

Standing for the Hope of Israel: Understanding Jesus in the Light of Hebrew Faith and the Gospel about the Kingdom of God

ANTHONY BUZZARD

My purpose here is to focus on the Abrahamic/Kingdom understanding of the Gospel which I believe is an absolutely necessary correction to current popular and pervasive accounts of the Gospel. I understand the Gospel of salvation to be a Message of Hope for mankind based on the seed and land — “seed and soil” — promises made by God to Abraham and David and executed by God through the Messiah and Son of God, the Lord Jesus.¹ The biblical Gospel thus addresses more than the salvation of the individual. It provides the Grand Scheme by which God is recovering rebel planet earth for Himself.

Our task as believers is to come in line with that Divine Program and to play our part in the Restoration exercise in which God is engaged.

First a bit of personal experience: In the spring of 1956 I was in my room at Oxford pondering my new-found delight in the Bible and the teachings of Jesus (Mum and Dad had just set up a visit to the psychologist to see if my brain was still functioning as it should: I was later pronounced sane, despite my religious enthusiasm which was not considered normal by friends and relatives of the Church of England). I was pondering specifically the way in which my evangelical friends of the Oxford Intercollegiate Christian Union

¹ The “my [human] lord” (*adoni*) of Psalm 110:1, a verse alluded to 23 times in the NT. *Adoni* is always the title of a human superior (195 times), never of God who is *adonai* (449 times).

*Originally delivered as a speech at Theological Conference, ABC campus, 1999, and transcribed and edited later.

(OICU) were working their presentation of what they called the Gospel. Note that their urging the likes of myself to get saved implied that the *normal* Church of England procedure (infant baptism, confirmation by the Bishop and nominal attendance at church “as and when” — in the case of many to be “hatched, matched and dispatched”) had not in fact saved me at all.

From the very first I developed an uneasy feeling about the way evangelicals did their “get saved” theology. It seemed potted, canned, lacking the richness of the biblical documents. It relied on a rather slick combining of verses out of Romans, and possibly John. What struck me even then was that Jesus’ teaching seemed to be much less prominent in the “evangelical” gospel. And yet was not *Jesus* the model preacher of the Gospel? No, I was told, Jesus somehow *was* the Gospel. And inquiring into the saving Message/Gospel of the historical Jesus seemed to be taboo.

I have spent some 45 years wondering how and why things had gone off track. I continue to think that there is something methodologically flawed with a system which presents the Gospel as Jesus dying and rising, but not as having *preached and taught the Gospel*. “You call me *teacher* and Lord,” Jesus said (John 13:13) “and you do well.” We hear much about calling Jesus Lord, but should he not be called Rabbi also?

We can put the problem this way: “Jesus came to do three days work,” says Dr. Graham, “to die, be buried and be raised.”² By contrast the early Abrahamic writings from the beginning of this century take us first to Luke 4:43: “I must proclaim the Gospel about the Kingdom of God to the other cities also; that is the reason why God commissioned me.” This strikes me as a brilliant mission statement, but how many churches have adopted it as their mission statement?

Can it be, then, that Paul is being popularly twisted and Jesus rejected when it comes to the issue of the Gospel? Is the result a “gutted gospel,” the phrase used by David Krogh at the Rockford General Conference of the Church of God in 1982? If so, then the mission of Abrahamic Faith is to provide a voice crying for reform and a return to the Gospel as Jesus preached it. I believe this movement from its inception set out with that ideal — and the ideal must be reclarified and maintained in every generation until the Parousia brings fulfillment of the Kingdom promise.

Let’s look at Paul and the Gospel first. I think we may find as we examine our subject that the solution to all current problems in teaching and preaching is to put the Hebrew Bible back into the prominent position it enjoys in

²“What is the Gospel?”, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association tract, 1980.

the teaching of all those New Testament pioneers of the faith, Jesus being the arch-example of a preacher/teacher steeped in the Hebrew Bible and the Hope of Israel.

