

First Christmas Borg & Crossan 12-19-21

Chapters 7-9

Chapter 7 Light Against Darkness

Light = ancient archetypal symbol

Jesus' exact day, month and year of birth is unknown. Dec. 25 not chosen as birthdate until middle 300's CE. Around 350 Pope Julius in Rome declared Dec. 25 as the date, integrating with the winter solstice festival celebrating the 'Birthday of the Unconquered Sun.' It became also the Christian birthday of the **Son**.

Our ancestors knew darkness in a way we don't. Cities were only illuminated with artificial light in the late 1600's and gas lighting didn't occur until late 1700's.

Light in the Old Testament: Was first of God's creative acts: "Let there be light." Sun, moon, stars not created until the 4th day. Light often symbolizes the presence of God. Psalm 119:105 - God's word is a lamp, lighting our way. Isaiah associates the coming of light with the coming of the ideal king, the Prince of Peace, who will uphold justice, the coming of light to those who live in deep darkness.

Light symbolizes the "glory" of God. Later Isaiah holds the promise of God's glory coming to God's people. "The Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

Jerusalem, filled with God's glory, will draw the nations to its light.

Light in the NT: Paul's letters

Paul's life-transforming experience was of Christ as light. "A light from heaven suddenly shone about me." 2 Corinthians: "The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ", then refers to creation: "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The 'glory' is the radiant, luminous presence of God. His extraordinary and marvelous claim about Jesus: his 'face reveals the "light of the knowledge" that comes from the "glory of God."

John's prologue: The Word (logos) with God in the beginning. "In the logos was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.....The true light, which enlightens everyone." Jesus is the light of the world.

Revelation to John: 21: 23 -25 The city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the lamb. The nations shall walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day- and there will be no night there."

Matthew and light: Star of Bethlehem observed by the magi, "We have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." Jesus' birth is the coming of the light that draws wise men of the Gentiles to its radiance. Magi had wisdom by being in touch with another reality. Had secret wisdom. Wise men from the nations of Gentiles are drawn to the light of Jesus, kneel before him, and pay him homage.

Luke and light: Savior = rescuer, deliverer. "Being rescued from the hands of our enemies" is the role of the "mighty savior" = what it means to be saved. Luke's hymn: "By the tender mercy of our God, the light from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." Peace is linked to light bringing in all three of Luke's

hymns in his birth narrative. *Nunc dimittis*: “Mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to enlighten the Gentiles (nations) and the glory of thy people Israel.”

“Salvation in the Bible includes rescue, deliverance, liberation, protection, healing, and being made whole” not only going to heaven.

Shepherds and angels: watching flocks by night, a being of light (angel) appears and God’s glory shines around them. Then the sky blazes with the heavenly host in God’s glory.

“Whenever angels speak in the Bible, it is time to listen carefully.” They reveal the meaning of what’s happening. “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Messiah = anointed one, promised by God, the hope of Israel. (John’s baptism of Jesus?) The angel actually uses the Greek word for “gospel”- language that echoes and counters Roman imperial theology.

Light is central to the stories of Augustus’ birth, who brought peace on earth, the *Pax Romana*- “They make a desert and call it peace.”

Shepherds were from the marginalized class that most acutely experienced oppression and exploitation in Rome and her client rulers. They were the first to hear of Jesus’ birth: the good news comes first to the poor and despised. It sets the stage for Jesus’ mission later in Luke: “good news to the poor”, “release to the captives,” “sight to the blind” and “to let the oppressed go free.”

Anti-imperial thrust of birth narratives in Matthew and Luke also contained in the Revelation to John’s birth story: Rev. 12: A woman is about to give birth to a child “who is to rule all nations.” But a dragon waits to devour the child. In the symbolic and mythological language that abounds in Revelation:

Read Rev. 12: 1- 5 p. 194

It’s clear the child is Jesus, and the dragon, the beast, the ancient serpent is Rome. After the dragon loses a battle in heaven, he is cast down to earth, where he rules the world. Using *gematria*, 666 encodes into “Caesar Nero”, ruler from 54 – 69 CE, the first to actively persecute the followers of Jesus.

John’s vision directly challenges Roman imperial theology. Woman about to give birth subverts the story of the birth of Apollo. Read myth of Apollo and Python, p. 195

The author of Revelation knows and echoes this story, but applies it to Jesus. Magnificent reversal, stunning subversion of imperial theology. Nero sometimes dressed as Apollo! Rome, empire, is Python, the beast.

Imagery of light is **both personal and political**. Contrasts between darkness and light are correlated with other central contrasts: bondage and liberation, exile and return, injustice and justice, violence and peace, falsehood and truth, death and life. So it is with the stories of Jesus’ birth. Must see both or we miss half their meaning.

