

The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Tradition*

Part One

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I. INTRODUCTION

According to Synoptic tradition,¹ the coming of the Kingdom of God was the thematic message of the historical Jesus and the “twelve” apostles or messengers who joined their efforts to his during his lifetime. But what did Jesus and his companions understand the Kingdom of God to mean? The answers given have generally varied with the interests or commitments of those discussing the question. It was only about eighty years ago that critical historians — i.e., those who attempt to weigh the evidence critically or objectively — began to suspect that Jesus may have thought of it in terms of the eschatological² beliefs of his Jewish predecessors and contemporaries. There was no single eschatological scheme in first-century Judaism, but there were a number of pervasive motifs: the Age to Come or Messianic Age would be inaugurated by God’s intervention in history, with or without the appearance of a

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¹ The term “Synoptic” refers to the first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) which, when compared or “looked at together,” are similar or even identical at numerous places, in contrast to the fourth Gospel (John) with which the first three have little in common.

² The term “eschatology” or “eschatological” as used here refers to the conceptions of the events associated in first-century Jewish and Christian thought with the anticipated end of the present age or world, and the coming or beginning on earth of the Kingdom of God or Messianic Age.

Messiah or messianic figure such as a king from the house of David, “the Son of man,” or Elijah; there would be a time of tribulation or suffering, at the end of which Satan would finally be overthrown; the earth would be transformed after the pattern of the Garden of Eden, man and nature redeemed from the curse of frustration and death; and the righteous would enter this Kingdom of God on earth and share in the messianic banquet and era, while the unrighteous would forever be excluded from it.

The two most important proponents of this interpretation published their findings around the turn of the present century: Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. In their view, the distinctive feature of Jesus’ eschatological understanding was his conviction that the time for these decisive events had come near: they would be fulfilled in his own lifetime, or at the latest within the lifetime of some of his contemporaries.

At first, this interpretation was thought too alarming, for it called into question both the liberal Protestant image of Jesus as the teacher of timeless (i.e., modern) truths or ethics, and the Catholic and traditional Protestant equation of the historical Jesus with the divine and omniscient Christ of the fourth Gospel and subsequent Christian doctrine. With few exceptions, British and American writers preferred to maintain that Jesus did not look for the imminent onset of the Messianic Age. Instead, most held, he believed and proclaimed that it had already come, if only partially. Many used C. H. Dodd’s term “realized eschatology” to signify this understanding. After some hesitation, German historians generally came to accept the basic position of Weiss and Schweitzer, at least their consensus that Jesus had expected the arrival of the Kingdom in the near future — thus, for instance, Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius, Hans Windisch. But in this case, what could Jesus’ understanding and message mean to modern men who do not believe that the present world is coming to an end, or that Satan now rules but that God is about to establish His Kingdom on earth? Bultmann proposed that Jesus’ understanding and message should be “demythologized,” i.e., that the “mythological” (first-century Jewish eschatological) aspects should be re-interpreted (or abandoned!) and the central idea expressed in terms of modern categories. For Bultmann, this meant categories drawn from existentialist philosophy; thus he speaks of Jesus’ “understanding of the meaning of existence”³ as the essential matter.

³ Bultmann and many of his pupils also speak of the understanding of existence expressed in or elicited by the *kerygma*, i.e., the “preaching” or message of the early

Few Anglo-Saxon critics have been willing to accept Dodd's claim that for Jesus the Kingdom was virtually *entirely* present. And few German scholars in or out of Bultmann's circle have continued to hold that Jesus thought it exclusively future. For the past decade or two, the dominant hypothesis has been that the historical Jesus thought and proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was both future and, in some sense, also present.

The tendency of interpreters to circumvent the evidence that Jesus looked for the coming of the Kingdom in the near future is traceable to the dogmatic interests or presuppositions of these interpreters. Most of the Synoptic evidence indicates unambiguously that Jesus and his followers looked for the coming of the Kingdom in the future. Our contention is that much of the "difficulty" over verses which might appear to indicate that Jesus thought of the Kingdom as present arises out of unwillingness on the part of interpreters to take seriously Jesus' eschatological outlook.

