

# The Gospel of the Kingdom in the Prophets: The Unfulfilled Dream of Messianic Government\*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A large portion of the message of the prophets is devoted to descriptions of the coming Kingdom of God. There is not the slightest doubt as to the meaning of these glowing accounts of the Messiah's future worldwide empire:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder . . . Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore.<sup>1</sup>

He [the Messiah] will speak peace to the nations; and His dominion will be from sea to sea, and from the River [Euphrates] to the ends of the earth.<sup>2</sup>

The appointed ruler will be characterized by "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And He will delight in the fear of the Lord."<sup>3</sup> With

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<sup>1</sup> Isa. 9:6, 7, RSV.

<sup>2</sup> Zech. 9:10, NASV.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. 11:2, 3, RSV.

him, "princes will rule in justice,"<sup>4</sup> a prediction which provides the framework of the whole New Testament idea that Christians are kings in training.<sup>5</sup> The Messiah's perfect government will bring about a new era of freedom from bodily disease. It will produce a joyous humanity with blessings extending to the inanimate creation.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God . . . Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water . . . And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.<sup>6</sup>

Isaiah 40:9 foresees a time in the future when "the Lord God will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him." The executive of this great work of restoration will be a human king, descended from David. His extraordinary gifts will equip him to rule with perfect justice:

A shoot will spring from the stock of Jesse, a new shoot will grow from his roots. On him will rest the spirit of Yahweh, the spirit of wisdom and insight, the spirit of counsel and power, the spirit of knowledge and fear of Yahweh: his inspiration will lie in fearing Yahweh. His judgment will not be by appearances, his verdict not given on hearsay. He will judge the weak with integrity and give fair sentence for the humblest in the land. He will strike the country with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips bring death to the wicked.<sup>7</sup> Uprightness will be the belt around his waist, and constancy the belt about his hips.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Isa. 32:1, RSV.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Tim. 2:12; 1 Cor. 6:2; Rev. 1:6; 5:10. Cp. Exod. 19:6.

<sup>6</sup> Isa. 35:1, 2, 5-7, 10, RSV.

<sup>7</sup> Isa. 11:4 (LXX) has "the wicked one," and Paul applies this to a single "antichrist" (2 Thess. 2:8).

<sup>8</sup> Isa. 11:1-5, New Jerusalem Bible.

Under the just rule of the future king even the nature of animals will be transformed:

The wolf lives with the lamb, the panther lies down with the kid, calf and lion cub feed together with a little boy to lead them. The cow and the bear make friends, their young lie down together. The lion eats straw like the ox. The infant plays over the cobra's hole; into the viper's lair the young child puts his hand. They do no hurt, no harm, on all my holy mountain, for the country is filled with the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters swell the sea.<sup>9</sup>

The peaceful Kingdom will be established on the ruins of former evil governments:

Once the oppression is over, and the destroyer is no more, and those now trampling the country underfoot have gone away, the throne will be made secure in gentleness, and on it will sit in all fidelity, within the tent of David, a judge careful for justice and eager for integrity.<sup>10</sup>

The triumph of the Kingdom will mean the banishment of all hostile forces: "That day, Yahweh will punish above, the armies of the sky, below, the kings of the earth; they will be herded together, shut up in a dungeon, confined in a prison and, after long years, punished."<sup>11</sup> Whereupon the glorious Kingdom will appear: "The moon will hide her face, the sun be ashamed, for Yahweh Sabaoth [the Lord of the armies of heaven] will be king on Mount Zion, in Jerusalem."<sup>12</sup>

The time will come for God to reassert His sovereignty on earth in the person of His chosen king: "Behold, a king will reign righteously, and princes will rule justly. And each will be like a refuge from the wind, and a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry country, like the shade of a huge rock in a parched land."<sup>13</sup>

The Old Testament (which more appropriately we should know as the Hebrew Scriptures) speaks often of a great crisis in human history. By a stupendous divine intervention the God of creation will bring to a

<sup>9</sup> Isa. 11:6-9, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>10</sup> Isa. 16:4, 5, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>11</sup> Isa. 24:21, 22, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>12</sup> Isa. 24:23, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>13</sup> Isa. 32:1-2, NASV.

dramatic close the present era of human misrule and initiate a new government on earth. A number of master texts summarize the hope presented by the prophets of Israel as they pointed to a brand new world epoch:

The God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed . . . It will shatter and absorb all the previous kingdoms, and itself last forever.<sup>14</sup>

A throne will even be established in lovingkindness, and a judge will sit on it in faithfulness in the tent of David; moreover, he [the Messiah] will seek justice and be prompt in righteousness.<sup>15</sup>

At that time they shall call Jerusalem "The Throne of the Lord," and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, for the name of the Lord; nor shall they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their evil heart.<sup>16</sup>

And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.<sup>17</sup>

## II. JESUS' INTENSIFIED MESSIANIC HOPE

The announcement that the Kingdom of God was "at hand"<sup>18</sup> and that men should respond by believing the Good News about the Kingdom<sup>19</sup> challenged Jesus' audiences to understand that their national hopes were to be realized. Jesus did not say when the Kingdom of God would arrive. The announcement that it was "at hand" meant, as it had meant in similar words used by the prophets centuries earlier,<sup>20</sup> that men should prepare

<sup>14</sup> Dan. 2:44, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>15</sup> Isa. 16:5, NASV.

<sup>16</sup> Jer. 3:17, NASV.

<sup>17</sup> Dan. 7:27, RSV. The Kingdom in this verse belongs to the saints as the Messianic community in Christ. The translation "their kingdom . . ." is found in the RSV, GNB, the translation of the Jewish Publication Society and the *International Critical Commentary*.

<sup>18</sup> Mark 1:15; Matt. 3:2; 4:17, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Mark 1:15.

<sup>20</sup> The prophets had announced the "day of the Lord" (Joel 2:11; Isa. 13:6, 9; Zeph. 1:14), referring to it often as "that day." It is the battle day of God when He goes forth

for its arrival with the greatest urgency. Jesus' concept of the Kingdom of God was drawn from its rich history in the recorded messages of the prophets of Israel, whose work Jesus expressly said he did not come to destroy.<sup>21</sup> His proclamation of the Kingdom would call attention to the certain fulfillment of those predictions in the future: the establishment on earth of a divine government presided over by the ideal king of Israel, the Messiah.

