

The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Tradition*

Part Two

RICHARD H. HIERS

III. HOW SCHOLARS HAVE DISPOSED OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF JESUS' VIEW OF THE KINGDOM

Perhaps the simplest method is that demonstrated in B. H. Branscomb, *The Teaching of Jesus*. Here the author simply ignores the eschatological evidence, and so finds no difficulty in presenting Jesus as founder of the “Kingdom of the heart,” a moral philosopher enunciating virtues and great principles for all generations to come. Various writers, such as C. H. Dodd, strategically bypass inconvenient Synoptic texts; for instance, Dodd nowhere accounts for Matthew 10:23 or Luke 10:12.¹ T. W. Manson ignores a whole series of passages that are contrary to his thesis that in the latter phase of his ministry Jesus thought in terms of “realized eschatology.”² Karl Adam notes that the eschatological interpretation makes much of Mark 9:1, 13:30, and parallels, and promises “an unprejudiced evaluation” of these texts, but then never mentions them

* Reprinted, with minor revisions, from *The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Tradition* (Introduction and Chapter 1), 1970. Used by permission of the University of Florida Press.

¹ See Gösta Lundström, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, Richmond, 1963, 121.

² For instance, Mark 10:23; 14:25 (= Luke 22:18); Luke 10:9, 11; 12:35-48; 19:11-26.

again.³ But usually, as in the case of Dodd and Manson, this method is relied upon only in conjunction with other, more sophisticated methods.

E. F. Scott presents a variation: in his earliest study of Synoptic eschatology, *The Kingdom and the Messiah*, he was still under the influence of Schweitzer's view that for Jesus the Kingdom of God was entirely future and imminent; but in his later books, he seems to have forgotten (though he does not explicitly repudiate) that understanding, and therefore feels free to describe Jesus as the teacher of permanently valid moral principles, who meant by the term "Kingdom of God" only the life of "inward fellowship with God."⁴

Another method is to suggest that some, at least, of the eschatological sayings attributed to Jesus were really put into his mouth by the early church or the evangelists. An early example of this position is George B. Stevens of Yale University, who notes the tendency of preachers and exegetes to evade the plain eschatological meaning of the Synoptic texts: "One can only wonder whether [this procedure] could ever have obtained the consent and advocacy of candid men in any other realm than that of theology."⁵ But then Stevens goes on to claim that this plain eschatological teaching was improperly attributed to Jesus by the apostolic church. Few critics attempt to attribute *all* of the eschatological passages to the church, but some, for instance Hans Windisch and C. H. Dodd, intimate that quite a number of them may be eliminated in this manner.⁶ It is interesting to notice that a Roman Catholic writer may feel that he is denied this option.

The most immediate explanation of this difficulty would be that the Evangelists, imprisoned in the errors of their age, had read their own false views into Jesus' words; it might be assumed that the error was not the Lord's doing, but the Evangelists'. But this interpretation cannot be reconciled with the dogma of inspiration.⁷

One can appreciate the dilemma of the scholar who wishes to undertake an "unprejudiced evaluation" of the text, but within the limits set by the

³ *The Christ of Faith*, New York, 1960, 314.

⁴ *The Kingdom of God in the New Testament*, New York, 1931, 186.

⁵ "Is There a Self-consistent New Testament Eschatology?" *American Journal of Theology* 6 (1902), 67.

⁶ Windisch, *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount*, Philadelphia, 1950, 26; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed., New York, 1961, 138 ff.

⁷ Adam, 320.

dogma of an infallible Jesus on one hand, and that of an infallible Bible on the other.

