

REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF THE ADVENT IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Abstract

The concept of the divine Savior who comes into the world is central not only to the message of the New Testament but also to the teaching found throughout the books of the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible.

Keywords: Advent, Savior, Servant, Christ, and Son of Man

1. Prologue

Every time when year-end holidays are approaching, Christians, and others who may not even be Christian, remember Jesus Christ's (first) coming to earth.¹ *Advent* appears to be the buzzword in many parts of the world during this season. While Christ's Advent is described in detail in the New Testament (NT), this crucial event is grounded in God's promises that are recorded in many pages in the Old Testament (OT), also known as the Hebrew Bible. This brief article presents some reflections on the concept of Advent as it is found in the books of the Hebrew Bible.

All serious overviews of the topic of the Advent in the Bible begin with the classic monograph titled *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old*

¹ While the Christmas season in the West covers the last weeks *before* the New Year, in the East it is in the first weeks *after* the Year New. People in the Philippines like humour, so they like to say that every month that has the letter "r" in its name (September–April) belongs to the season of Christmas.

Testament and Later Judaism written by the late Scandinavian biblical scholar Sigmund Mowinckel. Born in 1884 to a Lutheran family in Norway, he died in Oslo in 1965 following a brilliant academic career that began at the age of 33 with an appointment to a university teaching position.² Mowinckel's impressively productive career led to a full professorship sixteen years later when the chair in Oslo became vacant. Those among us who have had pastoral experience may be interested in knowing that he was also an ordained Lutheran minister.

The English translation of the book *He That Cometh* was first published in 1956, and its reprint was done in 2005. In the book Mowinckel argues that the messianic ideal was derived from royal ideology via the connecting concept of the "anointed one," which took place after the collapse of Israel's monarchy. He endeavored to demonstrate that there is a continuity between the royal ideology of the ancient Near East and Jewish messianic expectations. In Mesopotamian traditions, for example, after the fall of Babylonian kingship, there were expectations of the coming of an ideal future ruler. Another noteworthy conclusion reached by Mowinckel was that the king in Israel was regarded as the Lord's adopted son. This conception is supported by a number of biblical passages (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7; etc.).

The backbone of Mowinckel's work is his extensive study of the chapters from the second part of Isaiah's book that describe the prophetic figure of the Servant of the Lord. Similarly, the climax of his work focuses on the figure of the Son of Man from Daniel 7. The Servant's task was to bring Israel back to the Lord, not as a victorious king but through his suffering and death. From the Jewish point of view, a "suffering Messiah" is a contradiction in terms, but for the Christian church, Jesus Christ is the true fulfillment of these prophetic predictions.

Unfortunately, Mowinckel could not reach the same conclusion regarding the identity of the Son of Man in Daniel 7 because, according to him, the Son of Man ("the Man," an ideal Man or divine Anthropos) is not an individual, personal Messiah but a pictorial symbol of the people of Israel. He admits, though, that Jesus Christ laid claim to the title "Son of Man" because

² In the field of biblical studies, Mowinckel is mostly known by his Form Critical study of the Psalms first published in six volumes. This work secured him a prestigious place among top European biblical scholars, though, as John J. Collins says in the foreword to the book, "Mowinckel was primarily an historian of religion rather than a theologian." See Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), xvi.

this figure from Daniel was the model of the Messiah.³ To this day, *He That Cometh* is considered to be the authoritative text on the roots of messianic expectations, yet many scholars are still struggling to identify the Davidic Messiah (cf. 2 Sam 7; Ps 2) with the Son of Man from Daniel 7.

2. Divine Advents

The faiths practiced in many parts of the world may be described as religious movements from down up. The attempts to move up in order to get closer to the realm of the divine stand in contrast to the story of the Bible where it is God who comes down to earth to get closer to human beings. If we accept the view that the Hebrew Bible⁴ is an inspired record of God's acts in history, we are likely to conclude that the early portions of the Bible present a series of divine Advents into the world. Beginning with the stories from Genesis, the reader of the Bible can see the Lord who time and again comes down to earth not only to redeem the lost and the oppressed but also to discipline the arrogant oppressor.

