



THE SEASON OF A D V E N T

The Hope of a Coming King



I. INTRODUCTION

- A. In the liturgical tradition of the church, the season of Advent is intimately connected to the event of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Unsurprisingly then, we tend to regard Advent as a time of preparation to celebrate Christ's birth on Christmas day. Nonetheless, the depth and richness of this season is much more comprehensive than this. Although the length and focus of Advent varied over the first centuries of the church, the format of four Sundays preceding a fifth and final Christmas service became standard practice in the seventh century A.D. It was also during this time that the Christmas season became the principal foundation from which the Church's liturgical calendar arose. It went from being a period that primarily commemorated Christ's birth at Bethlehem to a celebration of "the whole mystery of Incarnation Redemption, embracing Crib, Cross and empty Tomb."¹
- B. The mystery of the Incarnation is the dawning of His triumph as the universal Sovereign Ruler. Thus, while the Christmas season was a time that celebrated the victory and accomplishment of the Incarnation/Cross (Rev. 13:8; cf. John 1:29), it predominantly looked to Jesus's final triumph as King and Judge—the time when the fullness of redemption will be experienced by the redeemed in the presence of the Redeemer. The result was a strong liturgical undercurrent in the Advent calendar that rooted the church in the hope of Christ's end-of-the-age coming. It is a time of expectation as Christians hopefully wait for His coming through the celebration of the Incarnation/Nativity. When seen this way, the worship and focus of Advent is meant to be an annual invitation into waiting for the hope of Christ's imminent return. Thus, the Christian New Year begins with the end of things rather than the beginning. As Fleming Rutledge has noted, "Surprisingly, the liturgical season of Advent, rather than Lent, best locates the Christian community. Advent – the time between – with its themes of crisis and judgment, now and not-yet places us not in some privileged spiritual sanctuary but on the frontier where the promised kingdom of God exerts maximum pressure on the present, with corresponding signs of suffering and struggle."²

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. Revelation 22:17 (NRSV)

II. THE EXPECTATION OF THE OT AND ITS CERTAIN FULFILLMENT

- A. At its heart, Christianity is a religion of waiting. God's grand redemptive plan is the pilgrimage of His people as they live in anticipation for His salvific arrival. As one scholar notes, "All history is a journey of desire towards a meeting with the divine.

In its purest form, this waiting for God has always been a practical expression of human hope, and this hope has always been based on a divine promise. This is how Salvation History has been played out in the world."³

- B. Beginning in Genesis 3:15, the entire message of the OT is framed as a promise. Subsequently with Abraham, the vagueness of the promise given in the Garden of Eden is definitively clarified—providing a plan for Salvation History and thus hope while awaiting its fulfillment.

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike His heel." Genesis 3:15 (NRSV)

He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Genesis 15:5 (NRSV)

- C. The hope of the fulfilled promise's surety was such a foundational premise to the OT that the Apostle Paul not only draws upon it to establish the doctrine that righteousness/salvation comes by faith alone, but that also that Abraham was so fiercely and faithfully committed to it that he was,

Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." Romans 4:18 (NRSV)

- D. From Abraham forward, God continued to remind His covenant keeping people that He will remain faithful to His covenant. Although the end of the Pentateuch leaves one looking for the fulfillment of the patriarchal promises (e.g., Israel is not in the Promised Land; Deut. 34), at significant locations it looks forward to the "last days" when a Messiah will right all wrongs. Genesis 49 (concludes Patriarchal history), Exodus 15 (concludes the Israelites exodus from Egypt), Numbers 23-24 (concludes wilderness wandering), and Deuteronomy 32-33 (concludes conquest of the Transjordan) are all summative sections of what has transpired in Israel's history, but they also look to the "last days" and the time of the Messiah (Gen. 49:1; Exod. 15:18; Num. 24:14; Deut. 31:29; 34:10-12).

