

Taking Stock, Taking Heart, Taking Action: Australia, refugees and the ethics of Isaiah

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ABSTRACT

“Taking Stock, Taking Heart, Taking Action” applies the ethics of Isaiah to Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. Since Federation, Australia’s responses to asylum seekers and refugees has ranged from positive encouragement and welcome (post-WWII) to punitive discouragement and detention (current ‘illegal maritime arrivals’). Representative passages and themes across the book of Isaiah are explored and examined to support a consistent ethical emphasis on the compassionate and just treatment of the marginalised and needy. When evaluating and challenging Australian policy in the light of Isaiah’s ethics, the sovereignty of God over world issues is emphasized, particularly in times of political turbulence. Isaiah 1–39 calls for a taking stock of the use (or misuse) of language and power, with righteousness and justice used as yardsticks against which God judges the attitudes and actions of people. After judgement, Isaiah 40–55 encourages a taking heart, as the voices of the marginalised and the suffering servant (in this case asylum seekers and refugees) point to a future beyond what has previously been experienced or hoped for. Finally, in Isaiah 56–66 the true fast of God addresses the need for action, both for others and for ourselves..

Introduction

Although using Biblical texts as a relevant foundation of critique may be difficult, ancient prophets spoke into the political arenas of their time. The prophet Isaiah’s forewarnings took place in the middle of a succession of genuine crises in foreign policy and there is in the book, as a whole, a capacity to “engage with the predominant secular discourse of corporate governance” that is concerned not only with the lives of those who acknowledged the lordship of Yahweh but which spoke to surrounding nations as well (Isa 45:6).

While Isaian scholarship has undergone a number of changes in recent years, for the purposes of this article, I will use Bernhard Duhm’s understanding of the book of Isaiah as composed of three quite distinct sections: Taking Stock (Isaiah 1-39), Taking Heart (Isaiah 40-55) and Taking Action (Isaiah 56-66).

Australia and refugees

People flee their homes because of natural disasters and human conflicts, but unfortunately, the flight to safety can also expose them to trauma in the countries in which they seek refuge.¹

Australia has a varied history when it comes to welcoming persecuted peoples. At Federation, the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (which became known as the 'White Australia' policy) placed limits on immigration and at the same time indigenous Australians were classified as flora and fauna (unchanged until the mid-1960s²). Both policies reflected underlying supremacist notions of white Australians and a fear of people who did not share their skin colour, culture, language or faith.³

After World War II large numbers of people displaced by war were assisted and in 1951 the Convention on Refugees came into being, of which Australia is a signatory. The "populate or perish"⁴ principle of the mid-1950s to early 1960s, programs such as Operation Reunion and Bring out a Briton campaign (£10 Poms) brought many new migrants to Australia. Four thousand refugees were welcomed in the wake of the Hungarian uprising, with many migrants employed on the Snowy Mountains Scheme in NSW of the 1950s.⁵ In 1965, indigenous Australians were given the vote and the early 1970s saw the end of the 'White Australia' policy.⁶ On the humanitarian front, the Determination of Refugee Status committee was formed in 1978 in the wake of the Vietnam War and programs expanded to include migrants from South America, the Middle East and Africa.⁷ After the 1989 student protest and military response in China's Tiananmen Square, thousands of Chinese students studying in Australia sought asylum.⁸

In 1996, the Australian Government connected its onshore and offshore programs for the first time, the only nation to do so. Thus the offshore quota is reduced commensurately for each

¹ Abraham Mamer, "Refugee Plight", in *Gesher: the official journal of The Council of Christians and Jews*, 4/5 (2014): 55–58, 55.

² Remember Your History, "Australian Flora and Fauna Act". accessed September 29, 2015. <http://donotforgetourhistory.weebly.com/australia.html>

³ At this point it is essential to note that any reference to national character or psyche in this paper is to a white perspective. Indigenous peoples do not have the same issues with immigration that white Australians do, and have suffered in a similar manner at the hands of white Australians as asylum seekers and refugees. In May 2015, Ray Jackson, president of the Indigenous Social Justice Association said, "Locking people up doesn't solve any problems, it only causes harm. We have seen that time and time again with Indigenous people, and now the government is making the same mistake with asylum seekers. This has to stop. The Australian Government must stop imprisoning Indigenous people, and they must stop imprisoning asylum seekers. I am proud to welcome people in need into our community."

"Aboriginal solidarity with refugees," accessed September 19, 2015, http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aid=31815#.VfyqzIJ-_IV

⁴ Department of Immigration and Border Protection, accessed June 10, 2015, <http://www.immi.gov.au/about/anniversary/immigration-history-1956-1965.htm>

⁵ Immigration history, 1956–1965.

⁶ Australian Electoral Commission, "History of the Indigenous Vote." accessed September 29, 2015. http://www.aec.gov.au/indigenous/files/history_indigenous_vote.pdf

⁷ DIBP, Immigration history, 1976–1985.

⁸ DIBP, Immigration history, 1986–1995

onshore asylum seeker resettled.⁹ Following violence in Serbia and East Timor in the late 1990s, nearly 4000 Kosovars and 2,000 East Timorese were given safe haven in Australia.¹⁰ Temporary protection visas, which prohibit recipients from applying for permanent residency or family reunion visas, were introduced and the processing centres in Nauru, Papua New Guinea and Christmas Island were opened.¹¹

By the second decade of the 21st century the language surrounding asylum seekers grew increasingly negative, with asylum seekers commonly labelled 'boat people' and 'illegals', contributing to a shift from a humanitarian focus to one of maintaining border security.¹² By 2014, Australia's asylum policy was incorporated into Operation Sovereign Borders, a three-pronged program of turning back the boats, offshore processing on Nauru and Manus Island and offshore resettlements in Nauru, Papua New Guinea and Cambodia; anywhere, in fact, but Australia.¹³