One may picture God coming to the garden of Eden to look for Adam and Eve (Gen 3). The same God is filled with grief as He is pondering what to do with the violence that threatened to destroy the world that He had created (Gen 6). The Lord intently watched the ambitious human project which attempted to unite the world by constructing a city in the shape of a tower as tall as the sky (Gen 11).

In Gen 15 we see the Lord coming down to give encouragement to His friend Abram. He walks between pieces of slain animals that Abram had prepared for a covenant-making ceremony. God also visits Abram near Hebron,⁵ where He enjoys a delicious meal and repeats the promises made before. He then explains to His friend how He is on a fact-finding mission that will determine the destiny of the five cities of the plain (Gen 18).

In Exodus the Lord hears the cries of His enslaved people, and He comes to fulfill His promises by convincing Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt (Exod 2). At Sinai, God came to reestablish the covenant relationship with Israel (Exod 20). Once this covenant is broken, it is the Messenger of the Lord

³ Years after Mowinckel's death, a fragment of an Aramaic text from Qumran (4Q246) was published containing a prediction about the Advent of One of whom it was said would be called "Son of God" and "Son of the Most High" (cf. Luke 1:32, 35).

⁴ The acronym *TaNak* is used by the Jewish readers of the Bible (cf. Luke 24:44).

⁵ Called in this text Mamre and elsewhere in the Bible Kiryat Arba (Gen 13:18; 23:2).

(Messenger of the Covenant) who tries again and again to repair the damage caused by the unfaithful nation.

During a very sad and chaotic period of Israel's history, this divine Messenger is portrayed as coming to Bokim⁶ and speaking to people in such an emotional manner that it moved them all to tears and loud weeping (Judg 2). In contrast to this, there are many poetic parts of the Bible, such as the Psalms, that describe God's coming to earth as a most joyous event, filled with song and dance. Not only the city of Jerusalem but the whole earth is jubilant in welcoming the Lord of the universe.

This universalistic outlook of the Advent is also found in the Hebrew prophets, though much of what they said was addressed primarily to the leaders of Israel. Their ministry may be viewed as one more form of the divine Advent toward the people of God. The prophets did not come to bring a new message, only to call people back to their God and the Torah, given to them through Moses at Sinai. They comforted the weak and the oppressed and confronted the oppressors regarding their two main sins: idolatry (against God) and social injustice (against fellow humans). They announced death to the unfaithful nation and hope to the faithful remnant. This proclamation was centered in the One that would come as the Shepherd of God's people (Isa 40).

3. The Advent of the Lord's Servant

Isaiah ben-Amoz was a professional keeper of royal archives in Jerusalem in the eighth century. He is better known as a Hebrew prophet and is closely associated with one of the three longest books of the Bible. As one of the most gifted poets of Israel, Isaiah was a master of metaphors. In the first chapter of his book, he compares society around him to a human body whose head is ailing: the heart is sick; from head to toe no spot is sound; all is covered by bruises, welts, and festering sores not pressed out, not bound up, and not softened with oil (Isa 1:5–6 JSB).⁷ God's fair daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field; she is comparable to Sodom, another Gomorrah.⁸

⁶ In Hebrew the name *bokim* means "place of weeping" (Judg 2:1, 5), while *baka* is simply "weeping" (Ps 84:6).

⁷ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸ This low point in the history of Israel has parallels in the kingdoms of the ancient Near East. Destructions of famous cities in the ancient world were usually explained as

Would not a just God, the Judge of all the earth, do justice (cf. Gen 18:25) by making the punishment fit the crimes committed in Judah? Is He not expected to bring comparable judgment for comparable wickedness? Of course, He would! He is capable of doing that very thing, but He can do even better than that. His Advent to Earth would show how much He cares for lost humanity. The Book of Immanuel (Isa 7–12) is the best-known promise about the Savior's Advent to our world.