- E. Furthermore, significant books in the structure of the Hebrew Bible not only perpetuate this hope, but they also provide further details concerning the Messiah.

1. Deuteronomy, the final book of the Torah, ends with the expectation of a future prophet like Moses (Deut. 34:10-12; cf. 18:15).

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹²and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel. Deuteronomy 34:10-12 (NRSV)

2. Malachi, the final book of the Prophets, ends with the expectation of a coming Elijah, who himself was portrayed as a prophet like Moses.

“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD.” Malachi 4:5 (NASB)

3. Chronicles, the final book of the Writings, ends with an expectation of a coming temple-building messiah.

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, ²³“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.” 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 (NKJV)

- F. It was essentially the mission of the OT prophet to give hope to the righteous in the interim of covenant fulfillment. They were to lift the gaze God’s chosen from the frustrations and pain of the present toward the hope of God’s covenant. The people were to look beyond the temporal and fleeting blessings that God provides or withholds, to something far greater—the coming of a Redeemer. Their message tells us that He will be the divinely appointed Messenger who will solve their problems and fulfill the Patriarchal promises.

- G. Out of all the OT prophets, the one who has been dubbed the prophet of hope, and the who first put into words a theology of waiting/hope is the prophet, Isaiah. He is the most cited OT prophet in the NT for good reason. The book gives more insight into the Messiah’s nature, identity and mission (in this age and the next) than any other OT work. The hope of the coming messiah is so strong in Isaiah, that many throughout Church history have referred to it not as “a prophecy, but the Gospel: ‘He is not so much a prophet as an evangelist.’⁴ No other biblical work compares with its glorious picture of the restoration of Israel and the Messiah’s millennial reign. Unlike any prophet, Isaiah saw the Lord Jesus in His exalted majesty, His shameless humility, and His anointed

kingship to end wickedness and fulfill the Father’s purpose for all of creation—the bringing together in Christ of all things both in heaven and on the earth (Eph. 1:9-10).

- H. The theological richness therein is unsurpassed in both scope and depth. Building from the foundation of God’s established covenant, Isaiah sets forth a vision of Israel’s glorious future. From beginning to end, He masterfully interweaves the themes of judgment and redemption, chastisement and grace, Israel and the nations; all of which converge in the Messiah and His work among His people—resulting in Israel and the world’s redemption.

- I. In Isaiah 7 we learn He is called Emmanuel, “God with us;” that He will be King, Prophet and the One who will suffer with His people (7:14-17). He is His people’s Redeemer (9:2-7), will rule over them as the root and shoot of Jesse (11:1-5), and will suffer for His people as the Servant of the Lord (42:1-9; 49:5-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). This “gives a total view of the means whereby God expects to deliver His people from both the causes and the effects of sin. Central to the book’s attitude about arrogance and pride is the picture of One who will establish His rule through the moral force of His own humility and self-giving rather than through brute force.”⁵

- J. To this end, the traditional Advent reading for tonight comes from Matt. 1:18-25. It conveys both fulfillment and the expectant hope of an ultimate cosmic consummation. It is Emmanuel, the promised Child whom Israel awaited and in whom we now also hope.

For a Child has been born for us, a Son given to us; authority rests upon His shoulders; and He is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and His kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. Isaiah 9:6-7 (NRSV)

- K. In the interval of the in-between it is Emmanuel that we meet in worship—God with us! While we wait, He is here in solidarity and consolation.

¹ John Power, “Advent,” *The Furrow* 17.12 (1996): 751.

² Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 45. She will later say that “On the Sundays immediately preceding Advent, the appointed biblical texts are especially laden with the theme of judgment: the wise and the foolish virgins, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, the parable of the talents, and most conspicuously – on Christ the King Sunday every third year – the Last Judgment in Matthew 24:31 and following...” (314).

³ Power, “Advent,” 752.

⁴ R. Jamieson, et al., *A Critical and Explanatory Commentary on the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 66.

⁵ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 41.