

God and Israel: The Return

Zechariah 12: 1–14

Revelation 21: 1–7

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‘And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.’ *Revelation 21: 2*

Running through the Scriptures from first to last is the promise of coming home. Homecoming is to a land, and to a city; but the land and the city are not the full end of the promise. They are signs of the reconciliation of God with his people. They promise to restore our intimacy with our Maker, lost since the days of Eden, when God walked and talked with his noblest creature in the garden in the cool of the evening.

The story of the people of Israel does not chart a simple circle from estrangement to wandering to homecoming, but lurches backwards and forwards: sometimes in the wilderness but accompanied by God in fire and cloud, sometimes at home and prospering but far out of divine earshot, no matter how loud the prophets shout God’s passions. And many of the Old Testament’s most urgent intimations of union, peace and plenty are written out of a state of exile, such as the tender and yearning passages of the later chapters of Isaiah.

But Israel the land is real, and Jerusalem the city is real. ‘You are now come to Mount Zion’ says the writer of the letter to the Hebrews; and so too do the modern tour guides of the Dome of the Rock. The associations of place with God’s intimate presence can’t be made fully metaphorical – if they could, the modern history of the Middle East would be extremely different. At the same time the presence of God is unconfined by the land or the city; God is not to be found by fencing off any piece of earth.

Therefore Israel’s history of exile does not chart an absolute divorce between herself and God, and the history of her return from Babylon is not the fulfilment of a reconciling joy. Being history, it’s all much more mixed up and partial than that. Israel’s return from Babylon was one of a vassal people; and it was characterised by a series of internal political and religious squabbles which set the scene for its enduring enmity with Samaria. Some of the specifics of this time are narrated in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Even in these books, and more strongly yet in other post-exilic writings, this return – compromised and partial though it was – is a sign and a promise. God dwells again with his people as he could not before. Sometimes the sign of his dwelling is the Temple, and sometimes it is something a little different.

As in the passage of Zechariah we have heard. This vision of reconciliation, of homecoming, is saturated also with mourning. It is a mysterious passage, partly apocalyptic in its vision, looking towards a time not yet come, a return not yet accomplished but signposted in the return from Babylonian exile which is Zechariah's historical model. The people of Jerusalem are united in turning towards God, but the spirit in which they turn is one of supplication. There is a powerful hint that they have wounded God himself: 'they shall look upon me whom they have pierced' as the KJV has it, or 'upon him whom they have pierced' as other translators have rendered the Hebrew. The mourning is carried out by every prominent tribe of the house of Israel, mentioned by name.

When the writer of the Gospel of John quotes this passage, he chooses the form which requires us to gaze upon a suffering God: 'they shall look upon him whom they have pierced' [John 19: 37]. As we read it we are standing at the foot of the cross. We have watched the Messiah, the Son of God, die. The soldiers have broken the legs of those crucified to his right and to his left, and have testified that Jesus himself no longer breathes. 'And he that saw it bare record; and his record is true ... for these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled. [John 19: 35, 36]. Part of that scripture is the words of Zechariah.

For we who are Christians, then, the God for whom we mourn, the God we killed, is Jesus Christ. Zechariah's prophecy has passed into the central typology of the Passion; it is, for example, the main text of one of Lancelot Andrewes' most famous sermons, preached on Good Friday in 1597. The piercing of Jesus's side and the faithful who weep for their wrongdoing in the earthly Jerusalem are deeply joined. This is a vision of fulfilment – 'it is finished' – which belongs to the days of abandonment between death and resurrection, to the darkest days of Holy Week. We are redeemed but not recalled to life; the sacrifice is complete but the body of God is still lifeless and powerless, destroyed by human hands, tenderly held and wept over by women, buried in a stranger's tomb. Salvation is coming, but he is not yet here.

'Behold, he cometh with clouds', writes John of Patmos towards the beginning of Revelation [Revelation 1: 7]; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him; and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him.' Even at the inception of the *parousia*, the fulfilment of all things, this incomplete state of affairs is still extant. The Wesleyan hymn which paraphrases this passage 'Lo, he comes with clouds descending', takes the wail of tribes and nations and emphasises it in a dramatically short line which the hymn's usual melody, 'Helmsley' repeats and builds:

Every eye shall now behold him
Robed in dreadful majesty;
Those who set at nought and sold him,
Pierced and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
Shall the true Messiah see.

This sounds like a baleful fulfilment. It does not sound like reconciliation, or the perfection of God's intimacy with man. But, then, this is a perception of Advent, a depiction of a moment before the moment of arrival: 'Behold, he cometh'. The announcement of homecoming with which Revelation ends sounds very different:

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, 'Behold'.

[Revelation 21: 2-3]

We are still looking on at something imminent, but the feeling is quite different. Now, we are invited to see reconciliation as it happens, to watch the partial and imperfect fall away and the temporary temporal to become an eternal now:

'the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.'

[Revelation 21: 3b-5]

For the holy city to which we come home is not made with hands, and the return for which we yearn lies only beyond the wilderness of history.