

ACTS 1:6 AND THE ECLIPSE OF THE BIBLICAL KINGDOM

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Few passages of Scripture have suffered more at the hands of hostile commentary than Luke's brief and brilliant summary of Jesus' last conversation with his apostles. It is in the nature of "famous last words" that they communicate something of supreme importance. It is surprising, then, that the disciples' last question to their master should have been the target of the indignation of so many commentators. The apostles' enquiry related to Jesus' and Luke's favorite theme, the Kingdom of God. They asked, "Lord, has the time now come for you to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

There has been a common tendency among expositors to treat the Apostles' question as utterly out of tune with their Lord's teaching. Their enquiry is supposed to reveal a tragically inadequate understanding of Christianity's central theme. How, it is asked, could these associates of Jesus still cling so stubbornly to the crude notion of a theocratic restoration of the Kingdom as the renewal of the Davidic empire on earth, typical of the allegedly false hopes of Judaism? Fortunately, the argument continues, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost rescued the apostles from their crudely literal understanding of the Kingdom of God and banished forever the Jewish national hope they were harboring.

William Barclay's response to the disciples' parting question in Acts 1:6 is typical. He despairs of the disciples' ability to grasp the meaning of Jesus' message of the Kingdom, the heart of his Gospel: "The trouble was that [Jesus] meant one thing by the Kingdom and those who listened to him quite another...The Apostles looked for a day when by divine intervention the world sovereignty they dreamed of would be theirs. They conceived of the Kingdom in political terms."¹

¹ *The Acts of the Apostles*, Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press, 1955, 3.

Barclay then gives us what he considers to be the true definition of the Kingdom. It is “a society upon earth where God’s will would be as perfectly done as it is in heaven,” as shown by the parallel phrases of the Lord’s prayer: “Thy kingdom come” with “Thy will be done on earth.” Such a kingdom would never be founded on power.²

It is the purpose of this article to suggest that a number of deeply rooted theological misconceptions underlie the disparaging attitude of commentators towards the disciples’ question about the restoration of Israel. Disapproval of the apostles in Acts 1:6 reveals more about the prejudices of expositors than the truth of Scripture and suppresses vitally important biblical information about the future of the Kingdom of God. An attack on the apostles in Acts 1:6 implies an attack on Jesus who had taught them. Only recently have commentaries begun to be objective enough to see that nothing in the text suggests that Luke means us to view the apostles as out of step with Jesus’ intentions. Common sense would require that the disciples be given credit for asking not the wrong question but the right one. They had, after all, been in Jesus’ company since the beginning. They had heard Jesus preach and teach the Good News about the Kingdom day after day. They themselves had been sent out in public to proclaim the same Gospel of the Kingdom (Lk. 9:2, 6, etc.). They had been congratulated by Jesus for their special insight into the divine plan associated with the Kingdom (Mt. 13:51). Jesus had probed their understanding of the parables of the Kingdom to satisfy himself that they had grasped their meaning (Mt. 13:11). To complete their training on the key issue of the Kingdom of God, the disciples had undergone an intensive forty-day “seminar” under the tutorship of the risen Jesus on earth (Acts 1:3) as he explained Scripture to them (Lk. 24:32, 45). It seems incredible that after all this exposure to Jesus’ instruction they had failed entirely to understand what was meant by the Kingdom.

The unsympathetic attitude of commentators to the notion of the Kingdom as a restoration of the sovereignty of Israel points to a serious flaw in what theology has traditionally thought Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God. Since Jesus’ reply to the apostles cautions them only in regard to the *time* of the expected restoration, it is puzzling that commentators should feel justified in adding to the text their own battery of arguments in favor of a superior view of the Kingdom of God. Their constant cry is that the Christian Kingdom is spiritual and not political.³

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ Cp. *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*: “The question the disciples asked reflects the embers of a once blazing hope for a political theocracy in which they would

The disciples were clinging to “crassly Jewish” notions about the future. A survey of a range of commentary will reveal the seriousness of the criticism leveled at the early followers of Jesus.

A Historical Survey

The commentary by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown is one of the few of its era not to follow the usual pattern of condemnation:

As their question certainly implies that they looked for some restoration of the Kingdom to Israel, so they are neither rebuked for this nor contradicted. To say, as many expositors do, that our Lord’s reply was so intended, is not to listen simply to what he says, but to obtrude upon his words what men think they ought to mean.⁴

With far less sympathy, H.A.W. Meyer, writing in 1884, deplores the apostles’ lack of understanding: “By their ‘to Israel’ they betray that they have not yet ceased to be entangled in Jewish Messianic hopes, according to which the Messiah was destined for the people of Israel as such; cp. Luke 24:21.”⁵

The Pulpit Commentary reacted similarly:

Even after the Master’s crucifixion and resurrection they had asked, “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?” It was not until after the effusion of the holy spirit at Pentecost that their imperfect view was corrected and they understood what Christ meant when he said, “My Kingdom is not of the world.” The terrestrial proceedings of the Messiah were the subject of the keenest expectations and the ground of national aspirations.⁶

Later commentary on our passage is unrelentingly harsh. Writers on the book of Acts maintained a steady stream of negative reaction to the idea that the Kingdom could be in any way compatible with a national

be leaders...But though [Jesus’] words about the Spirit’s coming rekindled in the disciples their old nationalistic hope, Jesus had something else in mind.” The commentary describes the question as “misguided” (Frank Gaebelein, ed., Zondervan, 1981, Vol. 9, 256).

