

A Worldwide Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

Not to result in a religious conversion, but to hearing the “teaching” that goes forth from Zion in the name of the God who is worshipped there. The universal is to be found in the particular.

By Bernhard W. Anderson



Most people are familiar with the biblical vision of the coming of a time when nations will “beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks” and prepare for war no longer. The poem is found in slightly different versions in both the Book of Micah (4:1–5) and the Book of Isaiah (2:2–5). It may have been an independent piece which editors of both prophetic books used for their own purposes.

In this vision, the hill on which the Temple of Jerusalem stands is portrayed as the highest of all mountains of the earth. As though drawn by a powerful magnetic force, “all the nations”—or, as we read in the Micah version, “peoples” and “many nations”—will make a pilgrimage to Zion (Jerusalem), saying:

“Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”

Isaiah 2:3 (NIV)

The motivation for this pilgrimage of the nations is the expectation that “torah [teaching] will go forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3c). The result will be that the age-old practice of resorting to war to settle international disputes will be abandoned, and—as we read in Micah—people will enjoy the dividends of peace and dwell in security (Micah 4:4).

This beautiful picture still fires our imagination and stirs the hope that ultimately the time will come when people will “study war no more,” in the words of the folk song. In the immediate situation of negotiating for peace in the Middle East, we dare to hope that, despite the hard political realities, Jerusalem will somehow show the nations the way to peace. For Jerusalem is a pilgrimage city of three religions: Muslims who worship at the Dome of the Rock, Jews who pray at the Western Wall and Christians who reenact the Stations of the Cross.

One major feature of this vision, however, is difficult in these days when many leaders are urging that no one religion should claim hegemony and when “pluralism” is the order of the day. The ancient poem portrays Jerusalem as the center of the world, to which all peoples will come to hear divine instruction at “the house [temple] of the God of Jacob.” One commentator describes the poem as “a softening and re-minting of the imperialistic notion of a world capital.”¹ Certainly the poem is appropriately placed as a preface to a collection of Isaiah’s prophecies (especially chaps. 2–12). For the message of Isaiah, the great eighth-century B.C. prophet, was profoundly influenced by the “imperialism” of David, who made Jerusalem the capital of his realm and planned for a Temple as God’s “dwelling place” to which all the tribes of Israel would go up. Elsewhere in the Book of Isaiah, where the prophet’s seminal message is reinterpreted, it is said that peoples will come submissively to Jerusalem, bringing the wealth of the nations as a tribute (see Isaiah 45:14–23 and 60:1–18). Moreover, in the Book of Psalms the invitation to worship is addressed not just to Israel, but to all peoples, as in Psalm 99:

The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble!

He sits enthroned upon the cherubim;
let the earth quake!
The Lord is great in Zion;
he is exalted over all the peoples.
Let them praise your great and awesome name.
Holy is he!

Psalm 99:1–3 (NRSV)

This language may strike some people as an imperialistic claim made on behalf of the God who is known and worshipped in Zion. But the imperialism, if it be that, is mitigated considerably when one considers the image of the sacred mountain that the poet uses. Here Zion is described in terms of the ancient Canaanite myth of the Cosmic Mountain, to refer to a study by Richard J. Clifford.² According to the myth, the sacred mountain is located at the center of the cosmos, “the meeting place of heaven and earth,” where the creator engages in conflict with opposing forces of evil and where the decrees for the future go forth. In this imaginative way of thinking, any important temple, whether in Babylonia, Canaan, Israel or elsewhere, is located at the center, the spiritual capital of the cosmos, where the eternal order intersects the earthly sphere and people are brought into contact with the realm of the holy. In this poetic sense, it is proper for people, depending upon their religious allegiance, to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to Mecca, to Rome or Canterbury, or some other temple.

Here we find ourselves on the ground of a lively debate that is being waged today over whether religious leaders should move beyond the exclusive claims of a particular religion to a pluralistic theology. All that I can do here is to call attention to the relevance of this debate to the biblical vision of world Peace. This poem found in Isaiah 2:2–5, and indeed the whole Book of Isaiah, gives expression to a profound paradox: The God who is to be praised universally as creator and king is manifest in Zion—in a particular place and to a particular people.

It is noteworthy, however, that the pilgrimage of the nations to Zion does not result in religious conversion but, rather, in hearing the “teaching” that goes forth from Zion in the name of the God who is worshipped there. The peoples retain their identity, even as they hear the torah of the God of Zion. The universal is found in the particular, even as the particular bears witness to the universal.

One of the most helpful commentaries on the relation between a particular religious experience and its universal implications is found in Emil Fackenheim’s little book, *God’s Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections*.³ Reflecting on Jewish “root experiences” (Exodus and Sinai), this philosopher observes that Jewish faith does not start with the universal, with “God’s presence-in-general”; rather, it is based on the divine presence “to particular [people] in particular situations.” However, this presence of God to Israel, since it is not that of a tribal god, has universal implications. Fackenheim writes: “These implications are manifest only in the particular; and they make of the [people] to whom they are manifest, not universalistic philosophers who rise above their situations, but rather witnesses, *in, through, and because of* their particularity to the nations” (p. 8).

Though this paradox of the universal in the particular and the particular as witness to the universal baffles our comprehension, the poetic vision of world peace which we have been considering is not an imperialistic claim. Imperialism is the imposition of order upon peoples, from the outside; but in this case the peoples act on their own, from an inner motivation: “Come, let us go up to the mountain the Lord.” The nations are attracted to Zion, the spiritual center, because the teaching that goes forth from that source appeals to the deepest human longings for *shalom* (peace, welfare) and because there they come into contact with the universal ethical demand for justice and mercy that transcends and judges the national exercise of power.

Endnotes:

1. R.E. Clements, *The New Century Bible Commentary Isaiah 1–39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 40.
2. Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, Harvard Semitic Museum 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972).
3. Emil Fackenheim, *God’s Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970).

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