Chapter 8: Jesus as the Fulfillment of Prophecy

Matthew: Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel. Matthew treats Hebrew scripture texts as if they were predictions of Jesus. He uses a “prediction- fulfillment” formula. Directly quotes the Old Testament 40 times. “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”

These passages lead to the notion that the OT predicts not only the birth of Jesus in detail, but also his life, death and resurrection. Suggests there was a collection of Messianic prophecies in the time of Jesus. It also led to a negative attitude toward “the Jews.” How could they not recognize Jesus as their messiah despite the clarity and precision with which he had been predicted?

None of the five passages is a prediction of the distant future or a prediction of Jesus.

Virgin birth predicted? Isaiah’s passage “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” Is actually addressed to King Ahaz in the 8th cen. BCE. Jerusalem was surrounded with armies to conquer it and replace Ahaz with a king more to their liking. Emmanuel in context means God would be with Ahaz and the people of Israel in their impending crisis. By the time the child could eat on his own and know to choose good over evil, the crisis would have passed. The Hebrew really says “the young woman will conceive...” but Matthew uses the Greek word for virgin, the Septuagint word, not the Hebrew word. In Isaiah, the young woman is already ‘with child.’

Birth in Bethlehem predicted? Words Matthew uses are mostly from Micah and 2 Samuel: “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” 2 Sam.: “It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall rule over Israel.” The passages summarize Israel’s yearning for king like David, the shepherd king. It is hope and promise, not prediction. Jesus was most likely born in Nazareth- he is often referred to as ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’

Flight to Egypt and Return? Matthew says, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’” Hosea, 8th Cen. BCE. Not a prediction. The reference is to a past event (the exodus out of Egypt under Moses). Israel is the child spoken of in the fuller passage. Therefore God’s tender care for Israel in the past is contrasted to their faithlessness in the present. Not a prediction of the future.

Lamentation of the Mothers of Bethlehem? Jeremiah 31:15 passage follows Herod’s killing of all the children in and around Bethlehem 2 years old or younger. Rachel “weeping for her children with wailing and loud lamentation” personifies the mother of Israel grieving the death and deportation of her children the Israelites either by the Assyrian Empire in the 8th cen. BCE or the Babylonian Empire in the 6th Cen BCE.

Home in Nazareth predicted? “He will be called a Nazorean”. No such passage in Hebrew scripture. Maybe Matthew created it to match his penchant for 5.

Three different ways to see what Matthew is doing with the prediction-fulfillment formula:

1 Argument that these passages are messianic prophecies and predictions of Jesus’ birth and life. But they were not understood that way in their ancient Jewish context. Prophecies sometimes have double meaning embedded- for their own time (in Isaiah, Hosea, etc.) and their fuller meaning in the NT. But this means that no one thought these were predictions until they were “fulfilled.”

2 Polar opposite of above: Matthew takes these passages out of their ancient contexts and makes them mean something they didn’t intend to mean in order to prove that Jesus was Messiah. He twisted the OT to make his point. If they are predictions of the Messiah fulfilled in Jesus, they prove he is the promised one of Israel.

3 Passages cited by Matthew were not predictions. Matthew did not think they were. Matthew was not trying to prove that Jesus was Messiah. Instead, Matthew was writing for “insiders”, for his own Christian Jewish community, for Jews who already believed that Jesus was Messiah. They express the convictions of “insiders.” Matthew “mined” the OT, sacred to his community, for passages he could integrate into his narrative, seeing the story of Jesus “prefigured” there.

Same pattern used in other authors of the ancient Mediterranean. Mining Homer, which prefigured Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Aeneas himself prefiguring Augustus. **Virgil’s Augustus as the Trojan Caesar and Matthew’s Jesus as the Davidic Messiah prove nothing, but explain everything.**

“It’s a testimony to his and his community’s way of seeing Jesus in relation to the ancient scriptures of the Jewish tradition.” **It affirms who Jesus had become in the experience and thought of Matthew’s community.**

Luke and the Old Testament: Luke uses the OT very differently in his Christmas story. He doesn’t use a prediction/fulfillment formula. He does proclaim the continuity of Jesus with Israel and his fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel.

Fulfillment seen in the songs of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon- chants sung repetitively. “Are pre-Lukan canticles. Could be pre-gospel songs sung in worship by early Christian communities. Their tone is jubilant, ringing with the conviction that God’s promises are being fulfilled.” P. 213 for content.

Luke echoes phrases from ancient Israel’s scriptures. Not a process of cutting and pasting. Language from Hebrew scriptures was very familiar. Luke’s first two chapters written in style that imitates the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT. Luke changes literary styles at will. Deliberately imitating the style of the Septuagint says what has happened in Jesus is the continuation and climax of the story of Israel.