That Israel was looking forward to an era of world peace under the government of the Messiah cannot reasonably be doubted. The fact is documented in hundreds of standard works on the Bible and the history of the Jewish religion. An authority on the literature of the prophets states what is clear to any who have read their writings:

For many centuries the Jews had believed that some day in the not distant future their God, the Creator of the Universe, would manifest Himself and glorify His Name and His people Israel in the sight of all mankind. This is the essential substance of the Messianic Hope.<sup>22</sup>

In view of this hope the attitude of the early Christians can be stated as follows:

Their minds were always filled with a sense of expectancy, a sense of an impending change of tremendous import in which Jesus would occupy a central and conspicuous position in the capacity of Messiah, and they, as His chosen disciples, would share in His glory.<sup>23</sup>

Another Old Testament scholar notes that the prophet Daniel "equates the coming kingdom with the golden age and envisages it as being established here *on earth* as the final phase of history."<sup>24</sup> The Kingdom would mean a restructuring of human society under a divine government operating in a renewed earth.

to reestablish the Kingdom. The New Testament calls the future advent of Jesus the day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:2; cp. 1:10). The prophets describe the day of the Lord as "near and coming very quickly" (Zeph. 1:14), though it has not yet come. The prophet is projected forward into the future and sees the end as near. Both Testaments recognize the Day as the time when God punishes the evil of the world. "He arises to shake terribly the earth" (see Isa. 2:10-22).

<sup>21</sup> Matt. 5:17.

<sup>22</sup> H.D. Hamilton, *The People of God*, Oxford University Press, 1912, Vol. 2, 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> D.S. Russell, *Apocalyptic, Ancient and Modern*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988, 26.

### III. THE GOOD TIME COMING

One has only to glance at the subject headings given by the translators of the Jerusalem Bible to catch the flavor of the Old Testament background to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. In the writings of the great prophet Isaiah we learn of an era of "Everlasting peace,"<sup>25</sup> "The future restoration,"<sup>26</sup> "The coming of the virtuous king,"<sup>27</sup> "The liberation of Israel,"<sup>28</sup> and "The glorious resurrection of Jerusalem."<sup>29</sup> In Jeremiah we read of "Zion in the messianic age,"<sup>30</sup> "The conversion of the nations,"<sup>31</sup> "The future king,"<sup>32</sup> "Promise of recovery for the northern kingdom of Israel,"<sup>33</sup> "Promise of restoration to Judah,"<sup>34</sup> "Jerusalem magnificently rebuilt,"<sup>35</sup> and "The institutions of the future."<sup>36</sup>

Ezekiel gives us a description of "Judah and Israel in one kingdom."<sup>37</sup> Hosea speaks of "The repentance and reconciliation of Israel: A promise of future happiness"<sup>38</sup>; Joel foresees "The glorious future of Israel"<sup>39</sup>; Amos writes warmly about "Prospects of restoration and idyllic prosperity"<sup>40</sup>; Obadiah describes the political triumph of the Kingdom of God;<sup>41</sup> finally, Zechariah provides vivid pictures of "messianic salvation,"<sup>42</sup> "The Messiah,"<sup>43</sup> and "The restoration of Israel."<sup>44</sup> Zechariah concludes with a description of "The splendour of Jerusalem."<sup>45</sup>

No one who has pondered these stirring visions of the future can possibly miss their point. With one accord the prophets of Israel pro-

<sup>25</sup> Isa. 2:1-5.

<sup>26</sup> Isa. 4:4-6.

<sup>27</sup> Isa. 11:1-9.

<sup>28</sup> Isa. 43:1-7.

<sup>29</sup> Isa. 60.

<sup>30</sup> Jer. 3:14-18.

<sup>31</sup> Jer. 16:19-21.

<sup>32</sup> Jer. 23:1-8.

<sup>33</sup> Jer. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Jer. 31:23-26.

<sup>35</sup> Jer. 31:38-40.

<sup>36</sup> Jer. 33:14-26.

<sup>37</sup> Ezek. 37:15-28.

<sup>38</sup> Hos. 14:2-10.

<sup>39</sup> Joel 4:18-21.

<sup>40</sup> Amos 9:11-15.

<sup>41</sup> Obad. 21; cp. Micah 4:1-5.

<sup>42</sup> Zech. 8:1-17.

<sup>43</sup> Zech. 9:9-10.

<sup>44</sup> Zech. 9:11-17.

<sup>45</sup> Zech. 14:1-21.

claimed that there is coming on earth an era of peace and permanent security for all nations under the supervision of God's chosen agent, the promised son of David. What Irving Zeitlin writes of Isaiah summarizes the Jewish hope of God's Kingdom on earth:

The prophet looks forward to the end of this era and to ushering in the new, wherein arrogance, oppression, war and idolatry will all vanish together. Only after Israel has been cleansed of her haughtiness will she truly become God's people, and carry his word to the other nations. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."<sup>46</sup>

We must here register our protest against the extraordinary idea that this vision of the future was fulfilled during the historical ministry of Jesus, or at any time since. It must be obvious to all that the nations have not beaten their swords into farm instruments (even professing Christians have killed each other in domestic and international wars) and that Jesus as King-Messiah has not yet visibly taken up his position as ruler of the nations on the restored throne of David.<sup>47</sup>

#### IV. DANIEL'S VISION OF THE KINGDOM

The importance of the book of Daniel for Jesus' thinking needs special emphasis:

I think there can be no doubt where Jesus Christ found and nourished His doctrine of the Kingdom. He found it in the book of Daniel, and especially in Daniel 7. There are many evidences that the Book of Daniel was one of the favorite books of Jesus Christ, one of the books which He diligently and deeply studied during the years of peaceful obscurity in Nazareth before His stormy public ministry began. He makes several references to Daniel, and when the Book of Daniel is once understood, it throws quite a flood of light upon the numerous parables in which our Lord described the Kingdom . . . He declared again and again that the Kingdom was the first object of His life to establish, and, He asserted, it ought to be the first object of our lives to promote. He summed up all our duties in the ever-memo-

<sup>46</sup> *Ancient Judaism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, 228.

<sup>47</sup> Luke 1:32, 33; Luke 24:21; Acts 1:6; 3:21; Luke 22:28-30; Matt. 19:28; Rev. 11:15-18; 20:1-6.

rable command to "seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33).<sup>48</sup>

Taking our cue from the book of Daniel, we may easily establish the fact that the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven) is a real, external empire. Not only this, it is to be a government which will seize power suddenly and dramatically. Its administration will be in the hands of "the Son of Man"<sup>49</sup> and "the saints."<sup>50</sup> On no account, from the evidence of Daniel, could it be an invisible reign established only in the hearts of believers. Its political dimension and its location on earth are unmistakably clear. It is equally obvious that the Kingdom of God described by Daniel has not yet appeared.

