

From the Messianic Kingdom to “Heaven’s Gate”: An Uneasy Tension*

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I. INTRODUCTION

I have chosen to make my point by reference to the contemporary Heaven’s Gate tragedy. It appears that the aspirations of those dedicated but tragically misled persons represent the extreme of a tendency which began in the second century. More precisely, their desire to move up to the “Second Level” or “Kingdom of Heaven” (to use the language of a surviving cult member) represents the age-old tendency to push the very Jewish, first-century Palestinian Jesus in a Gnostic direction. Heaven’s Gate claimed the support of Jesus for their (as they saw it) heroic self-sacrifice in pursuit of sanctity.

Bible reading and sympathetic resonance with the Jesus of history is hampered by a widespread Gnostic and unmessianic tendency which tries to recreate Jesus in terms of a set of Gentile presuppositions into which Jesus will not fit. This *tendenz* has afflicted the theological enterprise at every level and is convincingly documented.

The tendency, I believe, began in the early days after the death of the apostles when the faith fell into the hands of Greeks who were strongly imbued with a Greek philosophical spirit. The Hebrew world of Jesus is rarely appreciated by those who sit in pews and perhaps also by those who minister to them. From my own experience as a weekly churchgoer in the Church of England, plus hundreds of daily chapels at boarding school, I

* Originally delivered as a speech for the sixth Theological Conference at Atlanta Bible College, April 27, 1997.

can attest to being quite unaware of any tension between the biblical Jesus' Messianic teaching and the Anglican world of faith in which we all seemed to live quite happily.

But once I was goaded into a first-hand encounter with the NT records everything changed. I have not recovered from the shock even now, 40 years later. What I saw there, though I certainly could not have given it a name at the time, was the same Jewish apocalyptic Messianism which prompted Johannes Weiss¹ and Albert Schweitzer² to drop their famous bombshell on the theological world. Schweitzer said in effect, "You theologians look at the New Testament like a man gazing down a well. But what you see in the NT is merely an image of yourself, a portrait of Jesus drawn in terms of your own modern philosophies and ideals, but quite unlike Jesus the first-century Jew. Jesus was not a liberal theologian just promoting 'the inner life,' the fatherhood of God or the 'brotherhood of Man.'"

Many studies since the time of the Schweitzer/Weiss revolution have demonstrated that the historical Jesus was a Jewish Restorationist prophet of the end of the age. If one compares the NT with other Jewish writings which bracket the time of Jesus' ministry, it becomes obvious that the NT is cut from the same cloth. Both Jesus and his close contemporaries worked within a very specialized framework of Kingdom teaching found in Daniel, the Sibylline Oracles, the Testament of Moses, the Psalms of Solomon, and the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, as well as the Jewish Targums and at Qumran.³

These findings from the Schweitzer era have continued to provoke a crisis of faith, much like that which stimulated the rise of the Adventist movement in the 1850s. Rediscovery of the historical Jesus occurs when people discard some of what they have been taught as the faith and decide not just to read the Bible but to study it — and study it in its first-century Jewish environment.

The Adventists of the 1850s recognized the terrific emphasis on the Parousia as a pervasive theme of the NT. They found the Day of the Lord in the prophets of Israel, heard the fiery words of John the Baptist who

¹ *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, first published 1892; later ed. and trans. by Hiers and Holland, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.

² *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, first published 1901.

³ For wonderful documentation on this, see *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation*, ed. Wendell Willis, Hendrickson, 1987.

summoned his compatriots to flee from the coming wrath and to prepare not for “Heaven,” much less for a space capsule behind a comet, but for the arrival on earth of the Kingdom of Heaven. The opening statements about the ministry of John and Jesus (Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23) are summaries of the whole thrust of the Christian faith as presented in the NT. Both John and Jesus called for repentance in view of the approaching day of judgment. This is the Christian gospel.

In my Church of England days, if I had any conception of eschatology, personal or in community, it was that at the moment of death I would ascend in a disembodied condition to realms beyond the skies, or, as I read in a publication put out by a large evangelical organization, to the great Cabin in the Sky at which a “Welcome Home” sign would be posted in the window. I read recently that according to a very well-known evangelist our purpose in the so-called afterlife is to polish rainbows.

