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LUCRETIA MOTT: ISAIAH 58

MARK BREDIN

In a sermon at Cherry Street Meeting on 31 March in 1850, Lucretia Mott drew upon Isaiah 58:6–7, 13 and James 2:15 for inspiration against sentiments expressed by Isaac Watts (1674–1748), views that led, she believed, to complacency towards the poor and the slave. She perceived such to be an outrage to the God of the biblical prophets. More precisely, Lucretia’s evocation of Isaiah 58 in her address resulted in an intensification of her already developed sympathy for the poor, motivating her to social engagement for justice.

In making this argument I consider: (1) what it means to read the Bible empathetically; (2) her use of Isaac Watts for rhetorical purposes; (3) her breakfast musings; (4) her belief in the original goodness of creation designed for hospitality; (5) her use of Isaiah 58.

I conclude that Lucretia should be studied, at least provisionally, as one who *used Scripture as a probe to self-reflection and examination* sensitizing her to God within, in opposition to the status quo. She did not read Scripture as a book of information to be mastered. Rather, for her, it was a book of transformation to be assimilated into her very being. *In short she read Isaiah 58 empathetically.* This concept could be helpful and an instructive insight for Friends today.

READING THE BIBLE EMPATHETICALLY

All of Lucretia’s speeches and sermons draw heavily upon Scripture. T. Vail Palmer Jr. contrasts Lucretia’s use of Scripture with that of George Fox and Margaret Fell noting that Fox and Fell “read the Bible empathetically.”¹ Patristic scholar, Frances Young, observes that to read the Bible empathetically “...we come away with our consciousness in some sense transformed. The story and the characters come alive in our imagination as we make an emotional

identification with them...”² Therefore, to claim that someone does not engage at some level emotionally with the Bible is an indictment against them. Margaret Bacon, who wrote a biography on Lucretia, however, notes that Lucretia “had the gift of empathy.”³ I suggest that this gift is evident in her use of Isaiah 58. In short, she read empathetically making an emotional identification with what she read.

Further, her empathetic use of Scripture is pivotal for understanding her as a social activist. She knew the Scriptures so well that she was able to weave together texts, impromptu, in impressive and sophisticated ways adapting them creatively to her particular situation while emotionally identifying with them and being transformed by what she read. What she read changed her, put her in touch with the counter-cultural voice of God within, transforming her to act with passion and sympathy to the victims of injustice.

More, her reputation among her contemporaries as a great speaker and preacher should alert the modern reader to consider what made her such a distinguished orator. I suggest Lucretia’s sermons appealed to her audience because her words came from the heart; her use of Scripture was not quoted literally as from a detached observer, but expressed by one who had been steeped in the language, metaphor, imagery and symbols of Scripture. Her audience heard Lucretia bring life to Scripture; this is not done by cold detached reading, but by empathetic reading.

LUCRETIA MOTT AND ISAAC WATTS

Lucretia begins by quoting twenty-four lines of poetry written by Isaac Watts, an author her audience revered as a hymn writer. She says after quoting him that Watts’ poem “is inculcated in the religious training of most of the children of the age.”⁴ Watts, therefore, is a literary foil to Lucretia, serving to heighten the contrast between his views and her own. She denounces him for supporting hierarchy, the status quo, and encouraging apathy towards the

poor. The words she quotes, according to Lucretia, exposed Watts to the indictment of teaching poverty as part of God's plan:

Not more than others I deserve (line 5)
 Yet God has given me more (line 6)
 For I have food while others starve (line 7)
 Are these thy favours day by day (line 21)
 To me above the rest (line 22)
 Then let me love thee more than they (line 24)⁵

Watts would not have recognized himself in Lucretia's attack. Her fight with Watts is contrived for rhetorical purposes and best understood in the context of it being a spoken and impromptu address, and not a carefully written essay for others to scrutinize.

It is particularly Watts' words: "I have food while others starve" that provoked Lucretia's ire and led her to lament the status quo that numbed and detached people to the consequences of their consumption that resulted in others lacking in basic necessities. His words aided her to a painful self-examination recognizing that she herself was complicit in injustice in giving thanks to God for "favours" that are gained; but, she, through self-scrutiny came to recognize they are not "favours" from God, rather they are in fact "favours" plundered to feed unrestrained appetites.

