

“Jesus Christ in the Old Testament”

John 12:37-43

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Text Comment

- v.37 From this point on in the Gospel of John the Lord Jesus keeps himself to his disciples. This section, taking us to the end of chapter 12, is something of a parting shot to the Jewish church as a whole. They have refused to believe in him *in spite of the miracles that he has performed before their very eyes*. Faith based on miracles is not the best faith, but it is better than no faith at all! This generation of Israel is like that generation of Moses' day to whom Moses said, “With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those miraculous signs and great wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.” [Deut. 29:3-4] **But unbelief this broad, this deep, this intractable in defiance of the most stupendous signs requires some explanation. That now comes in what follows.**
- v.38 That is, the prophets predicted that the Messiah would be rejected by his people. The question in Isa. 53:1 is rhetorical. He means that no one has believed it.
- v.40 In a strongly predestinarian statement, cited from Isaiah's prophetic commission in chapter 6 of his prophecy, Israel's unbelief is explained as a result of God's hardening her heart so that she would not believe. Of course, it is a judicial hardening. That hardening is itself punishment for her sin. Still, he did not extend the grace of the new birth to Israel in general. But these Jews were still responsible for their unbelief as v. 37 makes clear. We will return to this subject, important and difficult as it is, next Lord's Day morning.
- v.43 There were exceptions to the general unbelief of the Jews, even among the religious leadership. However, the faith of many of them – Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were notable exceptions – seems to have been temporary and, finally, spurious. It was not able to stand up to any test of loyalty. They were too jealous of their standing to risk it for Jesus' sake. Calvin writes, “We must...notice, that rulers have less courage and constancy, because ambition almost always reigns in them, and there is nothing more servile than that. To put it in a word, earthly honours may be called golden shackles binding a man so that he cannot freely do his duty.”

Now, as I said, I plan to return to this text next Lord's Day to take up the difficult statements made here about the hardening of Israel's heart. But, before that I wanted to consider with you the astonishing and, I think, very important statement John makes in v. 41 regarding the reference of the text he cited from Isaiah 6.

There are some exegetical details about which commentators argue at some length, but the main point is unmistakable. John says that Isaiah *saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him*. Now, in the context of the prophecy in Isaiah itself, particularly that in Isaiah 6, verses from which chapter

immediately precede the statement here in v. 41, Isaiah had seen the glory of *the Lord* who is explicitly identified in Isa. 6:3 as Yahweh or Jehovah. Isaiah, found himself in the temple one day in the year in which King Uzziah died, and there he was given a vision of the Lord in his majesty. There were six-winged seraphs attending him, using two wings to cover their faces and two to cover their feet before the glory of the Lord and using the other two wings to fly, and they were calling to one another, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory.” The doorposts and thresholds of the temple shook, the temple itself was filled with smoke, and Isaiah himself was devastated before the mighty vision that he saw. He had seen the glory of the Lord.

But, here, John tells us that the glory Isaiah saw was in fact the glory of Jesus Christ! And when Isaiah wrote down his vision and told of the majesty of God that he had seen, he was writing about Jesus Christ.

Now, it does not seem likely or necessary that John means that Isaiah understood at the time that God was triune, and existed eternally in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and that the glory he saw in the temple that day was a manifestation of the majesty of God the Son as distinct from the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the trinity awaited the incarnation, the coming of the Son of God in human nature, to be disclosed in any completeness. There are only hints and anticipations of the triune nature of God in the OT. But the “chain of reasoning” [Carson, 450] that would lead to John’s conclusion here is not hard to follow. The Son of God had been now revealed to the world as the Word of God, the one who makes known the Father. He was in the beginning with God and was himself, indeed, God, one with the Father. He was the perfect revelation of God to mankind. It stands to reason that when God revealed himself to his people in the ancient epoch, it would have been the Son of God, the second person of the triune God, who did so, just *as now* it was the Son of God who was revealing God to man. They did not know him by his incarnate name of Jesus, they knew him simply as God, Yahweh, the Lord. But, we now know, in retrospect, that Israel had primarily to do with the second person of the Godhead, who later came into the world as a man and whom we know as Jesus Christ. When the saints of the OT were “trusting the Lord” they were, most directly and most specifically trusting the Son of God, because he was the person of the Godhead whom they had seen and heard and come to know.

And, if we had any doubt about that chain of reasoning, it is confirmed many times in the NT.

1. Many times, of course, texts in the OT that refer to Yahweh are directly applied or interpreted of to Jesus Christ. That is, according to the New Testament, it was the Son of God to whom the OT texts made reference. One example among many is found in Romans 10:13 where Paul concludes a demonstration that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ by citing Joel 2:32, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” In Joel 2:32, “Lord” is the Hebrew name, “Yahweh.” Jesus is Yahweh! And, remember; already in this Gospel we have been taught that it was the Son of God who actually created the world, who made the heavens and the earth, who formed the seas and dry land, who brought living things and man himself into existence. It was that person of the Godhead we know as God the Son, and, since the incarnation, as Jesus Christ. He has added to himself a human nature and a

name to go with that nature, but his person is the same as that Yahweh, that Jehovah who revealed himself to Israel.