In less than 100 years, Australia's immigration policies shifted from measures that protected asylum seekers and refugees and used civil or criminal measures only if necessary through ones that were more deterrence-based until under the current government there is a primary reliance on military intervention.¹⁴

Evaluating and challenging Australian policy in the light of Isaiah's ethics

Although concern for the protection of the widow and orphan was common in the ancient Near East, in practice those without power, like widows and orphans, suffered the most when facing Israel's legal system.¹⁵ Prophets encouraged the people to be open and generous in a way that surpassed any legal obligation so that they would, of their own volition, do those things which they themselves saw as good. The concepts of acting rightly and living justly are to be found in all cultures, with the Australian concept of mateship and a fair go being a less formal indication of its commitment to these two concepts. For Isaiah, partnering for justice was something that God initiated; however, there was a necessary human component.

⁹ Refugee Council of Australia, "Asylum Insight: Humanitarian Program", accessed May 15, 2015, <http://www.asyluminsight.com/humanitarian-program#.VVWHkP>

¹⁰ DIBP, Immigration history, 1996–2005.

¹¹ DIBP, Immigration history, 1996–2005.

¹² Andrew Wilkie, "Communique for the Office of the Prosecutor regarding Mr Andrew Wilkie MP's application relating to crimes against humanity in Australia", accessed April 14, 2015, <http://www.andrewwilkie.org.au>, 4.

¹³ Nikolas Feith Tan, "Europe rejects the 'Australian Solution'", Eureka Street, accessed May 15, 2015, <http://www.eurekastreet.co.au/article.aspx?aeid=43930#.VVWG>

¹⁴ Bob Douglas, Claire Higgins, Arja Keski-Nummi, Jane McAdam and Travers McLeod, *Beyond the boats: building an asylum and refugee policy for the long term*, Australia21 in collaboration with the Centre for Policy Development and the Andrew and Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law at UNSW, November 2014, 18.

¹⁵ Eryl W. Davies, *Prophecy and Ethics: Isaiah and The Ethical Tradition of Israel*, Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1981, 102.

Isaiah himself preached for 40 years to a deaf and blind nation (Isa 6:10),¹⁶ and while there was nothing faulty about his message, the people were unable to understand or comprehend what he was talking about. Many people in Australia form their opinions about asylum seekers by listening to talk-back radio and certain dominant media outlets and choose to live as if Australia is isolated from larger world issues. Despite this deafness and blindness, a seed was promised amidst the stumps (Isa 6:13), a seed of compassion and humanity that may, in the Australian context, one day bear fruit.

Taking Stock

As God's spokesmen, the prophets brought a "lawsuit against recalcitrant Israel."¹⁷ In a similar vein, the use, and misuse, of language and power in discourses around Australian refugee and asylum seeker responses and policies can be evaluated.

Taking Stock of Language - Isaiah 5:10-6:13

Isaiah 5:10–30 contains a series of *hōy* (woe) oracles which condemn, followed by consequences, introduced by *lākēn* (therefore).¹⁸ Three of the woes are pertinent for this discussion: the decrying of deceit in general (vs. 18), the denouncing of a perverse morality exhibited in a language of deceit (vs. 20) and the condemnation of the denial of justice to the innocent (vs. 23). The opening image of vs. 18 indicates that deceit was a studied and intentional action of the people. In language that calls evil good and good evil (vs. 20) there is a distorted morality which leads to the guilty being acquitted whilst the innocent are denied justice (vs. 23).

Although the context and genre of Isaiah 6 are quite different to the preceding ones, the theme of pure speech remains constant. Isaiah identifies and confesses the uncleanness of both his and the nation's lips. The prophet is then cleansed, his guilt assuaged and sin forgiven. The role of lips, of speech and language, is very important for God. Verses 9b–10 indicate that Isaiah's preaching will only exacerbate the deafness and blindness of the people—that what was highlighted by the woes will remain unacknowledged.¹⁹ However, a positive word is given - that out of all this burning judgment a holy seed will come (vs. 13).²⁰

Walter Brueggemann states that "words, speech, language, and phrases shape consciousness and define reality."²¹ Prophetic voices declare that the people have been sold

¹⁶ I am indebted to Eugene Peterson for this understanding of Isaiah, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation in Following Jesus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007).

¹⁷ Greg Forster, *Christian Ethics in the Old Testament*, (Bramcote, England: Grove books, 1998), 6.

¹⁸ Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39, with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans. 1996, 124.

¹⁹ Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, John Knox Press. 1989, 56.

²⁰ Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39: Interpretation*, 59.

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1978, 66–67.

a lie by those with power over the dissemination of words – the media. The symbolic cleansing of Isaiah 6: 6–8 raises the possibility that God’s people then, and Australia now, have the opportunity to exchange the lie for truth and to expose the unreality of spurious claims; such as, that terrorists are entering Australia on the pretext of being asylum seekers.²²

Successive governments in recent decades have used language to define the ‘reality’ around asylum seekers in quite negative terms, such as ‘illegals’, ‘unauthorised maritime arrivals’ and ‘queue-jumpers’. When the process for selecting which refugees from camps are eligible for resettlement in a third country is “more like a lottery than an orderly process,”²³ the negative epithet of ‘queue-jumper’ is both inappropriate and inaccurate, while the use of terms such as ‘lawful’ and ‘unlawful’ asylum seekers is questionable given that there is no real basis to assume that unauthorised arrivals (unlawful) are in fact of greater risk to Australia than those who arrive holding valid visas (lawful).