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom [in the New Testament, the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven] which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever.<sup>51</sup>

In the next verse the impact of the Kingdom is likened to a stone crushing the "iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold" of former world empires. According to the prophet, whose message we are challenged to believe, "the great God has made known to the king [Nebuchadnezzar] what will take place in the future [in Hebrew, *be acharit hayamim*, i.e., in future Messianic times]; so the dream is true, and its interpretation is trustworthy."<sup>52</sup> The Son of Man is to be appointed monarch of the divine Kingdom, sharing rulership with the saints:

To him [the Son of Man — Jesus' favorite self-title] was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed . . . And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to

<sup>48</sup> H.P. Hughes, *Essential Christianity*, Isbister and Co., 1894, 59.

<sup>49</sup> Dan. 7:13, 14.

<sup>50</sup> Dan. 7:27.

<sup>51</sup> Dan. 2:44, NASV.

<sup>52</sup> Dan. 2:45, NASV.

the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.<sup>53</sup>

The Kingdom of God is evidently an empire, exercising sway over all nations. It will come to power on the earth (“under the whole heaven”)<sup>54</sup> and its establishment will be by a catastrophe, an international upheaval resulting in a complete political reorganization. Before its irresistible power the nations of the world will have to bow. A recurring theme of the New Testament (but infrequently preached) is that Jesus and his followers will be the executives of the new world government — the Kingdom of God.<sup>55</sup> To be a saint in the New Testament is to be one appointed to rule in the coming Kingdom. As Alan Richardson says:

*To enter the Kingdom means much more than to become a subject of God's Kingdom, it means to receive a share in God's kingship, to be one of those appointed to reign.* Jesus speaks of the poor in spirit, i.e., the Christian “hasidim” [saints] as those to whom the heavenly kingship belongs; they are the meek who, according to the prophecy of Psalm 37:11 shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5). As the old Israel obtained the inheritance of the promised land so the new Israel shall possess the earth as its inheritance . . . After the death of the antichrist in Daniel 7 “judgment was given to the saints of the Most High and the time came that the saints possessed the Kingdom (*malchut*).”<sup>56</sup>

The Kingdom of God was destined to replace hostile world empires pictured by the great image of Daniel, chapter two. The seventh chapter of Daniel provides an indispensable blueprint for the later mission of Jesus who saw his own destiny and that of the Church in the great visions granted to the prophet, who himself, foreshadowing the career of believers, both suffered at the hands of the Babylonians and later attained high office in government.

#### V. ISAIAH'S HOPE FOR WORLD PEACE

The bright future is nowhere more vividly depicted than in the words of the prophet Isaiah. His vision is of:

<sup>53</sup> Dan. 7:14, 27, RSV.

<sup>54</sup> Dan. 7:27.

<sup>55</sup> Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:4.

<sup>56</sup> Alan Richardson, *Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, London: SCM Press, 1958, 86-87, emphasis added.

days to come [when] the mountain of the Temple of Yahweh shall tower above the mountains and be lifted higher than the hills. All the nations will stream to it, peoples without number will come to it; and they will say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the Temple of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways so that we may walk in his paths; since the Law will go out from Zion, and the oracle of Yahweh from Jerusalem.” He will wield authority over the nations and adjudicate between many peoples; these will hammer their swords into plowshares, their spears into sickles. Nation will not lift sword against nation, there will be no more training for war. O House of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of Yahweh.<sup>57</sup>

When that new age dawns, “those who are left of Zion and remain of Jerusalem shall be called holy and those left in Jerusalem, noted down for survival.”<sup>58</sup> Following the cleansing of the Temple area, when

the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughter of Zion and cleansed Jerusalem of the blood shed in her . . . Yahweh will come and rest on the whole stretch of Mount Zion and on those who are gathered there, a cloud by day, and smoke, and by night the brightness of a flaring fire. For, over all, the glory of Yahweh will be a canopy and a tent to give shade by day from the heat, refuge and shelter from the storm and the rain.<sup>59</sup>

The miraculous nature of the predicted Kingdom is matched by the supernatural conception of the Messiah: “The maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel.”<sup>60</sup> Matthew sees in the miraculous conception of Jesus the fulfillment of the oracle delivered by Isaiah 700 years earlier. Of Mary’s miraculous pregnancy he reports simply that “all this took place to fulfill the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet.”<sup>61</sup>

Inseparable from the greatness of the future Kingdom is the majesty of the promised king:

For there is a child born for us, a son given to us and dominion is laid on his shoulders; and this is the name they give him: Wonder Counselor, Mighty God [“Mighty God,” according to a Hebrew

<sup>57</sup> Isa. 2:1-5, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>58</sup> Isa. 4:3, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>59</sup> Isa. 4:4-6, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>60</sup> Isa. 7:14, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>61</sup> Matt. 1:22, Jerusalem Bible.

lexicon, means “Divine Hero”<sup>62</sup>, Father of the Coming Age [so the Greek version of the Hebrew text], Prince of Peace. Wide is his dominion in a peace that has no end, for the throne of David and for his royal power, which he establishes and makes secure in justice and integrity. From this time onward and for ever, the jealous love of Yahweh Sabaoth [the Lord of the armies of heaven] will do this.<sup>63</sup>

Later the prophet speaks of one evangelizing Zion and bringing the Gospel to Jerusalem.<sup>64</sup> The association of the two ideas of Gospel and God ruling<sup>65</sup> leads naturally to the concept of the New Testament “Gospel of the Kingdom of God.” Whenever the biblical text speaks of God becoming King, the Jewish commentaries translate the Hebrew verb “rule” by a noun: “The Kingdom of God will be revealed” (Jewish Targum, Isa. 40:10). So also in Exodus 15:18, “the Lord shall reign forever and ever” means that “the Kingdom of the Lord endures forever and ever.”

Exactly the same connection between the Gospel and the Kingdom is found in Isaiah 52:7: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” The context speaks of a public manifestation of the Lord: “The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”<sup>66</sup>

These critically important passages, along with the description in Daniel 2:44 of the Kingdom of God replacing the empires of the world, convey a clear picture of the Kingdom as a coming reign of God on earth, to be introduced by a supernatural intervention. It is belief in the impending arrival of a new era of history which Jesus demands with his summons to “Repent and believe the Gospel [of the Kingdom of God].”<sup>67</sup>

Isaiah’s vision of the bright future epitomizes the hope of the Kingdom:

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem

<sup>62</sup> *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Brown, Driver and Briggs, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961, 42.

<sup>63</sup> Isa. 9:6, 7, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>64</sup> Isa. 40:9.

<sup>65</sup> Isa. 40:10; v. 5 speaks of glory and Isa. 52:7 of the reign of God.