⁴ *Commentary on Acts*, Philadelphia: Lippincott & Co., 1868, 2-3.

⁵ *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles*, Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1979, 27-28.

⁶ *The Pulpit Commentary, Acts*, ed. Spence and Exell, exposition by A.C. Hervey, Chicago: Wilcox & Follett, 1880-1897. The same commentary on Luke 1:32-33 (1889) recognizes that Jesus has not inherited the throne of David in the way predicted by Gabriel.

restoration of Israel. The trend had been set by Calvin, no sympathizer with Messianism, who declared that “there are more errors in the question [in Acts 1:6] than there are words...Their blindness is remarkable, that when they had been so fully and carefully instructed over a period of three years they betrayed no less ignorance than if they had never heard a word.”⁷

Calvin’s criticism implies eleven mistakes. He does not detail his objections other than to say that the apostles confuse the Kingdom of Christ with a Kingdom which belongs to Israel. Calvin is evidently angry that the apostles had not given up their Jewishness and replaced it with an attitude more “Christian.”

Commentary in the second half of the 19th century persisted with its attack on the alleged obtuseness of the apostles. Albert Barnes, writing in 1863, took the opportunity to correct the apostles and reflect on the dangers of prejudice:

The Apostles had entertained the common opinion of the Jews about the temporal dominion of the Messiah. They expected that He would reign as a prince and conqueror, and free them from the bondage of the Romans. Many instances of this expectation occur in the gospels, notwithstanding all the efforts which the Lord Jesus made to explain to them the true nature of his Kingdom. This expectation was checked and almost destroyed by his death (Luke 24:21)...Yet though his death checked their expectations and appeared to thwart their plans, yet his return to life excited them again...and as they did not doubt now that he *would* restore the Kingdom to Israel, they asked whether he would do it *at this time*. They did not ask whether he would do it at all, or whether they had correct views of his kingdom; but taking that for granted they asked him whether *that was the time* in which he would do it. The emphasis of the enquiry lies in the expression “at this time” and hence the answer of the Savior refers solely to this point of their enquiry and not to the correctness or incorrectness of their opinions. From these expectations of the Apostles we may learn: 1. That there is nothing so difficult to be removed from the mind as *prejudice in favour of erroneous opinions*. 2. That such prejudice will survive the plainest proof to the contrary. 3. That it will often manifest itself even after all proper means have been taken to subdue it.

⁷ Calvin’s *Commentaries, Acts of the Apostles*, ed. D.W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, 25.

Erroneous opinions thus maintain a secret ascendancy in a man's mind, and are revived by the slightest circumstances even long after we supposed they were overcome; and even in the face of the plainest proofs of reason or of Scripture.⁸

In the present century the evident Jewishness of the disciples' question was noted and dismissed, in the style of Harnack, as a useless husk within which we are to look for the true "spiritual" Kingdom. Early Christianity is couched in the language of Jewish Messianism, so the argument goes, but the essence of the faith lies elsewhere. *The Clarendon Commentary* explains Acts 1:6 as follows:

The question is put in the language of the old Jewish Messianic hope. The restoration of the Kingdom to Israel was the regular phrase for that final establishment of the theocracy and spiritual renovation of mankind which had been the highest point of prophetic and apocalyptic expectation among the Jews. This hope was understood in a materialistic and nationalistic sense (as promising a time of material prosperity and Jewish world-empire) by some, but not by all. Clearly the disciples felt that an epoch-making crisis of divine action was at hand, though clearly too they did not understand what its nature would be.⁹

In a note on the Messianic hope an attempt is made to distinguish between Christian preaching and its Jewish dress:

So much of the Christian preaching in Acts is couched in the language of Jewish Messianism that an excursus on the Jewish Messianic hope is needed to grasp its significance...In time the rule of God would be established and this revived theocracy would mean the renovation of Israel, and through Israel of the nations as spiritual dependents of Mount Zion.¹⁰

The value of this comment lies in its concise description of the content of the hope revealed by the apostles' question. They were expecting the re-establishment of the promised Davidic theocracy. Discussion of the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3) provoked an eager response from the disciples. Mention of the holy spirit (Acts 1:5) in the same context naturally led to the supposition that the time had finally arrived for the manifestation of the Messianic Kingdom described by Old Testament prophecy. Our passage therefore, far from being an indication of apostolic ignorance, is of the highest significance as revealing the apostolic mind on eschatology and the nature of the Kingdom of God.

