

## ISAIAH'S VISION OF THE COMING MESSIAH

(Isaiah 11:1-10)

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### A. Introduction

The unifying theme of Isaiah 11:1-11 is the *coming reign of God*. In this passage, Isaiah announces the coming reign of God in three ways.

First, Isaiah announces that the coming Messiah will install a just sociopolitical order.

Second, Isaiah announces that God will transform creation and establish peace.

Third, Isaiah announces that the Messiah will unify all peoples.

### B. The Messiah Rules with Justice (Isa 11:1-5)

11:1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

11:2 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.

11:3 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;

11:4 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.

11:5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. (NRSV)

#### 1. "A shoot from the stump of Jesse" (v. 1)

Isaiah's text begins with a vision of new shoot coming from the stump of a tree—"the stump of Jesse." The historical context is that of the Assyrian invasion of Israel and Judah. Assyrian had just destroyed the northern kingdom and much of the Judah. The Assyrians had been like an axe, cutting down Israel and Judah like trees. Now only a stump remained.

The "stump of Jesse" referred to only the remnant of what was left of Judah. Jesse was *the father* of King David (1000 and 961 BCE), so the "stump of Jesse" is a metaphor that refers to what was left of David's dynasty.

The image of a stump suggests what was corrupt and dead had been removed. All that remained was a remnant or stump. Now something new was going to grow out of that

stump, a new shoot or branch. Christians have understood the new shoot or branch to refer to Jesus Christ, who was a descendent of David.

## 2. The Character of the Messiah (vv. 2-3)

Next, in verses 2-5, Isaiah describes the character and activities of the Messiah. The character of the king will be shaped by the "Spirit" or the *ruach* of the LORD. This Spirit or *ruach* is the same force or wind that was active in creation.

**Gen 1:1-2.** "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep, and the Spirit (*ruach*) of God swept over the face of the waters."

The Spirit is the active and creative presence of God. This same Spirit provides the coming Messiah with three pairs of gifts necessary for being an ideal ruler.

First, in Isaiah's vision, the coming Messiah will be given the Spirit of "wisdom" (*hokmah*) and "understanding" (*binah*). The terms refer to practical wisdom that enables a ruler to face reality and deal with it fairly, including political and judicial matters. The OT makes clear that leaders who lack wisdom and understanding become cruel oppressors (Prov 28:16).

Second, in Isaiah's vision, the coming King will be given the Spirit of "counsel" (*esah*) and "might" (*geburah*). These terms are usually associated with political and military judgment and authority.

Third, the coming King will be given the Spirit of "knowledge" (*da'at*) and "the fear of the Lord" (*yir'at YHWH*). The focus is not on knowledge *per se*; rather, the focus is on the King having direct personal experience of God. The ruler will know God.

In verses 3-5, the Messiah concentrates on establishing justice and righteousness. Now, because the Messiah has the Spirit, he will not judge things superficially—as Isaiah says, "he will not judge by what he eyes see or what he hears (11:3bc).

Rather, the Messiah will act as one who sees and hears below the surface. As such, he will ensure that the "poor" and the "meek"—the most vulnerable—have full protection under the law (11:4ab; cf. Psa 72:4, 12-14).

This repudiates Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism assumes that "the survival of the fittest" not operates in the biological sphere, but also the social sphere. So only the fittest should survive and that, in turn, justifies social policies that show no sympathy for those unable to support themselves—the poor, weak, and vulnerable. Isaiah repudiates Social Darwinism.

### 3. The Messiah will stop the wicked (v. 4)

In verse 4, Isaiah also envisions the Messiah having power and authority. His words have the power to transform, even to destroy.

The Messiah is said to “strike the earth with the rod of his mouth” and “with his breath kill the wicked” (v. 4). The language is metaphorical and symbolic. The rod symbolizes some form of discipline. It was not a weapon like a sword or spear.

In this way, Isaiah seems to suggest that the Messiah will make irresistible judicial pronouncements, so strong that it utterly stops or kills wicked.

Does this text suggest that God or the Messiah is a violent? No. Why? Isaiah’s vision is steeped in symbolism and we should not take “kill” literally. When Isaiah mentions “killing the wicked” (11:5), I don’t think it means terminating a biological organism, but

- stopping the wicked,
- overcoming evil,
- ending wicked behaviors,
- nullifying bad or destructive attitudes,
- dismantling crooked institutions

... and I can imagine a variety of non-violent ways to do that ... for which the word “kill” would be the most powerful way to state it.

We are not told how the Messiah will terminate wickedness. However it happens, it is Good News.

- It is good news all the oppressed and poor people of the world;
- It is good news for all those crushed by injustice and abuse.

But it is also bad news.