<sup>66</sup> Isa. 52:10, RSV.

<sup>67</sup> Mark 1:14, 15.

a rejoicing, and her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the child shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their children with them. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.<sup>68</sup>

#### VI. THE MINOR PROPHETS’ VISIONS OF THE GLORIOUS FUTURE FOR ISRAEL

The so-called minor prophets repeat the divine assurances of an abundant future for the land when the people of God return to the Lord with all their hearts. The ancient curse imposed because of disobedience to the covenant will be removed and a “milk and honey” condition will prevail in fulfillment of the divine promises of restoration:

Israel, come back to Yahweh your God; your iniquity was the cause of your downfall . . . Provide yourself with words and come back to Yahweh. Say to Him, “Take all iniquity away so that we may have happiness again and offer you our words of praise. Assyria cannot save us, we will not ride horses any more, or say ‘Our God!’ to what our own hands have made, for you are the one in whom orphans find compassion.”

I will heal their disloyalty. I will love them with all my heart, for my anger has turned from them. I will fall like dew on Israel. He shall bloom like the lily, and thrust out roots like the poplar, his shoots will spread far; he will have the beauty of the olive and the fragrance of Lebanon. They will come back to live in my shade; they will grow corn that flourishes, they will cultivate vines as renowned as the wine of Helbon. What has Ephraim to do with idols any more when it is I who hear his prayer and care for him? I am like a cypress ever

<sup>68</sup> Isa. 65:17-25, RSV.

green, all your fruitfulness comes from me. Let the wise man understand these words. Let the intelligent man grasp their meaning. For the ways of Yahweh are straight, and virtuous men walk in them, but sinners stumble.<sup>69</sup>

“When that day comes,” says the prophet Joel:

the mountains will run with new wine and the hills flow with milk, and all the river beds of Judah will run with water. A fountain will spring from the house of Yahweh to water the wadi of Acacias. Egypt will become a desolation, Edom a desert waste on account of the violence done to the sons of Judah whose innocent blood they shed in their country. But Judah will be inhabited for ever, Jerusalem from age to age. “I [Yahweh] will avenge their blood and let none go unpunished,” and Yahweh shall make his home in Zion.<sup>70</sup>

These promises will find fulfillment after the great Day of the Lord described in the previous verses.<sup>71</sup> Amos pictures the future in the same terms. There will be a purging as well as a restoration of Israel:

Yet I am not going to destroy the House of Jacob [Israel] completely — it is Yahweh who speaks. For now I will issue orders and shake the House of Israel among all the nations, as you shake a sieve so that not one pebble can fall on the ground. All the sinners of my people are going to perish by the sword, all those who say, “No misfortune will ever touch us, nor even come anywhere near us.” That day [following the Day of the Lord] I will re-erect the tottering hut of David, make good the gaps in it, restore its ruins and rebuild it as it was in the days of old, so that they can conquer the remnant of Edom and all the nations that belonged to me. It is Yahweh who speaks, and he will carry this out. The days are coming now — it is Yahweh who speaks — when harvest will follow directly after plowing, the treading of grapes soon after sowing, when the mountains will run with new wine and the hills all flow with it. I mean to restore the fortunes of my people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them, plant vineyards and drink their wine, dig gardens and eat their produce. I will plant them in their own country, never to be rooted up again out of the land I have given them, says Yahweh, your God.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Hos. 14:2-10, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>70</sup> Joel 3:18-21, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>71</sup> Joel 3:15-17.

<sup>72</sup> Amos 9:8-15, Jerusalem Bible.

## VII. PSALMS OF SOLOMON

That the hope of a new political order on earth was very much alive when Jesus began to preach is clear. In the light of the mass of other Messianic material in the Hebrew Bible it is in no way surprising that first-century Jews eagerly expected an era of national glory, to be realized in the Kingdom of the promised Messiah. The following excerpts from the “Psalms of Solomon,” dating from about 50 years before the birth of Jesus, depict the Messianic empire of the future. These Psalms are not themselves part of the official canon of Scripture. They draw their inspiration, however, directly from numerous Messianic passages in the Old Testament Psalms and the prophets (particularly from 2 Samuel 7, Psalms 72, 89, and 132) and thus show how these texts were being used in Israel:

Lord, you chose David to be king over Israel and swore to him about his descendants forever, that his kingdom should not fail before you . . . See, Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel in the time known to you, O God. Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers, to purge Jerusalem from gentiles who trample her to destruction; in wisdom and righteousness to drive out the sinners from the inheritance; to smash the arrogance of sinners like a potter’s jar; to shatter all their substance with an iron rod; to destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth; at his warning the nations will flee from his presence; and he will condemn sinners by the thoughts of their hearts. He will gather a holy people whom he will lead in righteousness; and he will judge the tribes of the people that have been made holy by the Lord their God. He will not tolerate unrighteousness to pause among them, and any person who knows wickedness shall not live with them. For he shall know them that they are all children of their God. He will distribute them upon the land according to their tribes . . . And he will have gentile nations serving him under his yoke, and he will glorify the Lord in a place prominent above the whole earth. And he will purge Jerusalem and make it holy as it was even from the beginning, for nations to come from the ends of the earth to see his glory, to bring as gifts her children who had been driven out, and to see the glory of the Lord with which God has glorified her.

There will be no unrighteousness among them in his [Messiah’s] days, for all shall be holy, and their king shall be the Lord Messiah. For he will not rely on horse and rider and bow, nor will he collect gold and silver for war. Nor will he build up hope in a multitude for

a day of war. The Lord himself is his king, the hope of the one who has a strong hope in God . . .

O Lord, your mercy is upon the works of your hands forever. You show your goodness to Israel with a rich gift. Your eyes are watching over them and none of them will be in need. Your ears listen to the hopeful prayer of the poor, your compassionate judgments are over the whole world, and your love is for the descendants of Abraham, an Israelite. Your discipline for us is as for a firstborn son, an only child, to divert the perceptive person from unintentional sins. May God cleanse Israel for the day of mercy in blessing, for the appointed day when his Messiah will reign. Blessed are those born in those days, to see the good things of the Lord which he will do for the coming generation; which will be under the rod of discipline of the Lord Messiah, in the fear of his God, in wisdom of spirit, and of righteousness and of strength, to direct people in righteous acts, in the fear of God, to set them all in the fear of the Lord, a good generation living in the fear of God, in the days of mercy.<sup>73</sup>

These Psalms capture the essence of the Messianic hope presented by the Old Testament and current in Israel at the time when Jesus began to announce the Kingdom of God. They show a striking affinity also with passages in Luke's Gospel,<sup>74</sup> the book of Revelation,<sup>75</sup> and many other New Testament texts. They delight in the prospect of a world freed from tyrannical government, sharing the vision of Isaiah:

Once the oppression is over, and the destroyer is no more, and those now trampling the country underfoot have gone away, the throne will be made secure in gentleness, and on it there will sit in all fidelity, within the tent of David, a judge careful for justice and eager for integrity.<sup>76</sup>

#### VIII. ABRAHAM, THE LAND AND THE KINGDOM

A sense of the coherence of the biblical story is gained when we recall once again the basic themes on which Israel had been nourished. A number of key texts had established the land promise as an inviolable

<sup>73</sup> Pss. of Solomon 17:4, 21-28, 32-34; 18:1-9.