All this seems to me to be the symptom of exactly the deficiency from which we suffered in the big state church. We had no grasp of the purpose for which we were Christians. We had no knowledge of the biblical Messianic framework out of which Jesus worked and taught. And yet paradoxically we said that Jesus was the Messiah — but not really because we did not expect him to complete his Messianic work by coming to rule and reign on the earth. Somehow we had managed to tame that highly charged title “Christ,” so that we could have reacted quite sympathetically to the child in Sunday School who thought that Jesus Christ was the son of Mary and Joseph Christ. Along with that anemic view of what the term Christ meant went the strange idea that Jesus had somehow descended from the sky and entered the womb of Mary. Again, in those Church of England days I would not, I suppose, have been unhappy with what a Catholic priest recently said to the flock on television: “God came to Mary and said: ‘Mary, would you please be my mother?’”

As I grew up I was aware of my cousin John A. T. Robinson’s apparently deviant and not quite respectable ways of doing theology. While he was Bishop of Woolwich he had made himself notorious with a book called *Honest to God*. He was, in his way, a conservative exegete.

I have come to respect many of my cousin J.A.T. Robinson's utterances from his chair at Cambridge. He, too, had obviously reflected at length on what the Bible said about "what happens when we die." The issue of heaven and the "second level" received a dogmatic treatment from his always incisive pen:

The whole of our teaching and hymnology has assumed that you go to heaven — or of course hell — when you die This proposition is in clear contradiction with what the Bible says The Bible nowhere says that we go to heaven when we die, nor does it ever describe death in terms of going to heaven. Wesley's words "bid Jordan's narrow stream divide, and bring us safe to heaven," have no biblical basis.⁴

J.A.T. Robinson later spoke of:

the remarkable transformation that overtook Christian eschatology almost as soon as the ink of the NT was dry. It is one of the most remarkable silent revolutions in the history of Christian thought. And it affects the center of interest or pivotal point of the whole subject In the NT the point around which hope and interest revolve is not the moment of death at all, but the day of the Parousia, or appearance of Christ in the glory of His Kingdom The center of interest and expectation continued, right through the NT period, to be focused on the day of the Son of Man and the triumph of His Kingdom in a renovated earth. It was the reign of the Lord Jesus with all his saints that engaged the thoughts and prayers of Christians The hope was social and it was historical. But as early as the second century AD there began a shift in the center of gravity which was to lead to a very different doctrine In later thought it is the hour of death which becomes decisive.⁵

I have been struck with the common-sense approach of Nigel Turner, the Greek expert who produced the volumes known as the Moulton,

⁴ *On Being the Church in the World*, SCM Press, 1960, 129.

⁵ *In the End God*, Fontana Books, 1968, 42, 43.

Milligan, Turner trilogy.⁶ In his excellent book *Christian Words*, Nigel Turner wrote:

The language of the Church had better be the language of the NT. To proclaim the Gospel with new terminology is hazardous when much of the Message and valuable overtones that are implicit in the NT might be lost forever. "Most of the distortions and dissensions that have vexed the Church," observed the late Dean of York, "where these have touched theological understanding, have arisen through the insistence of sects or sections of the Christian community upon using words which are not found in the NT."⁷

II. FROM THE JEWISH JESUS MESSIAH TO THE GENTILE JESUS, GOD THE SON

There is clear evidence in the history of Christian thought of the causes which have contributed to this great shift. They have a significant bearing on our own heritage in the Abrahamic faith. Luther is followed by C.S. Lewis: both depreciate the value of Jesus' teaching as gospel.