- It is bad news for people who exploit others for their selfish desires.
- It is bad news for political leaders who serve their own ambitions, rather than the needs of the people.
- It is bad news for leaders of financial institutions who cheat people out of their savings and their homes and then transferring masses of public funds into their pockets through “government bailouts”

### 4. Righteousness and faithfulness (v. 5)

The Messiah will judge in righteousness and faithfulness. The word for righteousness (צְדָקָה; *tsedeq*) describes how a person is to act toward his neighbor. It has to do with relationships. It means doing what is ethically right—honesty (Gen 30:33), integrity (Deut 6:25), truthfulness (Zech 8:8).

A righteous person is, therefore, faithful to the covenant of God. And the role of political leaders is to uphold the law or covenant of God and, will “put people right” with God.

### C. God Transforms Creation and Establish Peace (Isa 11:5-9)

11:6 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.

11:7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

11:8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

11:9 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. (NRSV)

When we move to verses 5-9, there is an abrupt shift in Isaiah's vision. Whereas the first five verses characterize the rule of justice in human society, verses 6-9 describe an almost mythological scene of natural harmony, the transformation of the natural order.

#### 1. Creation transformed (vv. 6-7)

In verses 6-7 of Isaiah's vision, creation is transformed. Natural enemies in the animal world live in peace.

- The wolf and the lamb will live together (11:6)
- The leopard and the goat, the calf and the lion, will rest side-by-side (11:6)
- The cow, the bear, and the lion will eat vegetarian ... instead of each other (11:7)

#### 2. Peace Established (v. 8)

More than that, human beings—even at their most vulnerable stages—will live without fear:

- A child will play with formally dangerous animals (11:6)
- An infant will not be bitten by a cobra (asp) (11:8)
- A young child will not fear snakes (adder) (11:8)
- Humans and animal will not hurt or destroy (11:9)

This vision of Isaiah may be purely figurative, with the predators symbolizing human oppressors and their victims, but Isaiah may have a broader cosmic reconciliation in mind.

#### 3. What? Where? Why? (v. 9)

Notice that verse 9 focuses on what, where, and why.

- What is happening in verse 9? They (humans and animals) will neither *harm* nor *destroy*... literally, neither "*act wrongly* nor *act corruptly*."
- Where is this happening? On the holy mountain; that is, Mount Zion. In Isaiah 2:2, Zion is referred to as the Lord's Mountain, which was thought to be the gathering-point for all nations on earth. Now all peoples gather on the Lord's mountain.
  - Why is this happening? Verse 9 brings the first two parts of the passage together. As a consequence of the rule of justice (11:1-5) and the transformation of nature

(11:6-8), "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (11:9).

#### **D. The Messiah Unifies All Peoples (Isa 11:10)**

11:10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. (NRSV)

Finally, verse 10 ends on the same note that we began. The passage began by talking about the "stump of Jesse" and now it ends by referring to the "root of Jesse."

The coming Messiah was referred to as the shoot that comes from the "stump of Jesse" and now the coming King is referred to as the "root of Jesse."

The coming Messiah will be the focal point around which all the nations will come. All the nations will *inquire* of him (NRSV) or *seek* him (RSV) or *ally* to him (NIV) or *hope* on him (LXX) [Heb *darash*].

Notice this is a reversal of the Tower of Babel. In the Tower of Babel story, the nations were dispersed throughout the earth because they had collectively rebelled against God. But now, in Isaiah's vision, all the peoples are returning to God, a reversal of Babel.

The Messiah is for all peoples. This is an inclusive vision. All nations, tribes, and peoples come to the peaceable kingdom.

- The wolf and the lamb live together
- But so do Jews and the Gentiles
- Men and women; chauvinists and feminists
- Republicans and democrats
- Straights and gays
- Black and white
- Israelis and Palestinians
- Mennonites and other Mennonites
- All come to the Messiah

#### **E. Summary**

Isaiah announces that the coming Messiah will install a just sociopolitical order.

Isaiah announces that God will transform creation and establish peace.

Isaiah announces that the Messiah will unify all peoples.

**F. What are the implications of Isaiah's Vision?**

1. Isaiah's vision suggests there is a relationship among justice, mercy, and peace in human society, and on the other hand, harmony in the natural order on the other. Reinhold Niebuhr said, "If you want peace, work for justice."
2. Isaiah's vision suggests that human justice lead to a transformed relationship between human beings and the rest of creation; as a corollary, corruption within human society leads to the destruction of the environment and its creatures.
3. Isaiah tells us that God will—through the birth or ascension of a new and ideal king from the line of David—dramatically and decisively change the sociopolitical realities of the world; righteousness will reign and wickedness will cease.
4. However, trust that God will bring a new future does not preclude working hard here-and-now in anticipation of God's future. We should ask what will help us to align with God's goals for humanity and the created order. In our politics, we should ask what aligns with the coming vision of the Messiah.

Follow up discussion: Compare Isaiah's Messianic vision with the description of the theology of the Tea Party. See Jim Wallis, "The Theology of the Tea Part," *Sojourners*, Vol. 39, No. 10 (Nov 2010) 18-23.