BREAKFAST MUSINGS

Lucretia's sermon in part took shape while she ate breakfast on the morning before she preached. Lucretia shares that while eating breakfast on the morning of 31 March 1850 she was led to think about the custom of giving thanks and praise for food in the midst of those who are hungry. She perceived Watts to be saying that hunger is simply a fact and that nothing can be done about it. She says that in her "heart and soul...I could not feel that it would be right to return thanks for anything like peculiar blessings for special favors..."⁶ adding "indeed my heart at times smote me with the feelings that there belonged to us at least our share of reproach and condemnation that things are *as* they are."⁷

“Smote” suggests a strong *sympathy* for God’s pain at humans living contrary to God’s intentions and the suffering this causes many. Such *sympathy and feeling* for God’s pain results in caring *to her core* for the pain and cries of the poor and the slave. Lucretia grieves: “how far we have been instrumental in bringing about these manifold evils.”⁸ Note she includes herself. From this grief she is driven to find ways of life “that...shall not consign its thousands of starving people to an untimely grave.”⁹ Her sermon ends:

...it is not God’s design that some of us should live in luxury and unbounded indulgence, while others are toiling morning, noon, and night for bread. This ought never to be a subject of thanksgiving or of praise, but blushing and confusion of face, that such is the state of things around us that we are ignorantly partaking to such an extent as tend to perpetuate evil rather than good.¹⁰

Lucretia saw that the simple act of eating breakfast had consequences for the rest of creation. She perceived Watts, albeit unfairly, as one who saw poverty as part of God’s design. From the beginning of her address Lucretia identifies her responsibility for injustice through self-examination observing how social structures blind citizens to their culpability in poverty.

TORAH AND ABUNDANT CREATION

At the heart of Lucretia’s theology is Scripture’s teaching about creation which comes to the fore in this sermon. God designed creation to be a place of abundance for all, but one that depended on cultivating self-control. People are to consume moderately trusting in God’s provisions and not hoarding. A key component for this is to live so others do not starve. Disobedience to this commandment for restraint leads to injustice. The covenant established with Moses by God on Sinai is for Israel to live with restraint so all can live generously.¹¹

Lucretia is influenced by Genesis 1–2 in the following soaring words to Cherry Street Meeting establishing the goodness of creation as central to her sense of God:

...that God, in his wisdom, in his unbounded and illimitable benevolence, has abundantly crowned the earth with blessings...and given unto man of his abundance, richly to enjoy; and that it is desirable that all classes of Society partake of these rich blessings.¹²

The design of creation, although limitlessly benevolent, depends on trusting that life flourishes when people live generously rather than keeping things to themselves. Lucretia laments: “there is a fatal want of faith and confidence, in the power with which God has gifted the creatures he has made...”¹³ According to Lucretia, habits of hoarding result from lack of trust in God’s beneficence and leaves little for others.

Lucretia talks about humanity resisting “the laws of our being,” causing us to feel alienated from God and His intentions for us. She observes: “oh! do I believe, that it has been from the... non-observance of the laws of our being that great depression is felt.”¹⁴ Strikingly, reflecting on the following words of Anglican Priest, Christopher Bryant, who wrote independently of Lucretia, helps intensify our understanding of Lucretia:

I came to understand that to resist God was to run counter to the law of my own being; God’s judgement worked through a kind of in-built psychic mechanism; it was self-acting and imposed from within me. My punishment in the shape of unwelcome feelings of guilt, anxiety or depression was self-inflicted.¹⁵

Lucretia emphasizes obedience to these laws as “coupled with justice and love...” and being “instrumental in relieving the afflicted...” We flourish when we live in harmony with God’s laws, which are also the laws of our being, in doing so we become expressions of God’s mercy. But if we don’t, we feel God’s judgement from within. In 1886, addressing Fifteenth Street Meeting, Lucretia speaks of the importance of meditating night and day on the law echoing Psalms 1:2 and 119:97.¹⁶ In Psalm 119 we find words reiterating the inseparable link between Torah and mercy: “The earth, O LORD, is full of thy mercy: teach me thy statutes” (v. 64).

In her address at Cherry Street Meeting in 1849 she draws upon Psalm 19:9: “The law of the Lord is perfect.”¹⁷ Psalm 19 is noteworthy for its close depiction of creation and law *with Torah being creation inwardly ordered*.¹⁸ Creation is abundant to the extent that every aspect of it is in harmony with Torah. Lucretia’s close relationship to Scripture would not miss the link between creation and Torah.

In conclusion, *the law is synonymous with mercy that fills the whole earth*. Law is God’s Torah, it is mercy and is at the heart of God’s design for creation. Built into creation is Torah, and central to Torah is living with restraint.

ISAIAH 58

Firstly, I consider how Lucretia reshaped James 2:15 by interweaving Isaiah 58:7, and, secondly, examine the changes she made to KJV Isaiah 58:6 before looking at Isaiah 58:13. Secondly, I suggest particularly how the religious custom of fasting mentioned in Isaiah 58:6 points to God’s ordering of creation as it was intended to be—as a place of abundance for all, yet dependent on living with restraint.

