

1 December 2019

What Do We Do with the Prophets?

Isaiah 11:1-9

Most of the prophecies of the Messiah that we read at Advent and Christmas come from the prophet Isaiah. Today we read one of Isaiah's most memorable visions, that of the 'Peaceable Kingdom.' It's found in Isaiah 11, verses 1-9:

- ¹ A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*
- ² 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.*
- ³ 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;*
- ⁴ 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.*
- ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*
- ⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*
- ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*
- ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*
- ⁹ 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.*

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Almost from the beginning of the Christian Church, there have been those who saw the Old Testament as an embarrassment. Within a century after Christ, Gentiles already outnumbered Jews in the church, and some were asking, "Why are we using this strange Jewish book as our Bible?" There was this one Gentile believer named Marcion in the second century, for example, who decided to toss the whole thing out. Marcion loved what he heard about Jesus, and his

teachings of love and forgiveness and mercy to the poor and downtrodden, but that Old Testament God was something else! Judgmental, bad-tempered, nothing at all like Jesus. Marcion decided that the Old Testament God wasn't Jesus' Father at all but some sort of semi-divine poser who got big ideas about himself and went and created an ill-conceived, poorly-constructed world. Marcion was rejected by the church as a heretic, but there are a lot of Christians today who unconsciously hold similar beliefs. Like Marcion, many would just as soon drop the whole Old Testament as a bad lot.

In contrast to that perspective, you have someone like Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French philosopher and mathematician and early computer designer and, yes, theologian. Pascal's best known book is his *Pensées*, or *Thoughts*, in which he sets out to prove the truth of the Christian religion by . . . examining the Old Testament. His thesis is that Christ is prefigured and foretold so precisely and accurately in the words of the Hebrew Bible that it is simply impossible for it all to be coincidence. This is the very finger of God, to have a book that so perfectly foretells Christ five hundred to a thousand years before his birth. To Pascal, the Old Testament isn't an embarrassment but an essential part of the Christian message.

So which is it? Now, as some of you know, my PhD is in Hebrew Bible, so you can guess where my sympathies lie, but even I have to admit that parts of the Old Testament feel very different from the life and teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The two testaments don't always play well together, so how *do* they connect? Well, Pascal was right in an important way: the clearest bridge between the two testaments are the Hebrew prophets. These peculiar characters, like Jesus himself, were outsiders filled with the Spirit of God and were regarded with suspicion by the religious establishment. From their outsider's perspective they not only preached angrily against superficial faith, but they painted pictures of what the world would be like if people would turn back to God in truth. In these visions, they do indeed foretell Jesus Christ.

Just not always in the way we think. The Early Church trotted out a lot of Old Testament "prophecies" of the Messiah that just don't hold up under examination. In the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, after telling how Joseph and Mary hid in Egypt from Herod, Matthew says, "This fulfills the prophecy of Hosea, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" No, it doesn't. I mean, yes, that line is in Hosea, but it's not a prophecy. In that verse, God's remembering the Exodus – "Out of Egypt I called my son, Israel." It has nothing to do the Messiah. We can't just pick individuals scraps of scripture out of context because, taken by themselves, they mean something we want them to say. If we can do that, then anyone can make the Bible mean anything. Or, for another example, take that famous verse, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" – Isaiah 7:14. That sounds great, but if you go back and read the context – even just verses 13 and 15 – you see that it's part of a larger prophecy that the Empire of Assyria will invade Israel within a couple of years. It's not about the Messiah coming at a future date; it's about the Syro-Ephraimitic War coming soon. In fact, most of the prophecies of the Hebrew prophets have to do with their own time and foretell events that at least some of their audience will live to see. There aren't as many "Messianic" prophecies as the Early Church imagined.

But there are some. Take, for instance, the prophecy that we read earlier from Isaiah 11. Here Isaiah promises a descendent of David who will one day rule with righteousness and justice, judging the world by the heart of God rather than by human advice, caring for the poor and strengthening the weak. At that time, natural enemies will learn to live in peace. The wolf shall live beside the lamb, the leopard with the goat, lions and bears and cattle will live in harmony. In those days, all humanity will live in peace, because the knowledge of God will fill the earth. This was not a prophecy that came true in Isaiah's lifetime. Nor in any lifetime since then, including ours. As long as humanity in its current condition is running things, this is not going to happen, and Isaiah – who was not an idiot – knew that as well as we do. No, he was envisioning a time when humanity would no longer be stuck in its current condition, when the heart of God would rule, and the picture of peace and harmony he paints is a portrait of God's deepest heart.

He's not alone. Other prophets had similar visions. Ezekiel, proclaiming the mind of God to Jewish exiles in Babylon, saw a day when God would take the initiative in their salvation. Weary of waiting for the people to follow God of their own volition, God was going to step in personally. Ezekiel 36:25-26: *I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.* No one said it better than the prophet Jeremiah, though:

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (31:31-34).

Like Isaiah and Ezekiel, Jeremiah sees that the heart of God is not one of judgment but of love and forgiveness and transformation, and that in the end God's heart will rule. The new covenant that God will establish will not be about *Thou shalt* and *thou shalt not*, but rather about *I will write my ways on your heart* and *I will forgive you* and *I will be your God*. These prophets, these amazing witnesses – persecuted, oppressed, imprisoned, beaten, and rejected – saw that there would be a time when the law would lose its power, when God would dwell within us, when forgiveness would be a gift without strings, when the flinty heart of humanity would be softened by the warmth of God's love, and when the world itself would be transformed.

So did these prophets foresee Jesus of Nazareth? Well, sure, there are a few specific Old Testament prophecies that are fulfilled: Jesus was a descendent of David, as foretold by Isaiah, and he was born in Bethlehem, as promised by the prophet Micah. But these things are trivial compared to the deeper connections. The prophets weren't concerned so much with the circumstances of the Messiah's birth as with the purpose. They all might have been astonished to

hear that the Messiah they looked forward to would be a wandering artisan's son from Galilee, but what Jesus brought is exactly what they longed for.

C.S. Lewis has a useful analogy here. He asks us to imagine a man who has never lived anywhere but in England. Now England has no real mountains, but this man notices that in the spring, the winter snows remain longer on the tops of hills than they do in the valleys and that the higher the hill, the longer the snow remains. So he imagines that if there were hills that were even higher, there might even be some on which the snow never melts at all. He's never seen such a thing, so it feels like a fantastic dream, but he can imagine it. Now that man goes to the Alps. On the one hand, he's astonished – nothing in the geography of Britain can really prepare you for the Alps – but at the same time he nods, “Yes, that's what I was talking about, though the reality is more splendid than I had even imagined.” That's the sense in which the Hebrew prophets foresee Christ. They didn't see all the details, but there is no doubt that if they had heard his teaching, witnessed the manner of his birth, the way he lived, the people he loved, and how he died and rose again, they would have recognized that both their greatest prophecies and their deepest hopes had been fulfilled. “Yes, that's what I was talking about, though the reality is more splendid than I had even imagined.”