

The Messiah and the reign of peace

Isaiah 11

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The opening verses of Isaiah 11 are well-known and offer splendid sermon material for Advent: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding ..." A Dutch Hymn sings: "And David's ancient line is blossoming again, in the middle of the night." Dr. L.A. Snijder writes in his commentary on the prophet Isaiah: "His talent is as the menorah, the seven-branched candelabrum, of the Divine spirit."¹ And justly so, for in the Gospel we hear how Christ is saturated with the Spirit of God. When the young Jesus talks with the scribes in the temple, we read: "Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers." (Luke 2:47). And in the High-priestly prayer we are moved by his knowledge and fear of the Lord (John 17, Isaiah 11:2). We see Isaiah's words crowned in the worship of the Lamb, who is seated at the Father's right hand: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!" (Revelation 5:12). Isaiah goes on to describe how the Messiah appears, comes to the help of the meek and judges the world with his judgements: "He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked" (verse 4). These are words that we read again in Paul's second letter to the church at Thessalonica: "then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming" (2 Thessalonians 2:8). At which Isaiah traces out the peace of the coming kingdom: "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together" (verse 6). God's goodness permeates the whole of creation and the nations seek the Messiah and bow down and pay Him homage (see Romans 15:12 and Revelation 5:5).

Spiritual interpretation

We see in church history that the prophetic images of the reign of peace are generally explained symbolically. For example, the marginal notes of the Staten translation (the Dutch equivalent of the King James version of the Bible) state: "The wolf with the lamb: These are the angry, bad, wild, fierce people, both Jews and gentiles, who will be so transformed by the preaching of Christ and of his servants and the inner working of the Holy Ghost, that, laying aside their evil affections, they will be clothed with the spirit of love and of meekness." When Isaiah says: "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain" (verse 9), the same expositors comment that this is to be understood as referring to the mount of the sanctuary, i.e. the temple, by which the church of the believers is meant. If the prophecy is not spiritualised, it is interpreted universally. It refers to the peace that will reign in the world. The Prince of Peace will indeed come from David's line, but that is further of little relevance and the mount of the Lord, together with Revelation 14, is even bestowed heavenly characteristics: "Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000."

¹ Jesaja, series De Prediking van het Oude Testament, p.145

Israel restored literally

However, if you read further, you notice that the Messiah does more than this. Only this is something that is seldom referred to in Advent preaching. Snijder remarks in this respect: "It is generally recognised that the content of this passage does not correspond with the vision of the Messianic king and his reign of peace" (p.150 of his afore-mentioned work). But is this really the case?

What Isaiah says is that with the coming of the Messiah and the dawn of the reign of peace:

a. The age-old conflict between Judah and Ephraim, i.e. between the Kingdom of the South and the Kingdom of the North, will disappear. That is also what the prophet Ezekiel saw happening in the future: "I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms" (37:22). And it begs the question whether that is also what Jesus meant in the first place when He told the Jews: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16).

b. The promised land will have rest from all surrounding enemies and the land will truly expand to encompass what God originally promised: "from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates" (Joshua 1:4, Isaiah 11:14-16).

c. The return of the people to the land, the Aliyah, will be brought to completion. God will raise his hand "Yet again" (verse 11). The return has already started but it will achieve its ultimate fulfilment through the Messiah. There will be a new exodus in the end-time finale. I believe we should read the words of Jesus in this light when He says that the Messiah, at his coming, will send out his angels to gather the elect from the four corners of the earth (Matthew 24:31). After all, the elect are, in the first place, the children of Abraham in the New Testament too (see: Luke 18:7, 2 Timothy 2:10 and Titus 1:1).

Isaiah's perspective of the future is thus not only simply universal and definitely not only simply spiritual: the reality is that Israel will be restored to her ancient glory and more than that. That is what Zacharias sings and what Mary testifies of:

"salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us [...]to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace [...]He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful" (Lucas 1:71,79 and 54).

It is against this prophetic background that the last question posed by the disciples to Jesus becomes understandable: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

The question that then arises, is whether we dare to preach this in the church. Of course people do not expect "Israel theology" in the dark days of Advent, but rather words about personal salvation and a peaceful future for the world. But do the prophets not show us that that future, however universal it may be, still has Israel and the Messiah as the king of the Jews at centre-stage?

The question is not whether we dare, but whether we want to be obedient to the way of the Lord, and whether we rejoice when God, after an age-old journey with the people He himself created, arrives at the complete fulfilment of his promises concerning Israel.