2. But, even more definitely, there are a number of places in the NT where the name of Jesus Christ is, in a striking and obviously intentional way, put back into OT history and back into the dealings between Yahweh and his people. Let me mention some examples.
 - a. In Heb. 11:26 we read that Moses forsook his favored position in the Egyptian court and chose to be mistreated with the people of God because he regarded “disgrace *for the sake of Christ* as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.” Now the name of Christ never appears in the story of Moses in Egypt. The name “the Lord” or “Yahweh” appears repeatedly, but never Jesus Christ. No one knew that name in those days. That Moses was serving Christ, the second person of the Godhead, is the disclosure of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. I imagine that most Christian readers of the Bible, when they are reading Exodus and encounter the name “the Lord” or “Yahweh” or “Jehovah” think of God the Father or, indistinctly, of the triune God together. But we are being told in the NT to think of God the Son as the person of the Godhead with whom Israel in those days had directly to do.
 - b. You find the same thing in Jude 5. There, in the NIV and most English translations, we read that “the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt.” In the context that is surely a reference to Jesus Christ as the previous sentence in v.4, ended with the words “Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.” Then “Lord” is immediately repeated a few words later. Surely the second Lord is the same as the first. But, in fact, it is very doubtful that Jude wrote “Lord” in v. 5. It is highly probable that what he actually wrote was “that Jesus delivered his people out of Egypt.” Even those who reject that reading admit that there is very weighty attestation for it. Many of the best early manuscripts read Jesus, the Latin Bible reads Jesus, early church fathers had “Jesus” in the text they commented on, the early Egyptian translations of the NT read “Jesus,” and so on. But to a majority of the committee that made the decision as to what reading to choose it just seemed unlikely that Jude would have written Jesus. However, it is a principle, a canon of textual criticism, of the science of determining the best reading among the available options, that the more difficult reading is often right because scribes, in copying the NT, were more likely to adjust difficult or what they thought were unlikely readings than they were likely to make an easy reading more difficult. It is very interesting, by the way – this is probably more than any of you really want to know about this but it is a striking reading and makes a powerful point if Jude 5 says that *Jesus* led his people out of Egypt – that Bruce Metzger, the well-known evangelical scholar who taught NT for so many years at Princeton Theological Seminary, who served on the committee that fixed the text of the modern standard edition of the Greek NT, and who wrote a commentary explaining why the committee chose the various readings that it did for the modern edition of the Greek NT, says in that commentary that he thinks the committee made a mistake here. He thinks the Greek text and so the NIV built on it, should read “Jesus” not “Lord.” “Critical principles,” he writes, “seem to require the adoption of ‘Jesus’, which admittedly is the best attested reading among Greek and versional witnesses.” [*A Textual Commentary*, 726] Clearly a point is being made, if we are to read “Jesus” in Jude verse 5. The very same one we know as Jesus Christ was the Almighty God who brought Israel out of bondage on eagles’ wings. The Redeemer of Israel was, in fact, none other than

the Redeemer of the world! The Passover that *he himself* instituted as the means of Israel's deliverance, was the foretelling of *his own* death for the sins of his people.

- c. It is even easier to accept that reading in Jude 5 when we read Paul saying in 1 Cor. 10:4 that Christ followed Israel in the wilderness and provided food and drink for them in the desert wastes through which they passed. A close reading of 2 Cor. 3 indicates that it was the glory of Jesus Christ that shone on Moses' face when he came out of the Tent of Meeting after his conferences with God (as we read in Exodus 34). And a similarly careful reading of Heb. 12 indicates that it was Christ who gave the law to Israel at Sinai. Remember how the Christmas hymn has it: "O come, O come, thou Lord of might, who to thy tribes on Sinai's height, in ancient times didst give the law in cloud and majesty and awe, Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel, shall come to thee, O Israel."
- d. And, then, there is the striking statement in 1 Peter 1:11. Peter is speaking of the prophets and their prophecies of Christ, "of the grace that was to come to you" is how he puts it. But he says this. "They were trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ *in them* was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." In other words, it was the Spirit *of Christ* that revealed the word of God to the OT prophets. The Holy Spirit was, even then, expressly the Spirit of Christ, he was serving the interests of God the Son in revealing God and his truth to the church and to the world. The Holy Spirit is referred to a number of times as the Spirit of Christ in the NT, but here he is being called the Spirit of Christ in respect to his ministry of revelation to the OT prophets.

We'll take all of this together and surely the church father Eusebius is right when he wrote, "All the old Patriarchs might properly be called Christians..." Abraham was a Christian, not simply because, as Paul said, he was justified by faith as we are, but because the person of the Godhead with whom he had directly to do in his pilgrimage in this world was none other than God the Son, whom we now know, in his incarnate form, as Jesus Christ. The Israelites of the wilderness generation were Christians, nominal Christians only alas, not only because, as we read in Hebrews 4 they had the same gospel preached to them as we do today, but because the person of the Godhead with whom they had to do, up to whom they looked, who brought them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, was none other than the Son of God we know as Jesus Christ.