⁸ London: Routledge, Warne and Routledge, 1863, 4.

⁹ Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923, 132.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

Commentary seems, however, to have dismissed Luke's and the apostles' testimony to early Christian views of the future.

John Bright's extensive study of the biblical theme of the Kingdom of God provides a further example of commentary expressing shock at the nationalism involved in the disciples' final remarks about the Kingdom:

The Messianic hope of Israel was thus grimly tied to the line of David, to Jerusalem and the Temple...It meant that as long as the state lasted, each king in the popular mind was a potential Messiah. It helped to father the national delusion that, though Judah might be decimated, Jerusalem and the Davidic state could never be destroyed...It meant that when he who was the fulfillment of that longing should appear, men would demand of him things which were not in his nature to deliver: "Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)...Judaism's frenetic question would be: "Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?"¹¹

Surprisingly even George Ladd, whose sympathy with premillennialism is well known, was unable to break away from the tradition of exposition which took exception to what was perceived as Jewish and therefore by definition unchristian ideas of the Kingdom of God. Ladd pointed out that "the phrase 'to redeem Israel' [Luke 24:21]...does not refer to the redemption of men from their sins. In its present context the phrase means to deliver Israel from her bondage to foreign powers."¹²

Ladd noted that:

This same sentiment is expressed in Acts 1:6 where Luke summarizes the disciples' attitude by the question: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" The disciples were still looking for a nationalistic and political savior for the people of Israel, a hope which we have found in the apocalyptic literature.

He adds (though Luke does not say this): "Jesus rebuked them for failing to understand the prophetic scriptures."¹³

A Change of Attitude

In the same decade a distinct change of heart is to be observed in commentators' treatment of the "awkward" evidence of Acts 1:6. An

¹¹ *The Kingdom of God*, New York: Abingdon Press, 1953, 93, 168.

¹² *I Believe in the Resurrection*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1975, 97.

¹³ *Ibid.*

objective examination of the text revealed that neither Luke nor Jesus whom he reports displayed the slightest discomfort or surprise about the prospect of the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel. No rebuke was issued to the disciples for their blindness. On other occasions Luke is not afraid to report the slowness of the apostles to grasp truth, when this is appropriate. Earlier they were unable to accept that the Messiah had to die: “They understood none of these things” (Lk. 18:34). In Acts 1:6, however, their question reflects an expectation which was simply the natural outcome of the detailed instruction about the Kingdom they had received from Jesus. The hope of a restored Davidic Kingdom was evidently part of the common view of the future held by Judaism and Jesus. Indeed, as Lukan eschatology and Kingdom theology have come under close scrutiny, its Jewishness has become more and more obvious. The results of this discovery have yet to filter down into the pulpit, much less the pew. But they should set in motion a revolution in our understanding of Jesus and his Gospel.

Conzelmann observed that the hope for the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel met with not the slightest correction from Jesus: “Acts 1:6 speaks of the Kingdom being restored to Israel. It is not the hope of this which is rejected, but only the attempt to calculate when it will happen.”¹⁴

Haenchen added his voice to those who saw the need to clear the disciples of the longstanding charge of spiritual blindness:

Those gathered — Luke implies that not only the Apostles were present — ask whether Jesus will now restore the kingdom to Israel. The question is not meant to show the disciples’ ignorance, but provides an opportunity to clarify a problem of the highest significance. The earliest Christians regarded the outpouring of the spirit as a sign that the end of the world was at hand (*apokathistimi*, from Mal. 3:32, LXX onwards is a technical term in eschatology: the establishment of the right order by God at the end of time [sic]).¹⁵

The Kingdom of God

A number of important studies of Lukan theology have continued to clarify the meaning of key terms in Luke’s writing.¹⁶ Paramount among

¹⁴ *The Theology of St. Luke*, New York: Harper and Row, 1960, 163.

¹⁵ *The Acts of the Apostles*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971, 143.

¹⁶ For example, G. A. Krodel, *Acts, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986; Robert Tannehill,

these is the Kingdom of God. Interest in the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel is not to be ascribed to a regrettable failure on the part of the disciples. It is an essential element in what Luke meant by the Kingdom of God.

Taking Acts 1:6 as our cue we can see that Luke's hope for the future is fully in line with the Davidic Messianism presented by Hebrew prophecy. This is nowhere challenged in the New Testament and is confirmed elsewhere in Luke's writings. The *means* by which the desired restoration of Israel is to be achieved obviously received a new twist when Jesus announced his own death and resurrection and when the Israel of his generation failed to recognize their Messiah. Luke's major point, however, is that God's promise of redemption in Israel and Jerusalem would not occur until the Messiah had passed through death, resurrection and a period of exaltation to the right hand of the Father. Following this he will return to carry out the whole program of restoration foreseen by the prophets (Acts 3:21).