Isaiah 5:18 condemns the pursuit of falsehood. By employing language which conflates complicated policy to a three-word slogan (‘stop the boats’), Australia is floundering in a false reality of its own making. The secrecy surrounding Operation Sovereign Borders does not allow for a transparent and open assessment of government policy, while those who seek to expose its culpabilities and errors are vilified and threatened with prosecution.²⁴

In the face of terrorism, real leadership is needed from our politicians and the media to bring truth into the public arena rather than using public fear for political ends. When those who apply to us for assistance are treated as adversaries the lines are further blurred between what is good and what is evil.²⁵ Not every action by asylum seekers is a terrorist conspiracy (Isa 8:12a) and neither should the behaviour of one refugee, such as Man Monis and the Lindt Café siege in Sydney 2014²⁶, engender fear of all refugees (Isa 8:12b). It may be that Australians are both deaf and blind, preferring to believe our own lies than allow the truth to reclaim us, personally and nationally.

²² Brueggemann, *Imagination*, 66–67.

²³ Peter Mares, *Borderline: Australia’s Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers*. Sydney University of NSW Press. 2001, 19.

²⁴ From 1 July 2015, anyone employed in detention facilities, is liable for prosecution if they speak of what they experience to media.

The Drum, “Border Force Act: detention secrecy just got worse”, accessed September 4, 2015.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-28/barns-newhouse-detention-centre-secrecy-just-got-even-worse/6501086>

²⁵ Mares, *Borderline*, 98.

²⁶ The Australian, “Sydney Siege”, accessed September 6, 2015.

http://www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/sydney-siege?gclid=CLag_cnj4ccCFVQGvAodXnoNZg

Taking Stock of Power - Isaiah 9:8-10:4

Although the people have failed to turn to Yahweh (Isa 9:12–16) and judgement is to come against all Israel (Isa 9:8–11), the chief aim of the prophet is to condemn those who have ultimate responsibility for this state of affairs—the leaders of God’s people (Isa 10:1–4).²⁷ The prophet condemns those who, because of their position, manipulate the legal system to achieve their own ends—in this case the confiscation of property and the attachment of holdings belonging to poorer and less-powerful groups.²⁸ Just because an action is legal, it is not necessarily just.

In a democracy, the government is elected by the people and called to represent the people. That does not, however, absolve ordinary citizens from responsibility or guilt when it comes to the actions and policies of their government. Nonetheless, leaders do come under greater scrutiny because of their position of power and privilege. The time of reckoning spoken of in Isaiah 3:1–3 is relevant today, with Australia and its leaders to be called to account for their behaviour towards refugees - Australian Member of Parliament Andrew Wilkie has already made representation to the International Court in The Hague, calling for an investigation into “crimes against humanity perpetrated by members of the Australian Government against persons arriving in Australian waters who are seeking protection”.²⁹

God is critical of those who abuse power and wealth, who “acquit the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent” (Isa 5:23). Rather than displaying actual leadership, both government and opposition parties “have become locked into an unseemly competition to talk tough on asylum and...to scapegoat the asylum seeker.”³⁰ This reinforces the ostracism of asylum seekers who are found to be refugees, compounding their difficulty in finding work, so that the idea of the “dependent refugee, relying on social welfare benefits, [becomes] a self-fulfilling prophecy.”³¹

As with Israel, so with Australia, when the law itself becomes an “instrument of injustice”³² the usual processes of law are weakened and distorted so that the justice owed to the poor could be easily ignored - each time Australian immigration detention has come under the scrutiny of parliamentary investigations, a vast majority of submissions have called for policies to be done away with or severely amended and each time the status quo has been maintained and the calls for change ignored.³³

²⁷ Sweeney, *Isaiah*, 191.

²⁸ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*. New York: Doubleday. 2000, 212.

²⁹ Andrew Wilkie, Letter to The Hague, accessed June 26, 2015, <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/B0gOVILCAE2KvM.png>

³⁰ Jeff Crisp, “Refugees and the Global Politics of Asylum” in Sarah Spencer, ed., *Politics of Migration: Managing Opportunity, Conflict and Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, 75–87, 83.

³¹ Crisp, “Global Politics,” 83.

³² Davies, *Prophecy and Ethics*, 98.

³³ Mares, *Borderline*, 69.

When Isaiah brought God's judgement on the people, even those who were traditionally favoured by God—the fatherless and widows (Isa 9:17)—were included in the condemnation.³⁴ Eryl Davies notes that the “innocent are made to suffer as much as the guilty,”³⁵ that those who had no power in society were made to suffer as if they were guilty. In like manner, in an effort to curtail the people smuggling trade, those who are not guilty - asylum seekers who came by boat - have been detained in off-shore detention on Nauru and Manus Island, many for over two years before being processed.³⁶ Thus measures set in place to deter potential terrorists or address people smuggling negatively impacts genuine refugees.

The unjust laws and oppressive decrees of Isaiah 10:1-2 are exemplified when boat arrivals are transferred to Manus or Nauru and responsibility for their future relinquished, when those already granted refugee status in the community are still so uncertain about their futures in Australia that death seems an acceptable option,³⁷ or when the desire for family reunion is thwarted solely because the applicant came by boat.³⁸ Australia has become guilty of persecution by policy, of using its powers as a sovereign nation to rule unjustly against the vulnerable and needy.

The movement of refugees is not merely a “by-product of war” because displacing people is often a “weapon on war”³⁹ and although Australia has not directly created refugees, it has, by its support of US led-offensives in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, and most recently Syria, contributed to the displacement of people who now seek asylum in Australia and elsewhere. The factors surrounding the conflict in the Middle East are varied and steeped in historical discord. Developed countries find themselves torn between allowing other nations to solve their own disputes and the responsibility they have as global citizens to ensure the safety of civilians and pursue peace. It is important that Australia examine the extent to which its military involvement in foreign conflict, however well-intentioned, has contributed to the increase in asylum seekers and refugees, and whether that in turn increases our responsibility to act generously towards those who seek protection on our shores.