A different line of interpretation is followed by those who state, in effect, that Jesus talked in terms of the eschatological ideas of his contemporaries, but only out of deference to their limited understanding, and that in fact he actually meant something else. This method assumes that Jesus did not really share the eschatological outlook of his contemporaries, but used its terminology to convey to them fragments of truth which they were incapable of understanding in noneschatological categories. Thus E. F. Scott speaks of Jesus' eschatological language as a "vehicle" for his thought. This language was only symbolic, "little more than figurative." "Yet in the last resort (Jesus) has broken with the apocalyptic view," and really understood the Kingdom of God as "a fact of the inward life," or "fellowship with God."⁸

C. H. Dodd describes Jesus' eschatological imagery as intended only to symbolize "the moral universe," or "the eternal realities," or an "order beyond space and time."⁹ Amos Wilder speaks of Jesus' references to the eschatological Kingdom of God as "stylistic," or symbolic of "ineffable" realities, or as intended to dramatize his message to "simple people."¹⁰ Even Bultmann, who usually gives the impression of knowing better, sometimes describes Jesus as having been *first* an existentialist preacher of the Will of God, and only afterwards an eschatologist. Eschatology was only "mythology," the "garments" in which "the real meaning in Jesus' teaching finds its outward expression," viz., "that man *now* stands under the necessity of decision, that his 'Now' is always for him the last hour."¹¹

Bultmann reveals his failure to comprehend the reality and significance for Jesus of the coming eschatological event in his embarrassment over the theological or moral problem of eschatological "rewards" in

⁸ *Kingdom of God*, 82, 95; cf. 110.

⁹ *The Gospel in the New Testament*, London, n.d., 29; *Parables*, 40, 83. For a critique of Dodd see C. C. McCown, "Symbolic Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63 (1944), 335-38.

¹⁰ *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus*, New York, 1950, 60, 89, 113. For appraisal of Wilder, see C. Freeman Sleeper, "Some American Contributions to New Testament Interpretation," *Interpretation* 20 (1966), 329-37.

¹¹ *Jesus and the Word*, New York, 1958, 55 ff., 131; "Jesus and Paul," in *Existence and Faith*, New York, 1960, 186. See also Paul Schubert, "The Synoptic Gospels and Eschatology," *Journal of the Bible and Religion* 14 (1946), 156.

Jesus' teaching. Bultmann writes as if there were something extraneous or unseemly (at any rate, un-Lutheran) about Jesus' attaching the promise (or threat) of eschatological rewards (or punishment) to his proclamation of God's demand for radical obedience.¹² He fails to grasp that if Jesus really believed that the Kingdom of God, the Son of man, and the Judgment were near — whether in a few weeks or a few years — it would not have been a question of “rewards,” but of responding in the face of this decisive event in such a way as to have some hope of surviving Judgment and entering the Kingdom. This Kingdom is coming. Will men be found penitent, faithful, fit for entering it? Bultmann puts the cart before the horse when he describes Jesus as demanding radical obedience and *then*, in order to motivate compliance with this radical ethic of neighbor-love, adding the sanctions of rewards and punishments. Bultmann falls into the trap described by Schweitzer in 1901: “So long as one starts with the ethics and seeks to comprehend the eschatology as something adventitious, there appears to be no organic connection between the two.”¹³ Wilder's distinction between “formal” and “essential” sanctions similarly begins with Jesus' ethics, but ends in a disjunction between ethics and eschatology.

Several writers feel that the eschatological interpretation — and with it, presumably, the eschatological passages it explains — should be disposed of more emphatically. The tone is that of indignation. The method is that of sarcasm or *reductio ad absurdum*. The presupposition is that Jesus had divine foreknowledge of the future, or, at any rate, was not so unreasonable (i.e., so unlike us) as actually to have “swallowed uncritically the contents of the Jewish messianic hope.”¹⁴ “Even if Jesus used at times some of the imagery of the apocalyptists, and even though he shares some of their underlying ideas, yet he never identified the Kingdom of God with any of these *dreams*.”¹⁵ Jesus could not possibly have been guided by what to us is so obviously a “fantastic delusion.”¹⁶

¹² *Jesus and the Word*, 79, 121; *Theology of the New Testament*, New York, 1954, 14 ff.