Jesus and the Messianic Program

The New Testament hope, epitomized by the disciples' question in Acts 1:6, is based on the fact that Jesus came to confirm the promises given to the fathers (Rom. 15:8). The first thing said about Jesus is that he is destined to succeed to the throne of his ancestor David and rule over the house of Jacob forever (Lk. 1:32-33). This statement is a precise summary of the Messianic hope which pervades the prophets and the psalms. It was the prevailing expectation among Jesus' contemporaries.¹⁷ Luke does not say that Jesus has already taken up a position on the throne of David. He closes the period of Messiah's ministry on earth by reverting to the Davidic theme announced by Gabriel before the conception of Jesus. He records Jesus' approval of the hope of Israel's restoration, noting that it lies in the future. By reporting the disciples' question about when the restoration will occur he allows us to know that Jesus *distinguishes between the immediate coming of the Spirit at Pentecost — "not many days hence" (Acts 1:5) — and the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel which is to occur at a time unknown (Acts 1:7).*

In a sermon given by Peter shortly after Pentecost further light is thrown on the time for the expected fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. In answer to the very reasonable objection that Jesus' disappearance to heaven does not seem to advance the Messianic

The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts, A Literary Interpretation, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1990.

¹⁷ As shown, for example, by the Psalms of Solomon 17, 18.

program on earth, Peter explained that “heaven must retain [the Messiah] until the times of the restoration of all things about which God spoke through the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient times” (Acts 3:21). The period which Israel is to look forward to is also a time of relief (*anapsuxis*, Acts 3:19) to be introduced by the coming of the Messiah. We should not overlook the important connection between the *apokatastasis* or restoration promised for the future Parousia and the related verb found in the earlier question of the disciples: “Is it at this time that you are going to restore [*apokathistaneis*] the kingdom to Israel?” In the light of this verse it is unlikely that Luke intends to say that Jesus’ session at the right hand of the Father marks the re-establishment of the throne of David. Luke has previously made a careful distinction between the immediate coming of the spirit (Acts 1:5), consequent upon the ascension, and the still future coming of the Davidic Kingdom (Acts 1:6-7).

Luke wants us to understand that the great Davidic themes announced earlier by the angel and prophesied by Mary, Zechariah and Simeon (Lk. 1:46-55, 68-79; 2:25-32) still await their fulfillment at the Parousia. The promised restoration is the subject of the charismatic utterances which accompanied the birth of Jesus. The recipients of these prophetic visions were the faithful of the Messianic community. They were not Jews who did not understand Christian eschatology. The same hope for the re-establishment of the throne of David remains a burning issue for the apostles of Jesus just before his ascension. The biblical Christian expectation is for the renewal at the Parousia of the Davidic Kingdom so that Israel may serve the Lord “all their days” (Lk. 1:74-75) and be guided into the peace she has never experienced (Lk. 1:79). The Magnificat and the Benedictus are of the highest significance as laying out Christian eschatology. The future is expressed in prophetic past tenses. It is clear that before Jesus’ birth Israel had not yet been “saved from the hands of all who hate her” (Lk. 1:74); nor had the righteous been exalted to rule in place of the mighty who were to be deposed (Lk. 1:52). The New Testament expects these Messianic events to be fulfilled at the return of Christ (cp. Mt. 19:28; Acts 3:21 and especially Rev. 11:15-18).

Luke’s Messianic Outlook

The songs of Mary and Zechariah are inspired utterances which do not deal with the immediate career of Jesus nor his death and resurrection but look ahead to the Parousia which for Luke is the time for the redemption of Israel. For Mary and Zechariah the birth of Jesus

guarantees the future long-awaited goal of all prophecy — the establishment of universal peace under the rule of the Messiah, the promised heir to the throne of David.

When a number of Luke's key terms are brought together we gain a coherent picture of an eschatological future which confirms the vision of Old Testament prophecy.¹⁸ The righteous are eagerly anticipating (*prosdechomai*) the consolation (*paraklesis*) of Israel (Lk. 2:25), which has still not occurred by the time of the crucifixion, since Joseph of Arimathea is still awaiting (*prosdechomai*) the Kingdom of God (Lk. 23:51). The parallel language shows that Luke expects the coming of the Kingdom to involve the restoration of Israel. The righteous remnant, who enjoy the inspiration of "holy spirit," share this hope. Zechariah awaits the redemption (*lutrosis*, Lk. 1:68) of Israel which for Anna the prophetess is the redemption (*lutrosis*) of Jerusalem (Lk. 2:38). The hope is definitely territorial and tied to Jerusalem as the center of the expected Kingdom.