Luther created by a dogmatic criterion *a canon of the gospel within the canon* of the books. "Those Apostles who treat oftenest and highest of how faith alone justifies, are the best Evangelists. Therefore St. Paul's Epistles are more a Gospel than Matthew, Mark and Luke. For these do not set down much more than the works and miracles of Christ; but the grace which we receive through Christ no one so boldly extols as St. Paul, especially in his letter to the Romans." In comparison with the Gospel of John, the Epistles of Paul, and 1 Peter, "which are the kernel and marrow of all books," the Epistle of James, with its insistence that man is not justified by faith alone, but by works proving faith, is "a mere letter of straw, for there is nothing evangelical about it." It is clear that the infallibility of Scripture has here, in fact if not in avowal, followed the infallibility of popes and councils; for the Scripture itself has to submit to be judged by the ultimate criterion of its accord with Luther's doctrine of justification by faith.⁸

⁶ *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, T&T Clark, 1976.

⁷ T&T Clark, 1980, viii.

⁸ G. F. Moore, D.D., LL.D., Litt. D., Professor of the history of religion at Harvard, *History of Religions*, Scribner's Sons, 1926, emphasis added.

Cp. "In the course of time *Luther came practically to set up a canon of Scripture within the Canon*. Probably most Bible students actually do this in practice to varying degrees. Luther's virtual canon consisted of three Pauline epistles as forming the central core: Romans, Galatians and Ephesians. To these he added John, 1 John, 1 Peter and Acts. The least valuable book in the New Testament was

C. S. Lewis reflects the same tendency:

The epistles are for the most part the earliest Christian documents we possess. The Gospels come later. *They are not "the gospel," the statement of the Christian belief. . . . In that sense the epistles are more primitive and more central than the Gospels* — though not of course than the great events which the Gospels recount [what about the great words of Jesus which are the saving Gospel?⁹ — A.B.]. God's Act (the Incarnation, the crucifixion, and the Resurrection) comes first: the earliest theological analysis of it comes in the epistles: then when the generation who had known the Lord was dying out, the Gospels were composed to provide for believers a record of the great Act and of some of the Lord's sayings.¹⁰

What about Jesus' saving gospel of the Kingdom?

In contrast, Moore, as a historian with less of a theological axe to grind, recognizes that the teaching of Jesus recorded in the Synoptics is absolutely essential for the new birth:

The idea that the entrance into the new and higher life, the immortal life, must be by a spiritual or intellectual rebirth, or rather regeneration, meets us often in the mysteries, and especially in the intellectual mysticisms of the age; *anagennasthai* (to be born again) and *paliggenesia* (rebirth) are familiar terms in them. In John it is the sine qua non of salvation. Flesh breeds flesh; spirit alone can engender spirit, and only he who is begotten by the divine spirit can enter the "Kingdom of God." In the thought of the time spirit was not only the principle of divine life but of the higher knowledge; so Paul conceives it (e.g. 1 Cor. 2:14). In John

Revelation, and he found little more value in Hebrews, James and Jude. What governed his choice was that he regarded as supreme the great doctrine of justification by Faith. This, he held, is the essence of the Gospel, and by it all the rest must be interpreted. It was this that caused him to place the three Synoptic Gospels on a lower level. It was not that he thought less than anyone else of the importance of Christ's own words, His life, death and resurrection — nobody could read the epistles without realizing the immense importance to Paul of, at least, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. It was because the Gospels do not clearly and evidently deal with the central doctrine of justification by Faith, and this was for Luther, the touchstone by which the Golden Truth is disclosed" (Norman Snaith, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Epworth Press, 1956, 12).

⁹ John 5:24, 47; 12:47, 48; 1 Timothy 6:3.

¹⁰ From C. S. Lewis' introduction to J. B. Phillips' *Letters to Young Churches*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1947, ix, x, emphasis added.

[recording Jesus] the two are inseparably connected, or rather they are the same thing.¹¹

III. OPPOSITION TO THE MESSIANIC KINGDOM, BIBLICAL MESSIANISM AND THE JEWISHNESS OF JESUS

Distinguished voices in the churches sometimes confess to discomfort about certain aspects of Jesus' teaching. J.B. Phillips speaks of the "apocalyptic passages in Luke which frankly I find a bit of an embarrassment."¹² Georgia Harkness, writing about the Kingdom of God, is certain that Jesus cannot have spoken the words attributed to him in Luke 19:27: "Bring My enemies here and slay them in My presence."¹³ The apocalyptic Jesus has for a long time been unwelcome in the church bearing his name. Harkness speaks of "the difficulty encountered by even His closest disciples to grasp His message . . . When they came together they asked Him, 'Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?' The Davidic Messiah was still their dream!" At work in such commentary is a deep-rooted traditional prejudice against the Messiah of the New Testament. Harkness goes on to say: "Jesus apparently thought that it was useless to argue with them, for He told them that it was not for them to know the times or the seasons fixed by the Father's authority."¹⁴ But these surmisings have no basis in the text at all. Jesus positively did not correct their Davidic Messianism, which they had both learned from the Old Testament and had confirmed in Jesus' company.

