

## ***The Enormous Imagination of God***

By Dr. Dave Neale

During the Season of Advent, the Book of Isaiah is always the featured Old Testament text from the lectionary. Other than the infancy narratives, Isaiah is the most oft quoted book of the Bible at Christmas.

Why is that? Isaiah is sometimes called the fifth gospel because so many of the themes of Jesus' life and ministry seem to be found in it; presaged, we might say.

They both have the same name.

Isaiah is *Yeshā'yahu*, after all means "Yahweh saves."

*Yeshā'yahu*/Isaiah → *Yeshua*/Joshua → *Yēsous* → Jesus → "Salvation"

They have the same name.

Isaiah is the most quoted book in the New Testament by far. There are more than 500 allusions to the text of Isaiah throughout the New Testament corpus. Quite often the allusion is predicated by the statement... ***to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah.***

Both Isaiah and Jesus were prophets. Jesus saw himself as a prophet. ***A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country***, Jesus said. He was seen as a prophet, ***This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee...*** the crowds said of him at his triumphal entry to Jerusalem.

It is said of the prophets that they see what others do not. They have trans-dimensional vision. They are "generative personalities." They are 'artists who redescribe reality... in new and venturesome categories.'<sup>i</sup>

And so, we speak of what we will call the ***Enormous Imagination of God*** both Isaiah and Jesus possessed.

Like Da Vinci and Michealangelo, Einstein, Marie Curie (the first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize). While we sense the presence of the divine in the imaginations of these people, the visions of grandeur of the prophets issue from God, so we hold.

By their spiritual vision they shape our perception of reality. Their visions show us how to hope. They give us a vision that empowers us to rise to the challenges of our day.



Some years ago, I arranged to stay at St Marks Monastery in the Armenian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. I had been in Israel with a group of students, and somewhat guiltily put them all on a plane to fly home while I soaked up the vibrations of Jerusalem for a week or so.

St Marks is a small place. It is the home of the Syrian Orthodox Church, where the liturgy is in Syriac, or Aramaic. This church thinks of itself and preserving the oldest liturgy in Christendom, that is, in Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

It is also, in their own view of things, located where the house of John Mark stood, and the place to which Peter came on the night of his miraculous release from prison. He came, Acts 12:12 says, **to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark.**

I didn't stay there because it was on anyone's list of nice places to stay. I had a small cell really, to which I was confined for three days with Maccabees Revenge!

I stayed there because it was to this small building that the first rolls from Qumran were brought in 1948. They had initially been taken to a Bedouin shop in Bethlehem, owned by a fellow named Kando.



The American scholar John C. Trevor, was the first westerner to see the scrolls. In a little-known book called *The Untold Story of Qumran*, he recounts how the Metropolitan Samuel placed the ancient roll of leather on an old table. In that dim office, he unrolled the scroll and saw the last verse of Isaiah on the first sheet (they are pieces of vellum stitched together at the seams), and unrolling it all the way to its end, he saw the first verse of Isaiah.

“There, word for word, appeared the very first verse of the Book of Isaiah...The entire book with its sixty-six chapters was included in the scroll.”<sup>ii</sup> Ancient manuscripts are almost never found intact in their entirety.

This Isaiah Scroll dates to 125 BCE and was probably in use in some synagogue while Jesus walked the earth.

I never get tired of telling this story! You will only appreciate this stupendous discovery if you understand that prior to its emergence, the oldest Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament were highly fragmentary and dated no earlier than 1200 CE.

Seventeen vellum sheets, stitched together, 24 ft long. Discovered in Cave Four at Qumran, I've been to Cave Four. The Jews never destroyed old sacred manuscripts; they stored them. In this case in jars in caves outside the Qumran settlement, possibly because they were too damaged to use, but possibly to hide them from the Romans who destroyed the settlement in 70 CE on their way to Masada.

By the way, the Scroll basically confirms the text of what we have in our modern Bibles; it's was the same text that was in use 2000 years ago, so assiduously has the train of tradition been preserved.

Here is why I tell you this story about the Isaiah Scroll... The historical setting for this text is the return from captivity in Babylon in the early sixth century BCE.

As for our passage today, In Isaiah's time, the *great reversal* of fortune had now arrived for the battered nation. Having been carried into exile by the Babylonians, they were being sent home by Cyrus the Persian. They will once again come home, and rebuild their temple which lies in ruins.

***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.*** (61:1)

Then, 550 years later, a young man in his late twenties stands up in his home synagogue in an obscure town the Galilee, and asks for the Isaiah scroll, and turns to this passage.

***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.***

Now, if that vision isn't quite expansive enough for you, I don't know what to say to you.

Matthew and Mark simply say that ***he taught them... and many were amazed!***<sup>iii</sup> That's it. There is no detail, but Luke preserves what happened next on that fateful day that he presented himself to his home congregation.

And what do we find when this anointing comes upon these great men of God, Isaiah and Jesus? We see an enormous imagination that transcends what is our actual reality.

The young man stands before his home synagogue with a cosmic vision so vast, that he says to his friends and neighbors: ***Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.***

We've made Christmas a time of sentimentality and nostalgia; but the true purpose of Christmas, this birth of the sacred baby of heaven and earth, is that it calls us to acts of enormous imagination.

Young people, your gospel calls you to acts of imagination. You are not to live a dull and boring life! Jesus forbids it!

Dance. Art. Music. Social justice. Evangelism. Activism. Compassion. Science. Enormous acts of kindness in a broken world. How big can you dream?

That is what Christmas is about.

***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.***

The Gospel of John is definitely the Gospel of Enormous Imagination. It speaks of the advent of this Messiah in these terms: ***What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*** (John 1:3-5)

Darkness indeed. Here we are in this world we've made for ourselves. I read this week that 200 people died in BC in November from unregistered drug use. 7 people a day died from poisoned street drugs.

***Truth stumbles in the public square... truth is lacking.*** (Isaiah 59:14)

But we, O Christians, are called to rise up to deeds of Enormous Imagination. Our Lord calls us to no less this Christmas.

Let us, in this Christmas season, prepare our hearts once again for the great restoration.

Amen

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<sup>i</sup> *Oxford Annotated Study Bible*, p. 863 OT.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Untold Story of Qumran*, by John C. Trevor, p. 37

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 13:54 and Mark 6:2.