

Bible Tuesday for the Feast Day of Epiphany, 2019

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

This portion of Isaiah was written after Israel already returned to Canaan and Jerusalem from Babylonia, after the Persians defeated the Babylonians. When the Israelites returned to Canaan with permission from their new overseers, the Persians, Nehemiah was their Persian appointed governor, and Ezra was their new priest. Things did not go very smoothly. The Temple was rebuilt but money was tight. When Babylonia defeated Israel, the upper echelons of society were taken captive to Babylon, while the farmers and fishermen were left to ply their trades and pay tribute to Babylonia. When Persia allowed the Israelites to return to Canaan, there was much civil unrest between those who were returning and those who were left behind. Topics of argument included usurped lands, religious practices, and marriages of Jews to non-Jews. Nehemiah wanted to deal with these two groups mercifully, while Ezra wanted all mixed marriages to be dissolved and all non-Jews to leave Israel.

This above passage of Isaiah tries to interject hope and peace into this turmoil. The prophecy is the in the form of a poem written to Jerusalem as if it were a woman. Israelites from far flung lands shall return to Jerusalem, and nations, some of which had conquered Israel, will now come to Jerusalem as a world capitol.

Very early Christians saw this as a prophecy about Jesus instead of Jerusalem, to whom "kings" came bearing the gifts of gold and frankincense.

Psalms 72:1-14

¹Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.

²May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.

³May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

⁴May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.

⁵May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

⁶May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.

⁷In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

⁸May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

⁹May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust.

¹⁰May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

¹¹May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

¹²For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.

¹³He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.

¹⁴From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

This is a coronation psalm. It is traditionally ascribed to Solomon, along with Psalm 127. Solomon was the first king of Israel rightly called “the king’s son” since none of Saul’s sons became king, and God promised the throne of Israel to David’s line forever. While not reflected in the English translation, the prosperity of verse three is reliant upon the king executing verse two correctly. Only when the king judges the peoples as God would judge them, granting the cast aside and neglected justice, will the land yield prosperously for the people.

The psalmist states that when Israel’s king serves God and the people faithfully, then the nations of the world will bring him tribute. Seba was known for exotic wealth. The psalmist ignores the common marks of kingship such as victories at war and expansion of the kingdom, in favor of the qualities of the good shepherd such as tending to the poor, sick, and powerless.

Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

“The mystery”- God’s revelation of himself to humanity through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. While the Hebrew Scriptures do speak of Israel spreading God’s word and love, evangelism, in the style of Paul, Philip, Thomas, Barnabas, etc. does not seem exist until Jesus sends his apostles out. Prior to Jesus, the Israelites believed themselves to be God’s one and only chosen people, and rather kept that gift for themselves. Paul is stating in this passage, that God meant for everyone to have this gift of love, Israel and goyim, Jews and Gentiles!

In the last verse of this passage, Paul states the true miracle of Christmas, that God who is beyond comprehension, condescended to become human, that “loving the God made visible, we may come to love the God whom we cannot see.”

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In

Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Herod the Great – Herod the Great was not actually Jewish, descended from Abraham-Isaac-Jacob, but rather from Abraham-Isaac-Esau. He was born in 73BC in Edom, the land of the descendants of Esau, as opposed to Canaan, the land of the Israelites. He died in Jericho in 4 BC. Since the year 0 AD is supposed to be the year that Jesus was born, you might be asking how this king could be alive at Jesus' infancy in the gospel of Matthew, but dead before Jesus was supposed to be born. The answer is that Jesus was likely born sometime between 6-4 BC and that the scholars that set the year 0 and counted backward from it for BC and forward from it for AD did so slightly erroneously. Herod's father was a court official of the then client king of the Jews. (Client King is the term for those kings who were put in place by Rome to rule their own people for Rome.) While Herod was an Edomite and was raised Jewish, he was viewed by some as a lesser Jew. Herod's father helped his son secure favor with Rome and the Jewish Client King. Herod was appointed governor of Galilee while his brother was appointed governor of Jerusalem. Herod was greatly favored by Rome but feared by the Jewish leaders due to his brutality against his own people. In 40 BC, Herod was appointed King of the Jews by the Roman Senate, but had to take the kingdom by force because the nephew of the former Client King had usurped his uncle's throne. The war between Rome/Herod the Great and the nephew usurper ended in 36 BC. As king, Herod lived a decadent lifestyle, banished at least one of his wives, and murdered some of his own sons to keep them from usurping his throne. There was great animosity between Herod and those of his subjects who were religiously observant.

"Herod spent lavish sums on his various building projects and generous gifts to other dominions, including Rome itself. His buildings were very large, ambitious projects. Herod was responsible for the construction of the Temple Mount, a portion of which remains today as the Western Wall. In addition, Herod also used the latest technology in [hydraulic cement](#) and underwater construction to build the harbor at [Caesarea](#).^[37] While Herod's zeal for building transformed Judea, his motives were not selfless. Although he built fortresses ([Masada](#), [Herodium](#), Alexandrium, Hyrcania, and [Machaerus](#)) in which he and his family could take refuge in case of insurrection, these vast projects were also intended to gain the support of the Jews and improve his reputation as a leader.^[40] Herod also built Sebaste and other pagan cities because he wanted to appeal to the country's substantial pagan population.^[37] In order to fund these projects, Herod utilized a Hasmonean taxation system that heavily burdened the Judean people. Nevertheless, these enterprises brought employment and opportunities for the people's provision.^[41] In some instances, Herod took it upon himself to provide for his people in times of need, such as during a severe famine that occurred in 25 BCE.^[42]

Although he made many attempts at conforming to traditional Jewish laws, there were more instances where Herod was insensitive, which constitutes one of the major Jewish complaints

towards Herod as highlighted in Jewish Antiquities. In Jerusalem, Herod introduced foreign forms of entertainment, and erected a golden eagle at the entrance of the Temple, which suggested a greater interest in the welfare of Rome than of Jews.^[41] Herod's taxes garnered a bad reputation - his constant concern for his reputation led him to make frequent, expensive gifts, increasingly emptying the kingdom's coffers, and such lavish spending upset his Jewish subjects." (Wikipedia)

Wise Men – The Greek word “magi”, which appears in the New Testament, is translated as “wise men”, “kings”, and “seers”. These men were astronomers/astrologers who saw in the stars the sign of a new king born to the Jewish people. The gospel of Matthew does not make clear if they were traveling as envoys of distant lands come to pay tribute or if they were acting on their own accord. We also have no idea from where they came or how many magi there were. We do know from the above gospel that by the time the magi knelt before Jesus, he was no longer in the manger, but in a house in Jerusalem. Jesus could have been a toddler by this point.

The tradition arose in the middle ages that there were three kings, each bearing one of the three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It was also assumed that they came from three different countries and were of three different ethnicities. But note that none of this is actually in the above gospel passage, the only biblical reference to the magi.

The rest of this story is that Herod the Great feared another rival to the throne arising in Bethlehem so he waiting to hear a report back from the magi. When they did not return to him, he sent a unit of soldiers to Bethlehem and ordered “the slaughter of the innocents”: all male babies ages two and under be executed. Joseph was given a prophetic dream to grab Mary and baby Jesus and flee Bethlehem before the soldiers arrived, financing their flight with the gifts from the magi. They ran to Egyptian territory to fulfill yet another prophecy from the Hebrew Scriptures: “Out of Egypt have I called my son.” This prophecy was written from God’s point of view and refers to God calling the descendants of Jacob and Joseph out of slavery in Egypt. The gospel writer of Matthew also so this prophecy to refer to Jesus.