(1) ISAIAH 58:7 AND JAMES 2:15

Lucretia says:

If thou seest a brother or sister naked, destitute of daily food, give them not the things needful to the body only...¹⁹

Lucretia’s stenographer places these words in quotation marks because he recognized it as a quotation. The sense is that *if a person sees someone hungry or naked, and ignores their needs*, then their religion shows no commitment to “justice and love.” Lucretia shares ten of the twelve words found in James 2:15 and some of verse 16. In James 2:15, the apostle condemns those who say to the naked and hungry “go in peace” and do not offer warmth or food. However, Lucretia has: “if thou seest the naked...” These words echo Isaiah 58:7: “when thou seest the naked.” *The emphasis*

in Lucretia and Isaiah is when you see the hungry, you should feed them. When Lucretia meditated upon Watts

How many children in the street
Half naked I behold,

She was led to recall Isaiah's "if thou seest the naked." The "seeing" is significant for Lucretia.

Lucretia's paraphrase of James 2:15–16 is intertextually linked to Isaiah 58:7. The changes made to James 2:15 by Lucretia, while not altering the meaning, explain the processes that led to Lucretia's paraphrase.

In conclusion, James 2:15 and Isaiah 58:7 awakened her to God's transcendent presence within, to be in touch with the law of her being. Consequently, she experienced unease, discomfort, and depression that she did nothing to alleviate suffering. This "awakening" enables us to understand the close relationship between reading the Bible and her fame as a voice for the powerless.

(2) ISAIAH 58:6

Isaiah refers to God's anguished cry:

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? (v. 6)

Lucretia's following paraphrase emerges from feeling the anguish of God as her own:

we should be brought to feel that the true fast which the most high has chosen is to undo the bonds of wickedness, and let these oppressed go free and to break every yoke.²⁰

The stenographer does not place the words in quotation marks because they did not strike him as a quotation. This suggests the extent to which Lucretia spoke Scripture inwardly as her mother tongue, and with fluency. Her own language can barely be distinguished from that of Isaiah. *She lived the Bible.*

Lucretia found in Isaiah 58:6 her sense of God within awakened; she felt tormented as she ate her breakfast feeling God's pain and anger at the existence of poverty and injustice. In Isaiah 58:6 God rages at the apathy of the elite. Her response to this is "*we should be brought to feel...*" She experienced God's *cry of pain*, and her response is "*to feel*" God's pain. Her very being feels God's anguish which leads her to experience the suffering of the poor as her own.

The "*I*" *who chose that there be a fast* in 58:6, for Lucretia, is "the most high." This is a striking paraphrase. Lucretia's experience is of God as transcendent, overwhelming and powerful, who demands people to live in obedience to God's design.²¹ Lucretia is awakened to the transcendence within her by her engaging with Scripture inwardly, ponderously and empathetically. Lucretia's "most high" emerges and grows in the context of God's "feeling pain for the poor" in contrast to "apathy." Lucretia was spiritually awakened to that of God within through her reading and meditating upon Scripture. This God within is the most high, who is not the tamed God of the elite confined to rites and temples.

The "fast" of Isaiah 58:6 is, for Lucretia, the "true fast" of refraining from wearing garments that have the blood of the slave on them, and from living in properties built "by unrighteousness."²² She also saw those devout Christians in meeting, including herself, as not having paid decent wages to the workers upon whose labors their comforts and security depended. Lucretia sums up: "we must not use our neighbor's services without wages and give him not for his work."²³ Her paraphrase "true fast" is to act in a way that all flourish. Fasting is part of the Torah; it evokes for Lucretia the "law of our being" in which each of us is designed to live with restraint that all can live.

Isaiah refers to freedom from "wickedness" and "heavy burdens," liberation for the "oppressed" and the breaking of "every yoke." Lucretia's omits Isaiah's "heavy burdens." She saw "burdens" as a repetition of "yoke" and thereby unnecessary.²⁴ True fast therefore is to undo, free, and break injustice, as indeed was Torah. Each of these verbs relate to liberation from hunger,

oppression and slavery. True fast, that the “most high” chose, evokes the covenant God makes with Moses so that people live with restraint, so slavery no longer exists. God gives laws enabling humans to experience living together in *shalom*.²⁵ Israel more than all peoples should sympathize with those who are slaves for they were once slaves in Egypt. Their consumption habits are to be restrained and in line with God’s commandments of trusting in the goodness of creation.

Fasting in 58:6–7 shares particularly the language of the Jubilee commandments in the Torah. Lucretia alludes to fasting as law. She writes that “non-observance of the laws” results in “great depression.”²⁶ It involves “an immediate withdrawal of their beloved from their souls.”²⁷ On the basis of her sermon, God is very much the God who commands and we are those who must obey. To do this is to live so others flourish.

In conclusion, fasting was understood by Lucretia in the context of God’s ordering of creation according to Torah, involving restraint in terms of consumption so all can flourish. *Lucretia read fasting as the action of caring for others* and this was key to her adaption of Isaiah 58:6 to her situation. She read “fast” empathetically and imaginatively.

