

# What's in a Word? Recovering the Vocabulary of the New Testament\*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

It has been well said that the language we use uses us. If we say something long enough, we are going to believe it. Marvin Wilson, author of *Our Father Abraham*,<sup>1</sup> reminded us of this when he pointed out that our use of the term “Old Testament” tends to make us think of the Hebrew Bible as disposable, antiquated or obsolete. He suggests that a definitely Marcionite tendency still afflicts much Bible study in our time. Marcion was a mid-second-century Gnostic Christian, rejected by many because he did not like the Old Testament and confined his canon to Luke’s Gospel and some of the letters of Paul. Today lip service is often paid to the 77% of our Bible which we call the Old Testament. Many unwittingly take little note of its fundamental, indispensable role as the key to the mind of Jesus who expressly declared that he did not come to abolish it, but to bring it to completion and get at the depths of its meaning (Matt. 5:17). This unfortunate tendency to treat the Hebrew Bible as second class or of historical interest only, confuses and frustrates efforts by dedicated Christians to unite on biblical teachings and practices. If Bible readers would define the Kingdom of God, and indeed God and the Messiah, in terms of the Hebrew prophets (especially Daniel) there could be unity in the divided church we now seem to accept as normal. Jesus obviously recognizes the Law, Prophets and Writings as the divine

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<sup>1</sup> Eerdmans, 1989.

repository of instruction to be relied on as a massive support for faith in God and His Plan. Current trends which question the validity of the canon seem to me as problematic as trying to play chess without knowing where the edges of the board are. Without an authoritative canon, there is no faith to discuss. We consider first some examples of biblical words which drastically affect understanding.

## II. THE WORD IN JOHN 1:1

Is the current translation of John 1:1 really a translation at all, if by translation we mean the conveying of the original into an intelligible equivalent in the target language? Does the phrase “the Word was with God” mean anything in English? When was your word last “with you”? I suspect that our present standard renderings, though they may be word for word correct, simply allow the reader to feel good about his received orthodox Christology of the eternal Son assuming human nature. The capital on “Word” immediately suggests a *person* preexisting. And many readers (11 million copies around the world in many languages) are offered a paraphrase such as the Good News Bible: “Before anything else existed, there was Christ, with God. He has always been alive and is himself God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he did not make.”<sup>2</sup> The reader’s orthodoxy is all the more confirmed. But the Roman Catholic scholar Karl-Joseph Kuschel in his recent massive treatment of the question of Christ’s origin asks: “Why do we instinctively read: ‘In the beginning was the Son and the Son was with God’?”<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that the Hebrew Bible should provide our first line of investigation, if we are to get at John’s intention in the prologue. As a professor told me in seminary, “If you misunderstand the OT you will misunderstand the NT.” Amazingly no occurrence of the Hebrew word *davar* (word) corresponding to John’s Greek word *logos* provides any evidence that the “word from the beginning” means a *person*, much less an uncreated second divine Person, the Son of God, alongside the One God of Israel’s creed. *Davar* in the OT means “word,” “matter,” often “promise” or “intention,” but never a person.

Why shouldn’t John therefore be saying that God’s creative and expressive activity, His word or wisdom, the index of His mind, was

<sup>2</sup> Cp. GNB on 1 John 1:1: “Christ was alive when the world began.”

<sup>3</sup> *Born Before All Time? The Debate About the Origin of Christ*, New York: Crossroads, 1992, 381.

“with Him,” just as wisdom was “with [*para*] Him” in Proverbs 8:30 (LXX)? Proverbs 8, in fact, has remarkable parallels with what John later says about Jesus. Life is found in the words of Jesus (John 6:63), as it is found in Wisdom. Wisdom cries out just as Jesus does (John 12:44), as he urges people to heed his teaching. What is predicated of Wisdom in Proverbs is elsewhere attributed to God (Job 12:13-16).

The first verse of John is reminiscent too of what Wisdom says in Ecclesiasticus 24:9: “God created me from the beginning before the world.” There is good evidence that the Hebrew prepositions “*im*” or “*et*” meaning “with” can describe the relationship between *a person and what is in his heart or mind*. Even in English we might say “What’s *with* him?” or “What’s the matter *with* him?” not meaning that something is *next* to someone, but that something is going on *inside* him. Here are some interesting examples of the use of the Hebrew prepositions *im* and *et* from the Hebrew Bible:

**“*Im (with), alone = in one’s consciousness, whether of knowledge, memory or purpose*”<sup>4</sup>:**

Num. 14:24: “He had another spirit with him” (operating in his mind)

1 Kings 11:11: “This is with thee [Solomon]” (what you want)

1 Chron. 28:12: “The pattern of all that was in the spirit with him” (in his mind)

Job 10:13: “I know that this was with you” (parallel to “hidden in your heart”; NIV: “in your mind”; NASV: “I know that these things are your purpose”)

Job 15:9: “which is not with us” (we don’t understand it)

Job 23:10: “He knows the way which is with me” (the way of which I am conscious)

Job 23:14: “He performs the things which are appointed for me and many such things are with Him” (He has many such purposes); LXX: “He has willed a thing and done it.”

