

EDITORIAL

Vindicating the Claims of Jesus

I want to argue that Jesus almost certainly did expect God to intervene [i.e. in the first century] dramatically to end the present age, and to stress the serious implications of this error for Christology, whilst at the same time denying that it totally undermines his ethical teaching.¹

Despite his persuasive presentation of the biblical case for a unitarian Jesus, one who never claimed “Deity” in the traditional, Trinitarian sense, Richard Kingston’s reference to the “error” of Jesus implies a grave undermining of faith. It cannot be right that he who claimed to present the words of life and truth as direct communications from God his Father could at the same time make the extraordinary false prediction that his return in glory would happen within a definite chronological limit. Prophets are to be judged, according to the Scriptures which Jesus took to be divinely authoritative, by whether their prophecies come true. If Jesus really predicted an early return, within some forty years, he would have to be dismissed as a deceiver. It is hard to see then how his ethics could escape criticism also.

Kingston refers to the work of Albert Schweitzer who made the theological world aware of the uncomfortable fact that Jesus spoke constantly in terms drawn from the Hebrew Bible of his apocalyptic return in the future to establish a Davidic Kingdom on the earth. Schweitzer, however, included in his analysis the assertion that this dramatic future coming would occur “imminently” — providing in other words a specific time limit for the interim period until the Parousia. With this as an essential element of his reading of the New Testament Schweitzer was forced by the non-occurrence of the return of Jesus to conclude that Jesus had gone to the cross in a desperate attempt to bring about his goal. As he died, however, Jesus had realized his error and died in the deepest despair.

C.H. Dodd rose to the challenge with his theory of “realized eschatology.” He argued that the statements attributed to Jesus about a future catastrophic

¹ A. Richard Kingston, *God in One Person*, MacMillan Press, 1993, 138.

coming of the Kingdom did not originate with Jesus, but with his over-excited followers. They must take the blame for the failed prophecy. Jesus himself spoke only of a present Kingdom.

Kingston does not accept Dodd's attempt to separate Jesus from his eschatological sayings. He finds only *some* of the recorded future-Kingdom sayings suspect. When Jesus is reported as declaring before the High Priest "I am [the Messiah] and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God and coming in the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62), how, says Kingston, do we know this is really what Jesus said, since no disciples were present at the trial behind closed doors? But is this really a difficulty sufficient to prove the inaccuracy of the records? Could not the risen Jesus have subsequently relayed the account of his trial to the apostles, during the intimate sessions held in their presence for forty days (Acts 1:3)?

Matthew 10:23, Jesus' prediction about his arrival before the end of the disciples' mission to the cities of Israel, might appear to be a problematic text for those of us who believe that the Messiah spoke the truth always. But the New Testament gives examples of the language of "corporate solidarity," a Jewish way of speaking which strikes us in the West as unfamiliar. Jesus stated that his *contemporaries* had murdered all the Old Testament prophets (Matt. 23:35). From our point of view this seems clearly untrue, but it is profoundly true if we reckon that he was speaking of his contemporaries as one with their equally evil forbears. The "you" is corporate. Similarly in the Great Commission Jesus promised to be with the eleven disciples ("with you") until the end of the age. Does this mean that the end of the age would have to occur within the lifetime of the disciples? Not if he includes the eleven *and their successors* within his frame of reference. No one has difficulty in accepting the ethical teaching addressed to "you" disciples as relevant for us today, long after the death of those disciples. Why not then accept as a prophecy valid until the second coming Jesus' prediction that the cities of Israel will be incompletely evangelized at his return? Jesus envisages an eschatological mission in Israel as immediate preparation for the Parousia.

In Mark 9:1 Jesus forecast that those standing in his presence would see the Kingdom of God within their life time. The fulfillment of this saying is expressly said to be the immediately following event of the transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:16-19). Luke also could not have made it much clearer: He links the prophecy of the Kingdom expressly to the transfiguration when he says, "and eight days after this saying . . ." (Luke 9:27, 28). The transfiguration was

indeed a foreglimpse in *vision* (Matt 17:9) of the arrival of the Kingdom in which Moses and Elijah would reappear and faces would shine with the brilliance of the sun (cp. Matt. 13:43; Dan 12:3).

A Jesus who claimed to be the Messiah and Savior, the ultimate spokesman for God, cannot be judged partly right and partly in error. Jesus' claims are stupendous and exclusivist. He certainly never stated that he was God Himself, much less that he had existed personally in eternity past, but his whole ministry is invalidated if his claim to speak uniquely for the One God of Israel is in question, especially on the issue of his return to carry out the Messianic program. The New Testament Jesus made no prophecy about the time of his return. He denied that he knew the day or the hour (Mark 13:32) and said that only the Father knew the time for the expected Restoration of the Kingdom (Acts 1:6, 7). He set no limit on the interim period, stating only that this evil society in which humanity is united in a common wickedness (*genea*, Matt. 24:34, cp. the LXX use of *genea* in Prov. 30:11-14 and Ps. 102:18, and compare also Luke 16:8) would not come to an end until all the events outlined in his Olivet discourse were realized. His resurrection from the dead provided the approving verdict necessary to confirm him as *the* Prophet and Messiah who spoke only the truth.

A Savior-Messiah who issued inaccurate predictions about the future does not match the one "to whom God gave the spirit without measure" (John 3:34). With Jesus and the Apostles we confirm that he was indeed both the Son of God and the prophet par excellence whom the God of Israel had guaranteed to produce from the family of Israel and in whose mouth we hear the very words of God (Deut. 18:15-18; Acts 3:22; 7:37).