Theology has a tragic history of trying to rid itself of the teaching of Jesus which it does not like. Its animosity to Jesus stems from its non-apocalyptic tradition, dating from the time when the essentially Jewish framework of all that Jesus said was discarded by Gentiles unsympathetic with biblical Messianism. Paul would have strongly protested this departure from Messiah's Gospel. He painstakingly instructs the Gentiles at Rome and in Galatia in the detail of the Abrahamic basis of the Christian Gospel. He did not excuse the Gentiles from the task of gaining a thorough understanding of the Hebrew roots of the Gospel. He never abandoned the apocalyptic future-Kingdom Gospel. The same certainly cannot be said of historic Christianity, in which the Kingdom conceived of as a revolutionary message about God's intention to restore divine

¹¹ *History of Religions*, 142.

¹² *Plain Christianity*, Wyvern Books, 1954, 51.

¹³ *Understanding the Kingdom of God*, Abingdon Press, 1974, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

sovereignty to the earth at the return of Jesus has been conspicuous by its absence. There are clear indications in the theological literature of a desire to keep the historical Jesus and his apocalyptic Message at arm's length. When this happens the Gospel is jeopardized. The goal of Christianity is transformed into a vague hope of "heaven," instead of a passionate longing for peace and prosperity in the Messianic Kingdom on earth. A shrewd observer of the damage which has occurred to biblical faith pointed out that:

The shift from apocalyptic to other forms of thought does indeed constitute something like a "fall of Christendom" . . . It was a fall from the apocalyptic world of early Christianity to Platonic categories of thought . . . The surrender of apocalyptic thought forms produced an alienation of Christianity from its original Jewish matrix, with the result that the Messianic expectations of Judaism — evoked by God's promises to Israel — were diverted into non-apocalyptic Christology.¹⁵

IV. A SYSTEMATIC AVOIDANCE OF THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

Close inspection of the writings of modern theologians uncovers a deep-seated desire on their part to dispose of the uncomfortable Gospel as Jesus proclaimed it. The Jewishness of Jesus' and the Apostles' message is the obvious cause of offense. Modern man, says one immensely powerful school of thinking, will not tolerate teaching about a divine intervention to change the course of human history. That part of the teaching of the Bible is unfit for audiences in the scientific age. Yet there is much that is good in the Gospel, so the argument runs. We need to present the message stripped of its regrettable Jewish clothing. To use the technical term, we must "demythologize" it — remove it from its Hebrew framework and place it in the vastly superior atmosphere of contemporary philosophy. In this way it will be palatable.

What needs to be pointed out is that the "it" of the Gospel, after it has been put through the wringer of modern theological theory, is scarcely the message as Jesus gave it. Nor is Jesus Christ any longer the messenger. He has been superseded though his name remains on the expurgated package thought suitable for contemporary audiences.

¹⁴ J. C. Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel, The Coming Triumph of God*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982, 107-108.

The process by which Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom was transformed worked liked this: Theologians have argued that the Jewish apocalyptic and national-political elements of Jesus' preaching were merely the expendable Jewish "husk" containing the valuable kernel of abiding truth. Once the husk was removed there remained a timeless message which can appeal to every generation. In this way the embarrassment of believing in a Messianic Kingdom which never arrived can be smoothed over by turning the Kingdom into the church or "heaven" at death — this being an unobjectionable religious message. For centuries the illusion was maintained. Typical of this point of view are the words of a theologian writing in 1913:

The apocalyptic ideas and beliefs in which the great word of Jesus was embodied are, after all, of transitory significance. Not inaptly it is said of Messianism that it was "the nationalistic and contemporaneous encasement of the life work of Jesus which has been long since riddled and overturned in the process of historical development": Who today regards it as the characteristic mark of Jesus that He claimed to be the Messiah of the Jews?¹⁵

This immensely influential school of thought succeeded in "dumping" the unwanted Jewishness of Jesus, dismissing his Messianic Gospel as transitory and obsolete.