Jesus regarded the coming of the Kingdom as a future, supernatural occurrence. That he thought it present on earth in any sense is doubtful. It is equally unlikely that any of the Synoptic evangelists or their "sources" (Mark, "Q," "M," and "L")⁴ thought that the Kingdom of God was yet present or had been present on earth. For the historical Jesus and the Synoptic tradition alike, the Kingdom of God was still to come. The fact that this expectation was fulfilled neither in that generation nor any subsequent to date does not alter the evidence that Jesus and the early Christian community looked for its actualization in the near future.

church. Bultmann gladly relegates the historical Jesus to first-century Judaism (so far as his significance for theology is concerned), but maintains the essential identity of the early Christian *kerygma* (by which he usually means his rendering of Pauline theology) with the preaching of the church today. The central issue in the so-called new quest of the historical Jesus is the relationship between Jesus' understanding "of the meaning of existence" and that implicit in the *kerygma*. Proponents of the "new quest" generally wish to sanctify their conception of the *kerygma* or the understanding "of the meaning of existence" imputed to it by finding its parallel or basis in the historical Jesus.

⁴ It is widely recognized that Matthew and Luke both utilized Mark for their narrative framework and certain other material. Sayings that appear in approximately the same form in Matthew and Luke but not occurring in Mark are designated by the letter "Q" for the German *Quelle*, meaning "source." Whether such a "source" was oral or written, or even existed, are other questions. The letter "M" designates material found only in Matthew, and "L" what is peculiar to Luke. Some of the "M" or "L" traditions may have come from "Q"; these letters may also include several different subsources and material authored by the evangelists themselves.

It is ironic that this problem which was pivotal to the “quest of the historical Jesus,” the “realized eschatology” debate, the “demythologizing controversy,” and to the whole course of NT study in this century has largely escaped the attention of the nonspecialist. Laymen generally suppose that the real problem about the historical Jesus is whether he really existed, at least as described in the Gospel traditions;⁵ or whether the Dead Sea Scrolls discredit him as a mere echo of the Qumran Teacher of Righteousness; or whether Schonfield (or any other popularizer) has at last proven him some kind of fanatic or political operator.⁶ These misplaced or spurious concerns have, in part, been fed by the desire of authors and publishers to sell print. But they also result from the failure of NT specialists to expose to public view (and often to their own awareness) the specifically eschatological nature of Jesus’ beliefs and preaching indicated in the Synoptic tradition.

However strange this outlook may seem to us, it is quite characteristic of first-century Judaism and Christianity, and constitutes a basic feature of the context in which the latter developed. Perhaps the present study can serve to introduce the nonspecialist to, and remind the specialist of the eschatological character of, the Kingdom of God in the Synoptic tradition, a factor which must be recognized if one wishes even to begin to comprehend the intention and activity of the historical Jesus and the early Christian community.

II. ESCHATOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY

As Albert Schweitzer and more recently others also have shown, the efforts on the part of NT scholars and others prior to 1900 to portray the life and teaching of Jesus were by and large highly subjective and fanciful. In nearly every case, these writers managed to delineate a Jesus in modern dress, devoted to the concerns of modern men, and lending the weight of his good name to their causes — e.g., the furtherance of rational

⁵ Few critical scholars, of course, would claim that the Jesus portrayed in the fourth Gospel corresponds to the Jesus of history. By no means all of the Synoptic tradition is to be taken as evidence for the historical Jesus either; but here, at least, there is much that can be so regarded with a high degree of probability, as even so radical a critic as Rudolf Bultmann concedes (*Jesus and the Word*, New York, 1958, 14).

⁶ On J.M. Allegro and H.J. Schonfield, see Otto Betz, “The Crisis in N.T. Theology: The Gap between the Historical Jesus and the Faith of the Church,” Chicago Theological Seminary *Register* 59 (1969), esp. 12-16.

religion, the triumph of the proletariat, the fulfillment of man's progress toward the perfect society on earth.⁷ Jesus had apparently been doing well in these modernizing schools, and was advancing toward graduation into the world of respectable, contemporary society. But just when everything was going so well, it was discovered, to nearly everyone's dismay — including that of the two principal discoverers, Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer — that the modern (late nineteenth-century) Jesus was a figment of liberal theology's imagination: that the historical Jesus is "to our time a stranger and an enigma," who returns to his own time.⁸ So long as Jesus' eschatological outlook was ignored, it seemed possible, by use of only moderately ingenious exegetics, to find in him the advocate of all sorts of modern-day viewpoints and concerns. But once his eschatological outlook was recognized, it was no longer so easy to claim his endorsement.