Divine discipline is not just punitive, it is also redemptive. This is evident from Isaiah's book of which the first thirty-nine chapters are often called the Book of Judgment (cf. OT), while the last twenty-seven make up the Book of Consolation (cf. NT). The two parts of the book ("Isaiah of Jerusalem" and "Second Isaiah") balance each other. For example, the Song of an Unfruitful Vineyard (Isa 5) is balanced by the Song of a Fruitful Vineyard (Isa 27). Where is then the passage that can balance Isaiah's metaphor of a sick/dying human body? The answer is in one of the four Songs of the Lord's Servant who will bring light, healing, deliverance, and restoration, *Urbi et Orbi*, not only to Zion but also to the rest of the world.

Four passages in Isaiah are called the Servant Songs, with the first three (42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–9) leading to a climax in the fourth (52:13–53:12), descriptively titled the "Suffering Servant of the Lord." Most scholarly discussion has focused on the identification of the tragic figure of this Suffering Servant from Isaiah 53. This is one of the most difficult and contested passages in the Bible, vigorously debated by ancient, medieval, and modern scholars. Does the Servant represent the nation of Israel, or is he an individual such as a new Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Moses? Are the Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible⁹ (Targums) right when they identify him as the Messiah? When the apostle Peter told the early Christians that Jesus Christ bore our sins in his body and that by His wounds we have been healed (1 Pet 1:24), did he intend to quote Isa 53? One thing is clear, throughout Christian

signs of divine displeasure and abandonment that resulted from human misbehaviour. The eighth-century Babylonian text known as the Myth of Erra and Ishan tells of the destruction of cities whose population had rejected justice and mercy and practiced atrocities and oppression. Because of injustice, Erra intends to devastate cities, turn them into a wilderness, destroy cattle and produce, wipe out the population, place a fool on the throne, bring a plague of wild beasts, and level the royal palace. See John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

⁹ Known as the *Targumim* or the Targums.

history this passage from Isaiah has convinced more Jews that Jesus is the Messiah than any other text(s) from the Bible.¹⁰

The Advent of the Suffering Servant is complicated by a huge paradox which compelled the prophet to wonder: “Who would believe our message?” Could someone whose coming signifies the Advent of the Lord be compared to a tender shoot growing out of dry ground? He had nothing in appearance that would attract us to him, yet he suffered and died for a very specific purpose. This purpose is first noticeable in the choice of words used by the prophet.

A careful consideration of the Hebrew lexica in Isa 53:4–8 shows that this passage has several words shared with Isa 1:5–6, words like *sickness, suffering, plague, smitten, afflicted, wounded, crushed, bruises*, etc. (JSB). I suggest that through this similarity the book communicates a clear message: the city of Jerusalem and the land of Judah in the time of Isaiah’s ministry were as sick as a body covered with wounds and bruises. Yet, the Song of the Suffering Servant declares that the Lord’s Servant would take all these infirmities upon him so that by his wounds God’s people may be healed. His suffering and death make possible a future when all that is wrong on earth will be set right.

Furthermore, the Advent of the Lord’s Servant who suffers, dies, and comes back to life results in blessings and healing, not only for God’s people but leading to universal and cosmic consequences. For this reason, the book of this gospel prophet does not end with the image of the Suffering Servant. Rather, Isaiah goes on to describe a wonderful life in a new heaven and Earth (Isa 65–66) that was made possible by the Servant’s supreme sacrifice.

4. The Advent of the Son of Man

There is a consensus among scholars that Dan 7 occupies the central place in Daniel’s book, and that is why the revelation that it reports should be considered as *the* vision in the book.¹¹ The same agreement among scholars is lacking when it comes to the question of the background of the imagery

¹⁰ This observation was made by Joseph Wolff, the son of a rabbi, whose interest in Christianity started when he was still a boy and was related to a comment about Isaiah 53 made by a Christian neighbour. See Zdravko Stefanovic and Gil G. Fernandez, *Bridging East and West: Joseph Wolff’s Vision of a Global Advent Mission* (Silang, Philippines: 100 Missionary Movement, 1992), 5.