¹³ *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, New York, 1950, 51 ff.

¹⁴ T.W. Manson, “Realized Eschatology and the Messianic Secret,” in G. E. Nineham, ed., *Studies in the Gospels*, Oxford, 1955, 210.

¹⁵ Dodd, *Gospel*, 19 (emphasis mine).

¹⁶ Adam, 67. See the review of such interpretations in Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, Philadelphia, 1963, 51, 150.

Nothing about the Sermon on the Mount has the “burning odor of the cosmic catastrophe,” writes Bornkamm.¹⁷ Schweitzer is often accused of having described Jesus as “fanatical” or “deluded”;¹⁸ hence his interpretation can be readily dismissed, since Jesus, whether seen from the perspective of conservative or liberal theology, *of course*, was not deluded! Schweitzer nowhere describes Jesus as a fanatic or “deluded,” however, and in his M.D. dissertation, *Die psychiatrische Beurteilung Jesu*, points out numerous fundamental errors, both historical-critical and psychoanalytical, in certain interpretations which so described Jesus.

Another method used in attacking the eschatological meaning can be designated simply as devious or forced exegesis. For example, Herman Ridderbos, noting the unfavorable connotation of the term “this generation,” concludes, speaking of Mark 13:30 and parallels, that “we *must not* attribute a temporal meaning” to these words, but rather “must conceive of it” as referring to people of any age whose “disposition and frame of mind . . . are averse to Jesus and his words.” Similarly, he argues that Matthew 23:39 (Luke 13:35) and Mark 14:62 (Matt. 26:64) are to be thought of as addressed to the Jewish people and their leaders generally, “without inferring . . . that the latter would witness the *parousia* of the Son of Man before their deaths.”¹⁹

A classic example of devious exegesis is C. H. Dodd’s proposed translation and interpretation of Mark 9:1. “The bystanders are not promised that they shall see the Kingdom of God *coming*, but that they shall come to see that the Kingdom of God *has already come*, at some point before they became aware of it.”²⁰ Perrin furnishes a similar instance of eisegesis: of the petition “Thy Kingdom come,” he writes:

we must remember that those who are being taught to use this petition are those for whom the Kingdom is already a matter of

¹⁷ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, London, 1960, 223. See Leander E. Keck’s excellent criticism, “Bornkamm’s *Jesus of Nazareth Revisited*,” *Journal of Religion* 49 (1969), esp. 11 ff.

¹⁸ E.g., Hugh Anderson, “The Historical Jesus and the Origins of Christianity,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 13 (1960), 13; James Kallas, *Jesus and the Power of Satan*, Philadelphia, 1968, 69; Howard C. Kee, *Jesus in History*, New York, 1970, 17 ff.

¹⁹ *The Coming of the Kingdom*, Philadelphia, 1962, 502 ff.

²⁰ *Parables*, 37, fn. 1. This interpretation is reflected in the NEB’s translation of Mark 9:1. NEB translators also show a penchant for realized eschatology in rendering several other verses, e.g., Matt. 12:28 = Luke 11:20; Mark 1:15; Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 21:31; Luke 17:21. The director of the NEB Committee was C.H. Dodd!

personal experience. They are therefore either being taught to pray that others may share this experience; or, more probably, they are being taught to pray for the consummation of that which has begun within their experience.²¹

A more subtle type of methodology is pursued by most of the more recent NT critics, who concede that Jesus both talked eschatologically and really meant what he said; and yet, in one way or another, they undertake to show that Jesus really meant something else *as well* in speaking of the Kingdom, and that the modern reader should pay attention only to that something else. Tacitly they permit the eschatological Kingdom of God to fall into the background, and, if possible, drop completely out of sight.