V. THE THEOLOGICAL BOMBSHELL

It was in the 19th century that theology awoke to the recognition that Jesus was a Jew with a Jewish message for all mankind ("salvation is of the Jews"¹⁶). Johannes Weiss' book of only 67 pages, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, proved to be a theological bombshell when it pointed to unarguable evidence for Jesus' belief in an objective apocalyptic Messianic Kingdom of the future. Such an idea was revolutionary, since it had been traditional to think of the Kingdom as a religious experience or a moral force working to improve society. The new and shocking understanding that Jesus was in the best Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic tradition forced scholars of the Bible to deal with a difficult

¹⁵ H. L. Jackson, *The Eschatology of Jesus*, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1913, 343, 344.

¹⁶ John 4:22.

situation, not least the possibility of having to admit that the church had been misreading its own documents and misinterpreting its own founder.

Paradoxically, those who saw that Jesus had been the bearer of the news of the coming apocalyptic Kingdom did not suggest that such a "Jewish" Gospel was appropriate for the church now. Albert Schweitzer, whose independent investigation led him to see that Jesus was not a "liberal" theologian, but a preacher of a future apocalyptic Kingdom, was unable to embrace such a Gospel as the object of faith. Both Weiss and Schweitzer were scholars, as someone has said, who did not belong to their own school of thought. Quite astonishingly, they deemed it "better to cling to the modernized ethical construction of Jesus' message — although it rests on a misunderstanding — than try to retain Jesus' antiquated eschatological ideas."¹⁷ Avoidance of the awkward Jewishness of Jesus' Gospel was achieved by variations of the same "husk and kernel" theory. Jesus must be stripped of his local Jewish garb and made respectable for modern man. Bultmann's theory of "demythologizing" arrives at the same goal by a similar method. What counts for Bultmann is the permanent call to decision in Jesus' message. The Jewish framework can be dispensed with as the relic of a primitive world view which we have outgrown.

In England the famous C. H. Dodd proposed the extraordinary theory that Jesus spoke only of the presence of the Kingdom and not of any future cataclysmic manifestation by which a new age would be introduced. Dodd was confident, with his theory of "realized eschatology," that the early church must be blamed for reverting to the old Jewish concept of a future Kingdom and of Jesus as the Messiah destined to come "on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30).

It must be said that all attempts to separate Jesus from his Jewish apocalyptic background and teaching are doomed to fail. It would be much more honest if the church were to say plainly, "We reject Jesus," rather than affirming that we accept him, but only on condition that he gives up his unfortunate Messianic insistence that the Kingdom is going to enter history in the future as a world event for which the church of every generation is to prepare with solemn urgency. Christianity divorced from its prophetic-apocalyptic framework is a pale reflection of

¹⁷ *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl Braaten, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, Vol. I, 484.

the faith of the Bible, and it seems that the Protestant claim to be following Scripture is an empty boast as long as theology feels free to interpret away whatever is deemed unwanted and unsuitable. As one observer of the church's method of dealing with the Kingdom of God notes:

Analysis of the precise character of the eschatological beliefs of Jesus and the early communities has been complicated by a high degree of semantic confusion, if not obfuscation . . . There can be no doubt that Jesus and the evangelists looked for the future actualization of the decisive "last" events: the coming or manifestation of the Son of Man, the judgment of the living and the coming of the Kingdom or the coming age. *That this certainty has played but little part in contemporary exegesis and theology* can be attributed primarily to the dogmatic or philosophical interests (or aversions) of the "doers" of exegesis and theology. It is only quite recently that these "futuristic" beliefs are coming to be recognized as something other than a primitive Jewish and early Christian absurdity to be disposed of quickly and, if possible, quietly.¹⁸

Churchgoers are generally unaware of the filter through which the "primitive" biblical teaching has been passed.