It is not surprising that many writers since Schweitzer have been unwilling to surrender their versions of the "historical" Jesus without a struggle. What more powerful ally could one have on behalf of his particular cause than "the Founder" (as many liberal writers preferred to call Jesus) himself? Furthermore, many modern Christian exegetes and moralists remained convinced that Jesus' message — his gospel and ethics — is still authoritative for and relevant to the Christian life today. Given this conviction, surely Jesus must have intended his message for our day, and not simply for his own generation.⁹ Furthermore, the eschatological interpretation of Jesus' outlook and teaching seemed to undermine his authority: if Jesus were mistaken about the time of the coming of the kingdom of God, then perhaps he was in error about some other things as well, such as his relationship to God or the nature of the moral life.¹⁰

⁷ Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York, 1950) is still the best summary of these efforts. He writes, retrospectively, of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century "lives" of Jesus, "Thus each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus. . . . But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character" (4). These words were also prophetic of many of the treatments yet to come. See also Gösta Lundström, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, Richmond, 1963, Chs. 1-3, 9-11.

⁸ *Schweitzer*, 399.

⁹ This conviction has been a major factor in the resistance of many writers to Schweitzer's characterization of Jesus' message as "an ethic for the interim." See my article "Interim Ethics," *Theology and Life* 9 (1966), 220-33.

¹⁰ E.g., George E. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom*, New York, 1964, 136 ff.

By far the clearest and most forceful and, incidentally, the first thorough analysis of the Synoptic evidence apropos of Jesus' concept of the kingdom of God is the first edition of Johannes Weiss' *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, a slender volume of which Rudolf Bultmann says:

This epoch-making book refuted the interpretation which was hitherto generally accepted. Weiss showed that the Kingdom of God is not immanent in the world and does not grow as part of the world's history, but is rather eschatological; i.e., the Kingdom of God transcends the historical order. It will come into being not through the moral endeavor of man, but solely through the supernatural action of God. God will suddenly put an end to the world and to history, and He will bring in a new world, the world of eternal blessedness.¹¹

Since this book is now to be available in English, a brief summary of Weiss' argument will suffice.

The eschatological character of Jesus' Galilean preaching, Weiss suggests, is evidenced not only in Mark 1:15 and Matthew 4:17, "Repent; the kingdom of God is at hand," but also in the "Q" summaries which in their earliest form describe Jesus as "preaching the gospel of the kingdom saying: Repent" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:43; 8:1). He instructs his disciples to proclaim this same message as he sends them on their preaching mission (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9, 11): "The meaning of this well-attested proclamation of Jesus and his disciples seems quite clear: the kingdom (or the rule) of God has drawn so near that it stands at the door. Therefore, while the *basileia* (Kingdom) is not yet *here*, it is extremely near."¹²

The first supplication of the prayer Jesus put on the lips of his disciples, Weiss points out, was "Thy kingdom come!" "The meaning is not 'may thy kingdom grow,' 'may thy kingdom be perfected,' but, rather, 'may thy kingdom *come*.' For the disciples, the *basileia* is not yet here, not even in its beginnings; therefore Jesus bids them: *zēteite tēn basileian* (seek the Kingdom; Luke 12:31). This yearning and longing for its

¹¹ *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, New York, 1958, 12. See also the appraisal of Weiss by David Larrimore Holland, "History, Theology and the Kingdom of God," *Biblical Research* 13 (1968), 1-13.

¹² *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, Göttingen, 1892, 12. The following pages of the same work are also cited in the discussion which follows: 17, 25, 27, 36 ff., 42, 49, 63, 65-67.

coming, this ardent prayer for it, and the constant hope that it will come — that it will come soon — this is their religion.” Only the Father knows when the kingdom will come; there is no way to calculate the time of its arrival — not even the Son knows that (Mark 13:32), but Jesus’ followers can be sure that God will bring it (Luke 12:32; 18:7ff.; 21:28).

Nevertheless, Jesus expected the kingdom to come in the near future. His instructions to his disciples as he sent them on their preaching mission (Matt. 10:5ff.; Luke 10:10ff.) make sense only when we realize that in Jesus’ view no time was to be lost:

In case a town should not receive them, they were immediately and emphatically to abandon all further attempts to approach it and were to shake off its dust from their feet. Such a procedure is anything but “pastoral.” . . . It can only be explained on the supposition that no time may be lost with fruitless or problematical efforts. Where they meet with unresponsiveness, no more energy dare be wasted there which might better be directed toward receptive souls. The expectation of the *immediate* onset of the end forms the background for these ideas.

At some point, however, Jesus began to realize that the kingdom would not come during his own lifetime. But he still expected it to come during the lifetime of the generation of his contemporaries (Mark 13:30 and par.). In Mark 9:43ff. it “is presupposed that those to whom the words are addressed will *live to see* the coming of the kingdom,” but first they must pass through the final Judgment. At the time of Judgment, the dead, having been raised, including even those of ancient and foreign cities and nations, will pass before the judgment throne of the Son of man, where the fate of each will be decided: those found righteous will then enter the kingdom of God and sit at the messianic table in the bright warm banquet hall with the patriarchs (Matt. 8:11ff.), while the wicked will suffer exclusion from the kingdom of God.