There are fortunately also songs to be found in the days of Advent, which translate this joy into words: the psalms of course, but what do you think of Hymns Ancient and Modern 49?

**"O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel**

**That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.****Introduction**

The creation of the new state of Israel in 1948 has greatly influenced church thought concerning God's plan of salvation for the Jewish people and the land promise. Many 'Church and Israel' commissions rapidly followed one another and countless articles and books were published on this topic. Almost sixty years have passed, and while this continues, the last word has not yet been spoken.

In this presentation I aim to give an introduction to the development of thought in the Church relative to the land promise. Additionally, I will focus on some of the underlying expectations and presuppositions regarding the land promise. In conclusion I will share some considerations about (Christian) Zionism.

1. Acts 1:6 and church history

In the beginning of 'the first book of the Church history' we read about the apostles' question and Jesus' answer concerning everything that has to do with the promise of the land. *'Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"*⁷ *And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority'.* Acts 1:6, 7 (NKJ)

After His resurrection Jesus taught the apostles about the Kingdom of God (verse 3) over a period of forty days. The apostles asked a question about the 'kingdom of Israel' because the topic was evidently discussed. After all, the kingship of Israel is a result of the Kingdom of God that is discussed in many Bible passages. The Kingdom of God is directed at earth in the sense that, if His will is the law on earth, His Kingdom will be realised. What portion of the law is not aimed at the land and people, at justice and property, at relationship and status on earth? The thoughts of the apostles of old and of present-day Jews include the physical land in the Kingdom of God and the kingship of Israel. Those thoughts have their origin in the Bible.

The first major change in expectation of the early Christian church was undoubtedly brought about by the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The Arch of Titus in Rome painfully showed that the restoration of Israel's kingship was not yet at hand. When the name of the land of Israel was changed to Palestine by Emperor Hadrian after the Bar-Kochba revolt in 135 A.D., it became quite evident that the restoration of Israel's kingship would be eventful. This world's high and mighty had their own agendas. Israel was never to be mentioned again. All and everything was employed in the attempted to eradicate Israel's expected kingship.

The triumphalism of the church readily agreed with this. Augustine even once said that the Diaspora was the visible sign of God's judgment of the Jews and His justification of the Christians. The land had disappeared from view...

And yet this does not complete the picture of the Church in the Middle Ages. That became evident with the onset of the Crusades. The Holy land was in sight! And was it not to be set free of Islamic rule? But the spotlight lingered on the past rather than on the future of the

people of Israel. The crusaders concentrated on the holy places where Jesus walked and Biblical incidents occurred. If future events had been taken into account, it was limited to a one-sided view that the Mount of Olives was 'merely' the place to which Jesus would return.

The diminishing importance and authority of the Old Testament in the Church prevented corrective thoughts as far as the promise of land was concerned. This part of the Bible, in which so much had been written about the land, was rarely read and mainly used to illustrate New Testament truths. Israel had been replaced by the Church, and the land by the heavenly sphere.

But the Reformation on the European continent brought some changes. The translation of the Bible sparked a new interest in the Old Testament. English Puritans and individuals of the Revival in the Netherlands, such as Da Costa, gave the expectation of the kingship of Israel new life. The Chiliasts (Millennialists) and the Brethren Movement also made a contribution.

Yet these developments were mere preparation for what happened after 1948. the events of this period of time caused a revolution in the Church's thinking. Who knows how many books about Jesus the Jew saw the light? Well-known theologians even wrote new commentaries and withdrew earlier declarations about Israel and the Church, such as the 'International Critical Commentary on the New Testament' on Paul's letter to the Romans. In the Netherlands it was the Netherlands Reformed Church who dared to publish 'Israel: people, land and state' (1970). And in 2004 the Church Order of the Protestant Church of the Netherlands constituted the following:

'According to her confession as one Apostolic and Holy Catholic or general Christian Church, the Protestant Church of the Netherlands shares in Israel's expectation and eagerly awaits the coming of the Kingdom of God.' (article 1.1) and *'The Church has been called to embody her unequivocal bond with the people of Israel. As Christ-confessing, religious community she pursues dialogue with Israel in order to comprehend God's Word and in particular the coming Kingdom of God.'* (article 1.7)

With all due respect it is our opinion that, with this confession, the Church has returned to Acts 1:6 and the expectation of the apostles. It is quite shameful that it took (a part of) the Church 19 centuries to regain perspective on the people of Israel and the promise of land. This demands an attitude of humility and sobriety.