Fulfillment: Larger Framework

Central to the OT is the theme of God’s promise and fulfillment. A major dynamic of the law and the prophets, sacred by the 1st century CE. They were the Bible for Jesus and early Christianity.

Promise and fulfillment are the overarching theme of the Pentateuch. God’s people are threatened, God overcomes the threats. Then the worst happens: the ancient Hebrews are taken into slavery in Egypt and face genocide at the hands of Pharaoh. But thru Moses, God liberates them from Egypt and leads them into the wilderness, where Israel lapses into faithlessness, but God continues to be faithful.

The Prophets: Israelites now are a people living in their own land. They yearn for justice and peace. They hope for a king who will bring both. That created a monarchy @ 1000 BCE. The monarchy became a native domination system that oppressed and exploited most of the people. Egypt had been re-created within Israel.

The prophets cover the rise, failure, and fall of the monarchy. The kings of Israel and Judah did “what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” The prophets expressed the people’s yearning for and God’s promise of a transformed world. They constantly indicted the monarchs for injustice, violence and idolatry. Injustice and violence are the product of loving something more than loving the “Lord your God.”

“They yearned for a different kind of king and different kind of kingdom.”

Isaiah and Micah express that longing almost identically- read p. 219

People sitting under their own vines and fig trees is an image of everyone having their own land, a secure basis for material existence. “No one shall make them afraid.”

By the time of Jesus the ancient Jews had lived under one empire after another for @ 500 years. All behaved as empires do, with oppressions, injustice and violence. (Exception: century of independence under native rulers Maccabees/Hasmoneans from 164 BCE to 63 BCE. But it brought little justice and peace.)

Infancy Hymns in Luke: Context is central. Mary’s Magnificat emphasizes the great reversal brought by the coming of Jesus. Scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful, sending the rich away empty, filling the hungry. Reflects Hannah’s hymn (p. 221). It is the hope of the law and the prophets- this world will be changed. “*God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever.*”

Thus Luke proclaims what the coming of Jesus means. The Benedictus emphasizes the fulfillment of God’s promise to transform this world.

These hymns remind us that God is concerned about the whole of life. A “spiritual reading” of these hymns can obscure this. Not just internal states, but how the world should be. **The exclusively “spiritual” reading of this language emerged only after Christianity became the dominant religion of the late Roman and early European culture.**

Before then it was understood to be about *this world* and the *transformation of this world*.

They announce that the Great Divine Cleanup of the World has begun in Jesus.

The nunc dimittis proclaims the promise and fulfillment theme- ‘realized eschatology’: In Jesus, God’s salvation has come; and it revelation to the Gentiles and glory to Israel.

Jesus is prophecy fulfilled. He **completes** the Law and the Prophets. He decisively reveals and incarnates the passion of God as disclosed in the Law and the Prophets: hope for a very different kind of world than those of Pharaoh and Caesar, of domination and empire. It means:

“I see in this person the anointed one of God, the decisive disclosure of God- of what can be seen of God in human life, the fulfillment of Israel’s deepest yearnings, the one who reveals God’s dream for this world.”

Chapter 9 Joy to the World

1 Joy is the dominant theme of Christmas. 2 Advent is time of expectant anticipation and repentant preparation 3 The meaning of Christmas past for Christmas present and future.

Light, fulfillment and joy are threads woven together. Luke’s three hymns express joy.

Stories of the first Christmas also hold conflict. Their emotional tones are also ominous. Herod seeks to kill Jesus, the rulers of the world resist the coming of God’s kingdom.

Nunc Dimittis- Simeon warns Mary: “This child is destined for the falling and rising or many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed- and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” She will have pain and grief because of the destiny of her Son. Christmas brings joy and conflict then and now.

Read story of Marcus at 6 years old p. 230.

Advent hymn: “O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear.” We are like Israel- in exile, captive, mourning, lonely, longing.

Verse 7 explicitly universalizes that yearning: “O Come Desire of nations, bind, in one the hearts of all mankind/ Bid thou our sad divisions cease, and be thyself our King of Peace.”

Advent is both personal and political. A season of repentant preparation.

“The story of the shepherds invites those of us who have some wealth and influence to become ‘disenchanted elites’, no longer mesmerized by the claims of empire to be the light and hope of the world. If we identify with the shepherds, we will dream of and seek a different kingdom, one more and more under the lordship of God as known in Jesus, revealed to them on a starry night as Messiah, Lord, and Savior.”

We are called to be Christmas Christians in a world that still descends into darkness. But that’s not the final word, unless we let it be.

Joy to the world- for God so loves the world.