

# THE OPENNESS OF THE KINGDOM: THE GOSPEL OF THE IMMINENT FULFILLMENT OF THE DAVIDIC PROMISES

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“The time is filled up and the Kingdom of God is almost here;  
repent and believe in the good news!” (Mark 1:15)

## Introduction

Thousands of Christians have struggled with Jesus’ proclamation and apparent expectation that the end of the evil age was imminently drawing near. According to Jesus, it was on the horizon, and seemed likely to appear at any moment. In fact, it was the *nearness* of the kingdom of God that was *the* gospel he preached. The good news of Jesus concerned the *timing* of the kingdom, not necessarily that a kingdom would come. Although second-Temple period Jews had a wide array of ideas about the Messianic age, there was a far-reaching overarching anticipation that such an age would come.

So what happened? Didn’t Jesus tell his disciples, “For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matt 10:23)?<sup>1</sup> Many have suggested that the kingdom came spiritually,<sup>2</sup> and others that the kingdom came in the form of an established Christian church. Still others maintain that some unidentifiable form of the kingdom actually came; yet there is more to come. I propose that the fulfillment or realization of Jesus’ heralded kingdom<sup>3</sup> was contingent upon the repentance of the Israelite people

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most free-thinking and prolific scholars today, Bart Ehrman argues that the earliest and most reliable strata of information we have in the Gospels, namely, but not exclusively, the Gospel of Mark, records Jesus as one who expected the “Son of Man” to be someone other than himself, a cosmic judge of sorts who would bring the kingdom of God. See Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, Oxford University Press, 1999, 145-148.

<sup>2</sup> This word is used in so many different ways at present that it has almost no identifiable meaning.

<sup>3</sup> Although I believe the kingdom to be a literal, physical, earthly establishment of a Davidic king, ruling/governing an Israelite people, extending out from the city of Jerusalem, I also acknowledge that kings were anointed sometimes long before being

and thereby acceptance of his message, a conditional kingdom only for a prepared and primed people.<sup>4</sup> In suggesting that Israel's rejection of Jesus delayed the kingdom's establishment at that time in history, we are able to see Jesus in line with many other prophets of old who proclaimed a message of blessing or cursing from God, which was often, if not every time, conditioned upon reactions and responses of the people.

### **Conceptual Confusions about the Gospel**

Churches typically overlook Jesus' gospel altogether. Rarely is Jesus even seen as one who preached the gospel. He is usually seen as the *content* of the gospel, the one who ought to be preached. Masses have been influenced by Billy Graham, whose association published tracts saying that Jesus "came to do three days' work."<sup>5</sup> That is, "He came not primarily to preach the Gospel...but He came rather that there might be a Gospel to preach."<sup>6</sup> Immensely popular writers and radio pastors like D. James Kennedy have made statements like, "Many people think that the essence of Christianity is Jesus' teachings, but that is not so...Christianity centers not in the teachings of Jesus, but in the Person of Jesus as Incarnate God who came into the world to take upon Himself our guilt and die

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enthroned. Along these lines, King Jesus seemed to be gathering for himself a kingdom, that is a renewed and purified people of God, a true Israel, a penitent group of Jews who would constitute a godly remnant. In this manner, the kingdom can be said to be present. This is cryptic at best and would not have been understood easily. This perspective does not deny that in its truest, purest and most natural form, the kingdom of God evokes images of prosperity, long life, peace, justice, and joy. Jesus even added or illuminated the idea of resurrection of the dead and immortality.

<sup>4</sup> Upon further reflection, it seems that it was the leadership of Israel that primarily rejected Jesus and his message. The ordinary people, like sheep, followed the shepherds and gate keepers of Israel, and some were virtually prevented from joining the kingdom movement. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for this very thing: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to" (Matt 23:22, NIV).

<sup>5</sup> Tract put out by The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association in 1980 as quoted in Anthony Buzzard, *Our Fathers Who Aren't in Heaven: The Forgotten Christianity of Jesus, the Jew*, Restoration Fellowship, 1999, 349.

<sup>6</sup> Buzzard, *Our Fathers Who Aren't in Heaven*, 349. These statements by Graham's association are extremely difficult to reconcile with passages such as "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent" (Luke 4:43; see also Mark 1:38).

in our place.”<sup>7</sup> Sentiments and statements like these have had a deep, profound and lasting effect upon the Christian perspective, psyche, and culture.