At the Last Supper, Jesus made it plain to his disciples that he would not again drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God had come (Luke 22:18). But to the meek, he promised that they would inherit the kingdom (Matt. 5:5). When Jesus spoke of “possessing” or “entering” the kingdom of God, he meant, as in the Beatitudes generally, the assurance of participation, and even, perhaps, bearing rule in the kingdom of God at that time *in the future* when God brings it. The kingdom will belong only to those who by repentance (*metanoia*) have made themselves ready

for it. Weiss does not use Schweitzer's term, "interim ethic" or "ethic for the interim," but his interpretation is virtually identical at this point: "the 'righteousness of the kingdom of God' does not signify the ethical perfection which members of the kingdom possess or achieve *in* the kingdom of God, but rather the *dikaiosune* (righteousness) which is the *condition for entrance into* the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:20)." One must be prepared to give up everything else for the sake of this highest, ultimate Good, as the parables of the pearl and the treasure in the field make very plain.¹³

Weiss was quite aware that recognizing the eschatological character of Jesus' conception of the kingdom of God would make it no longer possible to maintain that the words and outlook of the historical Jesus and the late nineteenth-century theological interpretation of Jesus and his message were one and the same. He insists, therefore, that "we cannot any longer use Jesus' words in the exact sense that was originally intended."

Weiss noted that his conclusions "present peculiar difficulties for systematic and practical theology"; in particular, the Protestant liberal understanding that the kingdom of God could be interpreted "as an 'actualization of the rule of God' by human ethical activity" is now seen to be not only without support from the historical Jesus, but "completely contrary to the transcendentalism of Jesus' idea."

What, then, should theology do? It not only could, but should, Weiss urged, retain the concept "kingdom of God" as "the characteristic watchword of modern theology. *Only the admission must be demanded that we use it in a different sense from Jesus.*"

Albert Schweitzer's interpretation of Jesus' eschatological message and ministry is generally more familiar than Weiss' and need not be summarized here. It may simply be noted that Schweitzer arrived independently at very much the same conclusions as Weiss, setting down his position initially in his "Sketch of the Life of Jesus,"¹⁴ and with some further additions in his celebrated, though often misread, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*.¹⁵ Like Weiss, Schweitzer did not shrink from concluding that the historical, eschatological Jesus is "a stranger and an enigma"

¹³ Matt. 13:44-46. See also Luke 12:31; Matt. 6:31.

¹⁴ English translation, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, New York, 1950.

¹⁵ Schweitzer's most recent account of Jesus' ministry and message was written in 1951: *The Kingdom of God and Primitive Christianity*, New York, 1968, esp. 68-130. His position basically is the same here as in his earlier studies.

to our time, and that, accordingly, “the historical foundation of Christianity as built up by rationalistic, by liberal, and by modern theology no longer exists.”¹⁶

Both Weiss and Schweitzer were concerned to show how this strange, eschatological Jesus with his negative, world-renouncing ethic might nevertheless be understood to mean something for our own time.¹⁷ Their proposals may have some merit, even though a considerable gap remains between the historical Jesus of their exegesis and the Jesus they found relevant to the modern world. The point to be noted here is that both men were capable of differentiating between the descriptive, historical-critical task and the theological, interpretative task. They did not allow themselves to be forced off the road of straightforward historical exegesis by fear or hallucinations of oncoming theological “difficulties.”

Some of the more recent studies of the Kingdom of God in the Synoptic tradition have not proceeded so forthrightly. In many of them the methodology employed seems to proceed on the principle that the end justifies the means. The implicit end is to get rid of Jesus’ strange, eschatological ideas and, with them, the attendant theological “difficulties” that seem to stand between him and his significance “for us” today.¹⁸ To achieve such a worthy goal, surely any means or methodology — if necessary, several at the same time — will do! Diverse as many of these studies are as to specific theological interest, it will be seen that they are guided by the same methodological consideration: to *dispose of* the eschatological aspects of Jesus’ thought, preaching, and activity.

¹⁶ *Quest*, 399.

¹⁷ For analysis of Schweitzer’s suggestions, see my book *Jesus and Ethics*, Philadelphia, 1968, Chapter 2.

¹⁸ Thus, e.g., Heinz Zahrnt, *The Historical Jesus*, New York, 1963, 53; Hermann Schuster, “Die Konsequente Eschatologie in der Interpretation des Neuen Testaments, Kritisch Betrachtet,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 47 (1956), 22.