<sup>74</sup> 1:32, 33; 2:11.

<sup>75</sup> 11:15-18; 19:15-16.

<sup>76</sup> Isa. 16:4, 5, Jerusalem Bible.

undertaking on the part of the God of Abraham to secure lasting peace in the Land of Promise, to be administered by those chosen to be sons of God:

Yahweh said to Abram . . . "Look all around from where you are toward the north and the south, toward the east and the west. All the land within sight I will give to you and your descendants for ever . . . Come, travel through the length and breadth of the land, for I mean to give it to you."<sup>77</sup>

God said this to him [Abraham], "Here now is my covenant with you: you shall become the father of a multitude of nations. You shall no longer be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham . . . I will make you into nations, and your issue shall be *kings*. I will establish my Covenant between myself and you, and your descendants after you, generation after generation, a Covenant in perpetuity, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land you are living in, the whole land of Canaan, to own in perpetuity, and I will be your God."<sup>78</sup>

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."<sup>79</sup>

If you [Israel] obey my voice and hold fast to my covenant, you of all the nations shall be my very own, for all the earth is mine. I will count you a kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation.<sup>80</sup>

Kingship and possession of the land of Palestine formed the basis of God's covenant between Himself and the chosen people, initially represented by Abraham. The royal status of Israel depended, however, on their obedience. How far they succeeded in living up to the high ideal demanded of them is documented in the Old Testament history of the Israelites. It was often a story of failure to meet God's standard, David being an exceptional example of rulership exercised in cooperation with God.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Gen. 13:14-17, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>78</sup> Gen. 17:3-8, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>79</sup> Gal. 3:8, RSV.

<sup>80</sup> Exod. 19:5, 6, Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>81</sup> Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah were also outstanding kings.



As we have seen, Israel's national hope, kept burning even in times of oppression by their enemies, was that the ultimate ideal king, the Messiah, would eventually bring about the golden age of world peace so vividly predicted by the prophets. With the dawning of that great day, the Kingdom of God would come. We know that prayers for the advent of the Kingdom were being offered in the synagogue at the time when Jesus began to preach. It is impossible not to notice the close affinity of this prayer with "the Lord's prayer":

Magnified and sanctified be His great name in the world which He has created according to His will. May He establish His Kingdom in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of all the house of Israel, even speedily and at a near time.<sup>82</sup>

As a distinguished German theologian pointed out, "the true background to Jesus' teaching is to be found in . . . Jewish thought concerning God as ruler, and upon his Kingdom as the manifestation of his kingly activity."<sup>83</sup>

Weiss claims that this is the dominant emphasis in the Old Testament, and he shows that such an emphasis carries with it the thought of conflict with a worldly or human kingship. The conception is that God will demonstrate his kingship by an act of judgment against the worldly kingship. Against this background we can see that it was natural for the prophets . . . when they proclaimed the great crisis that was to come, to do this in the form of a proclamation of the coming of a mighty act of God as king. The hope expressed in [the prophets] is for the coming of a mighty kingly activity of God whereby his people would be redeemed, his enemies and theirs destroyed, and the present evil state of things [cp. Gal. 1:4, "this present evil age"] totally and for ever reversed . . . It is this hope which lies behind Jesus' usage of the term Kingdom of God.<sup>84</sup>

#### IX. JESUS AS THE HERO OF GOD'S PLAN FOR WORLDWIDE PEACE

We are only echoing the words of many expert students of Scripture when we assert as our basic thesis: the Old Testament roots of the

<sup>82</sup> *Kaddish* prayer recited in the synagogue.

<sup>83</sup> John Weiss, *Jesus' Preaching of the Kingdom of God*, 1982.

<sup>84</sup> Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, SCM Press, 1963, 19, discussing the work of John Weiss.

Kingdom of God must be taken into account when we confront the Kingdom in the gospel message of Jesus. Uprooted from its Hebrew background the Kingdom is indeed a vague term in the minds of many Bible readers. There is a grave risk of placing a meaning on Jesus' central gospel term which will not be the meaning attached to it by Jesus and the Apostles. The result will inevitably be the presentation of a Jesus who bears little resemblance to the Jew Jesus whose teachings possess eternal significance.

We do not have to read far into our New Testament before we encounter a definitive statement about God's intention for Jesus, in which Davidic throne language reappears. "The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His Kingdom will have no end."<sup>85</sup> This alerts us immediately to the fact that we are now to expect the reappearance of David's royal empire. As Solomon once "sat on the throne of David his father," so Jesus is to occupy the same royal position. The stage is set for the great objective placed before the Messiah. Since, as every Jew knew, the throne of David had ceased to exist since the time of the captivity in Babylon, Gabriel's prediction required the restoration of the Davidic Kingdom. Evidently the great promises given by the divine covenant to the house of David are ultimately to be realized in Jesus.

In Luke's great opening statement about the career of Mary's son we have a virtual definition of the purpose of Christianity. The role of Jesus is described with precision. He is no vague religious figure. He is strictly linked to the national hopes of Israel, and his function is to become their king, ruling for God in the Kingdom of God. What Luke introduces us to through the communication of Gabriel is the purest Messianism, which can only be understood within its very Jewish environment. The angel's definitive description of Jesus' role in the divine plan would remind readers acquainted with the Scriptures of an important prophecy about the Kingdom of God found in the book of Obadiah. Israel's expectations were declared by the prophet at the conclusion of the revelation given to him. At a time when the "day of the Lord is near upon all the nations," the house of Jacob "shall possess their own possessions" and "saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau; and *the kingdom shall be the Lord's*."<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Luke 1:32, 33, NASV.

<sup>86</sup> Obad. 15, 17, 21.