Harnack develops the prototype of this method in his *Das Wesen des Christentums*.²² Jesus did share the eschatological outlook of his contemporaries, Harnack admits, but at the same time held a radically different notion about the essential meaning of the Kingdom of God. To him, it really meant personal religious experience: "God and the soul; the soul and its God," the "Rule of God in the hearts of men." How did Jesus manage to hold such irreconcilable notions simultaneously? Harnack's answer was straightforward if incredible: Jesus simply failed to perceive the contradiction, though it is obvious to us. We should think only of what was "peculiar" or essential in Jesus' message, and forget the "dramatic" and "external" aspects which he "simply shared with his contemporaries." "From this point of view," the eschatological understanding of the Kingdom of God "has *vanished*."²³ The essence of this procedure is to permit one's eyes to focus only upon the noneschatological meaning attributed to Jesus' words about the Kingdom of God. After a while one will hardly even notice the theologically inconvenient, eschatological Kingdom of God. It simply vanishes, or "pales into insignificance."²⁴

Hans Windisch utilizes this kind of methodology in his study on *The Sermon on the Mount*. He grants that Jesus expected the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. But at the same time, Windisch points to a class of proverbial or "wisdom" sayings of Jesus, which make no explicit reference to impending eschatological events. These sayings

²¹ *Kingdom of God*, 193.

²² English translation, *What Is Christianity?* New York, 1957.

²³ *Ibid.*, 54 ff. (emphasis mine).

²⁴ Adam, *The Christ of Faith*, 316. Though a conservative Catholic theologian, Adam's treatment of Jesus' eschatological understanding often resembles Harnack's.

were not conditioned by Jesus' eschatological outlook, and so are to be regarded, along with such other sayings as can be freed from the eschatological context, as *laws* to be obeyed literally by Christians in all ages. Windisch does not even find any particular difficulty in regarding the eschatologically conditioned sayings as laws for the modern Christian life. Jesus may have meant them for his own generation in the interim before the coming of the Kingdom of God; but Windisch does not hesitate to regard them as intended for the modern Christian as well.²⁵ Windisch then poses for himself the artificial task of constructing from various "hints" contained in the Sermon on the Mount a theory as to how Christians, who are required by Jesus to obey his impossible laws, may nevertheless hope for salvation. In effect, he ignores the eschatological context of Jesus' sayings, both by isolating certain noneschatological sayings, and by regarding all the others as well as "intended for" the present age. He sees Jesus as the giver of eternally valid *laws*, whereas Harnack sees him as the discoverer and advocate of certain timeless or eternally valid ideas or values. The methodology, however, is substantially the same.

Rather than maintain that Jesus held simultaneously that the Kingdom of God was future and imminent, and at the same time present and immanent, T. W. Manson suggests that during the early part of his ministry, Jesus thought of it as future; but then, after Peter's recognizing him at Caesarea Philippi as the Christ, Jesus began to speak of it as present, both in his own person and ministry and as the "Reign of God," a "personal relation between God and the individual" which men could enter at any time, rather than as an event or place in time or space.²⁶ But Manson can maintain his two-phase theory only by ignoring the numerous references to the future and imminent appearance of the Kingdom of God which are to be found in the Synoptic tradition *following* Caesarea Philippi.

Furthermore, Manson is unwilling to permit the conclusion that Jesus could actually have been mistaken in proclaiming the Kingdom of God as a coming eschatological event even during the early part of his ministry, and often writes as if Jesus regarded the Kingdom of God as present throughout the whole of his ministry.

Amos Wilder, like Harnack and Manson, proposes that Jesus regarded the Kingdom of God both as a future eschatological event, and as present

²⁵ *Sermon on the Mount*, 101, 172 ff.

²⁶ *The Teaching of Jesus*, Cambridge, 1951, 124-29, 135.

in his own person and ministry. And like theirs, Wilder's "both-and" is ultimately reduced to an "either-or": he quietly forgets about the future-eschatological conception, and leaves the reader, in the final analysis, with only realized eschatology. "Interim ethics" is eliminated in favor of "the ethics of the realized Kingdom of God."