I have yet to come across an average churchgoing Christian who is even aware that Jesus and his disciples were preaching a gospel that was very different from the one they hear on Sunday mornings and read about in gospel tracts.<sup>8</sup> Upon being asked to articulate their understanding of the “gospel of Jesus Christ,” many simply say something about God’s love and that Jesus died for their sins and rose again. Salvation by grace alone through faith alone by Christ alone is sometimes presented as the good news.<sup>9</sup> Many scholars have widely differing accounts of what the gospel of Jesus concerns.<sup>10</sup>

### Avoiding Anachronisms

I am not saying that the resurrection of Jesus isn’t good news; in fact, it seems that the resurrection validated and vindicated the rejected, maligned, and crucified Jesus, confirming that he actually was the Son of God,<sup>11</sup> that is, the king of the kingdom he proclaimed (Rom. 1:4).

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<sup>7</sup> D. James Kennedy, “How I Know Jesus Is God,” *Truths that Transform*, Nov. 1989, as quoted by Buzzard, *Our Fathers Who Aren’t in Heaven*, 348.

<sup>8</sup> It is immensely difficult to find a gospel tract that even mentions the kingdom of God, let alone explains and discusses what that means.

<sup>9</sup> This is especially true in the Reformed tradition (i.e., those emphasizing Protestant Reformation tenets).

<sup>10</sup> In terms of the scholarly world, Jesus’ gospel usually reflects the type of Jesus that is found in the particular study. Bart Ehrman notes, “Very few people who devote their lives to studying the historical Jesus actually *want* to find a Jesus who is completely removed from our own time. What people want — especially when dealing with such potentially dry matters as history and such potentially inflammatory matters as religion — is *relevance*. If Jesus was completely a man of his own time, with a worldview and a message totally out of sync with our own materialist, postcolonialist, secular-humanist, or whatever-ist society, then he may be an interesting historical figure, but he is scarcely relevant (or so it’s commonly thought) to the issues and concerns people need to confront today. And so it’s no wonder that some scholars — who are human after all — want to make Jesus into something else — a proto-feminist, for example, or a Neo-Marxist, or a countercultural cynic” (Ehrman, *Jesus*, 127).

<sup>11</sup> Colin Brown, editor of the *New International Dictionary of Theology*, says, “Indeed, to be a ‘son of God’ one has to be a being who is *not* God! It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God’s representative, God’s vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God’s son” (Colin Brown, “Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Ex Auditu*, 1991, 88). In this same article, Brown points out that the term son of God is also used of the Israelite nation (Exod. 4:22), angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Gen. 6:2, 4), Adam (Luke 3:38), and kings (Ps. 2:6-8; 89:26-27; 2 Sam. 7:14).

We ought to be careful to speak of the story as it happened, rather than place our current knowledge and concepts of what happened later onto the historical Jesus. Bart Ehrman pointedly remarks, “obviously Jesus wouldn’t be urging people to believe in his own death and resurrection when he had just started his ministry.”<sup>12</sup> When we are careful to rightly understand Jesus’ eschatological message within his own time period, we will be more apt to understand the early church’s message and therefore begin to develop a message that will be more truthful and accurate to the historical narrative.

### **What Is the Nature of the Kingdom that Jesus Proclaimed?**

Although there is widespread misunderstanding and even confusion about what Jesus meant by the coming kingdom of God, I think Ehrman makes some critical observations that are worth noting.

For one thing, almost all scholars today would agree that when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, he is *not* referring to “heaven” — in the sense of the place that your soul goes, God willing, when you die. To be sure, the Kingdom of God has *some* relationship to “heaven” as the place where God is enthroned; but when Jesus talks about the Kingdom, he appears to refer principally to something here on earth — where God will at some point *begin* to rule as he already *does* rule up above. This is in full keeping with the Jewish background to Jesus’ life and thought.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to remember that the hope of Israel and the promises of God have always been that God would dwell in their midst, *not* vice versa. “I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever” (Ezek 37:26-28, NIV).

Probably echoing this very passage, a loud voice from the throne in John’s Apocalypse is heard saying; “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3, NIV).

