

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 29 (Christ the King), Year B (tracks one and two)

First Reading (track one)

2 Samuel 23:1–7

Now these are the last words of David:

The oracle of David, the son of Jesse,
the oracle of the man who was raised on high,
the anointed of the God of Jacob,
the sweet psalmist of Israel:

“The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me;
his word is on my tongue.
The God of Israel has spoken;
the Rock of Israel has said to me:
When one rules justly over men,
ruling in the fear of God,
he dawns on them like the morning light,
like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning,
like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.

“For does not my house stand so with God?
For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,
ordered in all things and secure.
For will he not cause to prosper
all my help and my desire?
But worthless men are all like thorns that are thrown away,
for they cannot be taken with the hand;
but the man who touches them
arms himself with iron and the shaft of a spear,
and they are utterly consumed with fire.” (ESV)

Or (track two),

Daniel 7:9–10, 13-14 (verses 11 and 12 included in italics)

“As I looked,

thrones were placed,

and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
its wheels were burning fire.
A stream of fire issued
and came out from before him;
a thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
the court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.

“I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

“I saw in the night visions,

and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed. (ESV)

Second Reading

Revelation 1:4b–8 (4a in italics)

John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 18:33–37

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

As I have mentioned in other Divergences, the books of 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings have a different (more negative) opinion of monarchy than do the books of 1-2 Chronicles. I'll put a citation in here from 1 Samuel to highlight that:

1 Samuel 8

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, “Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.” But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey their voice and make them a king.” Samuel then said to the men of Israel, “Go every man to his city.” (ESV)

It is in this context that we should read David’s words about a “king.” While he rightly claims what it would mean to have a truly just and righteous king, and he claims that for himself to some degree, in fact David was far from that ideal king. We do tend to idealize them or demonize them, don’t we? Just a few verses after all this David causes Joab to take a census of the people, something he knows will displease God, but he does it anyways, and brings great calamity on the land. And we know of some of David’s other failings.

Still, the image of this ideal king still resonates with us. Perhaps less us in the US because our foundations are built on the rejection of monarchy, but then, that's human monarchy, not the rule of the King of Heaven.

It should be noted here that a good deal of modern Christian anti-semitism is rooted in the work of Martin Luther, and particularly in his historic exegesis of this passage. His work on the last words of David was unprecedented when he wrote it, and functioned as a third and Trinitarian essay against the Jews. The three works being - *Against the Sabbateans (Judenschriften)*, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, and *On the Last Words of David*. In this third, Trinitarian interpretation of 2 Samuel 23:1-7, Luther "emphasizes the messianic dimensions of the text and simultaneously de-emphasizes a Jewish understanding of the eternity of God's promise or covenant with the Jewish nation and people." (John T. Slotemaker, *The Trinitarian House of David: Martin Luther's Anti-Jewish Exegesis of 2 Samuel 23:1-7*)

Reading this first text on the Last Sunday of Pentecost, on the Sunday we call "Christ the King" Sunday, we may be tempted to do the same, if less intentionally. When we interpret a passage that speaks of David's "house" and read it as one that refers to Jesus, I think we do well to remember the way that the same has been done anti-semitically, and to walk carefully.

Or, (track two)

Our text from Daniel this week is well known in Christian circles, better than the text above, for its Messianic interpretations. "One like a son of man" is presented before the "Ancient of Days" and to him is given "dominion and glory and a kingdom." And when we read it on "Christ the King" Sunday, what else can we draw from it but Daniel's vision of the One who is to come, Jesus?

But that quite overlooks what the book of Daniel says only a few verses later,

And the kingdom and the dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven
shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High;
his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey him.' (Daniel 7:27, ESV)

Dominion is given to the *people of the saints of the Most High*. “His kingdom” here refers not to the “one like a son of man” but to the Most High, which is then entrusted to the people.