Such was the burning hope for liberation fostered by centuries of meditation on the Hebrew prophets, who yearned for a revival of the glory of Israel when David's great descendant would become king. The Bible gives us no authority for supposing the throne of David to be anything other than the seat of the king of Israel in Jerusalem. There is no justification for a sudden alteration of the meaning of "throne of David," to describe an invisible rule in the heavens. The promised king, the Messiah, must rule in the Kingdom of God, which is the restored Kingdom of David. The revelation granted by Gabriel to Mary, reported by Luke as a primary Christian doctrine, requires a fulfillment at the (still future) appearance of Jesus on earth to take up the position assured him by the divine Word announced at his birth. As the *Pulpit Commentary* on Luke 1:32 notes in a tantalizingly brief remark, "The words of the angel are as yet unfulfilled. They clearly speak of a restoration of Israel, still as far as we can see, very distant . . . The eventful hour still tarries."<sup>87</sup>

The learned commentator could have added that the promise of royal office for Jesus is the heart of the Gospel of the Kingdom, the Christian Gospel. The entire New Testament looks forward to that event. This is hardly surprising since the same hope had been instilled by the Hebrew prophets when they predicted a permanent Davidic ruler in Jerusalem. Isaiah 9:7 is the key Messianic passage in this regard. Both the Jewish Targum and Christian expositors recognize a reference to the Messiah "in whose days," as the Targum reads, "peace will be great over us":

There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over His kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore.<sup>88</sup>

When this magnificent Messianic prophecy (which was certainly not realized in the reign of the eighth-century B.C. King Hezekiah!) is read at the Christmas season or sung in performances of Handel's "Messiah," the false impression is gained, in the absence of clear information, that the prophecy has somehow already been fulfilled. In its biblical setting, however, it refers to the future and belongs with the petition "Thy Kingdom come" of the Lord's prayer. It is a companion prophecy to the prediction of Jeremiah:

<sup>87</sup> *Commentary on Luke*, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Isa. 9:7, NASV.

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely."<sup>89</sup>

While no Davidic king rules in Jerusalem, the main burden of Messianic prophecy remains to be fulfilled — and in "concrete" terms — as a stupendous political event which will introduce the first divine world government. Such is the staggering proposition of biblical Christianity about which the churches have fallen strangely silent.

#### X. UNBIBLICAL DEFINITIONS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The plain language of the prophets will not yield to a "religious" interpretation as the interior "kingdom of the heart" beloved by so many. The vision of the Kingdom does not mean a gradual amelioration of present governments. The earlier kingdoms of Daniel two are defined as actual political empires, starting with Babylon. It is on the ruins of these former world empires that the Messianic Kingdom will be set up. It will happen by a sudden divine intervention, causing the destruction of opposing kingdoms. The Kingdom of God in the Bible derives its meaning from this classic passage in Daniel, as well as those we have cited from Chronicles. Especially in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven, which is synonymous) has as its primary definition a world empire, centered in Jerusalem, administered by the Messiah and the saints. It is the goal of the entire divine purpose and the objective placed before every Christian believer. The outcome of history is the restoration of Eden under a new divine rule. The Kingdom of God is not a Kingdom *in* heaven or a place for departed souls at death. Nor should the Kingdom of God be reduced to a synonym for the Church.<sup>90</sup> The equation of the Kingdom with the Church has caused untold confusion.

<sup>89</sup> Jer. 23:5, 6, NASV.

<sup>90</sup> It is true that the New Testament expects that the faithful will become the Kingdom, but only after its present period of suffering. Hence it may be said that Christians have been made into a Kingdom (Rev. 1:6). They are preparing to rule (Rev. 5:10).

## XI. JESUS AS THE EXECUTIVE OF THE KINGDOM

The whole thrust of the New Testament is to present Jesus as the promised King of Israel, the Messiah and King of the Kingdom of God. The word “Christ,” which is the equivalent of the Hebrew word Messiah, is a title reserved for special human agents of God — prophets, priests, and particularly the king. The name “Jesus Christ” does not present us with a Jesus who is the son of “Mary and Joseph Christ,” as a child at Sunday School thought. “Christ” is not part of a proper name. “Jesus Christ” is equivalent to “Jesus the Christ,” i.e., Jesus the king of Israel. His full title is “the Lord Jesus Christ,” “lord” being the royal Messianic title given to kings of Israel and other human superiors. Jesus is therefore, as Luke tells us, the “Lord Messiah” or “King Messiah.”<sup>91</sup> “Lord” is the title conferred on him by the Lord God, his Father, in the immensely important prophetic oracle in Psalm 110:1. Luke also calls Jesus the “Lord’s Anointed”<sup>92</sup> (or Christ), once again linking him with Israel’s kings. It is a noteworthy fact that the later letters of Paul more frequently refer to the Savior as *Christ* Jesus, in that order, than as Jesus Christ, perhaps as a safeguard against any watering down of the rich implications of the royal word “Christ.” It may well be that Paul realized how fragile the Messianic concept could be in the hands of Gentiles unsympathetic to the heritage of Israel. Hence his insistence that Jesus is the Messiah. On that conviction Jesus had based his whole operation:

Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”<sup>93</sup>

Meaning and understanding are conveyed by words. Any alteration of the meaning of key words in a document will result in a breakdown of communication between the writer and the audience. “Jesus Christ” is the one name we cannot afford to distort, if the New Testament writers are to

<sup>91</sup> Luke 2:11. “The Lord Christ” was a recognized Jewish Messianic expression; cp. Lam. 4:20; Pss. Sol. 17:32; 18 (title); 18:7. On no account should “Lord Christ” be confused with “Lord God.” Ps. 110:1 had provided an important source for the distinction between two Lords, one of whom was Yahweh, the other the Lord Messiah.

<sup>92</sup> Luke 2:26. This title refers in the Hebrew Bible to kings of Israel.

<sup>93</sup> Matt. 16:16-18, RSV.

communicate to us effectively. The very substance of Christianity depends on a correct grasp of Christianity’s central figure. The hero of our faith was and is a Jew whose recorded words speak to us at a distance of 2,000 years. It does not take much imagination to see that the transmission of ideas over that length of time is fraught with the peril of misunderstanding. This is particularly true in the sphere of religion, which deals with controversial and abstract concepts. The human mind is all too prone to construct a “Jesus” of its own invention in keeping with its own ideals and agendas.

Consider, for example, the possibility of misinterpretation when an American and Englishman converse. Both speak the same language — or so they think. What meaning does an American derive from his colleague across the Atlantic when the latter states that he is “mad about his flat,” that “Tom and Jane have just broken up,” or that he intends to “open the bonnet and adjust the engine with his spanner”? An Englishman asking for “plasters” or “rawl plugs” in an American store may need an interpreter familiar with both versions of English. Without such help he is unlikely to obtain the desired Band-Aids and anchors.