2. Our earth and the land promise

'Higher, higher, lift your heart, down below is nothingness'. These words from an old hymn illustrate the expectation of a large part of the Church throughout the ages. Unbiblical Christian thoughts, that separated the earthly and heavenly, had been developing under the joint influence of Greek philosophy and the separation of Church and synagogue. The visible materialistic matters with which unbelievers occupied themselves, were considered to be earthly. And heavenly things would include dogmatics and all that concerns the church. In that way future expectation was altered to expect a new world that did not relate to life on earth. It was an escape route to a new creation, a totally different and new dimension. It stands to reason that, in view of this, the promise of land had no role or meaning.

For a Biblical distinction between heavenly and earthly, we have to look at Paul's letter to the Colossians. In chapter 3:2 we read: 'Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth'. But, when we subsequently read what Paul portends with 'things above' and 'things on earth', we discover that it refers to earthly and heavenly thoughts, language and actions 'Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry' (verse 5), and 'as *the* elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering' (verse 12)KJV.

This expectation is also found in 2 Peter 3:13: '*Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*'. Although the elements are destroyed, the earth is renewed in order for life, according to God's Law, to be actualized. And this image is portrayed in the book of Revelation. It is clear that this earth - these nations and these people in the coming world – will continue. The book of Revelation consoles us with the promise that the world will be redeemed. It will not disappear and a new one be created. It can, I believe, be compared with the old body that will be replaced by the resurrected body. The old body is the seed for the new body, according to 1 Corinthians 15:42-44: '*So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body*'.

The exact meaning of this remains a mystery. But one thing is certain, there will be a continuity between our present life and life after our resurrection. We will remain to be the same person. Renewed, but the same. In the same vein we can also expect a continuation between the old and new earth, and the old and new Jerusalem. While discontinuity is afforded much attention in the comforting books of the Bible, it does not exclude the continuity that the same Bible talks about. Thank God there is still hope for this world! Look at the wonder of Israel!

3. The church, Zionism and the land promise

Nineteenth century Zionism was a non-religious movement. The pioneers of the modern state of Israel were generally not religious. And the motives of the United Nations, that voted for a homeland for the Jews in the land of Palestine in November 1947, had no religious flavour.

Of this the Church should take note. The restoration of the land, people and state of Israel came about by the efforts of the unreligious. The majority of Christians were 'onlookers' who were not yet engaged in intercessory prayer for Israel. At times we seem to think that God acts on *our* recommendations or conversion. We would distinguish, for example, between ownership of the land and the right to reside in it.

The land was promised to the descendants of Abraham and they are the lawful heirs thereof. It is Israel's property. But... the right to live in the land, according to Deuteronomy 28-30, is subject to obedience to the law.

Deut 28:1-3, 15, 64: 'If you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God... Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country... But, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God... you shall be plucked from off the land which you go to possess'.

Deut. 30:1-3: 'and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you'.(NIV UK)

Yet we should prudently guard against mechanical interpretations of these verses. Israel may choose to negate this promise, but how and when God chooses to fulfil it, remains His sovereign concern. And above all, 'property' and 'rights' are the belongings of God. When looking at the law of the sabbatical year and jubilee, we read amongst others the following: '*... the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me' Lev. 25:23 (NKJ)*

We gain understanding while observing God's journey with Israel. Once again: the modern nation, land and state of Israel was initiated by God without the apparent presence of pious masses. But is it not characteristic of God's actions that reparation takes place prior to conversion? And is that not the heart of the gospel? '*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' and 'For if when we were enemies (of God) we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.'* Rom. 5:8 and 10 (NKJ)

So much has been said and written about Zionism, that we often tend to overlook the crucial importance of God's sovereign dealings with Israel. Dr. A. v.d. Beek wrote: 'The state of Israel... is a sign of Israel's unbelief (...and) the unconversion of the gentiles'² and: 'And additionally the area of the Holy Land is necessary to perpetuate our unease.'³ God's action in this world is visible to those who choose to see it, and to whom it has been revealed. Seeing remains to be a matter of faith and, therefore, a mystery. All attempts to analyse the actions of God in this world by way of simple reasoning, are sure to fail. We recognise God's actions by His Word. But for our human understanding the explanation of God's actions begins and ends with His compassion for this world.

² A. van de Beek, *De kring om de Messias. Israël als volk van de lijdende Heer*. Zoetermeer 2002, p. 376

³ A. van de Beek, *Teveel gevraagd?* P. 110