The hope expressed through Mary and Zechariah as mouthpieces of the holy spirit is not fulfilled at the crucifixion, for the disciples were still looking for Jesus to redeem (*lutrosthai*) Israel (Lk. 24:21). Their hope for national deliverance is not rebuked by Jesus and it reappears in Acts 1:6 after the disciples have received further extensive teaching about the Kingdom from the risen Messiah (Acts 1:3). The ultimate restoration of Israel is certain, as an event quite distinct from the coming of the spirit at Pentecost. It is the prerogative of the Father to determine when it will happen, since no man knows the day of the coming of the Son of Man in the power of his Kingdom. Jesus does not deny that he will bring about the restoration of Israel, but merely indicates that it is not for his disciples to know the time of the event (Acts 1:7), just as Jesus himself did not know the day of his future coming (Mk. 13:32).

Further information is provided by Luke in his version of the apocalyptic discourse. Jerusalem is to be trodden down until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Lk. 21:24). The implication is that Jerusalem, as capital of the Messiah's Kingdom, will not remain under Gentile control indefinitely. When the times of Gentile dominion, a period with links to Daniel's vision of heathen oppression of the holy land (Dan. 8:13), have run their course, the time for Jerusalem's redemption will have arrived. Luke describes the same scheme exactly when he postpones the manifestation of the Kingdom in Jerusalem to the time when the

¹⁸ Particularly the themes announced by Isa. 40-66.

nobleman, who must first depart to a far country, returns to reign in the Kingdom which by then he has obtained (Lk. 19:11-27).

The Old Testament basis for this whole eschatological outlook is clear. Isaiah 1:26 promises a restoration of Israel's administrators "as at the first," while in Isaiah 63:17-18 God is urged to "return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage [cp. Ps. 122:3-5].¹⁹ Thy holy people possessed your sanctuary a little while. Our adversaries have trodden it down."²⁰ Isaiah 65:9ff, along with a mass of other Hebrew prophecy, promises a grand restoration of the land of Israel with a new Jerusalem.

Luke's key eschatological terms are rooted in a number of other Old Testament passages. Isaiah 52:9-10 speaks of the consolation and redemption of Israel at the time when God reveals His holy arm and all the ends of the earth see the salvation of God. Isaiah 49:6 describes the recovery of the diaspora of Israel. The important point is that Luke expects restoration to occur fully at the Parousia. The *apokatastasis* (Acts 3:21), which will bring about restoration for Israel (Acts 1:6), will coincide with the coming of Jesus, when at the same time, the disciples may "lift up their heads because their redemption [*apolutrosis*] draws near" (Lk. 21:28), which is only another way of saying that "the kingdom of God is about to come" (Lk. 21:31).

The Lukan equivalent phrases may be summarized as follows:

The arrival of the apocalyptic kingdom (21:31) = the redemption of the disciples (21:28) = redemption in Jerusalem (Luke 2:35) = the redemption of Israel (24:21).

The expected future kingdom (23:51) = the expected consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25).

The restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6) = the times of the restoration of all that was promised through the mouth of the prophets (Acts 3:21) = the restoration of the house of David as promised through the mouth of the prophets (Luke 1:70).

¹⁹ The theme of comfort in Jerusalem reflects the promises of Isa. 40:1; 49:13; 51:3; 52:9; 57:18; 66:11,13. The redemption of Jerusalem is foreseen by Isa. 43:1; 44:23; 51:11; 52:3; 63:4 (*lutrosis*, LXX). Restoration is expected in Isa. 1:26; 49:6,8; 52:8; 58:12; cp. Jer. 27:22; 3:17-19. The coming of the kingdom is evidently the same event and is expected in Isa. 52:7, "Your God reigns," where the Targum reads: "The kingdom of God is revealed."

²⁰ Cp. Zech. 12:3 (LXX): "Everyone that tramples on Jerusalem shall utterly mock at it." The prophecy is repeated in Rev. 11:2: "They shall trample on the holy city for 42 months."

Contemporary Commentary on Acts 1:6

Recent commentary is happily no longer defensive in admitting the strongly political flavor of Luke's Christianity. R. Tannehill says: "John and Jesus are presented as the fulfillment of hopes for the redemption of Israel and Jerusalem. Jesus is the Davidic Messiah (Luke 1:32, 33, 68, 69), who will bring political freedom to the Jewish people (1:71, 73-74)."²¹ He notes that "The narrator understands the Scriptures to promise a messianic kingdom for Israel which will be a time of peace and freedom from oppressors. This promise is acknowledged as valid — if only Israel would accept its Messiah."²²

Tannehill explains that Luke's theme of redemption for Israel continues to appear as a future hope, even after the crucifixion. Eschatology has lost none of its Jewish, Old Testament orientation. It is still tied to the recovery of Israel and her resettlement in the land:

"We were hoping that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." Again it is a question of *Israel's* redemption. This hope is revived by Jesus' resurrection, which leads the disciples to ask, "Are you at this time restoring the Kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Here the hope for Israel's messianic kingdom, strongly expressed in the birth narratives, reappears. This question does not merely show the blindness of followers who have not yet received the Spirit. Jesus corrects their curiosity about times, but he does not reject the possibility of a restored kingdom for Israel, and Peter, after receiving the Spirit, still holds out the hope of the "restoration of all the things which God spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets of old" (Acts 3:21).²³

Of particular interest is the fact that Luke 1:70 and Acts 3:21 both contain the all-encompassing phrase, "which God spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old." In a brief statement the whole sweep of Hebrew of prophecy is brought before us. The promises of a royal Messiah succeeding to the throne of David and bringing about liberation for Israel and Jerusalem still await fulfillment at the Parousia. Jesus' words are to the same effect. The disciples are to expect their own redemption and the advent of the kingdom at the return of the Messiah (Lk. 21:28, 31). The great events marking the re-establishment of the Davidic Kingdom are not fulfilled when the Spirit is poured out and do not apply, therefore, to the Church this side of Christ's return. The Messiah's absence in heaven is temporary, extending to the end of the

²¹ *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 19.

²² *Ibid.*, 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

present age. Then will come the time for the realization of the hope which has run like a golden thread through the Hebrew Scriptures and onwards into the gospels. Luke's reporting of the prophetic utterances of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon are a precious foundation for Christian hope as long as the Parousia is delayed. Gabriel's opening announcement about the restoration of the throne of David and the disciples' closing question about the restoration of Israel bracket the whole of Luke's account of the Christian faith.

In a careful examination of Luke's eschatological presuppositions Arthur Wainwright notes that Luke demonstrates a considerable knowledge of Jewish tradition. Luke's eschatology:

retained the influence of Judaism...Luke was deeply concerned about Israel's future...Luke appears to look forward to a time when Israel will be reinstated. His references to the restoration and redemption of Israel provide a clue to his theological presuppositions...This redemption will follow the return of the Son of Man.²⁴

Modern readers of the Bible often do not share Luke's outlook and therefore miss the richness of the Messianic hope which is fundamental to Luke's account of the faith. The pressing question is whether the church has not thrown away a central element of New Testament faith by calling the earlier chapters of Luke pre-Christian. Commentary's clamorous accusations (examples are cited earlier) that the apostles were lamentably slow in growing out of their "Jewish" political views of the Kingdom may simply reveal how far we have departed from a New Testament understanding of the Kingdom of God. One of Luke's main purposes was to teach us Christian eschatology. We have rejected much of it and claimed a superior understanding which we label "spiritual," as distinct from Luke's Hebrew-based vision of the future which we find intolerably Jewish.

Gresham Machen, in his discussion of the early chapters of Luke, spoke of the "absence of specifically Christian ideas in the Magnificat and Benedictus, the absence of reference to facts in the life of Jesus."²⁵ He explained Luke's inclusion of these Messianic songs by saying that they point "to a time when the messianic hope was still couched in the terms of Old Testament prophecy. [The songs of Mary and Zechariah]

²⁴ "Luke and the Restoration of the Kingdom to Israel," *Expository Times*, 89, 1977-78, 76-79.

²⁵ *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, Harper and Row, 1930, 97.

were produced at a time when Old Testament prophecy had not yet been explained by its fulfillment.”²⁶

But Luke thinks differently. Those early Christian songs declare future Messianic events which remain unfulfilled as long as Jesus is absent in heaven. To the eye of faith those great events appear fulfilled even before the beginning of the ministry of Jesus in Palestine, since they are certain in the divine plan. A disastrous theory of over-realized eschatology, however, misinterprets them as fulfilled in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. But Luke still looked forward to the restoration and ultimate political liberation of Israel at the Parousia. He has not abandoned a natural reading of the prophets, while much of Christian tradition has transmuted the prophets’ obvious hope for the reinstatement of Israel in the land and applied it to the church now. There is a need to rediscover the territorial element in salvation.²⁷

Raymond Brown also finds that “there is nothing distinctively Christian in Gabriel’s words in vs. 32-33 of Luke 1, except that the Davidic Messiah has been identified with Jesus.”²⁸ On the contrary Luke was documenting the Christian faith and presenting a view of eschatology which is in need of recovery if our claim to believe in the normative role of Scripture is to be genuine. Apostolic Christians did not reject the Jewish Old Testament hope of peace on earth to be brought about by a new world-empire centered in Jerusalem. Luke so understands the future of the Kingdom of God. He describes a faith which is universal in its embrace but, for all that, none the less focused on the hope of Israel, the destiny of Jerusalem, and the ultimate re-establishment of the throne of David.