Job 27:11: “That which is *with (para) the Almighty* I will not conceal” (His purposes)

Ps. 50:11: “Wild beasts of the field are with Me” (known to Me, in My thought and care)

Ps. 73:23: “I am continually with thee” (in your thoughts)

<sup>4</sup> *Brown, Driver and Briggs Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, 768.

***Et: “a dream or word of Yahweh is said to be with the prophet.”<sup>5</sup>***

Gen. 40:14: “Keep me in mind when it goes well with you” (lit. “Remember me with yourself”). The Word was what God had in mind.

2 Kings 3:12: “There is *with him the word* of the Lord” (cp. 2 John 2: “truth is with us”; Gal. 2:5: “truth remains with you”).

Isa. 59:12: “Transgressions are with us” (in our knowledge, present to our mind). (Cp. John 17:5, the glory which Jesus had with God — present to God’s mind, as His purpose.)

Jer. 12:3: “You examine my heart’s attitude with you” (lit. “You have tried my heart with you”)

Jer. 23:28: “The prophet with whom there is a dream” (the prophet who has a dream)

Jer. 27:18: “If the word of the Lord is with them”

Job 14:5: “His days are determined. The number of his months is *with you*” (known to you)

Prov. 2:1: “Treasure my commandments within you” (= with you)

Prov. 11:2: “Wisdom is with the humble.”

In view of this Hebrew background I suggest a translation of John 1:1, 14 as follows: “In the beginning God had a Plan and the Plan was fixed as God’s Decree and the Plan was fully expressive of God’s mind . . . and the Plan became embodied in the Man Messiah Jesus.”

**John’s Purpose**

I believe John in his prologue is counteracting the Gnostic tendency towards a dualistic or pluralistic idea of God. A Gnostic Christian believed that the ineffable, unapproachable God, who was remote and distant from His creation, was mediated to His world by lesser divine figures, or a single lesser divine figure (the various Gnostic systems differed on this point). Justin Martyr, who certainly did not *claim* any Gnostic affiliation, nevertheless has no qualms about speaking of Jesus as the Son who is “an arithmetically *second God*,” not however uncreated and eternal as the Son in the developed Trinitarian sense, but as *preexisting as the Son* and coming forth at a moment of time just before the Genesis creation. Justin strikes out on a path which seems alien to the NT when he sees the Son of God active in OT times as the angel of the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> *Brown, Driver and Briggs Lexicon*, 86.

Tertullian, known as founder of Latin Christianity, likewise knows of a *second divine being* who was generated in time by the Father.<sup>6</sup> This Christology, which has ominous affinities with Gnostic dualism, could not have thrived unless it were first supposed that John meant that *the Son* as distinct from God's word of wisdom had existed from the beginning. The public continues to rely heavily on John 1:1 for the doctrine of the coequal deity of Christ. But what if they had been schooled on any one of the eight English translations which preceded the publication of the KJV in 1611?<sup>7</sup>

Another line of investigation of John's meaning is the extra-biblical literature of Judaism. In the Qumran *Manual of Discipline* we learn that "By God's *knowledge* everything comes to pass; and everything that is he establishes by his *purpose*; and without him [or it?] it is not done." Surely this is an echo of John's "by it [the word] all things came to be and without it nothing came to be" (1:3). In IQS iii 15 we read: "From the God of knowledge is all that is and that is to be," and in the Apocrypha "O God who hast made all things by Thy *word*" (Wisdom 9:1) and again, in Sirach 42:15: "I will now remember the works of the Lord, and declare the things that I have seen: In the *words* of the Lord are His *works*." In the *Odes of Solomon*, we learn that "the worlds were made by God's word," and by the thought of His heart (16:19).