³⁴ Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39: Interpretation*, 90.

³⁵ Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (London: T&T Clarke, 2010), 8.

³⁶ Elaine Pearson, “It's been two years since Manus Island reopened. Not a single refugee has been resettled,” accessed September 6, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/20/its-been-two-years-since-manus-island-re-opened-not-a-single-refugee-has-been-resettled>

³⁷ Heath Aston, “Omid Ali Avaz, Iranian refugee granted temporary safe haven, found dead,” accessed September 6, 2015. <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/omid-ali-avaz-iranian-refugee-granted-temporary-safe-haven-found-dead-20150313-1435ay.html>

³⁸ “As the holder of a TPV, you will not be able to sponsor family members for a visa through the Australian Humanitarian or Family Migration Programmes... You cannot travel to the country from which you, or the primary applicant on your TPV application, were found to engage Australia's protection obligations.”

“Visa options for illegal arrivals seeking protection”, accessed October 3, 2015.

<http://www.border.gov.au/Search/Pages/Results.aspx?k=TPV>

³⁹ Crisp, “Global Politics,” 76.

Taking Heart

As a reader comes newly to Second Isaiah, or revisits it afresh, they discover that it has the “ability to inspire, to shape one’s thought, to lift one’s heart, and to open the heavens to see God, above the turbulent history below.”⁴⁰ The book of Isaiah, like many prophetic books, could see a future of “universal peace inaugurated by God”⁴¹ the Redeemer who is at all times involved with the welfare of his people.⁴²

Taking Heart from the Voices - Isaiah 40

After the indictment of Isaiah 1–39, Second Isaiah turns to hope: there is a future that looks nothing like the present, a future gifted by Yahweh not dependent on the wisdom of humanity. God’s people are in exile, their voices silenced and in chapters 1–39 the only voices heard are ones of judgement. However, the voices of chapters 40–55 are ones of hope in which the real king is seen, the one who brings a new song (Isa 42:10), a new way of singing for a new “social reality”⁴³ in which the barren give birth (Isa 54:1) and nourishment comes (Isa 55:1–3).

As Isaiah 40 opens, new and unidentified voices are heard⁴⁴ to bring comfort, to speak tenderly, and to declare good news.⁴⁵ From out of a “hall of voices”⁴⁶ one calls loudly to prepare the way for the Lord (vs. 3–5). Here is the message central to biblical prophecy that pits and contrasts “the transforming power of the prophetic word...against the political powers and principalities that appear indestructible but are really impermanent” (vs. 9–11).⁴⁷ This is the good news heralded for God’s people (vs. 9) that Yahweh will come both in the power of a king and with the gentleness of a shepherd (vs.10–11).

Second Isaiah evokes a “community not derived from the Babylonian reality”⁴⁸ which looks to a future nothing like the present, nor the past. The voices of Isaiah 40 brought comfort; however, the voices of asylum seekers and refugees bring a challenge, yet not unmixed with hope. Although Australia has been relatively welcoming of refugees in the past, it has a murkier, more malicious, and definitely murderous history when dealing with its First Nations peoples. The presence of asylum seekers and refugees, with their different faiths, different skin colours and different tongues (Isa 28:11) reminds white Australia of a past that sneaks, seemingly unbidden, into present events, such as the racial vilification of AFL player Adam

⁴⁰ John D. W. Watts, “Reading Isaiah in a New Time”, *Review and Expositor*, 88 (1991), 133.

⁴¹ Davies, *Immoral Bible*, 84.

⁴² Charles Francis Whitely, *The Exilic Age* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1957), 147.

⁴³ Brueggemann, *Imagination*, 76.

⁴⁴ Christopher R. Seitz, “How is the prophet Isaiah present in the latter half of the book? The logic of chapters 40-66 within the book of Isaiah” in *The Journal for Biblical Literature* (1996): 219–240, 227.

⁴⁵ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 179

⁴⁶ J.D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987), 75.

⁴⁷ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 182.

⁴⁸ Brueggemann, *Imagination*, 108.

Goodes in 2015.⁴⁹ Although there is a challenge in these voices to revisit Australia's past and make right that which was very wrong, the voices of asylum seekers and refugees call Australia to a future that looks nothing like that past.

It was the faithful in exile who accepted the call to reframe their identity which included convincing the "still blind and deaf majority"⁵⁰ of Isaiah 42:18–20 and 43:8. Likewise, refugees and asylum seekers, by their very presence on our shores, call Australia to its future as a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-faith nation that resonates with its multi-nation indigenous heritage. Australia is being called back to its ancient roots by its newest arrivals and in the process is being asked to confront its deafness and blindness to an endemic racial intolerance that exhibits itself in the assumption of white western superiority, evident in both language and faith.

The voices of asylum seekers and refugees are prophetic voices that Australian society may not ordinarily listen to as they do not speak the dominant language. They could, however, be seen as the anonymous voices of Isaiah 40 used by God to speak to this deep malaise in the white Australian psyche. It is the courage and vulnerability of asylum seekers and refugees which challenges the assumption that Australia is the egalitarian nation it prides itself on. These voices bring discomfort, uncovering the shame of Australia's past (which lives on into the present), but also bring hope as they call to something greater and deeper, a renewal of this nation that is so much more than the past and more than many can now envisage. While many white Australians cling stubbornly to what was, asylum seekers and refugees speak of a new way of being Australian that is not dependent on 'them' adopting 'our' ways. It is not the voices of power but of vulnerability and shame which speak clearly and insistently. This future has the possibility of a new shape that leaves past inequalities and atrocities behind, built on people of varying backgrounds who have chosen, by birth, migration or asylum, to call Australia home.