(3) ISAIAH 58:13

God attacks the abuse of Sabbath keeping in a manner that parallels that of fasting in 58:6.²⁸ God rages that Sabbath is trampled upon by the wealthy pursuing their “own interests on my holy day.” In a Sabbath world there should be no exploitation or hoarding; no person has a greater right to creation’s resources than another. Wirzba observes: “Instead there should be joy of knowing that the world is sustained and loved into being by the God who is continually pouring and emptying himself out for creation’s good.”²⁹ Sabbath is a reminder that God has released his people Israel from slavery according to Deuteronomy 5:12–15. Sabbath, like fasting, is intimately connected with protecting the vulnerable in society, trusting in God’s beneficence.

While Lucretia does not mention Sabbath at Cherry Street Meeting in 1850, in her 1867 address to the Second Unitarian Church on November 24, she depicts God saying: “I am weary of your Sabbath...because ye grind the face of the poor, saith the Lord.”³⁰ “I am weary of your Sabbath” has no close parallel in the KJV although “I am weary” appears six times in KJV. The words regarding the poor are found in Isaiah 3:15, which clearly Lucretia is echoing. It is evident that fasting and Sabbath are both treated by Lucretia synonymously in the context of the exploitation of the poor, yet she sees in both of them something much deeper that involves restrained living for the sake of others.

CONCLUSION

Lucretia read Isaiah 58 empathetically in line with Young’s definition of “empathy” as stated early in this study. She read Isaiah 58, not as a detached observer, but as one who is open to its challenging message. We see this in her particular paraphrases of Isaiah 58:6–7. More precisely, Lucretia responds to what she reads recognizing her culpability in injustice. In short, *she read in order to change* and the change was the basis of her activism. This empathetic reading also explains in part why people were drawn to her as a public speaker.

Further, Isaiah 58 stirred Lucretia to see how the very religious traditions that commanded sympathy for the poor, such as fasting and Sabbath, on the contrary, depicted God as detached from them. This allowed people to live in comfort with their privileges, apathetic to the pain of others and blind to their culpability in it. They appeared respectable and law-abiding Christians but they neglected justice to the poor.

This study suggests that Lucretia read Isaiah 58 to be open to God; she pondered the words absorbing them into her being, changing her, opening her to the oppressed with whom God identified. This may encourage Friends to consider Lucretia as one who can teach us about reading Scripture as an inspiration for daily life in the midst of a culture that is so effective in socializing its citizens to tolerate and justify the daily injustices they see. I

propose that my claims about Lucretia’s reading of Isaiah 58 are evident in her use of other books of Scripture.

ENDNOTES

- 1 T. Vail Palmer, Jr., *A Long Road: How Quakers Made Sense of God and the Bible* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2017) 82.
- 2 F. M Young, *Brokenness and Blessing: Towards a Biblical Spirituality* (London: DLT, 2007) 23.
- 3 M. H. Bacon, *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott* (New York: Walker and Company, 1980) 22.
- 4 All references to Lucretia’s speeches and sermons are taken from C. Densmore, C. Faulkner, N. Hewitt, B. W. Palmer (editors), *Lucretia Mott Speaks: The Essential Speeches and Sermons* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 82.
- 5 Densmore, et al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 83.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 82–83.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 84,
- 9 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 11 W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 173, observes that Torah “is not to protect advantage, but to call that advantage into question when it does not benefit the community.
- 12 Densmore, et al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 83.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 15 C. Bryant, *Jung and the Christian Way* (London: DLT, 1938) 41.
- 16 Densmore, et al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 154.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 18 See D. Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified* (London: Quaker Books, 2006) 3; also T. Fretheim, *God and the World in the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abington, 2005) 143.
- 19 Densmore, et al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 85.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 86.

- 21 W. G. Rollins, *Jung and the Bible* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1983) 68, sees “most high” as a supra-natural symbol symbolizing “the ‘otherness’ and ‘transcendence’ of the divine.”
- 22 Densmore, et al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 86.
- 23 Ibid., 86.
- 24 The Hebrew *mōṭāb* (yoke) occurs twice in 58:6 and is translated by KJV “burden” and “yoke.” NRSV has “yoke” twice suggesting the Hebrew may be a repetition.
- 25 W. Swartley, *Health, Healing and the Church’s Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2012) 28: “God gives laws...to enable humans to experience a goodness approximating the intention of creation, living together in *shalom*.”
- 26 Densmore, et al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 85.
- 27 Ibid., 85.
- 28 Fasting on the Sabbath was a known custom by Suetonius (*Augustus* 76.2).
- 29 N. Wirzba, *Food and Faith* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011) 138.
- 30 Densmore, et al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 174–175.