We are surely in the atmosphere of the God who spoke and it was done in Genesis 1, and in John 1:1 we learn more of the self-expressive and creative activity of the word which (not "who") became Jesus. Jesus is therefore what the word *became*. I believe that many scholars would come to this sort of interpretation if they were not under the constraints of orthodoxy. How interesting, for example, that the great F.F. Bruce, amazingly, wrote of John 1:1 and the problem of the preexistence of Christ: "On the preexistence question, one can at least accept the preexistence of the eternal *word or wisdom* of God *which* (who?) became incarnate in Jesus. But whether any New Testament writer believed in his separate conscious existence as a 'second Divine *Person*' is not so clear

<sup>6</sup> "There was a time when the Son did not exist; God was not always a Father" (*Against Hermogenes*, ch. 3).

<sup>7</sup> With the one exception noted, the following translations rendered John 1:3, "By it all things were made. Without it nothing was made": Tyndale Bible (1535), Coverdale (1550; this version has "the same," rather than "it"), Matthew (1535), Taverner (1539), The Great (Cranmer's) Bible (1539), Whittingham (1557), Geneva (1560), Bishop's Bible (1568).

. . . . I am not so sure that Paul so believed.”<sup>8</sup> Is this after all anything different from the plain definition offered us by the standard *Lexicon* of Arndt and Gingrich? They say of the “word” in John 1:1: “Our literature shows traces of a way of thinking that was widespread in contemporary syncretism, as well as in Jewish wisdom literature and Philo, the most prominent feature of which is the concept of the Logos, the independent, personified ‘Word’ (of God) . . . this divine ‘Word’ took on human form in a historical person.”<sup>9</sup> It is most reassuring to have this definition offered us by such a prestigious authority. You notice that Arndt and Gingrich said nothing about the word meaning *the Son* before the birth of Jesus. The “word” in John 1:1, they think, is a personification, not a Person.

And yet without belief in that second preexisting Son it is not possible, at least here in the Bible belt, to qualify as a genuine believer! What an amazing paradox. The situation is different at the level of academic biblical studies.

How much, then, is at stake in the word “word”? Is it a Person preexisting or a purpose? At present a decision on this point is practically the difference between being accepted as a Christian or an unbeliever, as we found out recently when we were declared publicly to be heretics by a zealous Atlanta group of heresy-hunters.

But what if one understands “word” in John 1:1 to mean the Second Member of the Trinity, preexisting his birth as the Eternal Son? I am encouraged that a recent Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, Geoffrey Lampe, alerted his colleagues to how much is risked if we adopt the traditional understanding of “word” as a preexisting Person. Writing as a master of early church history he deplored the transition from the biblical Son of God to the notion of God the Son:

The Christological concept of the preexistent divine Son reduces the real social and culturally conditioned personality of Jesus to the metaphysical abstraction “human nature” . . . Human nature, according to the classical Alexandrine tradition, was enhypostatized in the divine Person of the Son; it [“impersonal human nature”] became the human nature of a divine personal subject . . . According to this Christology [which has survived as orthodoxy to

<sup>8</sup> From correspondence with the author.

<sup>9</sup> William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957, 480.

this day] the eternal Son assumes a timeless human nature, or makes it timeless by making it his own; it is human nature which owes nothing essential to geographical circumstances; it corresponds to nothing in the actual concrete world; Jesus [under this theory] has not, after all, really “come in the flesh.”<sup>10</sup>

I hardly need to point out that the learned professor’s strictures imply that the traditional view of Jesus as having a divine personal center or ego united to an impersonal human nature ranks as the antichristian view condemned by John in 1 John 4:2 and 2 John 7.

Professor Paul van Buren is equally strong in his conviction about the dangers of reading John 1:1 as a statement about a preexisting Son:

There is no clear indication that the priority of Jesus was intended in a temporal sense. We may conclude that for the earliest church, Jesus was accorded the priority in reality that the Rabbis assigned to the Torah. If one were to make the claim of priority in a temporal sense [as orthodoxy does], one would be claiming that Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, had existed with God before the creation of the world. That claim would be worse than unintelligible; it would destroy all coherence in the essential Christian claim that Jesus was truly a human being, that the Word became flesh . . . Jesus of Nazareth began his life, began to exist, at a definite time in history: the Word became flesh.<sup>11</sup>

Radical Anabaptists of a biblical unitarian stripe can take enormous heart from these penetrating observations of contemporary scholars. They may also want to take advantage of the refined scholarship of Kurt Rudolph whose analysis of the creeping effects of second-century Gnosticism on the original faith is now exposed to public view. Rudolph puts his finger on the problem when he points out that Gnostics, whom everyone recognized as heretics, actually managed to leave their baneful mark on what later became so-called classical orthodoxy in the definition of who the Son of God was. Listen to what he has to say about what really went on in those early efforts of the church to explain how the preexistent Son could be a human being:

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<sup>10</sup> *God As Spirit*, SCM Press, 1977, 144.