In terms of the physicality of the kingdom and the reign of God, Ehrman contends:

[Jesus] does not appear to be thinking in purely symbolic terms about God becoming the ruler of your heart. For he often describes the Kingdom with graphically tactile language. Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God “coming in power,” about people “entering into” the Kingdom, about people “eating and drinking in the Kingdom” with the

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<sup>12</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus*, 142.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Jewish ancestors, about his disciples serving as “rulers” of the Kingdom, sitting on actual “thrones” in the royal court.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus regularly speaks in common, ordinary language that would lead the majority in his day to imagine, visualize, and dream of a physical, earthly, and literal kingdom to be established in Israel. “Truly I say to you, in the renewed world, when the Son of Man is sitting on the throne of his glory, you [disciples] also will be seated on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28; cf. Luke 22:30).<sup>15</sup> And again, “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth,<sup>16</sup> when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from the east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God” (Q: Luke 13:23-29; Matt 8:11-12).

References such as these are scattered throughout the earliest records. George Eldon Ladd comments, quoting Charles Feinberg to drive the point home:

The kingdom of heaven must have reference to the kingdom which the Jews in particular expected, the kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament, the earthly Davidic kingdom. Dr. Feinberg affirms: “There is no explanation offered as to the meaning of the ‘kingdom’ in [John the Baptist’s] message, for the people knew what was implied by his words...There was no need to describe the conditions and characteristics of the kingdom, for that had been done so repeatedly and minutely. Nor was it necessary to inform them that the kingdom could not and would not be established without the rightful King...Nor does Christ explain what is meant by these words; his hearers knew full well their import.<sup>17</sup> How unwarranted is the assertion, then, of those who find that Christ’s

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 143

<sup>16</sup> Many have taken words such as these to mean that some will experience torment, agony and red-hot pain for all eternity in the flames of hell, whereas the context and other biblical data tell a different story. Some Jews will be *angry* (gnashing of teeth) when they are excluded from the kingdom while the Gentiles are welcomed to the Messianic banquet. For the background and context of this Hebraism, see Job 16:9; Ps. 35:16; 37:12; 112:10; Lam. 2:16 and Acts 7:54.

<sup>17</sup> Along this same line of thought, N.T. Wright remarks, “Israel would at last ‘return from exile’; evil would be defeated; YHWH would at last return to ‘visit’ his people. Anyone wishing to evoke and affirm all this at once, in first-century Palestine, could not have chosen a more appropriate and ready-made slogan than ‘kingdom of God’” (N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, 227).

ideas and conceptions of the kingdom involved something far removed from the thought of his hearers.”<sup>18</sup>

Using a different approach to determine the character of Jesus’ message and ministry, Bart Ehrman argues persuasively that, since Jesus’ ministry began with his association with the one who was to prepare the way of the LORD,<sup>19</sup> the apocalyptic prophet John the Baptist,<sup>20</sup> and ended with a community of apocalyptic Jews who believed in Jesus,<sup>21</sup> we then have the key to understanding what happened in between.<sup>22</sup> Ehrman asks, “How could both the beginning and the end be apocalyptic if the middle was not as well?”<sup>23</sup>

Since this article is primarily to propose that the literal kingdom was actually postponed since the majority of Israelites did not repent to prepare for it, I cannot go into great length to argue the nature or character of the kingdom — whether the kingdom is literal or figurative, physical or spiritual, on earth or in heaven. It does seem striking to me that many along with N.T. Wright argue that Jesus redefined the kingdom of God.<sup>24</sup> In his monumental work *Jesus and the Victory*

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<sup>18</sup> George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God: The Sixth Annual Mid-Year Lectures of 1952 Delivered at Western Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary of Portland, Oregon*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952, 112.

<sup>19</sup> N.T. Wright has popularized what has been called “Exile Theology.” This notion probably best makes sense of John the Baptist being the one who prepares the way of YHWH. After cataloging an impressively long list of quotations from the Hebrew Bible that speak of YHWH returning to His people, Wright states, “Never do we hear that the pillar of cloud and fire which accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness has led the people back from their exile. At no point do we hear that YHWH has now gloriously returned to Zion. At no point is the house again filled with the cloud which veils his glory. At no point is the rebuilt Temple universally hailed as the true restored shrine spoken of by Ezekiel. Significantly, at no point, either, is there a final decisive victory over Israel’s enemies, or the establishment of a universally welcomed royal dynasty” (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 621). After quoting post-biblical writings that describe the same concept Wright goes on to say, “There is ample evidence that most second-Temple Jews who gave any thought to the matter were hoping for YHWH to return, to dwell once again in the Temple in Jerusalem as he had done in the time of the old monarchy. Significantly, at no point, either, is there a final decisive victory over Israel’s enemies, or the establishment of a universally welcomed royal dynasty” (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 623).