The disciples’ question in Acts 1:6 is the climax of a coherent series of sayings about the future Kingdom of God in Luke/Acts. From the beginning of the gospel Luke presents the Kingdom of God as Messianic and Davidic. The root concept of the Kingdom is found in the covenant made with Abraham, of which the Davidic covenant is an extension. The restoration of the Kingdom to Israel at the Parousia is the ultimate horizon of the Christian hope. If the spiritualizing and mystical influence of Origen, which is so deeply embedded in Christian tradition, is laid aside, and we consider the possibility that the original faith should be

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

²⁷ For excellent insights into New Testament eschatology in the light of its Hebrew background, see G.W. Buchanan, *The Consequences of the Covenant*, Leiden: Brill, 1970; *Jesus, the King and His Kingdom*, Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984.

²⁸ *The Virgin Birth of the Messiah*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, 311.

read in terms of its own Hebrew Messianic presuppositions, it will not be difficult to see that Luke expects that Israel and the land are to be the arena of a restored Davidic theocracy (cp. Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10). This is just what we would expect from a community devoted to the message of the prophets, for whom the Messiah and the Kingdom of God were intensely political, but not therefore unspiritual, concepts.

When the Kingdom of God is redefined as “heaven” for departed souls or a synonym for the Church or a social program, or even Zionist hopes this side of the Parousia, it is unlikely that the biblical Gospel of the Kingdom can be heard in terms which make sense of it in its own Jewish context.²⁹ The Christian gospel presents salvation from sins for individuals, but salvation is linked to the future renewal of the earth and to a Kingdom centered in Jerusalem. The central message of Jesus was the approach of the Kingdom of God for which men were to prepare with all urgency. How faithfully has this Gospel been transmitted to us? A positive answer is hardly possible. A recent history of the doctrine of the Kingdom of God suggests that the Kingdom has not received anything like the attention it enjoys in the New Testament as the heart of Jesus’ gospel of salvation.³⁰ Moreover, it has suffered drastic reinterpretation when it has been forced to support various man-made agendas unrelated to the Messianic Kingdom or reduced to an interior kingdom in the heart.

Speaking of the misuse of Luke 17:21b (“the kingdom of God is among you”) as a way of obscuring the much greater emphasis on the futurity of the Kingdom, B.T. Viviano says, “Unfortunately this verse has been abused throughout history and led to an overly spiritual depoliticized and then trivialized interpretation of the Kingdom. It is a mistake to make this verse the starting point of our understanding of the Kingdom in the proclamation of Jesus.”³¹

Acts 1:6 and the Recovery of Biblical Eschatology

Acts 1:6 is a valuable text as a starting point for the recovery of New Testament theology of the Kingdom. Until recently this verse has been dismissed out of hand because it did not seem to agree with what we thought the Kingdom of God should be. In 1924, A.F. MacInnes examined the Kingdom of God as described in the apostolic writings. In a

²⁹ Liberation theology catches the spirit of Luke’s vision of political freedom but tries to force into being now what the New Testament does not expect before the Parousia.

³⁰ B.T. Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

brief comment on Acts 1:6 he dismisses the apostles as unreliable witnesses to the nature of the Kingdom: "At the beginning of Acts we see that the Apostles still held to their erroneous conception of the Kingdom of God. They asked Jesus after the resurrection when He would restore the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6); they were thinking of an earthly Kingdom."³²

Ramsay Michaels put his finger on the longstanding problem reflected in the antagonistic attitude of commentators when he wrote:

The tendency of much Christian scholarship has been to minimize the Jewishness or ethnicity of Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God with the observation that he had no interest in a political kingdom, or one that could be established by military might or rebellion against Rome. The tacit assumption is that non-political means non-nationalistic, which in turn means non-ethnic and non-Jewish, but instead "spiritual" and "universal." Actually the Kingdom of God in Jewish expectation was both spiritual and national, both universal and ethnic...After the resurrection, according to the Book of Acts, Jesus' disciples asked him (even after he had instructed them for forty days about the Kingdom of God!): "Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus' reply gives no hint that this nationalistic expectation was in any way wrong or misguided, only that the time of the restoration was set in God's authority alone.³³

We propose that commentators adopt the mindset of the apostles for a moment and allow themselves the liberty of supposing that these disciples of Jesus in fact knew exactly what they were talking about. Such an experiment could revolutionize our understanding of the thrust of the whole New Testament. A kingdom which is "spiritual" need not mean a kingdom which cannot appear at the Parousia localized in Jerusalem, with the new David as its sovereign in the company of the resurrected saints (cp. Dan. 7:14, 18, 22, 27; Lk. 22:28-30; 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:1-6), and blessing the entire world with an era of unparalleled prosperity and security. Why should such a thing be thought incredible when prophets and psalmists looked for the regathering of the tribes in the land and sang of the coming glorious reign of Messiah on earth? When the cloud of confusion over eschatology is

³² *The Kingdom of God in the Apostolic Writings*, London: James Clark, 1924, 92.

