

Jerusalem's King

We've heard about two of the major Old Testament themes that informed the Jewish expectation for a Messiah. One was the promise that David would always have a descendant on the throne of the people of Judah and the other was that a suffering servant would come who would be a Redeemer for God's people, someone who would die for their sins.

This week we want to look at a third theme that is seen in the Psalms and Prophets, especially in the book of Zechariah, and that is the Return of the King, the coming of Yahweh as the ruler of His people. I've called this message "Jerusalem's King" because the word "Jerusalem" means "City of Peace" or "Abode of Peace" and the prophesied arrival of this coming king was to be accompanied by a profound and lasting peace that would spread far beyond Israel.

Let's look at some of the texts that help us understand this theme ... starting with two Psalms that are "almost bookends" to the book of Psalms, the second Psalm and the second last one:

We'll come back to Psalm 2 in a minute, but notice the parallels between this and Psalm 149:

*Let Israel rejoice in their Maker; let the people of Zion be glad in their King ...
Let the saints rejoice in this honour and sing for joy on their beds
May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edge sword in their
hands
To inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples,
To bind their kings with fetters, their nobles with shackles of iron.
To carry out the sentence against them, this is the glory of all His saints.*
(Psalm 149: 6-9)

Both psalms talk about Zion and its King. Both psalms make it clear this is no human king. Both psalms picture a group of people called “the kings of the earth” in Psalm 2 and the kings of the nations in Psalm 149. And in both cases these people are in rebellion against God’s rule. In the first, they are trying to break off what they call the “chains” and “fetters” of Yahweh and His Anointed One, and in the second the people who have been saved by the LORD’s redeeming work are binding these kings with fetters and their nobles with shackles of iron.

Notice that there are stages of judgment in these two poems. In the first, God laughs at the rebellion of the kings of the earth and then rebukes and terrifies them with these simple words, “I have installed My King on Zion, My holy hill.” In the second, those who have honoured God are given the task of completing the work of judgment, finally binding the rebel kings with the chains they earlier wanted to break. It’s a timeless picture of human rebellion against God. What do these two psalms tell us about the Messiah, and how might they influence the expectation that the people of Judea would have had for their “Anointed One”?

First off, while the word Jerusalem means “city of peace”, the word Zion means, literally, “fortification” and the frequent picture of Zion is a fortress that is exalted, that is lifted up as a monument to the greatness of God. While one word presents an image of peace, the other seems to represent victory, and that seems to be at play in these two psalms.

The second element is that the “kings” of the earth are opposed to the God of heaven. They consider His requirements fetters to be broken off and they wish that His rule could be replaced by their own. While the psalmist uses familiar language describing kings and nobles, I think it’s important that we acknowledge at least the possibility that the kings are equivalent to the spiritual rulers and authorities that are continually working against the Kingdom of God, working to subvert His righteousness and the obedience of His people on the earth. This would make a neat tie-in with Ephesians 6, the passage about wrestling against principalities and powers, dark spiritual forces who oppose God’s Kingdom. The answer to their pride and their attempts to unseat God from His throne is, first, that Yahweh scoffs at them, rebukes them and declares that He has installed *His* King on Zion. The second part of the answer is from Psalm 149 where people who have learned to praise God are seen binding these spiritual kings and nobles and inflicting God’s vengeance on the spiritual forces that turn whole nations against God. I may be stretching on that one - I’ll admit it - but the Jewish expectation was surely that Jerusalem’s king would be a conqueror. He would execute God’s judgment against the nations that were enemies of Israel and would rule the whole world from Zion, or Jerusalem.

Now, let’s take this discussion of Zion into the book of Isaiah. We’ll start with Isaiah 24:21-23 and notice the parallel between this passage and the psalms we’ve just been looking at:

In that day Yahweh will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below
They will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon
They will be shut up in prison and be punished after many days
The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed
For the LORD Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
And before its elders gloriously.

You can see where someone might get the idea of the kings and powers representing spiritual beings in both heaven and earth - here Isaiah refers to the “powers in the

heavens above and the kings on the earth below". The other option would be that the kings on earth are representing the powers in heaven that have rebelled against the LORD God. The point of the passage is to show that, in the day when this evil is judged, God Himself will reign as King in Jerusalem.

Let's look at a couple of other Isaiah passages that influenced the expectation of Jerusalem's coming king:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy

When Yahweh returns to Zion they will see it with their own eyes

Burst into songs of joy together you ruins of Jerusalem

For Yahweh has comforted His people He has redeemed Jerusalem

The LORD will lay bare His holy arm in the sight of all the nations,

And all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God. (52:7-10)

It's very simple and very clear: God's reign, His coming Kingdom, would bring salvation, comfort and joy to His people, to His holy city. The messengers bring the good news and it includes peace, salvation, the reign of God, His comfort, redemption and victory over all the enemies of Israel. These are the signs of the Messianic Kingdom, the righteous rule of God that brings peace to the city of peace and security to the fortress Zion.

Further promises of salvation and redemption are found in Isaiah 59:20, 61:3 and 62:11. It's what you would expect from God's anointed King, and it's what the Jewish people were expecting to see when their Messiah would come.

I want to look at a prophetic book that we don't often read from - the book of Zechariah, which is the second last book of the Old Testament. It names the city Jerusalem 41 times; only Isaiah and Jeremiah, much longer books, reference Jerusalem more than that. And it describes the LORD God as the Victor, the One who conquers Israel's enemies, and, ultimately, the King of the whole earth.

