

Moving Mountains

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Readings: Psalm 48 and Mark 9:2-13

The recent nuclear test in North Korea reminded me of a book by the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, called *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*. In this book, he reflects on his experience on the 15 August, 1945. Two nuclear bombs had fallen in the past ten days, first on Hiroshima (6 August) then on Nagasaki three days later. Along with five hundred high school students working in a military factory, Kosuke Koyama listened to the emperor's speech declaring the war over and then walked home to his family's shelter, staggering from lack of food and the mental exhaustion after constant air raids:

Tokyo had become a wilderness. Familiar landmarks were gone; rice shops, temples and shrines where people had prayed for victory... I slept, and in the morning I watched the sun rise over a horizon of utter destruction. The sun itself, I felt at that moment, had become a part of the cosmic 'waste and void' (Gen. 1:2). Several years later the scene was brought back vividly when I heard the words of Jeremiah which touched me deeply:

I looked on the earth, and it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and their light was gone. I looked on the mountains, and they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and there were no people, and all the birds of the air had fled... the earth mourns, and the heavens above grow dark. (Jer. 4:23-28). 'I have seen "waste and void" concretely and personally in history", Koyama says. "It descended upon Tokyo". The framework of Japanese culture, with the emperor at its apex, went into crisis. "I was looking at the Japan of 1945 not in the light of the

‘hallowed spirits of the imperial ancestors’ but in the words of the sixth century prophet Jeremiah.”¹

Koyama’s analogy is also helpful in reverse: it provides us with a way of thinking about the message of Jeremiah to his own people, announcing the fate of the Judean culture which had Mount Zion and the dynasty of king David at its apex. What Jeremiah sees in the fate of Jerusalem is a spiritual crisis: a contradiction of the theological claims associated with Zion.

What is this Zion theology? Is it the same as modern Zionism that we hear about in Israel? The short answer is, no; it has very little to do with modern Zionism. We do find it expressed in a number of the early Psalms, which are hymns to Mount Zion, and we have read one of those Psalms this morning – Ps 48. Listen again to vs.1-2:

In the city of our God is his holy mountain;
Its elevation is beautiful, the exultation of the whole world,
Mount Zion, the heights of Zaphon
Is the city of the Great King.

To cut a long story short, this poetry identifies Mount Zion in Jerusalem with the ancient mythological Mount Zaphon in the surrounding Canaanite culture. The psalmist from Jerusalem has taken up this ancient indigenous mythology and reshaped it within a new theological geography.² Some of what was once believed about Zaphon is now said to be true of Zion. In particular, the mountain of God came to be seen as the source of fertility, social justice, and an enduring protection against military threats (e.g., in Ps 72).

¹ Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai* (London: SCM, 1984), pp.25 and 31.

² Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), pp.352-55.

When the kings of the earth approach Zion, according to Ps 48, they flee in terror. But *within* the ramparts of Jerusalem, its citizens find security: “God makes her secure for ever” (v.8). In addition, this promise of eternal security was intertwined with the eternal covenant made with King David in Jerusalem – that his dynasty would be established there for ever (2 Sam. 7:16; 23:5).

So when the imperial armies of Babylon invaded Judah, they did not just breach the walls of a city; they attacked the cultural framework that was attached to Zion and to the dynasty of David. The mountain of God, which provided stability to the whole created order, was shaken to its foundations. So what Jeremiah sees in his vision – the vision that haunted Kosuke Koyama – was nothing less than the *reversal* of creation. The birds fled, the heavens darkened, the earth mourned. According to Jeremiah, the implication of Zion’s fall are literally earth shattering; the landscape was deforming, reverting to the “waste and void” before the Creator spirit brought light and began the shaping of the world.

And what frustrated Jeremiah *most*, was that this suffering of the earth was avoidable. For years he remonstrated with the people of Judah not to misunderstand God’s choice of Zion and Jerusalem. In spite of the promise of eternal security in Zion theology, there were actually *conditions* attached to residence in Jerusalem. Jeremiah had the gall to stand at the gate of the temple and preach to people as they went in, questioning the Zion

doctrine of eternal security. The temple of the Lord is no refuge, he argued, and worship is meaningless, unless the people of God do these things:

If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the orphan or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place (Jer 7:5-7).

At one stage, Jeremiah's views were condemned as heretical; it was considered unthinkable by many of the priests that anyone should preach judgment against the conventional orthodoxies of Zion theology (Jer 26). These priests rested comfortably on the covenant associated with Zion, and quietly forgot that there was another covenant associated with another mountain: the covenant with Moses at Sinai. This is the most potent form of ideology – to rest securely on *one* part of the truth, and to suppress less convenient truths. This is spiritually a far more dangerous path than promoting falsehoods that are easily exposed.

The Sinai covenant was *conditional*. When the Israelites arrived at Sinai and Moses climbed the mountain, Yahweh makes this quite clear: “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles wings and brought you to myself. Now *if* you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’” (Exod 19:3-6).

Jeremiah was a prophet who moved between the two mountains: he held to the promises of Zion without forgetting the demands of Sinai. He remembered the Mosaic covenant not just as a history without relevance, superseded by a more convenient Zion theology. He saw the Sinai tradition as a continuing demand, to be held *in tension* with Jerusalem's confidence in Zion. Jeremiah took up the characteristic prophetic task to wrestle the Israelite tradition away from the convenient and ideological conformity into which it was sinking.