Taking Heart from the Suffering Servant - Isaiah 52:13-53:12

In the final servant song of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 the significance, fate and destiny of the prophet-servant is outlined rather than his identity made clear.⁵¹ The servant, however, has a number of distinct characteristics: disfigured to the point of anonymity (Isa 52:14), familiar with the pain of being despised and rejected (Isa 53:3), a substitute for the people (Isa 53:5), mute and silent (Isa 53:7), having suffered from injustice (Isa 53:8) and finally, a harbinger of hope (Isa 53:11–12).

⁴⁹ Jeremy Stanford, "Booing Adam Goodes: Are we even aware we're racist?" accessed September 9, 2015. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-28/standford-booing-adam-goodes-are-we-even-aware-were-racists/6653108>

⁵⁰ Ulrich Borges, "You are my Witness and my Servant: Exile and the Identity of the Servant (Isaiah 43:10)", in Mark J. Boda, Frank Ritche Ames, John Ahn and Mark Leuchter, eds. *The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 33–46, 43.

⁵¹ John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55: A literary-theological commentary*. London: T&T Clark. 2005, 476.

While the identity of the servant “is not the key to his activity and its consequences for posterity,”⁵² the lack of identity is quite deliberate and corroborated by the anonymous character of the sacrifice made. The disfigurement of the servant is so severe that he is marred beyond human likeness, and it is so appalling that the servant is despised and utterly rejected.⁵³ While people commonly make a link between suffering and personal culpability (Isa 53:4), the servant is not responsible for his own pain, as Isaiah 53:5 makes clear—his suffering is a substitutionary act for all the people. As the people move from blaming and rejection to a realisation of their part in the life of the suffering servant, the significance of the servant’s suffering becomes clear. Through all this, the servant remains silent (Isa 53:7), but it is not a silence borne of being appalled (as in Isa 52:14) but one of restraint; the servant refrains from saying anything either in his defence or retaliation.⁵⁴ Moreover, the servant is promised, not vindication, but light of life and a portion among the great on the grounds of his suffering for the many and his intercession for those whose transgressions have caused his pain (Isa 53:11-12). It is the servant who finally brings *šālôm* and it is the nations who are the beneficiaries of Yahweh’s deliverance.⁵⁵

The “sustained ambiguity”⁵⁶ around the identity of the servant allows for broader interpretation and application. For many Australians, the first visual they have of asylum seekers is of brown-skinned people with pixelated faces being shepherded from boats onto land. Although the pixilation of the images is done to protect the identity of asylum seekers it has the effect of dehumanising them; they no longer appear as human beings, in effect, they are disfigured beyond that of a human being (Isa 52:14). There is nothing in these pictures that makes them attractive; in fact, we become inured to their appearance, turn our faces away and reject them (Isa 53:3). Asylum seekers and refugees have already suffered much before they arrive in this country, having fled persecution and violence in their countries of origin and experiencing isolation and rejection in transit countries. The pain asylum seekers and refugees know first-hand is usually foreign to citizens of the country in which asylum is sought. Australians, in their blindness and ignorance, are ready to believe that in being treated firmly by government policy they are only getting what they deserve (Isa 53:4)—after all, they got on the boats. The vicarious suffering of the servant pays the penalty on behalf of, and for the benefit of, others (Isa 53:5)⁵⁷; so too, asylum seekers and refugees have paid, and continue to pay, not only for Australia’s ‘sins’ of complicity in world events through involvement in the conflict from which refugees have fled, but in the ‘sins’ of policies that treat

⁵² Seitz, “The logic of chapters 40-66,” 239.

⁵³ Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55*, 499.

⁵⁴ Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55*, 493.

⁵⁵ Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55*, 466, 493.

⁵⁶ Peter Wilcox and David Paton-Williams, “The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 42 (1988):80–102, 95.

⁵⁷ Joh Lindblom, *The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah: A New Attempt to Solve an Old Problem* (Lund: Håkan Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1951), 44.

such people harshly and with injustice (Isa 53:8). What is not recognised is that it is the disfigurement of *our* hearts that is obvious in the harsh policies and lack of compassion shown to asylum seekers and refugees. The servant has both an individual story and a social significance, and partners with God to break the bondage that is not only destroying the victims, but is destroying the oppressors as well.⁵⁸

The plight of the servant is a result of being afflicted by the community, and especially those who wield power within the community—community leaders, media and government.⁵⁹ Because the dominant culture has chosen to turn to their own way (Isa 53:6) the voice of the servant has been silenced (Isa 53:7).⁶⁰ Yet, as Yahweh's agent, the servant is charged with conveying God's principles, not with shouts and protestations, but "in a quiet, unassuming manner."⁶¹ The servant becomes a model for the manner in which those who support asylum seekers and refugees should go about their work. It will not be by protesting or violence but through peaceful processes that the values of Yahweh will be recognised and accepted among the nations of the earth.⁶² In bringing *šālôm*, this servant, or servants, will perform such a work that it will be those with power and authority who will effectively be silenced.⁶³

In the servant there is the possibility of change, in which the past is finally and completely left behind.⁶⁴ In the servant the possibility lies of dealing with the corporate sin that affects us individually and as a nation. Those who perpetrate injustice so often cannot see their own sickness of heart and so part of the role of the mistreated servant, of the asylum seeker and refugee, is to hold up a mirror to the dominant culture and reflect back the evil that is inherent there. In Australia's past and current treatment of asylum seekers and refugees (as in the treatment of our First Nations peoples) the depth of the evil in our own hearts is revealed. Indeed, the Servant Song of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 highlights the "mystery of how hearts crushed by oppression may speak to hearts hardened by self-justifying power."⁶⁵ Although the prophets called for Israel to return to God, although asylum seeker and refugee advocates call for a return to the fundamental principles of human rights, it is God alone who makes things right. It may well be that in the development of a righteous and just asylum seeker policy that salvation will come; that through the bruised reeds of refugees God is outworking his justice and bringing his peace to the earth.