This discrepancy has led most students of this passage to conclude that the “one like a son of man” referred not to an individual, but to the collective people of God, that is, the Jewish people as a whole. The idea that the whole people might be represented as an individual is not without precedent. We have only to look at the Suffering Servant of Isaiah to see that.

On the other hand, the discord of verses 12 and 13 has been treated by at least one author that I came across as a later interpolation, one that derived from the solar religion of Tyre, one that was later adapted by Solomon and used in its Roman form by Antiochus Epiphanes. I found it difficult to give that paper much credit, but the attempt to treat it as a fragment of another narrative, preserved within this chapter of Daniel, speaks to the interpretive challenges verses 12 and 13 represent.

Historically, though, this “one like a son of man” has been understood to represent the whole of God’s people, the Jewish people, and not an individual. That we read it on Christ the King Sunday therefore makes our appropriation of it a little problematic.

What is more certain to me is that this text comes to us out of an early form of the genre known as “apocalypse,” a form that emerges in times of great persecution, in this case, probably the Maccabean war and its aftermath. (2nd Century BCE) Characteristic of apocalypse is the presentation of a current crisis, foreseen by a reliable and faithful figure of the past who both foretells the crisis and God’s ultimate intervention on behalf of God’s people. So Daniel, a revered figure from the time of the Babylonian captivity, is depicted as having these visions of the plight of the Jewish people under Antiochus Epiphanes. These visions go on to prophesy the people’s victory (not an individual’s) and ultimate dominion.

These characteristics of Daniel and of apocalypse in general are important, given that our second reading for this Sunday comes from the Revelation to John, Christianity’s great apocalypse.

Second Reading

“... and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him.” What a terrible image. The savior of humankind appears in the clouds and instead of rejoicing, everyone wails in terror. What if that’s not what it says? What if it says all the tribes of the earth will mourn for Him? Because that’s what I’m inclined to believe after some study.

This shift comes from having read an article for the Journal of Biblical Literature by Leonard Thompson, in which he argues that this phrase should be read against its Greco-Roman background and as part of an early Christian understanding of Jesus, and early christology that is very, very human, and not (I infer from this article) the understanding of the pre-existent Son which later became a staple of Christian theology.

Beginning with a careful and pretty exhaustive examination of the grammar of that phrase and the meaning of similar phrases both within Scriptures and in the culture of the time, Thompson demonstrates that the verb *kopsontai* (mourn) along with the prepositional phrase *ep auton* (over him) is nowhere else translated as wail *on account of* him. In *every* other case that he found, it was used to describe what one does over someone who has died. Even later in Revelation the very same syntactic structure is used to describe what the kings of the earth will do over the slain whore of Babylon. They will *kopsontai ep auten*. (*auten* being the feminine of *auton*.)

He then goes on to show how this also fits better with the passage from Zechariah 12:10 to which John alludes here,

And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.”

So, there is this sense of terrible grief, but not the kind of wailing in terror that is often inferred from the current translation, even in the NRSV. Of course, we might choose to see “wailing on account of Him” as meaning “mourning over Him,” but then, why not just say it that way?

At any rate, Thompson goes on to show how this phrase, and the image of the returning Jesus fit very well within the framework of the emphasis in Greco-Roman stories of heroes who have died. John is primarily concerned with Jesus as the One who has died as an image for those Christians who now face death during the persecution by Domitian. So Jesus, as the hero who has died, is far more important as a model than the Resurrected Christ. As such, the lament over a hero, well known in John’s day and culture, makes much better sense of Revelation 1:7.

This isn’t to say that John doesn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead. He does mention it in chapter 20, only that this isn’t his primary way of drawing on Jesus’ example so as to build up the courage of Christians facing persecution. And this works particularly well here because Jesus’ humanity is still Christians understanding of Him.

We might be tempted to say that this is difficult to maintain, given what Jesus says of Himself in the Gospel of John, but keep in mind that the John who wrote the Gospel and the John who wrote Revelation are *not* the same person, no matter the traditional understanding. I have read arguments to the contrary, but they rely much too heavily on simply discounting the plain evidence so as to preserve their desired conclusion.