<sup>20</sup> Matt. 3:1-10; Luke 3:7-9.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-57.

<sup>22</sup> See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, Oxford University Press, 2000, 232-233.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>24</sup> Not being able to identify the type of kingdom described above in the life of Jesus, nor after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, N.T. Wright says about the imminent language that Jesus used: “The problem, though, is that Jesus spent his whole ministry *redefining* what the kingdom meant. He refused to give up the symbolic language of the

of God, it is remarkable how subtle this redefining is. If Jesus truly meant to change the traditional, accepted mode of thought, it could be assumed that he would go to great lengths to make this clear. There are only very few passages that could indicate that this is what took place, and even then there are alternative translation and interpretive options, many of which Wright expounds upon.<sup>25</sup> I would suggest that exegetes take the abundant number of clear texts and the already established framework discussed above as an interpretive grid for the few supposed “redefinition” passages.

### So What Happened?

To echo “openness of God” theologians, God’s plans are flexible and often contingent upon humanity’s responses and reactions to God’s initiatives.<sup>26</sup> It is

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kingdom, but filled it with such new content that, as we have seen, he powerfully subverted Jewish expectations” (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 471).

<sup>25</sup> After quoting Luke 17:20-21, Wright contends, “The italicized phrase translates *entos hymon*, an expression that has given rise to much controversy. It has been read as meaning ‘within you’ in the sense of ‘in your heart, as opposed to in your political or material circumstances’: that is, the kingdom is an inward, not an outward reality. It has also been read as meaning ‘in your midst’: that is, the kingdom is already present, here among you. Of these two, the latter is closer to the meaning we would have guessed from the rest of Jesus’ work. But philosophically the meaning is most likely to be a third option: ‘within your grasp.’ ‘If you had eyes to see,’ Jesus seems to be saying, ‘you could reach out and take hold of the new reality that is already at work.’ This reading is backed up by the following verses (17:22-37)” (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 469). Describing the idea that Jesus was establishing a kingdom by gathering a renewed people, Wright writes, “In Jesus’ own century, Judas the Galilean might well have told his followers that, by joining his movement, they were part of the new, and final, reconstitution of Israel, even though there was still the little matter of throwing off the Roman yoke to be settled. Bar-Kochba went so far as to have coins minted, numbering the years from ‘1,’ indicating the beginning of his declaration of independence. He behaved towards his followers as though he were already king. But his ‘inaugurated eschatology,’ too, remained in need of a final victory, which never came. If we had asked Bar-Kochba or his followers whether they were living in the time of the kingdom, their very coins — the only real ‘mass media’ of the ancient world — would have answered in the affirmative. Denial would have meant disloyalty. But if we conclude from this that they had no future hope, nothing left to aspire to, that their god had established his kingdom once and for all, we would be ludicrously wrong. Once we think historically, the language of the kingdom present yet future, already established yet needing still to win decisive victory, makes perfect sense” (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 467-468).

<sup>26</sup> I have covered this issue and related issues of immutability, impassability, and divine timelessness in a separate paper, “He Is Sovereign over His Own Sovereignty: An Introduction to God’s Openness — A Proposal of Possibilities with God” (paper presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> Theological Conference, Atlanta Bible College, Morrow, Georgia, February 7, 2003).

often overlooked that Jesus' kingdom message came with a condition. "Matthew and Mark both offer, as their opening summary of Jesus' proclamation, a sentence which includes the command to 'repent' (Mark 1:15; Matt. 4:17)."<sup>27</sup> Even though Jesus is commonly envisioned as walking around Palestine doing personal, individualized, one-on-one evangelism, speaking a timeless message about God's love and his willingness to forgive sinners, it is probably more accurate to see Jesus *heralding* an approaching kingdom, calling for *national* repentance, rather than winning individual souls.<sup>28</sup> N.T. Wright insightfully remarks:

We may begin once more where Jesus himself began: with John the Baptist. John had told Israel that, if she did not repent, her God would create children for Abraham from the very stones. From one point of view, this treated Israel as a whole as if she were pagan, needing to repent as would a proselyte if she wished to be re-included in the people of YHWH. But this event — Israel's reconversion, as it were — was not just another story about Israel and her God, yet one more chapter within an ongoing narrative. It fell within a wider Jewish notion of "eschatological repentance."