¹¹ Arthur Ferch, *The Son of Man in Daniel 7* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983).

that dominates this chapter. Some have argued for a Mesopotamian origin;¹² others have proposed that its background is an image of the Canaanite mythological pantheon.¹³ Today many scholars maintain that while the animals from Dan 7 resemble the figures of ancient Near Eastern art, these same creatures are very much like the ferocious predators from the judgment scenes described by biblical prophets such as Hosea (13:7–8). The most attractive suggestion is that the vision of Dan 7 is built on a retelling of the Creation Story from Gen 1.¹⁴

Daniel 7 is dated to the first year of Belshazzar, a time of great political uncertainties for the Neo-Babylonian kingdom, which were aggravated by the transfer of power from the last king of Babylon, Nabonidus, to his son, Belshazzar. As a high-ranking imperial official, Daniel must have been pondering big questions about the purpose of world history and the ultimate destiny of the human race. The vision given to Daniel presents a rather pessimistic perspective on earth's history¹⁵ because the powers of this world appear as unrestrained wild beasts. They receive the authority to rule (Aramaic *sholtan*) for a limited time; they misuse and abuse it for their own selfish ends until they are subdued by a stronger power and are ultimately destroyed. The angel interpreter explains the vision in a concise way: "These great beasts, four in number, stand for four kingdoms that will arise out of the earth; then holy ones of the Most High will receive the kingdom, and will possess it forever and ever" (Dan 7:17–18 JSB).

Three times in this chapter, Daniel says: "In my vision at night, I saw ..." The first time the prophet sees the four winds of heaven, the sea, and the beasts (Dan 7:2). The second time he introduces in this way the fourth and

¹² The seventh-century Akkadian text *A Vision of the Netherworld*. See Hermann Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and Eschaton* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 205–13. Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 5–133. For a good overview of literature, see John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 280–94.

¹³ The warrior god Baal "Rider of the Clouds" comes before the supreme god El "Father of Years" after his (Baal's) slaying of the sea monster. See John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, *Vetus Testamentum Suppl.* 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1957), 71, 208; John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 280–94.

¹⁴ Zdravko Stefanovic, *Daniel: Wisdom to the Wise: Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2007), 256.

¹⁵ Mervyn Maxwell calls it a "one-sided" view of history. See Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, vol. 1 (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1981).

the most destructive beastly creature (Dan 7:7). When he uses this same formula for the third time (Dan 7:13), he no longer sees a beastlike being but a humanlike being. This person comes accompanied by the clouds of heaven that are a visible sign of the divine Presence, and he approaches the Ancient of Days. In contrast with the oppressive earthly powers, such as Belshazzar, beasts, and horns whose authority is only for a limited time,¹⁶ this being receives dominion, glory, and kingship forever. Also, in contrast to the power-hungry and ruthless character of the earthly establishments, this person shares with the saints—the people of the Most High—the kingship, dominion, and grandeur under the whole of heaven (Dan 7:27). The saints who used to be oppressed and persecuted are now vindicated and glorified.

The earliest Jewish traditions saw in this humanlike being a heavenly figure, such as Michael, who will exercise judgment. A good number of intertestamental Jewish writers used the title “Son of Man” in a clear messianic sense. In later Jewish tradition, this messianic view faded, and the Son of Man was understood to represent Israel. Christians, based on Christ’s own statement before the Sanhedrin (Matt 26:64), have seen this passage as a prediction of Jesus’ Advent as a heavenly Son of Man. Jerome wrote that “none of the prophets has so clearly spoken concerning Christ as has this prophet Daniel.”¹⁷

