*Thus Says the Lord God of Israel*

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Have you ever asked yourself, “Where is God?” Now I don’t mean asking this as a response to some tragedy. There the question is really, “Why did God allow this to happen?”, which is a good question, but for another time. What I mean is, have you ever wondered where God is located? If you had a Google map of the universe, could you find the place where God resides?

The ancient Hebrews asked this question and they had an answer. The answer may seem strange to us moderns, influenced as we are by Enlightenment philosophy and modern science. The ancient Hebrew cosmology, the way the universe is ordered, saw the universe as composed of two distinct spaces. There is human space, the created order, where we live and there is God’s space, where God dwells.

Right after the creation, these two spaces were coextensive, which is a fancy way of saying they completely overlapped each other. After the Fall, God withdrew from human space, leaving only a point of connection between God’s space and human space. That point was Mount Zion, what we know as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Had God completely withdrawn from human space, it would have ceased to exist.

The relationship between God and humanity was changed. God no longer walked and talked with people as he had with Adam and Eve in the Garden. God continued to reach out to the world, maintaining the creation and influencing history through divine acts and through human agents. For a time, God sojourned with humanity, leading his chosen people through the wilderness toward a planned future.

God’s presence was with the people in the Tabernacle, for many years. As God’s people were pilgrims, so was God. Finally, with the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and the construction of Solomon’s temple, God had a permanent home among his people. It was in the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, that God’s presence dwelt. Thus Mount Zion in the City of Jerusalem was the point of contact between God’s space and human space.

This is the cosmology of the ancient Hebrews. It defined the world for them and was the basis of their beliefs. It explained for them why the world was as it appeared. It is this cosmology which informs Isaiah’s vision in our scriptural reading today. It remains the foundation of Judaism to this day. As we shall see shortly, it is the foundation of Christianity as well.

The prophets of the Old Testament were persons chosen by God to speak his word to his people. To use modern terminology, these were not consensual arrangements. From Moses forward through the Old Testament, the choice was God’s to make and he would not relent, no matter how much the prophet might protest. To be a prophet was to be an intermediary between God and his people. The prophet would carry God’s word to the people and speak to God on behalf of the people.

The prophets carried from God words of command, warning, condemnation, and promise. Throughout the books of the Prophets, we hear God telling people how they should live, warning them of punishment if they did not live by God’s word, and condemning them if they did not change their ways. But also in the prophets we find words of promise. These were often promises of a better life if the people followed God’s word.

The greatest of these promises were of the World to Come, a world of perfect justice and peace for all. The arrival of this world was the Day of the Lord, a day that all looked forward to. Our scriptural text for today is a vision, given to Isaiah by God, of that world. In this vision we see Mount Zion established as the center of the world, from which God’s word would flow to all the peoples of the world. God would establish peace among all nations and all the nations would come to Mount Zion to learn the ways of the Lord.

The Hebrews believed that the world would continue much as it was except without sin, violence, and injustice. God’s space and human space would once again totally overlap as at the beginning and God’s presence would once again be everywhere. This Day of the Lord would arrive with the Messiah. This was the belief that existed up to the time of Jesus. The Jesus event did not change the Old Testament belief so much as clarify it.

The Old Testament belief, what we now call Judaism, foresaw the arrival of the Messiah. But what they did not foresee was that Messiah arriving in the form of a divine-human, the Son of God incarnate. Jesus provided a unique and perfect revelation of God and God’s plan for the world. The birth of Jesus was the Day of the Lord the prophets foresaw, but it was not the arrival of the World to Come.

The Day of the Lord was the establishment of the Kingdom of God, but not its completion. Jesus proclaimed the arrival of the Kingdom of God and taught God’s word, teaching everyone what God expected of humanity. Indeed, the Word of God went out from Jerusalem as Isaiah saw in his vision, some heard and obeyed and others heard but did not obey. The Kingdom was now here on earth, but it existed alongside the kingdom of the world.

In his teachings, Jesus made it clear that while the Kingdom was here, its final consummation was still in the future. The World to Come was assured but not yet here. Those who are citizens of the Kingdom live in God’s presence but still live with the presence of the kingdom of the world. But the apostle Paul tells us that “the present form of this world is passing away.” (1 Cor. 7:31 NRSV) Therefore we should “…not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Rom. 12:2 NRS)

So Isaiah’s vision and the ancient Hebrew cosmology is not wrong so much as lacking critical details. These details, which completed the picture, were given in the revelation of God in the Christ event. As heirs of the Enlightenment, we moderns tend to think about and look at the universe as a physical thing. Our cosmology is science-centric.

Perhaps, we as Christians, heirs of God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and heirs of an ancient faith, should have a God-centric cosmology. God created the universe good, filled with his presence. Because of sin, God withdrew his presence, though not entirely, from the created world. But throughout history, God’s history, God followed a plan to restore the creation.

With Jesus Christ, the consummation of that plan has begun. In a time known only to God the Father, that consummation will be completed. The creation will be renewed, the effects of sin on the creation will be corrected. We don’t know what that world, the World to Come, will be like. Perhaps the ancient Hebrew vision that the world will be much as it is, with nations, governments, and societies, is what it will be like. The difference is there will be no sin, there will be justice for all and God’s presence will be felt by everyone. God’s space and human space will once again be coexistent, as they were in the beginning.

Through Jesus we have been gifted with God’s presence and his Kingdom in this world. Through the gift of grace, we have been made citizens of the already but not yet Kingdom. As citizens of that Kingdom, we should live by the Word of God which has come forth from Jerusalem. We should live by love, worshiping and giving thanks to the eternal God, working for the welfare of all, and working for justice for all. This is not a suggestion, but a command of God, a duty given to all of us. Thus says the Lord God of Israel.