He took a litmus test of authentic faith from the laws of Moses, and applied it to the Judah of his own day. For Jeremiah and most of the prophets before him, there was no value in religious practice unless it also took account of how fragile minorities were being treated – the “widows, orphans and foreigners”. This was not some kind of “works righteousness” which established Israel's right to salvation. On the contrary, for Moses and Jeremiah ethics always arise as a *response* to what God has already done. The questions of ethics are about the practical shaping of lives in response to our understanding of God's character and actions. And for Jeremiah, if refugees and the poor are not being treated fairly, not only would the protection of God be lost, but the very fabric of creation would start to unravel.

Isaiah 11 goes a step further than Jeremiah, looking beyond the destruction of Jerusalem, and turning the Zion tradition into a vision of justice and the transformation of the created order:

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,

the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Christians have often interpreted this text in messianic terms as pointing to Jesus – the one who fulfills Zion theology – and to the redemption he offers to human beings. But the last four verses are describing the impact of the messianic age on the whole created order, and not just on human beings.

When we read the story of the transfiguration in Mark's Gospel, where Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah as representative of the Law and the Prophets, what do we imagine they were talking about? Clearly, the *disciples* were dazzled and confused, and Jesus tells

them to say nothing about what they had witnessed until he has risen from dead. If they had any notion of how to understand this revelation on the mountain, it would perhaps have come from the story of God's glory settling on Mount Sinai. In Exodus 34, the experience of this glory leaves Moses with a radiant face, as he descends to talk with his people. The transfiguration, then, not only points forward to the glory of resurrection; it also recalls the glory on Mount Sinai. Mark seems to be suggesting that the resurrection of Jesus will fulfill the mountain-top experiences associated with the lives of Moses and Elijah.

This is where we need to think like the prophet Jeremiah, who moves between Sinai and Zion. We need to wrestle the church away from an all-too-human understanding of redemption, which would tend to exclude non-human creatures from the Kingdom of God. What we should hold before us is the cosmic Christ who redeems "all things in heaven and earth" (Eph. 1), and who shapes all of life in the ways of peace. And in response to that Christ, human responsibility for creation should never be overlooked.

If Jeremiah could join us this morning, I wonder what he would say. We can be sure that he would at least remind us to care for the refugee, for the widow and the orphan, and to avoid the gods who ultimately provide no security at all – including the idols of military and economic power (Deuteronomy 7-9). *And* he would ask, I think, about whether we have descended into a thoughtless neglect of the environment, wrongly assuming that creation refers only to a particular big bang millions of years ago – that might perhaps concern physicists at most. And he would remind us that creation is not just about ancient cosmic history; it is about how we live, and how we care for the environment. And we

would need to thank Jeremiah for his irritating, bordering on seditious, warnings about not leaving the fate of the planet to the dominant ideology. And then we might have to repent.

Of course, the business of repenting is a life-long project. Speaking personally, there have been milestones of repentance in my life when I was ten years old, then at eighteen, and then several times since, and each time I have had a different understanding of repentance and the new implications of what it meant to follow Christ.

About two years ago, for example, I went with my wife Ilsa, and my children Anusha and Mattheus, to Uluru. We were introduced by one of the traditional owners to some of the Dreaming stories associated with Mutijulu waterhole, and I felt a deep sense of sin. When I was shown the meaning of some of the rock formations, as interpreted by stories more than a thousand generations old, I felt the arrogance of asserting that God was not revealed in that country until the whitefellas arrived perhaps six generations ago. As if God somehow forgot to appoint people to care for that country. As if those custodians, the Anangu, did not already have Jeremiah's kind of conviction that creation is not just about the past but also about responsibility to country in the present. As if the Anangu had not already heard God speaking to them through the Creator spirit, and had not already given them a law.³

³ Mark G. Brett, 'The Loss and Retrieval of Ancestral Religion – in Ancient Israel and in Australia' in M. Parsons (ed.), *Text and Task: Scripture and Mission* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), pp.1-19.

At that moment, my generalized conviction about the place of traditional owners in Australian identity became much more specific and personal. I felt that I had no business walking around that rock until I had been welcomed there by the people who understood how to care for it. And then it occurred to me that the experience of Uluru applied in some sense elsewhere in Australia, even where the landforms are less dramatic, and where the traditional owners may have been dispossessed, or lost connection with the country of their ancestors through no fault of their own.

I have heard the voice of Jeremiah whispering to our hearts, and his message is this: we are not excused from Sinai's concern for the widow, orphan and dispossessed. Australian identity will be flawed until we have done something about the sinned against: until we have moved the mountain of indifference about the stolen generations, the stolen childhoods, the stolen wages, and the stolen lands. Repentance is not just about our own private debt of sin. We should not allow our hearts to be deadened by the democratic majority, or to be bewitched by the abundance of our own blessings. The God of Zion is also the God of Sinai. The blessings of God, including the wonders of creation, present us with responsibilities, and especially with responsibilities for the sinned against.