⁵⁸ P.D. Hansen, cited in Wallace and Bottomley, *Hope for Justice*, 26.

⁵⁹ Wallace and Bottomley, *Hope for Justice*, 15.

⁶⁰ Wallace and Bottomley, *Hope for Justice*, 23.

⁶¹ Charles Francis Whitely, *The Prophetic Achievement* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1963), 178.

⁶² Lindblom, *Servant Songs*, 17.

⁶³ Lindblom, *Servant Songs*, 42.

⁶⁴ Wallace and Bottomley, *Hope for Justice*, 28.

⁶⁵ Wallace and Bottomley, *Hope for Justice*, 34.

Taking Action - Isaiah 58

As individuals, communities and nations intentionally turn their minds away from what is familiar, safe and 'normal' a world of possibilities opens up.⁶⁶ As Trito-Isaiah opens, a visionary option for the future is revealed, based on the foundational characteristics of the saving Yahweh - righteousness and justice (Isa 56:1).⁶⁷ A time will come when the peoples of the world, including those considered to be outsiders because of their ethnicity (vs. 3), will be made fully welcome (Isa 56:3–8)⁶⁸ and people of all nations and languages will gather to see God's glory (Isa 66:18).

The first two generations of Israelites to return from Babylonian exile faced the challenges of who would lead the restoration of Jerusalem and who its inhabitants would be.⁶⁹ While both Ezra and Nehemiah argue powerfully for exclusion based on ethnicity rather than character (Ezra 9:1–10:17; Neh 10:28–30), the writings of Trito-Isaiah makes it clear that justice rather than "ritual or ethnic purity"⁷⁰ must determine who is to be part of this new community (Isa 56:1–2a) and the book draws to a close with a vision of the Jerusalem Temple as a "world house"⁷¹ (Isa 66:20).

In Isaiah 58, Yahweh outlines what authentic fasting looks like, based on his mercy and saving acts, beginning with people's religious activities which they complain God has not noticed (vv. 1–3a).⁷² Yahweh delineates the abuses that had crept into the rituals: exploitation of workers (vs. 3b), quarrelling and fighting (vs. 4) and superficial observances (vs.5). This is not an attack on rituals as a form of worship but rather on rituals unaccompanied by ethical practice.⁷³ In the form of rhetorical questions, the nature of true fasting is detailed in verses 6–7, characterised by the reversal of unjust conditions and the breaking down of oppressive systems.⁷⁴ This return to justice and mercy, of bringing deliverance and salvation, is outworked in practical ways: feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, clothing the naked. Most particularly, there is an injunction in vs. 7b to "not turn away from your own flesh and blood"; that is, to not pretend that those in need are not there, or to try to persuade oneself that the poor are someone else's responsibility or even just hoping that they would somehow go away.⁷⁵

⁶⁶ Thomas Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 6.

⁶⁷ Tony Campolo, "Isaiah: The Fast that God Requires" in *Micah Challenge: The Church's Responsibility to the Global Poor*, edited by Marijke Hoek and Justin Thacker (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2008), 84–94, 91.

⁶⁸ Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell, *Our God is Undocumented: Biblical Faith and Immigrant Justice* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 92.

⁶⁹ Myers, *Our God*, 93.

⁷⁰ Myers, *Our God*, 96.

⁷¹ Myers, *Our God*, 98.

⁷² Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66*, 177.

⁷³ Bachman, "True Fasting and Unwilling Hunger," 122.

⁷⁴ Bachman, "True Fasting and Unwilling Hunger," 114.

⁷⁵ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66*, 180.

As true fasting is embraced, restoration made and Yahweh's salvation worked out in practical ways, healing occurs—not only are the needy brought physical aid but the deeper malaise within the hearts of those previously caught up in empty rituals is brought to the light and addressed (vs. 8a).⁷⁶ The people call out for assistance (vs. 9a) and the saving God of mercy responds. As the “pointing finger and malicious talk” (vs. 9b)⁷⁷ are replaced with aid to the oppressed, light breaks in with promises of abundance, restoration and healing (vv. 10b–12). God promises to once again (Ex 15: 13) lead his people in grace and compassion (vs. 11), while the theme of Sabbath in vv. 13-14 points back to the rest that God requires (Exo 20:11) and to the salvation and redemption wrought through delivery from Egypt (Deut 5:15).⁷⁸

Isaiah 58 can be used for envisaging a way forward for Australia in dealing with asylum seekers and refugees in three ways—to honestly assess the situation, make a practical response and address latent fears. In bringing an honest assessment, it must be noted how much of the current debate around asylum seekers and refugees is fuelled by the underlying white supremacist understanding of the dominant cultural group in Australia. The ‘White Australia’ policy is a reality within living memory of many Australians and the attitudes that spawned such a policy continue to prevail, even if only covertly. Isaiah 58:9 urges for an abolition of the ‘pointing finger and malicious talk’ which diminishes the dignity of the individual. Australians, as Western thinkers, can readily transfer their own fears and prejudices onto others without acknowledging the existence of those fears and prejudices.⁷⁹ Much is made in the media and in the political arena of asylum seekers and refugees being merely economic migrants who want to take advantage of the prosperity of this nation. Here, the idea of the ‘great Australian dream’ is transferred onto others whose dream may be simply to escape persecution. Further, branding all asylum seekers as potential terrorists seeking to overthrow Western democracy springs from our own heritage of invasion and conquering; we conquered, therefore others must want to conquer us. Although much of white Australian history is couched in terms of invasion and subjugation, there is also an aspect of our history that could be accessed to help us understand the plight of oppressed peoples. The people of Israel had slavery as part of their national story and so were encouraged to be aware of the needs of the oppressed.⁸⁰ Likewise, Australians could tap into our convict history so that rather than repeating history, this time as the oppressors, we could develop a compassion based on the fact that in our heritage we have been the ones often unjustly convicted and shipped away to an island on the other side of the world.

