

NAMES FOR
THE MESSIAH

An Advent Study

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INTRODUCTION

*For 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.*

—Isa. 9:6

CHRISTIANS HAVE CLAIMED FROM THEIR BEGINNINGS that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures. His reign began a new testament of the relationship between God and humanity. For that reason Christians often call the Hebrew Scriptures the Old Testament. Jesus did not replace or deny the expectations of a messiah previously told. He fulfilled them. The

people were waiting for God to act, and many oracles in the Old Testament predicted what God would do.

What were these expectations, and did Jesus fulfill them?

Isaiah 9:2–7 is a well-known oracle, a divine utterance given to us, that uses four royal titles in verse 6—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. This Advent study will ponder each title and how the people understood it then, how Jesus did or did not fulfill the title, and how Christians interpret Jesus as representative of that title.

As we ponder the use of those titles with reference to Christmas and the birth of Jesus, two things become clear. First, in the witness to Jesus by the early Christians in the New Testament, they relied heavily on Old Testament “anticipations” of the coming Messiah. But second, Jesus did not fit those “anticipations” very well, such that a good deal of interpretive imagination was required in order to negotiate the connection between the anticipation and the actual bodily, historical reality of Jesus.

This book is for individual or group study.

Prayers and questions for reflection for each chapter are provided at the end of the book. Space is given for participants to write in their answers.

Week 1

WONDERFUL COUNSELOR

ISAIAH'S CONTEXT

THE ORACLE OF ISAIAH 9:2–7 IS WELL KNOWN AMONG us because of Handel's *Messiah*. The oracle did not *anticipate* or *predict* Jesus. There is no doubt that it pertained to the eighth century BCE, the time of Isaiah the prophet. While the oracle might have been utilized to announce and

celebrate the birth of a new royal prince in Jerusalem, namely Hezekiah, it is more probable that it pertained to the coronation of the new king. As with the anticipation of every new U.S. president, the coronation of the new king in Jerusalem was an occasion for anticipation of a new wave of well-being, peace, and prosperity. The liturgical articulation of such expectation would have been as extravagant and excessive as such occasions are, not unlike the political speeches of promise with which we are familiar in our own political context. Included in such flowery language would have been a traditional inventory of slogans or mantras about the new king, the sort of inventory that we know from ancient Egyptian liturgies that celebrate a new pharaoh. Thus the royal liturgy in Jerusalem likely resembled coronation liturgies in surrounding countries.

Specifically, the oracle of Isaiah 9:2–7 anticipates a new regime of peace and prosperity in Jerusalem, a season of “great light” that is contrasted with the “darkness” of imperial exploitation under the empire of Assyria. The coming king, it is anticipated, will release

Judah from that oppression, and this oracle anticipates a new regime of “endless peace” with “justice and with righteousness” forever (v. 7).

“WONDERFUL COUNSELOR” =
“WISE GOVERNANCE”

Our focus for the four Sundays in Advent will be to consider the four extravagant royal titles assigned to the new king in verse 6. The first of these is “wonderful counselor.” At the outset it may be noted that Handel, in his famous oratorio, mistakenly placed a comma after “wonderful,” thus dividing the phrase into two distinct parts. The two terms are to be taken together as “wonderful counselor” or “counselor of wonders.” The term “counselor” refers to the exercise of governance, the capacity to administer, to plan, and to execute policy. God is praised for assigning a new human king who is expected to devise plans and policies for the benefit of the entire realm. The term “wonderful” may be a modifier for the noun “counselor,” suggesting that the new king will have extraordinary

wisdom and foresight about planning. Or it may suggest that the royal plans and policies will be of exceptional quality, a big surprise that goes beyond all the usual conventions of political power and practice. Either way it is expected that the new king will initiate policy and practice that will dazzle in its effectiveness and in its practical benefit for the subjects of the king.

In actual practice the regime of Hezekiah at the end of the eighth century BCE in Jerusalem did enact some remarkable policies, notably withstanding the assault of the Assyrian army (Isa. 36–39). In the end, however, the rule of Hezekiah proved to be a disappointment. This glorious anticipation did not work out, for Hezekiah ultimately capitulated to the rising power of Babylon (Isa. 39). Perhaps it is inevitable, given the unpredictable nature of historical reality, that such high expectations could not be realized in fact. Perhaps it is always so. That reality, however, does not preclude the ambitious expectations for the next coming king. There is always new hope when leadership changes, for example, there is excitement about every new U.S. president.

