



Coming of the Son of Man

We look at the historical context of the readings for First Advent

The Holy Land is often referred to as 'the Fifth Gospel'. The story of God's people and the coming of Jesus all have a strong sense of place. Understanding the location of the stories can often be key to understanding the stories themselves.

I was struck that both passages during the first week of Advent (from Isaiah 64 and Mark 13) hint at Jerusalem in a state of war. Given the current tragedies unfolding in Israel and Gaza, this seemed particularly pertinent.

Isaiah recalls the return of the Jewish community to the devastated city of Jerusalem and the need to rebuild the Temple. The passage from Mark centres around Jesus's apocalyptic dialogue at the re-built Temple (it is often called the 'Second Temple') many years later, predicting its ultimate destruction.

Mark's Gospel was written a few short years after the Roman siege of Jerusalem, that saw the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. This was a seismic event for the emerging church, which still remained very much entwined with the Jewish community. Jesus's words from years before therefore took on an added urgency for the authors of the Gospel.

The destruction of the Second Temple is vividly described by Andrew Perriman in [The Coming of the Son of Man](#) (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005): *"When the Romans finally broke into the temple, fire quickly spread through the buildings and the colonnades. Titus had no desire to see the Holy Place destroyed and endeavoured to have the flames put out. But one of the soldiers, driven by hatred of the Jews who still fought the Romans within the grounds of the temple, snatched up a flaming brand, climbed up on the back of another soldier, and tossed it through one of the golden apertures into the inner courtyard, setting fire to the rooms of the priests around the Holy Place. When Titus heard what*

had happened he ran to the scene, but he was powerless to prevent the frenzied troops from slaughtering the remaining Jews of from finally torching the sanctuary itself."

Jesus's visions of 'the end times' do not always sit well with out modern sensibilities, given our eagerness to limit our reading of Scripture to literal interpretations. *"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory,"* he says (Mark 13:26).

What Jesus meant when he used the term 'Son of Man' has proven particularly divisive. We can be certain that Jesus is alluding to the vivid imagery used in the Book of Daniel: *"As I watched, the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven..."* (Dan 7:13a). That book also depicts a community in crisis and exile. We know that the Book of Daniel is the latest book to be included in the Hebrew canon, having been written somewhere between 167 and 165 B.C.E. A taste for visions of 'end times' characterises writing from this period.

Ultimately, it seems that Jesus is perhaps using this imagery from the Hebrew Scriptures to make the point that earthly authorities - whether the Roman or Babylonian Empires - will be stripped of their power and this will be transferred to Jesus as the human embodiment of divine power.

Reflections

- What does Advent mean for you?
- If Advent marks the beginning of the new Christian liturgical year, what are your hopes and desires for your discipleship over the coming 12 months?
- Do the apocalyptic passages in the Bible confuse, delight or repulse you? Why might they be relevant at Advent?
- How significant is the context and landscape of the Bible in shaping our understanding of God's story?

Resources

Each year the market is flooded with devotional books for the Advent period. I wanted to point you towards some of the better ones from recent years. Given the current bloodshed in Israel, Kelly Nikondeha's [The First Advent in Palestine](#) (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022) feels very immediate. It makes for a bracing change to usual sentimental offerings. The book really helps contextualise the Christmas story in both historic and modern day Palestine. Rachel Mann's [In the Bleak Midwinter](#) (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2019) is also excellent and offers Advent reflection through the poetry of Christina Rossetti.

Fleming Rutledge's [Advent: The Once & Future Coming of Jesus Christ](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018) pulls together variety of her masterful sermons about Advent. As she writes, *"Advent is the season that, when properly understood, does not flinch from the darkness that stalks us all in this world. Advent begins in the dark and moves toward the light—but the season should not move too quickly or too glibly, lest we fail to acknowledge the depth of the darkness."*

Links to these resources are imbedded into the electronic copy. Just click on the underlined words.