Paul and Acts

Some of the most revealing and essential teachings of the faith are contained in Luke's reports about what Paul taught, as found in the book of Acts. A persistent tendency in popular evangelicalism is to study Paul out of his epistles only (often to the practical neglect of Jesus in the Synoptics). Paul is first of all difficult for the unstable and the uninstructed, Peter remarks in 2 Peter 3:16: "Our beloved brother Paul: God has given him much wisdom, but part of what he says is hard to understand. Some ignorant and unsteady people even destroy themselves by twisting what he said. They do the same thing with other Scriptures also" (CEV).

Secondly, Paul was not writing to unconverted people in his epistles, to tell them how to become Christians. He assumes a basic foundation and takes quite a bit for granted. Yet tracts offering salvation insist on giving us isolated verses from Romans as a presentation of the saving Gospel.

So Acts fills in the gaps for us beautifully. In Acts 20 Paul's farewell speech in Miletus is recorded for us. Farewell speeches are particularly valuable as testimony to what is nearest and dearest to a man's heart. In a farewell speech famous last words are delivered, in Paul's case, to posterity.

Listen to Paul in Acts 20: "I solemnly testified to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Messiah . . . My desire is to finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus to testify solemnly to the Gospel of the grace of God . . . among all of you *I went about preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom* . . . I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:21, 24, 25, 27).

Paul was fearless in his presentation of the sacred trust which Jesus had deposited with him: the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. In typical New Testament fashion Paul then equates the Gospel of the Kingdom with the "*word* which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance [of the Kingdom], among all the saints" (v. 32). The Gospel of the grace of God (v. 24) is simply another and synonymous term for the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (Acts 20:24, 25). As F.F. Bruce, with an eye on his opponents in the dispensationalist camp, states: "The grace of God revealed in Christ is the subject of the Good News. It is evident from a comparison

of this verse [Acts 20:24] with the next that the preaching of this Gospel is identical with the proclamation of the Kingdom.”³

But now note the sorry state of confusion into which evangelicalism has fallen. I wrote to Dr. Erwin Lutzer of Moody Bible Institute and asked about the Gospel of Grace and the Gospel of the Kingdom. Here was his reply: “I believe that the Gospel of the Kingdom is different from the Gospel of the grace of God. The Gospel of the Kingdom had to do with the preparation of the people of Israel for the coming millennial Kingdom . . . The Gospel of grace has nothing to do with the Kingdom per se, but is a message of repentance which makes us members of God’s family.”⁴

Here we see the division and consequent confusion that attends the current preaching of the Gospel. This opinion of the Moody Bible Institute is all-pervasive. But it divides Paul from Jesus, complicates the Gospel and ultimately puts Jesus’ Kingdom Gospel into eclipse. Bruce states the obvious when he remarks that the Gospel of the grace of God in Acts 20:24 is none other than the proclamation of the Kingdom (v. 25).

It is a curious thing, but evangelicals are fond of the phrase “Gospel of grace” but seldom if ever provide Paul’s defining phrase in the very next verse: the Gospel of the Kingdom. In Dispensationalism the equation of the two terms is systematically denied.

I believe that our founding fathers in the Abrahamic Faith brilliantly recovered the unity of the New Testament by insisting on One Gospel, providing one Hope for all — immortalization as an executive ruler with Christ in the Kingdom (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27), the reception of the spirit now as a downpayment and first installment of the future reward of the inheritance (Col. 3:24; 2 Cor. 1:22).

There are other wonderful glimpses into the mind of Paul which show him to be a true Pharisee and Christian in his grasp of the future hope — and thus an adherent to the Hebrew Bible as the essential source of the Gospel. “This I admit to you,” Paul says with ringing confidence to Governor Felix:

They [the Jews] cannot prove the charges of which they now accuse me: But this I admit to you, that according to the way which they call a sect, I serve the God of our Fathers [the God of Jewish unitary monotheism], believing everything which is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the prophets. Having a hope in God which these men [his accusers] cherish themselves, that there shall certainly

³ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Acts*, London: Tyndale, 1952.