Perhaps the most popular recent variation on Harnack's methodology for disposing of Jesus' futuristic eschatological outlook proceeds with the assertion that, for Jesus, time had no real significance. It is not surprising to find the British Platonist proponent of realized eschatology, C. H. Dodd, arguing:

There is no coming of the Son of Man in history 'after' His coming in Galilee and Jerusalem, whether soon or late, for there is no before and after in the eternal order. The Kingdom of God in its full reality is not something which will happen after other things have happened.²⁷

It is strange that Bultmann describes Jesus as maintaining that the necessity of decision is the "essential characteristic" of humanity, that "every hour is the last hour." This being the case, "we can understand that for Jesus the whole contemporary mythology is pressed into the service of this conception of human existence."²⁸ Other theologians, including Hans Conzelmann, have followed Bultmann's lead in trying to eliminate the category of time (and thus also futuristic eschatology) from Jesus' outlook.²⁹

Another recent statement of this position is provided by Heinz Zahrnt:

So closely is the coming of the Kingdom of God bound up with the appearance of Jesus that there is 'no more time' between his present proclamation and the final dawning of the Kingdom. There is no room for any further event or any other saving figure.³⁰

From this perspective, one might say with Harnack, the eschatological understanding "has vanished." But however worthy the motives of these

²⁷ *Parables*, 83.

²⁸ *Jesus and the Word*, 51 ff.

²⁹ E.g., Hans Conzelmann, "Jesus Christus," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* III (1959), 644. See Lundström, *Kingdom of God*, 127 ff.

³⁰ *The Historical Jesus*, New York, 1963, 113.

interpreters may be, their declaration that for Jesus and his disciples time had no meaning is guided entirely by dogmatic considerations and is not supported by the Synoptic evidence.

The fact that many of the recent studies in Synoptic eschatology generally tend toward the elimination or de-emphasizing of the eschatological Kingdom of God is a sure sign of dogmatic interest. The studies by Kümmel, Ridderbos, Lundström, Perrin, and Ladd are, for the most part, straightforward, historical-critical examinations of the Synoptic evidence and extremely useful critical summaries of the ways in which it has been interpreted since Weiss' monumental volume appeared in 1892. All five find that some of the Synoptic texts unmistakably show that Jesus thought of the Kingdom of God as a future eschatological event, but that other Synoptic passages point toward the conclusion that Jesus *also* thought of the Kingdom of God as in some sense already present. There is nothing devious in the methodology of these recent studies up to this point.

But then toward the last chapter or in the last part of a decisive chapter³¹ even these writers begin to intimate that the significance of Jesus' teaching should, after all, be seen primarily in the sense of its present reality. Here, the significance perceived seems to vary directly with the theological and philosophical commitments of the interpreter. For Ridderbos, Jesus' conception of the present Kingdom of God comes out inextricably associated with Christology;³² for Perrin, with "religious experience."³³ It has been noted that for Bultmann, Jesus' eschatological preaching comes down to the proclamation of the eternal "Now" of decision.

In terms of methodology, many of the studies written since 1990 have shown little improvement over Harnack's. True, they do not suppose that the eschatological interpretation and evidence can be disposed of as quickly or completely as Harnack did. What is basically different is that

³¹ W.G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfillment*, Studies in Biblical Theology no. 23, London, 1957, 151-55; Perrin, *Kingdom of God*, 185 ff.; Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom*, 144, 213. Even Lundström, who insists that "The Kingdom of God is absolutely eschatological" and that its "purely future quality . . . should be clearly emphasized" (*Kingdom of God*, 232 ff.), concludes that for Jesus and the faithful who see it concentrated but hidden in Jesus, his sayings and miracles, the Kingdom of God has *come*. What is yet to come is not the Kingdom of God, but its "power and glory" (234 ff., 238).

³² *Coming of the Kingdom*, xxv, 76, 127, 230, 232, 527.

