

THE SEPTUAGINT AND THE VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS



Mark 1:1 "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

About 350 years before the birth of Jesus, Alexander the Great led his conquering Macedonian armies through the Holy Land on their way to conquer Persia and to invade India. Although Alexander himself died young, his extended Empire held sway for hundreds of years thereafter. Even after the Roman Empire conquered the Greek Empire, the Greek language and the Greek culture continued to dominate the Western world.

Jesus may have spoken Aramaic, but the language of arts and letters in his day, even in his home of Palestine, was Greek, not Latin, or even Hebrew. That is why, for instance, all of the books of the New Testament were written in Greek, even though they were all written by Jews. Moreover, two hundred and fifty years before the birth of Jesus, Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-243 B.C.) desired a copy of the Jewish Scriptures for his famous Library at Alexandria. According to tradition, the King employed seventy scribes from Jerusalem to translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek; consequently, this translation became known as the Septuagint (or "70" in Latin). The Septuagint became *the* most influential Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures in the world, so much so that in Jesus' day the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures was more widely read and better known than the Hebrew originals, even in Palestine! This is apparent to us both from the Dead Sea scrolls and from the Christians Scriptures. Indeed, whenever the New Testament writers quote the Hebrew Old Testament, they do so from the Greek Septuagint translation, and never from the original Hebrew or Aramaic. This is remarkable in and of itself.

And yet, we must also remember that all translations contain ambiguities and errors, and this is true of the Septuagint as well. And though most of the errors are minor, there are some significant major mistranslations in the New

Testament that affect the meaning and the impact of the Gospels. One of these can be found in the Gospel reading today. Today's reading from St. Mark portrays John the Baptist as fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah wrote that a voice cries out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." In beautifully poetic language, the author of Isaiah fills the Jewish people held in captivity in Babylon with the hope of returning home.

In the Greek Septuagint of the book of Isaiah, there was a slight mistranslation that altered the prophet's image and the prophet's meaning, and this can be seen reflected in the readings this morning. In the original Hebrew, as can be seen with the italicized portion of the English translation in our bulletins this morning, the prepositional phrase "in the wilderness" in Isaiah modified "the way of the Lord," that is, the way of the Lord, that highway back to Jerusalem, would be out there in the wilderness, out in the desert between their captivity in Babylon and their homeland in Judea. In the Greek Septuagint, however, that phrase "in the wilderness" was mistranslated so as to modify not where the highway of the Lord was to be found, but instead to modify where the voice was, the voice that was calling the people to prepare for the way, for

the journey home, that 'voice crying out in the wilderness,' a phrase so familiar to us Christians, especially during this season of Advent, that we are often surprised that it is not there in the Hebrew original of the Scroll of Isaiah.

And because of the mistranslation and because the Septuagint version was so popular and well-known, as the Jews in Jesus' days were reading the Greek translation of their own Hebrew Scriptures, so that they were indeed looking for a voice to be crying out in the wilderness to bring them back to God, to announce the Coming Messiah and the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whole communities, like the one at Qumran where the Dead Sea scrolls were found, moved out into the desert to await the great day of the Lord, to be there when the voice appeared. And so, it is little wonder then that "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" were going out to hear John the Baptizer, as reported in today's New Testament reading. It is no surprise that the Baptist crying out on Jordan's bank was perceived by many as the one fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, that he was seen and understood by the Jews as that 'voice crying out in the wilderness.'

So, what real difference does it make if this prophecy was slightly mistranslated in this way? Both talk about preparing for the coming Kingdom of God. And both talk about the way of the Lord out there in the desert. But in the Greek version, the

voice itself is out in the wilderness, like a new Moses leading a new Exodus to the Promised Land, reminding the Jewish people of that long and hard flight from their slavery in Egypt so long ago. The many years of that wilderness experience for those Jews represented hardship and struggle and temptation. John confirms this understanding with his attire and his diet, wearing camel's hair and eating locust and wild honey. This time of preparing for the Coming Kingdom of God is going to be hard, it is a time of sacrifice and preparation, a time of judgment and condemnation, of repentance and washing clean our sins, of bearing good fruit lest we be burned as chaff in an unquenchable fire. John the Baptist's message is one of urgency, and judgment, and condemnation. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come," he tells the Pharisees and Sadducees from Jerusalem, that "brood of vipers." "Bear fruit worthy of repentance," he says. "Repent" and prepare ourselves for the coming Kingdom of God.

In Isaiah, though, the original Hebrew emphasis was different. The prophetic voice was to be found, not out in the desert, but amongst the people there in captivity in Babylon. It was not a distant cry they heard, not a stranger who spoke out, but one among them who proclaimed comforting words, a fellow captive who prophesied to them that their long time of captivity was drawing to an end. And the voice they heard was not telling

them to prepare themselves, was not telling them to repent or to make amends. The voice of the prophet Isaiah was a voice of consolation. "Comfort, O comfort ye my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid. . ."

What a contrast these words make with those of John the Baptizer there on Jordan's bank, who hurled curses at those from the city who came to hear him preach. John spoke words of judgment and condemnation, while Isaiah spoke words of comfort and consolation.

And I find Isaiah's original message more reassuring than John's misinterpretation. In Isaiah, God knows that we are exiled here and that we long to go home, and that we cannot get there on our own; God knows that we are captives here, prisoners behind this vale of tears. In Isaiah, it is God who is going to come and rescue us. It is God's activity that matters here, not ours. The prophet of the exile reassures his people, not with a call to repentance, but with glad tidings, with reassurances that the Lord has heard their plea, that their penalty is paid, that the Lord will come, with a promise that the pathway through the wilderness back home will be made easy and smooth this time, the high places will be brought low and the low places raised up, to create level ground upon which the people of God will return to the Promised Land, where springs of water will flow in

the dessert, and flowers will bloom. It will not be like that Exodus of long ago with Moses. This time in the wilderness the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the lion will eat straw like the ox, and a little child shall lead them home. The message of Isaiah, like that of Jesus, is of a God of mercy and compassion and forgiveness, a loving father who will gather us up in his arms and carry us home.

This, I believe, is the true message of Advent, the promise of Christ's coming. It is not a time of judgment and damnation, it is not a season of penitence and foreboding, but it is a time of hope and comfort and longing. It is the season of a light shining in the darkness. God knows that we are exiled here, that our life is hard, that we long for a better world than this, that we yearn to be freed from the pain and sorrow of our lives, and that we cannot save ourselves. And we hear God's voice in reply, not calling us from the wastelands, but we hear his voice amongst us here in our captivity. And then perhaps not surprisingly, we find him born incarnate amongst us, a babe lying in a manger, who grows up and shows us all the way home.

AMEN.