This just may be the key, hidden from the likes of Albert Schweitzer, who ended up seeing Jesus as a disillusioned, failed prophet who was wrong about the kingdom coming during his lifetime. It isn't that *Jesus* was wrong, but that the *people* were wrong not to repent and prepare themselves for the return/day of YHWH. As N.T. Wright says:

"Repentance," in a good many texts, was *what Israel must do if her exile is to come to an end*...In Deuteronomic terms, this would mean a return to the *Shema*, to the love of YHWH alone with all the heart. The prophets regularly used the term "repent" to denote the turning to YHWH which would result in restoration, return from exile.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 246.

<sup>28</sup> Days after writing this sentence I came across this quote along almost exactly the same lines: "The disciples were not evangelistic preachers sent out to save individual souls for some unearthly paradise. They were couriers proclaiming a national emergency and conducting a referendum on a question of national survival" (George B. Caird and L.D. Hurst, *New Testament Theology*, OUP, 1994, 365, quoted in Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 323).

<sup>29</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 248. Wright then lists a number of scriptural references in a footnote: Isa. 44:22; 45:22; 46:8; 55:7; Jer. 3:10, 12, 14, 22; 4:1; 5:3; 15:19; 18:8; 24:7; 31 [LXX 38]:18; Ezek. 14:6; 18:30, 32; Hos. 3:5; 6:1; 7:10; 11:5; 12:6; 14:1, 2; Joel 2:12, 13; Hag. 2:17; Zech. 1:3-6; 10:9-10.



This concept of the Messianic age requiring a repentant, renewed, and clean people is scattered throughout post-biblical Jewish literature.<sup>30</sup> In an often overlooked NT passage, the author of 2 Peter contends in an eschatological context that God's people can hasten the Day of the LORD, that is, "speed its coming"<sup>31</sup> by holy and godly living. The Talmud encapsulates the idea that the Messiah would only bring about the new age if Israel prepared herself by saying, "All the forecast dates [for redemption] have come and gone. Now the matter [of when the Messiah will come] depends only on repentance and good deeds" (Sanhedrin 97b).<sup>32</sup> "Eliezer ben Hyrcanus spoke of Israel's 'repentance' as the condition for her liberation from the Romans, the real and final return from the exile."<sup>33</sup> These texts demonstrate that the idea of God postponing or delaying an intended plan of Messianic restoration based upon an unfavorable disposition of the Israelite nation toward God was within the purview of Jesus' epoch. Therefore, we should allow the possibility that God did desire the literal fulfillment of the promises of old within the lifetime of Jesus and his generation.

### Why Didn't I See This Before?

In this vein, a large number of Synoptic texts and parables begin to jump off the page, some coming to life for the first time. Feel the import of the following:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but *you were not willing!* Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 13:34-35, NIV).

A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" "Sir," the man replied, "leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year fine! If not, then cut it down" (Luke 13:6-8, NIV).

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not *repent*. "Woe to you,

<sup>30</sup>Bar. 2:32-4; Tob. 13:5f.; Pss. Sol. 18:4-7; Jub. 1:15-23, 23:26, and Philo De Praem. 162-172 make the same point, seemingly as an exegesis of Lev. 26:40-5 and Deut. 30. I owe this list to a footnote in Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 249.

<sup>31</sup>NIV version of 2 Peter 3:12.

<sup>32</sup>David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications Inc., 1999, 767.

<sup>33</sup>Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 249.

Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes...If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day" (Matt. 11:20-23, NIV).

But the Pharisees and experts in the law *rejected* God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John [i.e., for repentance in anticipation of God's soon coming judgment and subsequent establishment of Israel into the fullness of God's kingdom] (Luke 7:30, NIV).

A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed. He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son." But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard (Mark 12:1-8, NIV).