Some examples:

Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of people and livestock in it. And I Myself will be a wall of fire around it, declares the LORD, and I will be its glory within. (2:4,5)

Just from that short passage we can see that the expectation for the Messiah would be God's very presence with His people, bringing them security, protection from all their enemies. And that theme is repeated throughout the book. For example:

This is what Yahweh says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountains of Yahweh Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain. (8:3)

One of the key themes in Zechariah is that of the nations coming to Jerusalem to seek God's presence.

This is what Yahweh Almighty says: "Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek Yahweh Almighty. I myself am going.' And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek Yahweh Almighty and to entreat Him. (8:20-22)

Zechariah's last chapter contains this prophecy:

Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, Yahweh Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles." (14:16)

Again, the King comes to reign in His holy city, that King Is Yahweh, and His presence draws the nations.

Zechariah is probably most famously known for a passage that comes in chapter 9 and is noted by the gospel writers Matthew and John as being fulfilled by Jesus' entry into Jerusalem:

*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion; shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation
Gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (9:9)*

And in the very next verse, this coming King of Zion will proclaim peace to the nations and will rule from the Great River to the ends of the earth.

Over and over again, the prophecies of Zechariah point to a coming King who will reign in Jerusalem, who will bring victory to His people, who will be, somehow, the very presence of Yahweh among His people and who will usher in a time of peace and prosperity - not just for Judah, but for all the nations who will gather together to worship Him.

So, those are the pictures we have, from Psalms, from Isaiah and from Zechariah, that helped, at least, to inform the expectations that the Jews had at the time Jesus was born in Bethlehem. What happened? Why didn't they see in Jesus the fulfilment of the promises God had given through His word?

In the first place, their expectation was slanted towards the descriptions the prophets offered of an era of peace, rather than some of the other elements of their prophecies. They tended to interpret this peace on a political or national level and to see, along with this peace, a time of freedom from foreign oppression and a time of moral, social and financial prosperity. This didn't fit first-century Judea.

I think that the influence of Greek thought swayed their expectation of a coming Messiah towards him being a world leader, someone recognized by the nations as having the wisdom to guide them away from war and famine and into a moral and economic golden age. A significant Jewish perspective today on the coming of their

King is that he will bring the good out of the human race and help us all to achieve greater things, a more humanistic hope.

Another reason for their failure to grasp the nature of God's coming to His city is that it wasn't entirely obvious. Isaiah 7 tells us that a virgin would be with child and give birth to a son and call his name Immanuel - which we understand, now, refers to Jesus. But then it says that before this miraculous birth takes place, the enemies that Ahaz so feared would be laid waste. The space between prophecy and fulfilment was hundreds of years long and it would not have been clear to the rabbis of the day that they should be looking for a virgin birth.

To be fair, many of the rabbis that wrote following the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. recognized that the time for Messiah had passed. The records of genealogies had been destroyed - a descendant of David could no longer be identified. Also, the time frame predicted in the prophecy of Daniel passed with the destruction of the Temple and this was recognized by many Jewish scholars as a clear indication that Messiah must have come. Now, the common view is that he is delayed, and we wait.

The bottom line is that the King who came to Zion, who came to bring Yahweh's rule to earth, was executed in Jerusalem, fulfilling a whole other line of prophecy and opening the way of salvation to all people, Jews and Gentiles, from every nation.

Now, what do we learn from the expectations of the Jews related to the prophecies of a coming King?

That's what our studies of Scripture always come back to - what can we learn? What lessons can we apply to our lives from what others have gone through? Here are 3:

1. If you want to know what God is planning, don't look to the world outside. The world has a different way of thinking, a different approach. So, just as the rabbis should have stayed with the world view of the prophets, so we should avoid the world view of the modern educators and politicians who tell us things about religious belief that simply aren't true. The classic one, which I've mentioned before, is the idea that everyone has their own path to God, but it's all the same God, so it doesn't matter if the paths are different. This doesn't survive any test of logic or demonstrate any insight into the beliefs and teachings of the world's religions - but you hear it everywhere. It's one of the folk myths of our time, even though it's logically impossible. And where in Scripture do you read that human beings can choose how they will make their way to God, that it's up to us to follow the path our heart shows us? This human-centred religion is antagonistic to the teaching of Scripture and will not lead us to the insights we want. If the rabbis missed Jesus because they were looking for something the world told them, rather than something God had told them, then there's a lesson there for us.
2. One of the main benefits to us of fulfilled prophecy is that it strengthens our confidence in God's promises. What God spoke, He was able to bring into being. What He promised centuries earlier, He caused to happen through Jesus. That affirms to us that God is not a spectator in the unfolding of human history. He's a

participant who moves the major pieces. That doesn't mean He controls every human action, that He causes wars and natural disasters and political upheavals - though He might. It simply means that God does what is necessary to, for example, protect the line of David from the rage of foreign kings or disease or warfare, and to cause Jesus to be born in that line about a thousand years after the prophecy was given. He is able to arrange a Roman census that required that the pregnant mother of Jesus has to be in Bethlehem of Judea when her time comes. God is powerfully able to do more than we ask or even imagine - and that's the God we put our hope and trust in.

3. The third thing I want us to take home from this study is that when God comes as King, it's a really, really good thing. We don't need to be told that Jesus brought goodness through His teaching, His healing, His deliverance, His kindness, but we might just need to be reminded that His true followers have brought incredible good to the world for almost 2000 years. Those who are not trying to make kingdoms for themselves, but who honestly serve the Kingdom of God, have brought the world immeasurable compassion and hope, have established the means for rescuing lives and restoring health, provided the structures for universal education, opened the door to discovery through the sciences, risked their lives to bring peace in troubled areas, and on and on it goes. These are all signs that the King has broken in to our story in a radical and powerful way. The world may not want to acknowledge Him - I get that - but someday, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.