A parallel situation in the matter of reading the Bible is obvious. One may either investigate the New Testament oneself, paying careful attention to the meaning of leading terms in their first-century context, or one may rely on the Church to tell him what the New Testament means, assuming that one’s denominational tradition accurately reflects the Scriptures. The latter course involves a considerable act of faith — faith in the Church. Many Protestants are happy to place their trust in their chosen denomination. Rather illogically, however, Protestants claim that it is the Roman Catholics who rely on the Church, while Protestants pride themselves on the idea that the Bible — *sola scriptura* — is the source of their religion. But do most Protestant churchgoers really *study* the Bible?

A useful self-test may be considered by everyone seeking to know and understand the Jesus of the Bible. What is meant by the term “Christ”? As we have seen, the word is equivalent to the king of Israel and in the case of Jesus it designates the ultimate king, heir of the promises made millennia before to Abraham and David. This is exactly what Matthew has in mind when he opens his book with the definitive statement that Jesus Christ is “the son of David, the son of Abraham.”<sup>94</sup> At once the readers know that the ancestry of Jesus is to be traced to the key figures

<sup>94</sup> Matt. 1:1, NASV.

in the history of Israel and her covenants, specifically to the royal line of David. The regal meaning of “Christ” is emphasized when Matthew speaks of “Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ [Messiah].”<sup>95</sup> In his next chapter Matthew further defines Jesus as the one “born in Bethlehem,” and “born *King of the Jews*.”<sup>96</sup> There follows an inquiry on the part of the chief priests and theologians (scribes) as to “where *the Christ* was to be born.”<sup>97</sup> An authoritative answer is provided by an inspired statement of the eighth-century prophet Micah that “out of [Bethlehem] shall come forth a Ruler, who will shepherd [i.e. be king of] My people Israel.”<sup>98</sup>

The clear political implications of the birth of the rival ruler, the Christ, pose an immediate threat to the current king of Judea, Herod. He orders the destruction of all in Bethlehem under two years old, not knowing that the Messiah’s parents have fled with their baby to Egypt. The safe return of Jesus to the land of Israel after Herod’s death is marked by the fulfillment of another Old Testament saying: “Out of Egypt I have called My Son.” The same personage who is entitled to be called Christ, king of the Jews and ruler of Israel, is now designated as the Son of God. Matthew’s quotation is taken from a verse in the prophet Hosea in which the nation of Israel is called God’s “son.”<sup>99</sup> The application of this title to Jesus is right to the point. Jesus is the Son of God in a sense parallel to the status of Israel, the chosen nation. Jesus is the chosen king of the nation, a model for every pious Israelite who also aspired to be worthy of the name “Son of God.”

From start to finish the leading player in the New Testament drama is given the technical legal titles fit for the great descendant of the house of David. Luke introduces Jesus as the heir to the throne of Israel and later contrasts him with Caesar, head of the Roman empire. The crowds, whose theology was often in advance of the religious establishment, hail Jesus as “Son of David,” the Messianic title par excellence, associating him with “the coming Kingdom of our father David.” John reports that Nathanael, the Israelite without guile, recognizes Jesus as “the Son of God, the King of Israel.” Philip adds his contribution to the portrait of Jesus by describing him as “Him of whom Moses and also the prophets

<sup>95</sup> Matt. 1:16, NASV.

<sup>96</sup> Matt. 2:1, 2, NASV.

<sup>97</sup> Matt. 2:4, NASV.

<sup>98</sup> Matt. 2:6, NASV; cp. Mic. 5:2.

<sup>99</sup> Hos. 11:1; cp. Matt. 2:15.

wrote.” The reference to Moses recalled the famous words recorded in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18: “The Lord your God will raise up a prophet for you like me [Moses] from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him . . . And I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.” At his baptism Jesus receives a divine anointing as “Son of God,” the New Testament synonym for the Messiah, reminiscent of the consecration of King David, to mark him out as the chosen vehicle of God’s activity through His Spirit. Andrew expresses his excitement at having found “the Messiah (which translated means the Christ).”<sup>100</sup>

## XII. THE MESSIANIC CLAIMS OF JESUS

On a number of occasions Jesus deliberately acts as a king, without, however, attempting to take over rulership of Israel. In Matthew 21 Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, attracting attention as at least a potentially political figure. Once again a prophecy is fulfilled. Matthew points to the words of Zechariah calling on Israel to: “Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Zion! Shout with gladness, daughter of Jerusalem! See now, your king comes to you; he is victorious, he is triumphant, humble and riding on a donkey.”<sup>101</sup>

Jesus here made a deliberate claim to kingship as the expected Messiah. His acceptance of the people’s enthusiastic accolades was proof to those who had eyes to see that he considered himself to be in every sense the rightful claimant to the throne of David. The point was not lost on the crowds, although the officials of established religion, ever conscious of the need to maintain the status quo, as well as friendly relations with Caesar, reacted disapprovingly. For Jesus, however, the episode was alive with Messianic thrill. Even inanimate rocks would have burst forth in an ecstasy of praise if the disciples had remained quiet.<sup>102</sup> No more joyful prospect could be imagined than the arrival of “the coming Kingdom of our father David.”<sup>103</sup> Jesus did nothing at all to discourage such Messianic fervor.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>100</sup> John 1:41.

<sup>101</sup> Zech. 9:9, Jerusalem Bible; cp. Matt. 21:5.

<sup>102</sup> Luke 19:40.

<sup>103</sup> Mark 11:10.

<sup>104</sup> In both Testaments those who recognize God’s chosen kings are singled out as examples of faith. In 1 Sam. 25 Abigail acknowledges the “Messiahship” of David and actually becomes his wife (see especially vv. 23, 27-33, 42).

At his trial the question of the Messiahship of Jesus is the point of contention between the authorities and Jesus. The High Priest introduces the interrogation by using the familiar equation of “Christ” and “Son of God.” Jesus affirms that he is indeed the Messiah and that they will “see the Son of Man,” which Jesus uses as an equivalent Messianic title, “sitting at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” This was an explicit claim to be the one described by Daniel as the conquering ruler of the Kingdom of God destined to replace the empires of the world at a time when the Kingdom of Heaven would “crush all these other [empires].”

The picture provided by the New Testament is a perfect portrait of the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures: a descendant of the royal house of David, invested with charismatic power through the Spirit of God and appointed eventually to overthrow the yoke of foreign domination in Israel and to bring about the restoration of the Kingdom covenanted forever to David and faithful Israel. The Messiah’s entourage, believers in Jesus as the Christ, would also include Gentiles who could become full members of the Messianic community as the true “Israel of God.”