⁴ Personal correspondence, October, 1996.

be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial today (Acts 24:14, 15, 21).

How trivial all these great issues appeared to Festus, Felix's successor, is recorded by Luke in Acts 25:19: "The Jews simply had some points of disagreement with Paul about their own religion and about a certain dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive." Just another wacky superstition and from the Roman point of view an "in-house" dispute amongst Jews. Festus knew better than many modern Christians that Paul's Christianity was the supreme flowering of Judaism, allowing of course for the new conception of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ and the breaking down of the partition wall.

Notice how firmly rooted Paul remains in his Pharisaic background which was entirely compatible with the faith as it is in Jesus: "I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers, the promise to which our 12 tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by the Jews. Why is it considered incredible among you people, that God raises the dead?" (Acts 26:5-8).

Once again the vital focal points of Paul's theology remained always those with which Jesus himself had launched Paul into his ministry:

I appoint you a minister, delivering you from the Jewish people and the Gentiles to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance [i.e. of the Kingdom] among those who have been sanctified by me And so having obtained help from God, I stand to this day [the year was about 60 AD] testifying both to small and great, stating nothing except what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place, that the Christ was to suffer and by reason of his resurrection from the dead, he should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and the Gentiles (Acts 26:16-18, 22, 23).

Paul has one Gospel which as we see him in Acts 28:23 he takes to the Jewish people. Paul declares again: "I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel" (Acts 28:20). Note next his evangelistic method. After Paul's Jewish audience has reminded him, that he belongs to a "sect which

is spoken against everywhere,” Paul proceeds to the business of proclaiming the Gospel. This is much more than a “three easy steps to salvation in Romans 10.” A full day is set for the task of declaring the Gospel: “After they had set a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers. And he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the Kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus [note the order of events on the Gospel agenda, God first and Jesus second], both from the Law of Moses and from the prophets from morning to evening. Some were persuaded and some would not believe” (Acts 28:23, 24). Paul then took “*this* salvation” — there is no change in the Gospel message, it is still “this salvation of God” — to the Gentiles. We are reminded of Jesus’ preaching of the Gospel of God (Mark 1:14, 15) and “*this* Gospel of the Kingdom” (Matt. 24:14). That very same salvation message is now, Paul says, to go to the Gentiles, and they indeed will listen. He then remains two full years in his own rented quarters, welcoming all who come to him, “heralding the Gospel of the Kingdom and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered” (Acts 28:30, 31).

How very much Paul was a man of the Great Commission. Had not Jesus said that Apostles were to teach everything he had taught, to all the nations. Paul was exactly like his master. Compare their gospel styles: “The multitudes were aware of this and followed him and he welcomed them and began addressing them on the Kingdom of God” (Luke 9:11). “Paul welcomed all who came to him and he preached the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and taught concerning the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:30, 31).

It is therefore a major mistake to pit the words of Paul in Romans 10:9 against the plain evidence of what Paul preached as the Gospel. Romans 10:9 is made to say that confession of Jesus as Lord and belief in his resurrection is the only essential core of the Gospel. But context is all-important, and just as “absent from the body and present with the Lord” is extracted without context from the middle of Paul’s discussion about the resurrection and this misunderstood, so Romans 10:9 is extracted from the context in Romans 10:17 where Paul concludes that “faith comes by hearing and hearing from Messiah’s Word/Gospel.” “If anyone departs from the health-giving words, namely those of the Lord Jesus Christ,” he is in serious trouble (see 1 Tim. 6:3, 4). Thus John urges “If anyone comes to you and does not bring Messiah’s teaching . . .” (see 2 John 7-9).

The simple biblical fact is that “receiving Jesus” or “accepting Jesus” seems impossible, according to Jesus, without the reception of the Word/Gospel of Jesus. It was to make this fundamental point that Jesus spoke the

parable of the sower. I suggest that this passage deserves a much more prominent place in preaching than it currently receives. It is an extraordinarily fascinating and challenging section of Scripture, repeated three times (Matt. 13, Mark 4; Luke 8) and said in Mark's report to be the parable which must be understood and without which none of the other parables can make sense (Mark 4:13).

