



FIRST THINGS

ON SUPERSESSIONISM

by
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12 . 5 . 19

You brood of vipers,” excoriates John the Baptist in what may well be the most politically incorrect Advent sermon ever delivered. John simply doesn’t fit the season. “Deck the hall with boughs of holly / ’Tis the season to be jolly.” There’s nothing jolly about John. With a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, he looks the part of that unrelenting, rigid prophet of doom Elijah the Tishbite, who wore virtually the same attire (cf. 2 Kgs. 1:8).

The lectionary readings for the Second Sunday of Advent (December 8) pair John’s desert call to repentance in Matthew 3 with biblical passages that all highlight the gospel’s reach beyond Jews to Gentiles and to the ends of the earth. The famous passage of Isaiah 11:1–10 about the fruit-bearing shoot from Jesse’s stump concludes that “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9). The root of Jesse “shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire” (11:10).

Psalms 72 sounds a similar theme, reflecting on the Messiah’s universal reach and expressing the desire that he may have “dominion from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Ps. 72:8). After illustrating the Davidic king’s far reach with several examples (mentioning desert tribes, kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands, and kings of Sheba and Seba), the psalmist makes his universalist point plain: “May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!” (72:11).

The New Testament reading from Romans 15 fits the same pattern. Attempting to resolve a dispute about Jewish food laws, Saint Paul insists that the weak and the strong must “welcome” each other, thus imitating Christ’s own welcome of both disputing groups (Rom. 14:1; 15:7). Casting Christ in the position of the

strong (the party Paul himself identifies with), the apostle says that Christ nonetheless didn't try to "please himself" but instead "became a servant to the circumcised" to confirm the Abrahamic promise, which in turn was meant to make the Gentiles sit up and take note. This then leads to a catena of four biblical passages, each of which centers on the Gentiles being included in God's plan (15:9–12).

Does the church's choice of lectionary readings imply that the Jews have become a "brood of vipers"? John juxtaposes his brood-of-vipers (read: Satan's-offspring) accusation with a warning against trust in ethnic descent. Abrahamic lineage doesn't save one from the wrath to come, for "God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (Matt. 3:9). Does John introduce a replacement theology, with Gentile "children of Abraham" superseding Jewish "brood of vipers"?

We may wish to be cautious. After all, it is specifically the Pharisees and Sadducees that are addressed as "brood of vipers," while the general Jewish populace streams *en masse* to the ascetic prophet for the baptism of repentance (3:6). Likewise, when Jesus adopts the language of "brood of vipers," he uses it, like John, to address the Jewish *leaders* specifically (12:34; 23:33). And there is, of course, Jesus's word of instruction to the Twelve: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:5–6). That doesn't sound like a comment from someone about to replace Jews with Gentiles.

Perhaps we bandy about the charge of replacement theology or supersessionism a little too quickly these days. Following the horrific events of the Holocaust, it has become theologically suspect to speak of the church as the "seed of Abraham" (Gal. 3:29), the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:26), or the "circumcision" (Phil. 3:3). But Paul's language, much like the church's choice of lectionary readings, signals that the limiting stage of God's dealings with the Jews has been superseded by the universal scope of the gospel, which reaches the Gentiles and the ends of the earth.

To the mindset of late-twentieth-century theology, Matthew's Gospel as a whole is probably no less obnoxious than the desert prophet's initial call to repentance at the river Jordan. It is in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus responds to the Gentile centurion's faith by announcing that "many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness" (8:12). In this same Gospel, Jesus tells the chief priests and elders that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits"

(21:43). And, of course, the Gospel ends with Jesus's charge to his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19).

For Matthew's Gospel, universalism supersedes particularism. We need some kind of supersessionism. It is inherent in the scandalous claim that the Abrahamic nation, history, and faith are recalibrated around Jesus of Nazareth. Christians must follow their lectionary in being unapologetic about his universal claim.

Three caveats, however, are in order. First, though universalism supersedes particularism, there's no Gentile church replacing Jewish synagogue. "Jerusalem and *all* Judea and *all* the region about the Jordan" flocked to John, were baptized, and confessed their sins (3:8). The dispute in Matthew's Gospel is mostly one between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, not the people as a whole. It is not ethnic descent (Jewish or Gentile) but union with Christ that determines one's place in the household of God. The church comprises Jews as well as Gentiles.

Second, the universal reach of the gospel under the new dispensation does not contradict but fulfills the promises made to Abraham. This is Saint Paul's point in Romans 15. God shows himself as truthful and as standing by his promises to the patriarchs precisely when Christ serves circumcised Jews in his earthly ministry (Rom. 15:8). Paul seems to suggest that it is not the *replacement* of the Jews, but God's *faithfulness* to them that leads to the Gentiles being included in the people of God.

Third, Jesus makes clear that the monikers "brood of vipers" and "children of Abraham" are always in flux. It is one thing to follow Saint Paul in referring to the church as the "seed of Abraham"; it is another to turn John's juxtaposition between the two groups into an immutable us-versus-them framework. The desert monk asserts that children of Abraham can turn into a brood of vipers. (Apparently, it's the fruit of repentance that makes the difference.) And presumably it's possible for Satan's brood to turn into children of Abraham. The malleability is offensive to an ethnocentric understanding of the Abrahamic covenant—but equally obnoxious to a crude supersessionism that would exclude Jews from the salvific purposes of God.

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