

Christmas Eve

CHRIST'S MERCIFUL COUP D'ETAT

Isaiah 9:2-7

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

2The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. 3You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 4For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 6For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

A note in is order on verse 6, the "name" of the child: Ralph Klein notes that since OT Kings were not to be considered gods, as were their counter parts in other nations, the traditional translation in the NRSV "does not make sense." (Note, he is employing a theological hermeneutic here.) He suggests translating the name as two sentences: The warrior God is planning a marvel. The everlasting Father is planning to give us a Captain of peace or wholeness.

(<http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/advent.htm#Eve>) R. E. Clements has argued that the verse should not be translated as sentences but as royal titles: Wonderful Counselor, Divine Warrior (rather than Mighty God), Father for ever (rather than Everlasting Father), Prince of Peace (The New Century Bible Commentary: Isaiah 1-39, Eerdmans, 1980). He too is concerned about divine appellations. Given the fact that numerous commentators believe Hezekiah to be the child designated by the text and that these were royal titles used in his court, Clements argument has a lot going for it. However, since (as many of the commentators also note) Hezekiah never fulfills this promise, even in its most immediate political sense, two questions are raised. First, either Isaiah's prophecy was wrong or second, its referent lies beyond (but not unrelated to) the immediate contextual concerns, call it "deep darkness," that plagued Judah and Israel. I will be opting for the latter, seeing in the text, ultimately, a Christological fulfillment that we celebrate on Christmas Eve: the birth of the child Jesus. (Note, I too am employing a theological hermeneutic. Hence, I'm not so squeamish about the divine language associated with the child in the prophecy. This is not to say that Isaiah himself knew any of the details of the Christological fulfillment of his prophecy, although it is amazing how the early church found what they experienced in Jesus foretold in Isaiah—including, so-called Second and Third Isaiah. There is a sense in which I think Klein is right: In the midst of "deep darkness," Isaiah is saying "God's plan [to save] is still operative," whatever that might mean, and that same confession applies to the birth of Jesus. What Isaiah enjoins us to do is to trust in the promising God and the promised child, now known as Jesus.

DIAGNOSIS: Deep Darkness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Land of Deep Darkness*

Judah was living in dark times. The glorious days of David had passed. The nation had been split between North and South. As time passed, the Northern Kingdom (Israel) had been conquered by that rising giant, Assyria, and it looked as though it was only a matter of time until the South (Judah) would be met with the same fate. The light that was once Israel was fading fast. Hmmm! Doesn't that darkness sound familiar?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hoping in a Skilled Politician*

Isaiah knows that without hope the people perish; the people know it too. Question is, where do they /we tend to place our hope in such bleak times? The words of Isaiah in verses 6 and 7 give us a clue, if only as an antitype. The people looked to the Davidic line, their national heritage itself, as their source of hope, misinterpreting and misappropriating the promises of God. Indeed, many commentators (and perhaps ancient Israel itself) interpret verse 6 (and Israel's hope in the Davidic line) in exclusively political terms. The child is Hezekiah, they argue, and Israel's hope is that this child will restore the political glory that once belonged to David. To be sure, the verses are certainly enigmatic. But nevertheless, isn't the great temptation, still today, to think that our hope rests in recapturing political power through a skilled politician? Might not we also misappropriate the promise of God in such a narrow political interpretation?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Failed Politics and Divine Judgment*

If Hezekiah was the intended referent of "the child" of Isaiah's prophecy, then, as all the commentaries also note (because God

is the key interpreter of prophecy, and history bears witness to premature applications of them), Hezekiah certainly didn't fulfill the hope prophesied. We know the sequence of Israel's and Judah's failed politics: First, they are conquered by Assyria, then Babylon, then Persia ... and the sequence goes on far beyond the tradition of Isaiah's disciples. Why is this so? Isaiah himself tells us. The problem facing Israel and Judah ultimately isn't a lack of political skill on the part of their rulers, though there is that aplenty. Rather, the problem is God's own judgment upon the nations, including Israel and Judah, but also including us. Isaiah 10 gives us the hermeneutical key for interpreting the rise and fall of nations. The immediate political winners (like Assyria here) aren't winners at all. They are simply momentary "rods" in the hand of a wrathful God to execute judgment on the nations. They are given only enough power, for instance, to execute judgment and then, in due recompense for their haughtiness, their misinterpretation of their power, they too will get their due. Not only is the land of Israel and Judah in deep darkness, but the whole world is: And that darkness isn't primarily economic, ecological, or political in nature. Not primarily, though certainly secondarily. No, the deep darkness is primarily theological, the judgment of God upon us all.

PROGNOSIS: Great Light

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *New Politics and Divine Mercy*

If the ultimate source of Israel's deep darkness, isn't the enemy Assyria, or any of the subsequent political, economic and cultural rivals, but the very God who makes and breaks great nations, including Israel, then what, or better, who, is the conqueror of that Enemy. Answer, the child Jesus born in Bethlehem, David's City, for the purpose of bringing "endless peace for the throne of David and his Kingdom" (v. 7). This new

reign takes shape in a sort of coup d'état: "Authority now rests upon his shoulders (v. 6). In hindsight, that is, from the vantage point of Jesus, the names attributed to Jesus by Isaiah are most apt. Rather, than being a literal "son of David" who is adopted as a "son of God" (Psalm 2), he is the "Son of God (the Everlasting Father)" who is adopted as a "son of David" through his stepfather Joseph (see David L. Tiede, Luke: Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, p. 50.) He is that "wonderful counselor" who comforts us with the promise of mercy, divine favoritism. He is that "Divine Warrior," as Klein and Clement both translate it, who through the battle on the cross defeats the divine judgment that justly falls on the nations, Israel, too. He is the "Prince of Peace," establishing "endless peace," a peace that surpasses all understanding, a peace that is marked by his resurrection, the conquering of death.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Advanced Solution) : *True Hope and Increased Joy*

Isaiah knows that without hope the people perish. Now hope is nothing other than believing in a promise yet to be fulfilled. True, the power of hope rests in the trustworthiness and the power of the Promiser (the Child) to deliver. That's the "objective" side of hope; that's why Isaiah pours out the amazing appellations concerning the child that he does. And yet, hope does have its "subjective" side. It makes a difference in the believer already. Though hope signals something yet to come, by faith what is hoped for, is had already, and had—as Isaiah states—in the form of surpassing joy (v. 3), an ever-increasing joy in the promise. We may at first wonder why Isaiah spoke as though the child is already given, when in fact he would not come for another 700 years. That may be the reason why so many commentators think that Hezekiah is the referent. But the truth is the present-tense language is the language of faith and hope. To hope, to believe in a promise, is to have it now, already,

even as we await its consummation. Why? Because the sure dependability of the Promiser.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Land of Light*

People with hope and joy have their way of changing the landscape. True, those who have seen the Great Light that is the promise may still remain politically, economically, culturally insignificant. But the truth is they are really the ruling elite, the enlightened ones. They are elite or enlightened, not in the sense that they have some claim on the political or economic or cultural answers for the day, though they may have suggestions. Rather, they are elite or enlightened in the sense that they have a better promise to offer, than that political and economic power and might, which is here today and gone tomorrow. These enlightened ones live in service of Christ's coup d'état by proclaiming the promise as Isaiah did, only, perhaps, with a little more specificity than Isaiah did, because of the clarity that history and history's God has given to the promise in the life, death and resurrection of the child Jesus.