May I conclude with a brief exposition of this parable, with the help of the invaluable *Word Biblical Commentary* (a must, I would say, for every pastor's library).⁵ Jesus interprets the meaning of the parable or "comparison" of the Sower. Critically important is the definition of the gospel/Word which must lodge in the heart of the convert so that the saving process may begin. Matthew identifies the content of the saving Gospel of Jesus as "the Word about the Kingdom" (Matt. 13:19). Matthew also stresses the need for understanding of the Kingdom Word as the basis for conversion. The element of "hearing" is common to all four types of soil (human minds) which are exposed to the Message. Exposure to and understanding of the Message is actually a condition of repentance and forgiveness. Listen to these words of Jesus: "To you has been revealed the mystery of the Kingdom. But to those outside all this appears in parables, so that they may see and not understand . . . *If they did, they would repent and I would forgive them*" (Mark 4:11, 12). Jesus here says that grasping the Message of the Kingdom is the essential condition of repentance and acceptance with God.

Gerhardsson has found a correspondence between this parable and the Shema ("Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One Lord" – Deuteronomy 6:4):

The shema, which was said twice a day by Jews even in the time of Jesus, contains the confession that "the Lord our God is one Lord," to which is added the call to "love the Lord your God 1) with all your heart, and 2) with all your soul, and 3) with all your might." These elements correspond to the implied call of the parable as follows: 1) the reference to the heart in v. 19; [We remember that the heart in the Bible is not the source of emotion but of the whole personality, thinking and will.] 2) the reference to tribulation and persecution in v. 21 with the implication of an unwillingness to give one's life

⁵ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, (Vol. 33A), Dallas: Word Bank, 1993.

(=soul); and 3) the reference to wealth, which would include property, reflecting an unwillingness to give of one's possessions (=might).⁶

If this connection with the Shema is right it would confirm the fact that Jesus, with his saving Kingdom Gospel, is calling the people back to the covenant loyalty and its obligations. The sacred trust committed by Jesus to the Church faithfully to propagate the Gospel of the Kingdom (Matt. 24:14, etc.) is not less binding than loyalty to the One God Himself.

In Matthew 13:11 the "you" is emphatic. It reinforces the extraordinary privilege of the disciples (of all ages) to know and understand the mystery of the Kingdom. The Christian is the one in possession of that Kingdom Plan while the others remain on the outside because they fail to grasp it. As George Ladd says, "Jesus divides society into two antithetical camps: those who have heard and understood the Gospel of the Kingdom and those who have not."⁷ Hagner remarks: "The sower is probably understood firstly as Jesus, implying that ultimately the parable refers to the reception or non-reception of Jesus himself."⁸ The problem as Jesus sees it is one of understanding. The failure to understand the word of the Kingdom is due not to some overriding doctrine of predestination, but the natural opposition of the human heart to Truth. Hard-heartedness to God's saving plan results in the unreceptive mind which blocks understanding. Jesus cites Isaiah: "Their eyes they have closed." There is no inadequacy in the message. The fault lies with human deafness to the things of the spirit. As Hagner comments: "Those who will not receive the Message of the Kingdom do not understand it." The process is like this: the birds come and snatch away the saving seed of the Kingdom Gospel. The activity of the Devil "works together with, but does not absolve, those who have rejected the message. It is because they have rejected the message that the evil one is enabled to snatch away the seed."⁹

Jesus refers to the first category of soil: "This is the one which was sown along the edge of the path." Commentators point out that, fascinatingly, Jesus here equates the word with the soil, meaning that the person who is available to receive the word/seed can himself become a reproducing seed, i.e. he is designed not only to receive the seed, the Message, but himself to

⁶ *Ibid.*, 379.

⁷ *A Theology of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, see chapter 4.

⁸ *Matthew 1-13*, 379.