VI. DISPENSATIONALISM

For schools of theology committed to believing the authoritative word of Scripture, there are other ways of circumventing the Gospel of the Kingdom. One popular Gospel tradition has erected a scheme by which the Gospel of the Kingdom is specifically not the Gospel of salvation now to be offered to potential believers. It is a system known as "dispensationalism." All students of the Bible recognize that God appointed different "dispensations" or arrangements for different periods of history. The Mosaic dispensation, for example, made demands on the faithful different from those required under the New Testament Gospel. But dispensationalism goes much further. It maintains that the Gospel of the Kingdom was preached by Jesus to Jews only, until they refused the offer of the Kingdom; whereupon a different Gospel, the Gospel of grace, was introduced by Paul. The theory then holds that the Gospel of the

¹⁸ Richard Hiers, *The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Tradition*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1970, 94, 96, emphasis added.

Kingdom will be reinstated seven years before the return of Christ, a time when, according to most dispensationalists, the church will have been removed from the earth by the so-called "pre-tribulation rapture."¹⁹ This scheme may be examined in the note to Revelation 14:6 in the *Scofield Reference Bible*.

The dispensationalist system has been forced upon the text of Scripture in the interests of a theory alien to the Bible. As we have pointed out, Luke went to great lengths to show that Paul's Gospel was not different from that of Jesus. Both men preached the Gospel about the Kingdom.²⁰ Paul, contrary to dispensationalism, knew nothing about a difference between "the Gospel of grace"²¹ and "preaching the Kingdom."²² He deliberately equated them. By positing "two forms of the Gospel," dispensationalists have brought about a most unfortunate distinction which does not exist in the scriptural text. The article on "Gospel" in *Unger's Dictionary of the Bible* represents the common dispensationalist tendency to bypass the Gospel as Jesus preached it. This kind of thinking about the Gospel and salvation has had an immense influence, particularly in America:

Forms of the Gospel to be differentiated. Many Bible teachers make a distinction in the following:

(1) *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. The Good News that God's purpose is to establish an earthly mediatorial kingdom in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:16). Two proclamations of the gospel of the kingdom are mentioned, one, past, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist, carried on by our Lord and His disciples and *ending with the Jewish rejection of the Messiah*. The other preaching is yet future (Matt. 24:14) during the great tribulation, and heralding the Second Advent of the King.

¹⁹ Jesus spoke about gathering the elect Christians *after* the tribulation (Matt. 24:29-31). He also urged his followers to expect their redemption after the cataclysmic events leading to the end of the age (Luke 21:28). Paul expected Christians to have to survive until the public manifestation of Jesus in power and glory (2 Thess. 1:7-9).

²⁰ Luke 4:43, etc.; Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.

²¹ Acts 20:24.

²² Acts 20:25.

(2) *The Gospel of God's Grace*. The Good News of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ as provided by our Lord and preached by His disciples (1 Cor. 15:1-4).²³

Uncertainty about the Christian Gospel is not surprising when such complex misreading of the Bible is built into a system with a massive influence in pulpits and Christian literature. Surely the words of Paul in Acts 20:24, 25 should banish the artificial distinction proposed by the Bible dictionary. Paul looked back on his career and noted that he had “finished his course, the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus to testify solemnly of the *Gospel of the grace of God* . . . to all of you among whom I went about *preaching the Kingdom*.” *Clearly there is no difference between the Gospel of grace and the Gospel of the Kingdom*. It is true, of course, that Jesus did not initially preach his resurrection as part of the Gospel. The death and resurrection of Jesus were later critical elements in the proclamation of Paul. They did not, however, replace the preaching of the Kingdom, which remained as much the heart of Paul’s Gospel as it had been the center of Jesus’ own Message.

When Jesus embarked on his intensive evangelistic campaign in Galilee in about 27 AD, he summoned his audience to a radical change of heart based on the national belief that God was going to usher in the worldwide Kingdom promised by Daniel and all the prophets. Intelligent belief in the promise of the Kingdom is to be the disciple’s first step, coupled with a major U-turn in lifestyle. In this way men and women can align themselves with God’s great purpose for the earth.

