

Is Isaiah about Jesus?

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What do these words from Isaiah ben Amoz mean for us?

My first instinct is to meditate on Isaiah 9 in light of its historical situation, which is bound up with the geopolitics of the late 8th century BCE. Assyria, under the aggressive leadership of Tiglath-Pileser III, is becoming an imperial force in Syria-Palestine, and the regional powers of Aram and Israel are committed to a coalition to resist the Assyrian advance. To their collective south lies Judah, whose king Ahaz is following a decades-long policy of cooperating with the Assyrians. Clearly, if the Aramean-Israelite resistance has any chance of success (and, in truth, it does not), it must first eliminate any threat to its rear from the Judaeen king. And so the coalition invades Judah, in what scholars call the Aramean-Israelite War. But the Assyrians arrive in Syria-Palestine in 734 BCE, well before Aram and Israel can accomplish their designs for Judah. The coalition collapses, and Judah is saved.

This is almost certainly the context of Isaiah 7, the famous “Immanuel” prophecy. By the time we get to Isaiah 9, Judah is beginning to dig out from the chaos of the war. You can sense the relief in the language of text: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”

Yet for the vast majority of people who will read or hear this text on the third Sunday after Epiphany, the geopolitics behind the prophet’s words are at best unknown and, in the main, irrelevant. What matters is their predictive value: they announce the birth of the Messiah. “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God.” Never mind that these are royal titles for the king of Judah, just as “Defender of the Faith” is for the Queen of England; when we hear these words, we think of Jesus.

Is that wrong? Well, yes...and no.

As a student of the faith of ancient Israel and Judah, I object to Christianizing the text. Like most of us in our own time, Isaiah was almost certainly not thinking about anything other than the political crisis at hand. He was trying to bring the resources of his faith—his hope, his confidence in God’s grace toward the house of David, his certainty of God’s presence among the people of Judah—to bear on that crisis. He was not predicting events that lay some seven centuries in the future. To disconnect this passage from its context is irresponsible.

And yet, I am also a Christian who rejoices at the ongoing good news of the Incarnation. In that light, no, such a reading is not wrong. Isaiah’s words form a kind of lens through which I can see the meaning of Jesus more clearly, and by which I see dimensions of the incarnation that are otherwise indistinct. To understand this passage *apart* from its overtones for Christian faith is to understand it only partly.

I think of biblical texts like Isaiah 7 or Isaiah 9 as though they are limbs fallen from trees and now floating in a river. Once part of a larger tree whose trunk can still be seen rooted in its time and place, the text has been released into the flow of communal faith, unmoored from its historical reference point and drifting free in the religious subconscious of a people. It is still—and will always be—a limb from the tree that grew it. But along its way through time, it picks up other referents that cling to its branches—perhaps in ways not intended by its author, but valuable nonetheless to those who read it from other banks downstream.

Perhaps it is a measure of Isaiah’s genius—or of the Spirit’s movement—that we read his words about Judah’s emergence from darkness into light and think of the light that no darkness can ever overcome. It isn’t what Isaiah meant, but it may continue to be what he means.