⁹ *Ibid.*

become an agent of the seed and reproduce it in others, bearing fruit for the Gospel.

The rocky soil, category two, sprouts the seed immediately. This, says Jesus, is the case with the person who joyfully receives the Kingdom Gospel of Jesus. He hears the Message *and* receives it (unlike the first category who only heard). But he has no root, the soil is thin and superficial and he believes “only for a time.” He is a temporary (*proskairos*) believer (there is no doctrine of “once saved, always saved” in Jesus’ teaching). Just as the rising sun withers seedlings so “tribulation and persecution *because of the Word*” cause the superficial Christian to fall away. I note that it is persecution on account of the Gospel of the Kingdom which undermines this second category of soil/person.

The third seed is received into the heart/mind but it becomes choked by what Jesus calls “the anxiety of this age/world and the seduction of riches.” Anxiety and wealth are also subjects of importance in the Sermon on the Mount and they are repeated here as Jesus warns of possible failure along the journey of faith towards the Kingdom. The precious message can still be thwarted, even where it is initially received with joy.

The fourth category describes the seed which happens to fall on “good soil.” In direct contradiction to the first category where the failure was one of lack of understanding, this good soil *understands*. Understanding is the necessary factor in reception and understanding must result in proper conduct. “The good soil is that which receives the seed of the word, which nurtures the seed in discipleship and which bears fruit.”

It appears to me that churches may well make the mistake of assuming their attendees have understood the Gospel of the Kingdom, that they have taken their first step. If they have not, then the attempt to bear fruit without the presence of the essential seed Message given by Jesus can become futile. Churches can go through any number of exercises, “good works,” etc., they can execute any number of programs, but Jesus is concerned with the proper foundation. He begins his teaching here with these words: “When anyone hears the Gospel/Word about the Kingdom . . .” then follow the various reactions from non-comprehension, i.e. hard-heartedness, to joyful and fruitful reception. The point, however, that we should not miss is that, according to Jesus (and what else counts?), a human person confronts true Christianity when Jesus’ Kingdom Message is put to him. “Whenever anyone hears the Message of the Kingdom” is equivalent to “when anyone is invited to become a Christian.” The first thing that happens to the potential convert is that Jesus confronts him with his Message. Jesus’ converting tool is God’s

Gospel of the Kingdom in Jesus. I think it can hardly be doubted that this is the constant thrust of the gospel records. But this sort of theology and missionary method is alarmingly absent from current descriptions of “how to be saved.”

I have examined tracts from various sources. I have corresponded with authors of books on how to do evangelism, and one thing is very clear. The Kingdom Gospel is not part of their missionary equipment. As Lutzer confessed, “The Gospel of the Kingdom is not the Gospel of Grace.” This is the major methodological error which lies at the base of much Gospel preaching in America. A.C. Gaebelein in his book on Matthew 24 wrote of Matthew 24:14 (“This Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached . . .”): “The preaching which is mentioned is that of the Gospel of the Kingdom, *but that Gospel is not now to be preached, for we preach the Gospel of grace.*”¹⁰ This is the very same splitting in two what should not be divided. It is parallel to the dualism of body and detachable soul, which equally points to the paganism which has entered the church — and which urgently needs to be exposed and corrected. With these arbitrary and unscriptural decisions, the Gospel of the Kingdom of God commissioned throughout Christian history was canceled! Will no one rise in protest against such heavy-handed treatment of Jesus? “He who is ashamed of me and my words/Gospel” (Mark 8:35, 38). Note that preaching his Gospel can be a life-threatening event: “Whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel’s . . .”

In my book *Our Fathers Who Aren't in Heaven*¹¹ I cited the words of leading contemporary church-planters and biblical writers who admit that our methods for making a Christian do not sound like Jesus' method. Jesus' evangelistic language is not ours. Dallas Willard in his latest book *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*¹² was struck by those admissions on the part of Peter Wagner, Michael Green and Dr. Howard Marshall. He reproduced my quotations to illustrate the absence of Kingdom language in evangelism.