The nature of Jesus’ activity was that of a herald making a public announcement on behalf of the one God of Israel. The thrust of the Message was that each individual should undertake a radical redirection of his life in face of the certainty of the coming Kingdom of God. This was, and still is, the essence of the Christian Gospel. How can it be otherwise, when it is the Gospel Message which comes from the lips of Christ himself?

It is a matter of common sense to recognize that by using the term “Kingdom of God” Jesus would have evoked in the minds of his audience, steeped as they were in the national hope of Israel, a divine worldwide government on earth, with its capital at Jerusalem. The

²³ M. F. Unger, *Unger’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Moody Press, 1969, 420, emphasis added.

writings of the prophets, which Jesus as a Jew recognized as the divinely authorized Word of God, had promised the arrival of a new era of peace and prosperity. The ideal Kingdom would endure forever. God's people would be victorious in a renewed earth. Peace would extend across the globe.

Thus to announce the coming of the Kingdom involved both a threat and a promise. To those who responded to the message by believing it and reordering their lives accordingly, there was a promise of a place in the glories of the future divine rule. To the rest the Kingdom would threaten destruction, as God executed judgment upon all found unworthy of entering the Kingdom when it came. This theme governs the whole New Testament. In the light of this primary concept the teaching of Jesus becomes comprehensible. It is an exhortation to win immortality in the future Kingdom and to escape destruction and exclusion from the Kingdom.

VII. CONCLUSION

In 1924 a Yale Professor of Church History complained about "theology's" strange treatment of our Messianic documents:

The straightforward understanding of Christ's eschatological meaning has not been and still is not acceptable to a tender orthodoxy, for the sufficient reason that the promised event did not take place. And so our commentaries are full of attempts to explain away perfectly clear statements by allegorizing them into a prophecy of the church which would extend itself over the world . . . Anyone who has read the apologetic literature must say that the methods of modern criticism are often beyond his comprehension . . . From the beginning when Amos uttered his warning: "prepare to meet your God, O Israel," to the days when St. Paul comforted the Christians who grieved for those who had died before the expected appearance of the Lord, the note of immediacy is the same. Always the reckoning is at hand, yet always it is to come as a surprise: "The Day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night . . ." Paul was merely repeating the eschatology of the prophets and between him and them Christ uttered exactly the same warning: The Kingdom was approaching . . . The importance of that continuity cannot be too much emphasized.²⁵

²⁴ P.E. More, *The Christ of the New Testament*, Princeton University Press, 1924, 66.

Professor More then spoke of the familiar opposition between what has been rather disparagingly called the popular Jewish hope and Christ's supposed insistence on a "spiritual" reign of God in the hearts of men: "There was no such opposition as theology loves to draw. The Kingdom which Jesus preached was at once political and spiritual; and that unquestionably was the form in which it came to him from the molding hands of prophecy."²⁵

Professor Sanders in his well-known *Jesus and Judaism* senses the same tension between the Jewish Jesus and what long-standing non-Messianic tradition has tended to make of him, when he offers us this remarkable admission:

Writing as a liberal, secularized Protestant, brought up in a church denominated by low Christology and the social gospel, I am proud of the things that that tradition stands for, but I am not bold enough, however, to suppose that Jesus came to establish it, or died for the sake of its principles.²⁶

He is echoed by Professor Ramsay Michaels who remarks that "sometimes we 'love Jesus' too much to read the Gospels straight, and indeed it is not difficult to love something of our own making! Perhaps the Jesus of history was — and is — rather more like Eliot's 'Christ the Tiger' than some may care to admit."

Our Abrahamic heritage continues to urge Bible readers to recognize the Kingdom of Heaven/God in Jesus' Gospel, not as a Gnostic "second level" to which we ascend at death, but as the renewed earth under the leadership of the Davidic Messiah. Such a concrete empire of the future will still be spiritual, just as the risen and immortalized Messiah, invested with a spiritual body, was palpable and enjoyed a breakfast of fish by a lake.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁶ Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, 334.