⁷⁶ Mercedes L. Garcia Bachman, “True Fasting and Unwilling Hunger (Isaiah 58)” in Alejandro F. Botta and Pablo R. Andiñach, eds. *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 59:111–131, 125.

⁷⁷ All Bible quotations are from Today's New International Version.

⁷⁸ Allan Harman, *Isaiah: A Covenant to be Kept for the Sake of the Church* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 387-8.

⁷⁹ Thomas Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 2.

⁸⁰ Greg Foster, *Christian Ethics in the Old Testament* (Bramcote, England: Grove Books. 1998), 16.

In formulating a practical response, Isaiah 58:7 encourages the sharing of food with the hungry, providing the poor wanderer with shelter and clothing the naked. Given that asylum seekers and refugees are a global occurrence, then the double hit that is the reduction in foreign aid (in the 2105-2016 Federal budget) and the increase in expenditure on border protection and indefinite detention indicates that successive Australian governments have not been serious about addressing the situation at even a regional level.⁸¹ Government policies in some part reflect societal attitudes and Australian politics have been increasingly driven by what is perceived to be election-winning strategies. There must be a change in “the social policies that make people poor and hungry”⁸² and it is here that Australia’s actions in world events and our social structures need to be examined and changed, not least our “paternalistic tendencies”⁸³ that paint us as magnanimously beneficent.

Australia is called on to display leadership in an incredibly complex situation. In Yahweh’s judgement of his people’s fast that had devolved into exploitation and the seeking of their own good above the needs of others (Isa 58:3b) we see foreshadowed the self-interest of much current policy with regard to asylum seekers and refugees. The issues surrounding asylum seekers and refugees are highly complex; thus government slogans of ‘stop the boats’ and advocacy chants of ‘free, free the refugee’ are vastly inadequate. To offer hospitality to the poor wanderer (Isaiah 58:7) is to welcome someone “new, unfamiliar and unknown into our life-world”⁸⁴ and it does not come without risks. However, God calls for a “true administration of justice”⁸⁵ which Isaiah 58 delineates as “love translated into social policies.”⁸⁶

The third component is one in which the church can play a leading role, by not adding fuel to a wider “ecology of fear.”⁸⁷ If believers can courageously admit their own fears and address them, then they can speak into a society that has forgotten that the church has a legitimate voice. The presence of asylum seekers unsettles Australians because they remind us that Australia is not “shielded from the world’s upheavals.”⁸⁸ Australia is a very large island and, for a long time, quite isolated. However, the days of isolation are gone and the presence on our doorstep of those who have fled persecution, war and famine are cogent reminders that the world too is at our doorstep and we can no longer avoid engaging with it. But in not

⁸¹ Misha Coleman and Caroline Miley, “The Economics of Australia’s Asylum Seeker Policy and the Tasmanian Alternative” in *Gesher: the official journal of The Council of Christians and Jews*. 4/5 (2014): 51–54, 51–52.

⁸² Tony Campolo, “Isaiah: The Fast that God Requires” in Marijke Hoek and Justin Thacker eds., *Micah Challenge: The Church’s Responsibility to the Global Poor* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2008) 84–94, 94.

⁸³ Susan Snyder, “The Dangers of ‘Doing our Duty’: reflections on churches engaging with people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom”, *Theology*, 110 (2007): 351–360, 355.

⁸⁴ Thomas Ogletree, cited in Snyder, “The Dangers of ‘Doing our Duty,’” 354.

⁸⁵ Harman, *Isaiah: A Covenant*, 386.

⁸⁶ Campolo, *Isaiah*, 94.

⁸⁷ Susan Snyder, *Asylum Seeking, Migration and Church* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2012), 205.

⁸⁸ Mares, *Borderline*, 193.

closing our eyes to what is happening around us (Isa 58: 7b) Australians need to recognise their own needs and address them.

Firstly, to acknowledge that fear is part of white Australian psyche. When one culture can only prove its supremacy by force then the actual strength of that culture must be called into question, and fear becomes a motivator in protecting what is actually a quite fragile supremacy. Not only does popular media play to these deep-rooted fears so too does the government, which has stimulated a feeling of “crisis around the issue of boat arrivals and promoted an attitude of hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees.”⁸⁹ We are a fearful people and acknowledging and facing our fears is essential if Australia is to move forward as a nation.⁹⁰

Once we can acknowledge that we are afraid, we then have to identify and name those fears which have been denied and suppressed to the point that we do not know they actually exist.⁹¹ Such fears fall into three general categories: “politico-cultural fears,”⁹² “economic-welfare resource fears”⁹³ and “security-existential fears.”⁹⁴ White Australians fear the loss of national identity and the rise of such groups such as ‘Reclaim Australia’⁹⁵ is testament to such fears in sections of the Australian community. As well as breaking down national identity, asylum seekers and refugees, as well as regular migrants, are seen as competitors for limited resources; an issue that is particularly pertinent in Australia given that much of the continent is largely uninhabitable and water shortages and restrictions are a real part of life in many communities.⁹⁶ The third fear is one that looms the largest in the current world climate, that of asylum seekers and refugees being seen as “death-dealing terrorists;”⁹⁷ a legitimate fear given the rise of ISIS.

None of these fears are unreasonable nor, to varying extents, unfounded. However, a life lived in fear is no life at all, as those who have fled war and persecution and sought asylum would attest. Although the issue of asylum seekers would appear to directly pit the general principle of offering refuge to those fleeing persecution against the principle of serving “the interests of the national community”⁹⁸ it cannot be an either/or situation; a balance between sheltering the alien and not neglecting our own must be found. One way is to help fearful

⁸⁹ Mares, *Borderline*, 27.