Earlier in this Divergence, I described Revelation as the great Christian apocalypse. While it shares many of the traits of the apocalyptic form, I should note some of its differences as well. Primarily, it is missing the way in which an historical person of great faith becomes the foreteller of the current moment and foreseer of this moment's resolution. John of Patmos, a prophet of the early church, recounts visions that describe current events in symbolic language like that of Daniel or Ezekiel, or other intertestamental apocalyptic writings. But he doesn't ascribe these visions to someone else.

Instead, I think (and this is my own way of understanding it) John has been steeped in this late Jewish apocalyptic writing and thinking, and it has shaped his prophetic vision. As did the writer of Daniel, or IV Ezra, John speaks to a people heavily oppressed by Rome and seeks to encourage them to stand firm in the face of persecution, faithful to the promise that God will resolve all that they are enduring.

Reading this text as part of our lectionary for Christ the King tends to get us thinking of Revelation as a prediction of events yet to come, as we wait for the manifestation of Christ as King. The difficulty with that is that we are then obligated to read the rest of Revelation as something John envisaged as *our* future, not the immediate future of the people to whom he wrote. And that, of course, leads us to all the insane end-times speculation that we've endured over the centuries. Surely *these* are the signs that the end is upon us!

Instead, I prefer to read this passage as a description of the way that the Risen Jesus is manifest to every generation as Savior in the midst of oppression. He will not be King in some future way that He is not already. We may see it more clearly at some point, but Jesus as King is a present reality for me, not something to look forward to. And that leaves me with the uncomfortable question. Where do I fit today? Oppressor or Oppressed?

Gospel Text

This week, for Christ the King Sunday, we have a passage from John rather than Mark. It's easy to understand why. Mark just simply does not deal with this subject. He doesn't

even give us any resurrection appearances (if you stop at 16:8, as Mark intended). So we jump to Jesus' conversation with Pilate about whether or not He is a king.

I'll come back to this at the end, but I still must begin by recognizing that, for historical reliability, we have shifted into a section of John that is least likely to have any historical roots. Pilate's role in the Fourth Gospel seems clearly written to shift blame *away* from Rome and onto the "*judaioi*," the "Jews." We can argue that John didn't mean the whole of the Jewish nation here, which I believe he did not, but that doesn't change the way that "*judaioi*" has been read for hundreds of years, and most disturbingly in support of the Holocaust.

Taken on it's own, however, we see a shift in the image of kingship happening here. As Pilate probes and Jesus responds it becomes more and more clear that any kingship attributable to Jesus is "not of this world." Pilate then, has little to no reason to kill Him, apart from his fear of the people he's been given to rule. He is depicted as inept, not hostile.

When we read this today, I cannot avoid the controversy over someone (allegedly) yelling "Jesus is Lord" at a political rally recently. Such an expression in a political context is precisely the opposite of what Jesus is driving at here. Personally, I share the opinion of many who have closely examined the videotapes, that this is not what was said. But those who sought to make an issue of it have done what the hecklers probably did not do, regardless.

This brings us back to the question of how we acknowledge Jesus as King when He does not reign in some tangible manner. It seems to me to harken back to the problem that the author of Revelation dealt with in quite another way. He envisioned a tangible, political solution in his near future. Jesus offers a less tangible, but far more practical solution in the present. More practical, because Jesus has made clear time and again that His rule will not be built on a human model of power.

Coming back to the Jewish/Roman problem in terms of John's description of Jesus' Passion, I will repeat the caution I've found myself writing already in this Divergence. This is no buttress to antisemitism. I can theorize about *why* John went down these paths, but they don't change the fact that I must read them with great caution, remembering that the "King" I celebrate today is a good Jew Himself. As much as John tries to place blame on a certain set of Jewish leaders, calling them "the Jews," what he describes is the ascension of a Jewish King to the Throne imagined by prophets for hundreds of years. That it transcends any human throne only makes it universal, not exclusive of its Jewish antecedents.