### **Not Without Severe Consequences**

It is important to recognize at this point that this rejection of Jesus and his imminent kingdom message is not without severe consequences. For notice the rest of the parable as told by Jesus: "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:9, NIV). These are sobering words for those standing there listening to Jesus.

If the nation...rejected God's messenger and persecuted those who responded to his preaching, how could the assertion of God's sovereignty fail to include an open demonstration that Jesus was right and the nation was wrong? How could it fail to include the vindication for the persecuted and the cause they lived for and died for?<sup>34</sup>

In fact, it seems that because the nation did not welcome Jesus, they did not welcome God. For as Jesus told his disciples, "he who rejects me *rejects* him who sent me" (Luke 10:17, NIV). It is at this point, when all resources had been exhausted, after reaching out in an incredible number of ways (miracles were

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<sup>34</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 320, quoting George B. Caird and L.D. Hurst, *New Testament Theology*, 365.

performed, even some dead had been raised, etc.), the destruction of Israel's socio-religio-political system is forecasted. N.T. Wright says:

Jesus...predicted that judgment would fall on the nation in general and on Jerusalem in particular. That is to say, he reinterprets a standard Jewish belief (the coming judgment which would fall on the nations) in terms of a coming judgment which would fall on impenitent *Israel*. The great prophets had done exactly the same. Jerusalem, under its present regime, had become Babylon. The evangelists stressed the theme of judgment on present Israel, but they certainly did not invent it. Jesus seems to have adopted the theme from John, who predicted "wrath to come," saying that membership in physical Israel was no guarantee of a share in the age to come. Very much in the mould of Amos, or indeed of Qumran, John insisted on redrawing the boundaries of Israel; for him, only those who repented and submitted to baptism would be included. The story Jesus told about Israel's immediate future seems to have developed directly from this point.

Once again, we are able to view synoptic texts in light of this specific, unique historical situation:

Now when Jesus approached and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you had only known on this day, even you, the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden<sup>35</sup> from your eyes. For the days will come on you when your enemies will build<sup>36</sup> an embankment against you and surround you and close in on you from every side. They will demolish you — you and your children within your walls — and they will not leave within you one stone on top of another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God" (Luke 19:41-44, NET).

This text, and an array of others, are quoted by Wright as examples of typical prophetic oracles.<sup>37</sup> He concludes:

And the judgment which was to come was conceived in classic scriptural terms: invasion and destruction by foreign armies, allowed to do what they are doing because YHWH, having warned his people beyond patience and beyond hope, has deliberately abandoned them to their fate.

<sup>35</sup> A study note in the New English Translation observes, "This becomes an oracle of doom in the classic OT sense; see Luke 13:31-35; 11:49-51; Jer. 9:2; 13:7; 14:7. They are now blind and under judgment (Jer. 15:5; Ps. 122:6)."

<sup>36</sup> Another NET study note points out: "Jesus now predicted the events that would be fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The details of the siege have led some to see Luke writing this after Jerusalem's fall, but the language of the verse is like God's exilic judgment for covenant unfaithfulness (Hab. 2:8; Jer. 6:6, 14; 8:13-22; 9:1; Ezek. 4:2; 26:8; Isa. 29:1-4). Specific details are lacking and the procedures described (build an embankment against you) were standard Roman military tactics."

<sup>37</sup> See Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 322-336.

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Assyria and Babylon had been the instruments of YHWH's wrath before; now it would be the turn of Rome.<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusion

When taken as a collective whole, these ideas illuminate and heighten our understanding of Jesus and his gospel of an imminent kingdom. The respected and seasoned Ben Witherington III summarizes his work on NT eschatology with the following words: "a detailed analysis of the relevant data in both the Gospels and the Pauline literature leads at most to a conclusion that Jesus and Paul considered the imminence of the end *possible* in their era but not a *certainty*."<sup>39</sup> This is exactly the point; what could have come did not, and even 2000 years later, we are left waiting, wondering, and questioning, yet dreaming, hoping, and imagining a world with no more tears, sorrow, pain, and death; a world with no wars, famines, plagues, earthquakes, or tsunamis. We are then reminded of Jesus' poignant words directed toward an impenitent people: "I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Luke 13:35, NIV).

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>39</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992, 19, emphasis mine.