⁹⁰ Snyder, *Asylum Seeking*, 122.

⁹¹ Brueggemann, *Imagination*, 50.

⁹² Snyder, *Asylum Seeking*, 88.

⁹³ Snyder, *Asylum Seeking*, 97.

⁹⁴ Snyder, *Asylum Seeking*, 100.

⁹⁵ ‘Reclaim Australia’ is a grassroots movement that claims among other things: “Freedom from intimidation for being ‘Australian’. This includes showing patriotism to Australia, it’s flag, Anglo and Christian heritage, cultural customs of dressing, speaking, drinking and eating.” accessed October 2, 2015. <http://www.reclaim-australia.com/>

⁹⁶ Snyder, *Asylum Seeking*, 97.

⁹⁷ Snyder, *Asylum Seeking*, 100.

⁹⁸ Paul Statham, “Understanding Anti-Asylum Rhetoric” Restrictive Politics or Racist Publics?” in Sarah Spencer, ed., *Politics of Migration: Managing Opportunity, Conflict and Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 163–177, 165.

Australians meet fearful migrants. However, simple contact is insufficient; truthful and exact information needs to be provided along with a commitment to avoid “inflammatory discourse.”⁹⁹ Importantly, the church must not give aid out a sense of duty, which assumes that “the link between church supporters and asylum seekers [is] one-way traffic.”¹⁰⁰ Having worked with The Salvation Army in off-shore processing on Nauru, I can attest that “encounters with asylum seekers...change us.”¹⁰¹

As empty rituals are replaced by true fasting, the people become the light rising in the darkness (vs. 10b), guidance is assured (vs. 11a), abundance promised (vs. 11) and the foundations of the past are restored and rebuilt (vs. 12). In letting go of its empty rhetoric and redressing past wrongs Australia can lead the way, being a light to the nations as a truly multicultural community built on the age-old foundations of indigenous Australia.

Conclusion

With the increase in unrest world-wide, especially in the Middle East, the need to deal well with those who choose to flee only increases. It is not enough to relegate such issues to other nations or to view our own involvement merely at a local or national level. Successive Australian governments have sought to expand their profile as a world-player but those same governments have taken increasingly punitive and reductionist paths when it comes to dealing with asylum seekers and refugees.

Isaiah the prophet spoke into the society of his day, calling people to take stock of their attitudes and actions, particularly towards the most marginalised and vulnerable, identifying righteousness and justice as the measuring rods of society. The authors of Second Isaiah spoke of the voices that sang a new song, of the servant who through his suffering encouraged the people to take heart; all was not lost, a new way of living was possible. Third Isaiah outlined a way forward for God’s people, a way of taking action that addressed both the needs of the marginalised as well as their own.

Isaiah, a man of unclean lips, from a people of unclean lips (Isa 6: 5) was commissioned to speak to a nation that would neither see nor hear (Isa 6: 10). Australia is a nation which is neither hearing nor seeing accurately the plight of displaced people nor fully understanding its own responsibility to them. Despite this blindness and deafness, the message of the need for righteousness and justice to be foundational in dealing with asylum seekers and refugees must continue to be delivered. It was the one despised and rejected, the one stricken and afflicted, who as the agent of God bore the sins of the people (Isa 53:3–4). So it is that the pixelated faces of rejected asylum seekers who, having been silenced behind ‘operational

⁹⁹ Snyder, *Asylum Seeking*, 123.

¹⁰⁰ Snyder, “The Dangers of ‘Doing our Duty,’” 353.

¹⁰¹ Snyder, “The Dangers of ‘Doing our Duty,’” 353.

matters', bring a message of the new song that God has for both displaced peoples and Australians. It is the true fast of Isaiah 58 that God calls Australia to, one that deals justly with all people, builds our national character, develops a practical response both from the community at large and the church in particular and works to alleviate the fears of those who already call Australia home.

God is bringing all nations to Australia, by boat and by plane, as asylum seekers and as refugees, and as immigrants. The potential is *here* for Australia to be the "house of prayer for all nations" (Isa 63:19–20) if it can look past its own doorstep and recognise the global impact of the movement of displaced people; if its governments, of all persuasions, take a lead regionally in negotiating workable, collaborative and collective solutions for the processing and resettlement of asylum seekers and refugees; if bipartisan policies are developed that treat vulnerable people with justice and compassion, while not neglecting the fears and needs of its own people; and if local communities display the egalitarian and welcoming attitudes that we pride ourselves on.

Australia needs rescuing, from its past of the violent conquering of a land and people not their own. Australia is in need of a new identity based on the truth of who we are, rather than on fear. It could be that in learning to deal justly with asylum seekers and refugees that we are saved from ourselves; that in the showing of compassion, in acting with justice and righteousness to these most marginalised of peoples, that Australia may find its salvation. It could well be that a change of heart in the white Australian psyche with regard to asylum seekers and refugees could be the turning point for the last great move of the Holy Spirit,¹⁰² so that Australia truly becomes the 'Great South Land of the Holy Spirit.'

¹⁰² "Smith Wigglesworth's Prophetic Word of Australia's Mighty Revival," accessed September 24, 2015. <http://catchthefire.com.au/2011/11/smith-wigglesworths-prophetic-word-of-australias-mighty-revival-a-must-read/>

About the author

After six decades of involvement in the church, Bron Williams brings both depth and breadth to her biblical studies and theological understandings and has ministered across many areas including children and youth, women, and church leadership. Her work with asylum seekers on Nauru, with The Salvation Army in the role as Religious Liaison Officer, laid the foundation for Bron's honours dissertation of which this article is an edited version. Mother of three adult sons, mother-in-law to two amazing young women and grandmother six times over, Bron now runs her own business enabling women to be powered by their past.