³³ *Kingdom of God*, 186, 190 ff., 203.

instead of seeing a Protestant “liberal” face at the bottom of the well of history, each sees in the historical Jesus the reflection of his own particular theological milieu: Manson and Dodd, a benign (British) Platonic moralist; Ridderbos, a moderately conservative (Dutch) Evangelical Christologist; Bultmann, a (Lutheran) existentialist moral theologian. Everyone forces the Kingdom of God violently into his own theological tradition.

The fundamental methodological error in a great many studies of Synoptic eschatology in this century has been to begin and proceed with the assumption — sometimes perhaps not even recognized — that one must, somehow or other, *dispose* of the evidence that Jesus thought and spoke of the Kingdom of God as a coming eschatological event.³⁴ A variety of devious procedures, calculated in some way or another to eliminate or obscure the eschatological character of Jesus’ preaching and outlook, seem to follow inevitably in the wake of this basic a priori error. This error itself seems to stem from two sources. On the one hand, there is the desire to avoid the theological difficulties (whether for liberal or conservative faith) supposedly inherent in the eschatological interpretation: for instance, the possibility that Jesus was limited or mistaken in his knowledge of the future course of history, that he might *not* have intended his teaching as a series of ethical principles or ideals for the guidance of men during all following centuries, or his church as a permanent institution. Since Jesus’ teaching and his church are perceived by the Christian to be sources of direction for the life of the Christian community today, it seems much more reasonable to suppose that Jesus intended them to be so.

A second source of error seems to arise out of the desire to achieve a consistent or unitary, rather than an equivocal, conclusion to the question. Since the proponents of the view that Jesus thought of the Kingdom of God as both future event *and* present reality have nothing very satisfactory to suggest by way of explaining how the Kingdom of God could have been for Jesus both present and *at the same time* future, it seems more reasonable or logical to retain the one and explain away the other (or simply forget about it). Thus the methodologically sound “both-and” is

³⁴ There have been notable exceptions, of course: besides Weiss and Schweitzer, there are Walter E. Bundy, Millar Burrows, Martin Dibelius, Morton S. Enslin, Robert M. Grant, Erich Grässer, A. H. M’Neile, W. Manson, and Krister Stendahl, to name only some of the most prominent.

reduced to the seemingly logical or more consistent present or realized eschatology by an act of legerdemain.³⁵ It is significant that what is usually disposed of is the theologically embarrassing *futuristic* evidence, while the relatively scanty and problematical evidence which might be construed in favor of “realized” eschatology is given full play.

What is suggested here is only the obvious: the need for distinguishing between the historical-critical task of describing Jesus’ conception of the Kingdom of God, and the theological task of interpreting the difficulties raised by historical criticism and indicating the way or ways in which the Jesus of history, his ideas, words and deeds, may mean something for the life of faith in the modern world. When the critical task is carried out with too much concern for the theological difficulties that may result, the temptation arises to make the theological task less difficult by eliminating — through seemingly critical analysis — some of the offending evidence.

It may be implied here that theology has some unfinished business on its agenda: it has yet to come to terms with the implications of Jesus’ eschatological beliefs, message, and activity for contemporary faith and ethics. But that is another assignment. Here it is our hope that by asking the right questions — based on the assumptions of the first century rather than our own — we can at least recognize the intention and meaning of these traditions for those who first gave them currency.

³⁵ Of those critics who maintain a “both-and” position, Kümmel does so most successfully: *Promise and Fulfillment*; “Futuristic and Realized Eschatology in the Earliest Stages of Christianity,” *Journal of Religion* 43 (1963), 303-14. But the precise sense in which Kümmel understands Jesus to have thought the Kingdom present is unclear. This difficulty obtains also in Bornkamm, *Jesus*, and Zahrnt, *Historical Jesus*. Balance is maintained fairly well also by Floyd V. Filson, “The Kingdom; Present and Future,” *Journal of the Bible and Religion* 7 (1939), 59-63, and Rudolf Otto, *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*, London, 1943.