According to the Gospel writers, the title “Son of Man” was Christ’s favorite way of expressing His ministry, His destiny, and His Second Advent to Earth. Toward the end of his monumental work, Mowinckel concludes that there is a “great and incomprehensible innovation in Jesus’ view of Himself as the Son of Man. It is an original and essential element in His thought, that the Son of Man will be rejected, and will suffer and die before He comes in His glory with God’s angels and sits down on the judgment seat.... The death of the Son of Man, who is also the Servant, creates a new possibility that ‘the many’ may be saved.”¹⁸

Since Dan 7 belongs to the genre of apocalyptic literature, sometimes called “crisis literature,” it is appropriate at this point to present a few re-

¹⁶ Carol Newsom says that the stories from Dan 1–6 show that God “is in control of history” and that He “delegates and eventually takes back sovereignty over the earth.” See Carol Newsom, *Daniel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 33.

¹⁷ Newsom, *Daniel*, 248. See also Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

¹⁸ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 448–49.

minders pertinent to this topic. In her commentary on Daniel, Carol Newsom says that the imagery of Dan 7 articulates “the classic apocalyptic response to the mystery of evil. It is understood as never fully autonomous but as playing a designated role in a divine drama, a drama that leads to evil’s ultimate destruction and elimination.”¹⁹ Christopher Wright proposes that the purpose of apocalyptic visions is more than making predictions. It is, in the first place, “unveiling” or showing “the reality of what is going on in the present. The timeless reality is that God is still on the throne.”²⁰ Wright followed Daniel Block, who earlier had cautioned his readers that the purpose of apocalyptic texts is “not to chart out God’s plan for the future so future generations may draw up calendars, but to assure the present generation that—perhaps contrary to appearance—God is still on the throne ... and that the future is firmly in His hands.”²¹

5. Conclusion

It is safe to conclude with Fleming Rutledge that the concept of “Advent is not for the faint of heart.”²² The coming of the kingdom of God in the person of the Savior is anticipated throughout biblical prophetic passages where the language about the future Redeemer goes way beyond Old Testament historical reality. There is a good reason why the Old Testament can be called “the Bible of Jesus.” As Christopher Wright aptly says: “These were the stories He [Jesus] knew. These were the songs He sang, the stories He heard read, and the prayers He prayed every Sabbath.... This was the God He knew as Abba, Father. For us, the more we get to know the Scriptures of the Old Testament, the closer we will come to the mind and heart of Jesus Himself.”²³

6. Epilogue

In closing I would like to suggest that no word can better express the biblical concept of Advent than the greeting “*Maranatha*” that was common among

¹⁹ Newsom, *Daniel*, 221.

²⁰ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Hearing the Message of Daniel: Sustaining Faith in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 167.

²¹ Daniel I. Block, “Preaching Old Testament Apocalyptic,” *CTJ* 41 (2006): 52.

²² Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

²³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 162–63.

the early Christians. The Greek transliteration²⁴ of this Aramaic word is found at the end of the apostle Paul's first letter to the believers in Corinth (1 Cor 16:22).

Maranatha is a compound Aramaic word, made up of three parts: *Mar* ("Lord") – *an/anna'* ("our") – *'athal/tha* ("came/come"). Due to the intricacies of the Semitic verbal tenses,²⁵ there are no less than three ways in which the word can be understood: (1) *Maran-'atha* ("Our Lord has come"); (2) *Maran-'atha* ("Our Lord is coming"); and (3) *Marana-tha* ("Come, our Lord!)."

In summary, this short greeting encapsulates a rich, dynamic, and timeless perspective on God's kingdom on earth. The Lord's Advent is an event that is firmly grounded in the past. It is also a hopeful yearning for the immediate future. And, last but not least, it is an earnest prayer for the present: "Maranatha. Come, our Lord, come! May Your kingdom quickly come, may Your will be done on Earth as it is in heaven!"

²⁴ Transliteration in this case means that the word is Aramaic, but it is written in Greek letters.

²⁵ The verbal tense in Semitic languages very often expresses the quality of an action rather than its temporality.