If there is any uncertainty about the claims of Jesus among churchgoers, it is because tradition has conferred upon them a conception of Messiahship which Jesus would largely not have recognized. The Church in general has been most unwilling to accept the political implications of Jesus’ claim to Messiahship. Many are not even aware of these implications, because the impression they have gained from the Church is that Jesus was interested in what has been called a “spiritual” kingdom. Contemporary use of the epithet “spiritual” is responsible for a great deal of mischief. Besides being vague enough not to convey any definite meaning, it drives a wedge between the two concepts “spiritual” and “political” which are then thought to be incompatible. The fact is, however, that in the language and thinking of the Bible, a spiritual kingdom can at the same time be a kingdom based on a “concrete” rule by an individual located in a particular geographical place on earth.

To contest the political claims of Jesus is tantamount to resisting him as Messiah. Into this trap tradition has led many well-meaning students of Scripture, who have wanted to accept a “spiritual” Messiah but are far less enthusiastic about him as the appointed ruler of Israel in Jerusalem. A Jesus who never inherits the throne of his father David, however, is scarcely the Jesus of Nazareth of our New Testament. To reject the

political elements in the teaching of Jesus is to read the New Testament in disregard of its Jewish first-century context. With such a rejection one runs the risk of closing one’s eyes to historical fact and recreating Jesus in the image of a personal ideal. As the writers of *The Messianic Legacy* point out:

To accept Jesus as a Messiah while denying his regal and political role is simply to ignore the facts — to ignore the historical context, to ignore what the word “Messiah” meant and implied. Christians have regarded the Messiah as a non-political, wholly spiritual figure who posed no challenge to temporal authority, who had no secular or political aspirations himself . . . Biblical scholarship during the last two centuries, however, has rendered such an interpretation increasingly untenable . . . To the extent that [the Messiah’s] religious function included freeing his people from bondage, his spiritual role was also political.<sup>105</sup>

### XIII. CHRIST AND THE KINGDOM: THE COHERENT CENTER OF THE NEW TESTAMENT GOSPEL

Christians must awake to the fact that division over Jesus’ identity and message means division over the Christian Gospel. The Kingdom of God cannot remain a “nebulous term” if we hope to share the mind of Christ. Radical reformation is required if the Bible is to be expounded with clarity and the Gospel successfully proclaimed.

The cry for reform is nothing new. The 19th-century theologian Richard Rothe complained that received methods of explaining the Bible were inadequate:

Our key does not open — the right key is lost and until we are put in possession of it again our exposition will never succeed. The system of biblical ideas is not that of our schools and as long as we attempt exegesis without it, the Bible will remain a half-closed book. We must enter upon it with other conceptions than those we have been accustomed to think the only possible ones.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, Henry Lincoln, *The Messianic Legacy*, Jonathan Cape, 1986, 25.

<sup>106</sup> Richard Rothe, cited by G.N.H. Peters in *The Theocratic Kingdom*, Grand Rapids, reprinted by Kregel, 1952, Vol. 1, 21. Peters’ three-volume work on the Kingdom of God is one of the most remarkable expositions of this major biblical theme ever written.

Explaining the Christianity of Jesus apart from its roots in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants and the prophets is like trying to give an account of the history of the United States without reference to the Revolutionary War. God's contracts with Abraham and David are the great landmarks in the history of Israel. They are the definitive moments in the biblical story, revealing the divine plan in its progressive stages and pointing forward to a marvelous outcome to world history. The Christianity of Christ and the New Testament grows out of those two momentous episodes in the life of Israel. Both form the substratum of Jesus' announcement of the coming Kingdom of God, which is the essence of his commission as Messiah of that Kingdom. When Jesus, and later the Apostles, preached, they assumed an understanding that the career of Jesus (thus far his birth, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension) brings these covenants forward towards their yet future ultimate fulfillment. New Testament writers take for granted that the content of the promises made to the patriarchs (the true "Church Fathers") is common knowledge: namely that God has guaranteed a permanent possession of the land to Abraham and those who share his faith, and an endless future for the royal house of David when Jesus is installed as king in Jerusalem. As long as these promises remain unfulfilled, as they obviously are, they stand forth as the great objects of Christian faith and hope. A longing for their realization on earth, in accordance with the Lord's prayer, "Thy Kingdom come!" should be the inspiration of every Christian as well as the substance of all Gospel preaching.

#### AFTERWORD

### The Challenge To Believe in Hebrew Prophecy

It was the beautiful dream of Hebrew prophecy that in the latter days the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of the Messiah, should overlap the bounds of human empires, and ultimately cover the whole earth . . . Prophecy was never weary of telling of the Golden Age she saw in the far future, when the shadows would lift and the new Dawn would steal over the whole world . . . It is not unlikely that the term Kingdom of God was one of the current phrases of the times, a golden casket holding within it the dream of a restored Hebraism.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Henry Burton, *Expositor's Bible, St. Luke*, A.C. Armstrong, 1896, 251.

The prophets' forecast of a future golden age is essential to our understanding of the Christian Gospel. When Jesus commanded repentance and belief in the Good News about the Kingdom of God,<sup>108</sup> his message contained far more than the promise of forgiveness of sins. He demanded belief in the God of history and intelligent faith in His plan destined to find its climax in the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. We are commanded to "repent," i.e., change our entire outlook, and "believe the Good News of the Kingdom" — believe in the plan that God is working out for the benefit of the world through Jesus. Our commitment to this plan will ensure that we make every effort to gain a place in the Kingdom. Compliance with the divine program for the rescue of mankind enables us to come under divine protection. Acceptance of the Gospel shields us against the future wrath of God. As Paul put it, "We shall be saved from His wrath."<sup>109</sup> Salvation in the New Testament is frequently thought of as future: "Salvation is now nearer than when we first believed."<sup>110</sup>

An obedient response to the Good News about the Kingdom obviously entails an understanding of the meaning of the word "Kingdom." One cannot believe Good News about something which one does not understand! What, then, is this Good News? A number of fundamental texts from the Hebrew Bible lie behind Jesus' use of the term "Kingdom of God." On these texts the expectation of the Kingdom of God is built. We must insist that the Good News embraced information about a coming world government, with Jesus as its chief executive, and about how we must respond by preparing ourselves for its arrival. Though terms like "government" and "executive" may have negative connotations for us who have witnessed the misuse of authority, nevertheless the biblical promise is of justice and peace on earth under the benign rule of the Messiah. And who does not yearn for peace and justice in the affairs of man?

<sup>108</sup> Mark 1:14, 15.

<sup>109</sup> Rom. 5:9.

<sup>110</sup> Rom. 13:11.