly even blame Yahweh's seeming lack of action and initiative in putting right their

present troubles. Hence, many well-to-do Christians choose the option of emigration to foreign lands where the grass seems greener and the future seems more secure. Fourthly, to resist, like some of the exiles in Babylon who did not accept the foreign culture and domination, would be to seek to actively rebel against these forces or to actively pursue their downfall.

But there is another way to respond instead of denying reality, accommodating to the situation, being resigned to their fate or actively resisting the powers to be. Let us go back 'there' to the biblical text. The rhetorical strategy employed by Second Isaiah in Isaiah 40-55 is to present a positive picture of the future and to evoke a positive response from the exiles. There is no need to lose all hope and go into despair and despondency. 'Fear not' is a constant message of Second Isaiah to the despondent exiles. Yahweh will do a 'new thing'. He will open a way through the desert and lead his people home. This brings us back to the 'here'. This message can be extremely relevant for the church in Malaysia. In fact, it offers a fifth alternative to the Malaysian church - to counter these forces of change by providing hope and encouragement, challenge and renewal, and obedient and faithful living. It means presenting to the Malaysian church a positive picture of the future (what can the future be?) and evoking a positive response from it (how can it make it happen?). It entails providing the church with an alternative hopeful imagination of what the future could be if only it seeks to trust in Yahweh. This strategic reading of the text would seek to counter the negative charges brought by the church about Yahweh's inability and unwillingness to intervene and help in the present difficult circumstances. It would seek to show and demonstrate from past acts in nature as well as in history that Yahweh is able and willing to help his people. It would seek to counter the disillusionment and doubt faced by the church, which are generated by the prevailing culture and climate. It would seek to lift up the church from the downward spiral of self-pitying and helplessness and thrust it forward beyond the difficult circumstances to a glorious and hopeful future. The reading strategy is a workable alternative to draw the Malaysian church out of an exilic mentality. It is indeed a paradigm for encouragement, comfort and renewal and possibly even future survival for the Malaysian church.

Thus, in our reading of the Exilic text of Isaiah 40-55 and the present socio-political-economic-religious situation in Malaysia, the 'here' and 'there', we realize that there are immense possibilities of bringing a text constructed centuries ago for a different group of people for a different purpose, to bear upon present realities. The post-1987 Operation Lallang Malaysian church can find a fresh, relevant and applicable message from an old text that may seem initially to have little relevance today. The hermeneutical gap of almost 2,500 years can be bridged by reading the ancient written text into our present living textual situation and by bringing our situation into the written text, the 'here' and the 'there' interacting in a hermeneutical continuum.

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