This is a supremely important point in a day like ours when Christians have such a diminished view of the first 39 books of the Bible, what we call the OT. A supremely important point in a day when evangelical spiritual life is often misshapen for want of the pressure brought to bear on it by the first 39 books of the Bible. No, that law that was given at Sinai is not contrary in its principle or its spirit to the law of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ *gave us that law himself, at Mt. Sinai*. When he says in his Sermon on the Mount that not one jot or tittle of that law will fall away until all is fulfilled, he is speaking of *his very own law, the law he revealed to Moses at Sinai!* That religion of Moses practiced in Israel for those many centuries was not based on some sub-Christian principle, it was revealed by the Lord Jesus himself, it was worship offered to the Lord Jesus himself, it was a temple filled on several great occasions with the glory of the Lord Jesus himself. The spiritual world they inhabited in that ancient epoch – Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and all the rest, believers both great and small – was the same spiritual world in which you and I live today. It had the same Savior, it required the same faith, it proclaimed the same gospel.

But now, think of Christ himself and your view of him. The God who thundered his wrath at Sinai, who told the people not even to touch the mountain upon pain of death, who so severely punished his people for their faithlessness and the nations for their idolatries and corruptions, the God who destroyed the world with a flood, who devastated Israel and Jerusalem with the fury of foreign armies because of his people's spiritual apostasy, *that God, that second person of the Triune God*, is the very person we know and love as Jesus Christ, the very man who, here in John 12, is but three or four days from his crucifixion for the sins of the world.

And, in the same way, that tender Savior, that friend of sinners, that compassionate and sympathetic counselor of the heart-broken, that self-sacrificing Redeemer, is no one else than the Almighty, whose eyes are too pure to behold iniquity, who is angry with the wicked every day, who inhabits eternity and who dwells in unapproachable light.

Now, I am not saying that anyone who read the Bible with an open mind should ever have doubted this. It is taught in a hundred ways and both the goodness and the severity of God are revealed as well in the NT as in the OT. But, it is brought home to the heart in a very striking way - that we have but one God, of wrath and love, that there is but one Holy Scripture, God's Word, that there is but one Redeemer, one covenant of grace, that there is but one gospel, one faith, one church, one people of God, one spiritual world, one law for Christians to keep, one hope of salvation in the world to come, from the beginning of the world to its end - by the fact that it is Jesus Christ, himself, who is the person of the Godhead with whom God's people always have had direct communion; it has always been *his* voice that they have heard, *his* revelation they have always received and believed as the truth from God, *his* love and *his* wrath that they have felt in their hearts, -- always, from the very beginning to the present day. "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today and forever." And because he is, so is everything else that matters forever!

There is a way of reading the Bible and a way of thinking about Jesus Christ, common to us all as Christians, that keeps us from the fullest and purest appreciation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We think so naturally of Jesus Christ, perhaps because of his name as the *Son* of God, but, especially, because of his incarnation, his becoming so much like us, as somehow a lesser figure than God the Father. And this unwitting but deeply held prejudice is strengthened by the all too natural assumption that when we encounter God, the Almighty Yahweh, Jehovah, in the OT, this God of terrible majesty, we are encountering the Father, the first person of the Godhead. But we are not. The New Testament teaches us that we are not. We are encountering the Son of God from first to last. He is the face of the Triune God from first to last. He will tell his disciples later in this same Gospel that if we have seen him we have seen the Father and that is more completely true than we often realize. Because we see him not only here in his incarnate life, but we see him as God throughout the Bible.

It is only when we realize that it was the Creator of heaven and earth who became a man; it was the God All-Terrible who thundered his law and wrath at Sinai who became an infant in the womb of the virgin Mary, that it was the God who sent lightning down upon Elijah's sacrifice at Mt. Carmel and who destroyed the 185,000 soldiers of the army of Sennacherib, I say only then do we realize how breath-takingly stunning is the incarnation of the Son of God, how great was

the humiliation he undertook to subject himself to mistreatment by his own creatures so as to secure our salvation, and how great was his love to do it for people such as we.

John himself was favored to find himself in the inner circle of the Lord's friends during the years of the ministry. Peter, James, and John. We read that he laid his head on the Lord's chest as he lay next to him at the Last Supper. But, this same John, years later, in exile on the island of Patmos, saw the same Lord Jesus, now no longer in his humiliation with his divine glory hidden as it was while he was in the world. His voice thundered like a trumpet roll, his face shone with the brightness of the sun. And this same disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved, fell at his feet as though dead.

We are always in our hearts domesticating the Lord Jesus. His incarnation beguiles us. We think less of him than we should and so our trust and confidence in him is less than it might be. There is power behind that tenderness. And terrible holiness and an intractable wrath against sin! Let us love him and trust him as we ought, as the Mighty God who forsook the courts of everlasting day and chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay! And let us fear him as the God before whom even the seraphim, who dwell with him night and day, take two of their wings to cover their faces and two of their wings to cover their feet before the glory of their God!