³³ *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation*, Wendell Willis, ed., Hendrickson, 1987, 114.

lifted and when commentators believe what the New Testament says about the future, it will become clear that Acts 1:6 is a text which sits in judgment on our failure to believe the prophets and our reluctance to accept that the apostles knew better than we do what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God.

Bible readers are accustomed to hearing those parts of the text which fit with received ideas. It is possible that other elements of the message are unconsciously rejected because they are unfamiliar. It is the suggestion of this essay that Christian concentration on individual salvation now and at death has seriously interfered with the massive New Testament emphasis on the Kingdom of God to be introduced at the Parousia. In view of the delay of the Parousia, the church seems to have lost its nerve when it comes to believing those elements of the gospel which promise good things coming.

Faced with the obvious social and political implications of the Magnificat and Acts 1:6, expositors have resorted to various ways of bypassing the text. One technique is to offer a spiritualizing interpretation. A second is to read the text as authorizing political or social action this side of the Parousia. A third solution is to maintain that earlier revolutionary attitudes are modified or even corrected by later developments in the teaching of Jesus. This third way round the difficulty founders on the evidence of Luke 21:24 and particularly Acts 1:6 and 3:21. While it is clear that the historical Jesus undertook no revolutionary action in the political arena, this does not mean that a political revolution is not envisaged at the Parousia. It is to this event that Luke 24:21, Acts 1:6 and 3:21 point so clearly. It is fatal to a proper grasp of the Kingdom of God to rule the evidence of Acts 1:6 out of court on the grounds that the disciples did not share *our* perception of what the Kingdom should be. Once Acts 1:6 and other politically loaded verses are allowed to stand as testimony to the future Kingdom as a world government entrusted to the returning Jesus and the saints, a flood of light is thrown on biblical eschatology.

It is important to note that a Kingdom involving the restoration of Israel to the land is neither worldly nor secular, because it is to be a Kingdom in the hands of the Messiah himself. The suggestion that Jesus' activity as a non-violent preacher and healer is more "spiritual" than his implementation of a world government on the throne of David sets up a false dichotomy. Luke and the New Testament in general present us with a Jesus who is both the suffering Messiah and the conquering Messiah who brings in the Kingdom with power at the Parousia. Our problem is that we have been reading the New Testament as though it is not a

Messianic document in the sense indicated by Acts 1:6 (cp. Rev. 11:15-18; Luke 19:11ff). Tradition has taught us to believe in the eschatology of the individual soul. Luke intends us to expect the restoration of the throne of David and of Israel to the land. A new orientation to biblical eschatology is needed.

Jesus demonstrated the power of the future Kingdom in his ministry. The mighty, however, were not toppled from their thrones, the humble did not replace them and Jesus did not ascend the throne of David. Nor was the Kingdom of God re-established in Israel. Luke is careful to tell us that the outpouring of the spirit at the ascension, though it advances the Messianic program, is not the fulfillment of the promised restoration of Israel. Until that time the spirit as the “spirit of the promise” (Eph. 1:13) is given as a downpayment of something much greater, namely our future inheritance of the Kingdom.

It is a misreading of the gospel of Jesus to think that the content of his message is confined to events which took place in Galilee; nor is the gospel completed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel takes in the broad sweep of salvation history including the all-important Kingdom to be established at the Parousia. Setting dates for that event is impossible. Making known that fact of the future is part of the task of relaying the gospel faithfully. The presentation of the biblical view of the future, including the information supplied by Acts 1:6, clarifies the meaning of hope which Paul sees as a solid basis for the development of the faith and love (Col. 1:5; cp. Eph. 1:18). Acts 1:6 does not represent a decline from the spirituality of Jesus but is part and parcel of the total spiritual expectation of the Kingdom to which Luke and the New Testament writings point. Acts 1:6 reflects the mature understanding of disciples who have been with Jesus.

There is value in reflecting anew on how Calvin and a whole tradition of exegesis dealt with Acts 1:6.³⁴ The lesson to be learned is that apostolic testimony about the Kingdom is for our correction. For too long the church has rejected a concept of the Kingdom which is foreign to our

³⁴ Cp. the cavalier fashion in which the *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* dismisses Acts 1:6 as valuable only as “an authentic little touch...a veritable reminiscence of what we may be sure was their real attitude at the moment, though it soon ceased to be. When they asked, ‘Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ their thoughts were still running in the groove of the old Jewish expectation. It is the last trace of them that we have in this naive form” (Vol. 2, “Jesus Christ”). On the contrary the same eschatology is confirmed in Acts 3:21; cp. Dan. 7:14, 18, 27; Luke 22:28-30; I Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26, 3:21, 5:10; 20:1-6.

thinking but not to that of the apostles, who saw more clearly than we what it means to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Luke's Jesus is heir to the throne of David in Jerusalem, restorer of the Kingdom to Israel and guarantor of worldwide peace on earth, a prospect foreshadowed in his spiritual activity in Palestine.