JESUS AND THE EMPIRE OF ROME

This oracular text, with its fourfold inventory of honorific titles for the king—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—was ready at hand for the early church when it came to bear witness to Jesus. It was, moreover, ready at hand when Handel offered his glorious work of connecting the reality of Jesus to Old Testament expectation. The expected messiah would be received as a king, and so our Christmas carols abound with royal imagery. That is, they recognized the “long-expected” king who would set his people free. As ancient King Hezekiah had to face the Assyrian Empire with its threat, so Jesus came into an ominous political situation that was dominated by the Roman Empire, with its coercive military presence and its equally coercive tax system. The royal power of “Caesar” (emperor) was to be challenged by the new Jewish king who would, in Jewish expectation, defeat the power of Rome. Thus the Christmas story of Luke 2:1–20 is situated amid the power and command of Rome:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. (Luke 2:1–3)

The initial announcement of the gospel in Mark, moreover, is cast in royal language: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15).

The larger drama of the Gospel exhibits the way in which King Jesus takes issue with the royal power of Rome and subsequently with every regime of power that imagines it is ultimate and absolute. The power of King Jesus is intrinsically revolutionary and subversive against every repressive regime.

JESUS AS A SURPRISING ALTERNATIVE WHO EVOKED AMAZEMENT AND OPPOSITION

This leaves the early church, and subsequent church interpretation, to delineate what kind

of king Jesus is. How will he oppose the royal power of Rome? In that context Isaiah's oracle provides both eloquence and substantive guidance for discerning the new rule of Jesus. The general claim of the oracle is that a new regime of peace and well-being will displace the older (Roman) order of violence and extortion.

The anticipated king who will accomplish this displacement is termed, in the oracle, a "wonderful counselor." It remains, then, for the church at Christmas to delineate how it is that Jesus is the anticipated "wonderful counselor" and what that title means for good news in the world. While royal language is often used for witness to Jesus because he is the king of the kingdom of God that is at hand, he clearly fits no conventional royal expectation. And the charge at his subsequent trial that he claimed to be "King of the Jews" rests with great uneasiness for him (John 18:34–36).

But let us consider his role as "wonderful counselor," as agent of extraordinary plans and policies for the ordering of the public life of his people.

1. Jesus Was Wise

The king as “counselor” will be wise, and so he will devise wise plans, with a capacity to penetrate beyond conventional assumptions and with peculiar discernment about how the world works and what the consequences of policies will be. Jesus astonishes his contemporaries by his capacity to see and act beyond conventional assumptions. As they observed his work, people asked: “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!” (Mark 6:2).

The familiar birth story in Luke 2, moreover, moves promptly on to his childhood, when he is celebrated for his uncommon wisdom:

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. . . . And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. (Luke 2:40, 52)

He was already then discerned, according to this testimony and memory, as being on his way as a “counselor” who would be extraordinary in his discernment. The notion of his wisdom,

moreover, is extended in Paul's exposition of the wisdom of the cross that contradicts the "foolishness" of the world (1 Cor. 1:25, 27). If we consider this reference in the context of governance, being a king, then we can see that the raw power of Rome was indeed foolishness, even though it is typical for a world power.

**THE REST OF THIS
CHAPTER IS NOT
INCLUDED IN THIS
EXCERPT**

Prayers and Questions
for Reflection

WEEK 1

Wonderful Counselor

Opening Prayer

Shine your light upon us, O God, as we seek to be enlightened. By your Spirit, open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts as we prepare for the coming of your Son. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. What difference does placing a comma between “wonderful” and “counselor” make?

2. Jesus “articulated a world under ‘alternative governance’ that did not conform to old patterns of abuse and exploitation.” Isaiah predicted a new regime of peace and well-being that would displace the older order of violence and extortion. Draw or describe what you imagine that world would look like today.

3. The author says that Jesus opens the world to the impossible, and this offends the elite leaders. Why are they offended?

THE REMAINING QUESTIONS
AND CLOSING PRAYER ARE
NOT INCLUDED IN THIS
EXCERPT