I believe that the words of Jesus in Luke 8:12 have a vital prophetic role to play in calling churches back to his teaching. “Whenever anyone hears the *word*, the Devil comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart, so that he may not believe it and be saved.” This is a brilliant intelligence report about how salvation works. The Devil understands the process better than we

¹⁰ A. C. Gaebelein, *The Olivet Discourse*, 9, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969, emphasis added.

¹¹ Restoration Fellowship, 1995.

¹² San Francisco Harper, 1998.

do! He acts in direct opposition to saving Truth. He tries to prevent the Word of the Kingdom from lodging in the human heart. He knows that thereby another candidate for immortality is initiated. I submit that Jesus makes intelligent reception of the *word*, the Gospel as it fell from his own lips, the essential foundation of our faith. In John's Gospel Jesus over and over stresses the need for the reception of the word: "He who hears my *word* and believes Him who sent me, has the life of the Age to Come and will not be condemned but has made the transition from death to life" (John 5:24). So in Acts we read: "When they believed Philip as he preached the Gospel of the Kingdom and the Name of Jesus, they were getting baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12). Why is that precious verse almost unknown, out there in Christian radio land, while "accepting Jesus" is heard everywhere? Is not the fullest definition of the faith the most illuminating (Acts 8:4, 5 and defined by 12)?

In conclusion, I have tried to impress on our students the fact that "the word" in the Bible is more than a general term for the Bible. The Bible normally calls itself the Scriptures, but the word is the technical term for the saving Gospel concerning the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus. Paul ended his amazing career by "solemnly testifying before God and Jesus both the Kingdom and the appearing of Jesus." He then said "Preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:1, 2). It is not difficult to see what he meant by the word. It was the same word which had driven Jesus to a tireless circuit ministry in Galilee (Luke 4:43). It was to hear that "word of the Kingdom" that the crowds pressed in on him (Luke 5:1). It was to hear that Gospel of the Kingdom that the Jews arrived in their large numbers to the welcoming Paul (Acts 28:23ff.) and it was that salvation which Paul doggedly took to the Gentiles (Acts 28:28-31).

The warning against blindness and hard-heartedness in the solemn words of Isaiah 6 are repeated six times in the New Testament. Gospel preaching is not easy. It is met with resistance. So Isaiah warned and so the New Testament preachers discovered when their evangelistic efforts, while reaping a precious crop, also invited the vicious opposition of those agents of the Devil who did not want to see the word succeed.

I am convinced that the precious heritage of the Church of God equips them uniquely to enter into God's saving activity by playing our part in the Great Commission at this conclusion to the present century. Hope is a great stimulating virtue, but hope must be defined. In Paul's gospel, as in Jesus', hope was presented to the convert — hope not for "polishing rainbows in heaven," but for "fixing" the world on a grand scale when Jesus returns to fill

the world with the knowledge of God and when the nations beat their ghastly destructive weapons into farm implements. But note how Paul understands hope. First it was presented in the Gospel (Col. 1:5) and secondly hope was the source of faith and love. It is “*because of (dia)* the hope prepared for you in heaven” that the saints at Colosse were able to demonstrate love and faith (Col. 1:4, 5).

There is an effective way to present the Gospel Hope: I learned this from a dear Delta pilot friend who has seen the Abrahamic/Kingdom Gospel with its promise of rulership for the saints of all the ages on earth with Jesus when he comes back. “Where are you going to be in the future?” he challenges his Bible-reading friends. “Well, in heaven with Jesus,” comes the reply. “Why would you want to be there,” Dave responds, “when Jesus won’t be there?”

The arrival of Jesus in the future to bring into reality the Gospel hope is indeed his Second Coming, not a transient second visit. Jesus is coming to stay. He is coming to his home in Jerusalem and we are to reign with him on earth (Rev. 5:10). All that is nothing but the Hope of Israel contained in the Hebrew Bible, cherished by prophet and priest, saint and sage. To the propagation and clarification of that Kingdom Hope, the Abrahamic Faith is committed.