<sup>11</sup> *A Theology of Jewish-Christian Reality*, Harper & Row, 1983, 82.

The early Christian fathers, foremost Irenaeus and Tertullian [of the second century], strove hard to find forms which make intelligible in a non-Gnostic sense the prevailing division of the one Jesus Christ. Strictly speaking they did not succeed. Already Harnack was forced to say: "Who can maintain that the Church ever overcame the Gnostic doctrine of the two natures or the Valentinian docetism?" Even the later councils of the Church which discussed the Christological problems in complicated, and nowadays hardly intelligible, definitions did not manage to do this; the unity of the Church foundered precisely on this . . . It has often been forgotten that Gnostic theologians saw Christ as "consubstantial" with the Father, before ecclesiastical theology established this as a principle, in order to preserve his full divinity.<sup>12</sup>

We may rejoice that these experts are providing us with just the right persuasive information we need to make our case. Gnostics, they say, produced an "orthodox" view of Jesus as the eternal Son assuming impersonal human nature, before "orthodoxy" adopted *the same formula*. The church, they say, in its classical formation of dogma, did not win the battle against the Gnostics but absorbed some of their mischievous philosophical ideas. This unfortunate fact "has often been forgotten," says Rudolph. But these are facts that need to be put out on the table, so that information which is powerful may urge the church back to a genuinely non-Gnostic view of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God in that very Hebrew and Messianic sense. What terrific potential this would have for inviting Jews and Moslems, who believe that God is One, to consider the claims of Christ.

### III. SOUL — "HELLENISTIC DUALISM IS ALIVE AND WELL"<sup>13</sup>

Let me now go on to another word which has created the utmost havoc for Bible readers. The word "soul" continues to be a source of major confusion, affecting nearly everything that is said in contemporary mainstream churches about personal eschatology, what happens when we die. When Bible readers think about their destiny, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man continues to be the first point of reference. I cannot understand how this methodology is justified. Is the Hebrew Bible

<sup>12</sup> *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, Harper & Row, 1983, 372.

<sup>13</sup> John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 18:35–24:53*, Dallas: Word Books, 1993, Vol. 35C (on Luke 24:39).



to be entirely ignored, especially when it has so much specific information about the state of man in death? Sheol/Hades in the OT is a gloomy place of inactivity and forgetfulness. Ecclesiastes 9:5 says that the dead know nothing whatsoever, and Isaiah 38:18 that it is impossible for the dead to praise God (I hardly need to multiply examples). This view of the immediate afterlife makes no impression at all on the vast majority of churchgoers who have been trained to think of a blissful survival in heaven immediately after death. We are constantly told that “bodies” sleep but “souls” do not. But is this sort of body-soul dualism anything other than the old Gnostic Hellenistic view of the nature of man in Christian guise? Whenever the text of Scripture in both Testaments speaks of the dead as falling asleep and remaining asleep until the resurrection, it refers to persons, not bodies. For Paul it is the dead, not the dead *bodies*, who rise or are awakened in the resurrection. If in 1 Corinthians 15 *egeiro* had been rendered “to awake from sleep” or “to be awoken from sleep,” the doctrine of the sleep of the dead would have been even more impressive. I cannot understand why it should be so difficult to follow the teaching of Jesus when he said of his friend Lazarus that he was sleeping, or dead, and that he intended to awake him from that sleep of death. The word John has chosen to use there, rather fascinatingly, is the same word found in Job 14:12 (LXX) where Job speaks of the dead awakening from their sleep.

It was the *soul of Jesus* (that is, Jesus himself) who went to Hades but was not abandoned there (Acts 2:31) and three days later emerged from the tomb as the risen person, the same human being now immortalized. I note that Paul said (1 Cor. 15:1-3) that to believe the Gospel properly we must believe that Jesus died *according to the Scriptures* and that after burial he rose again *according to the Scriptures*. I take it that in order to believe these things about the death and resurrection of Jesus *according to the Scriptures* one must believe in the scriptural idea of the death of the whole person and the resurrection to life of the whole person. Paul would have found problematic, to say the least, that idea that Jesus really did not die as a person, but merely survived as a disembodied spirit. Would Paul accept as resurrection the idea that an immortal soul or spirit rejoined a body? Would he accept belief in the death of a Savior who could not, being immortal God, actually die?

One may not like to think of the geography of death, but the plain fact is that the Bible presents us with such information. Jesus clearly did not go to his Father the day he died (John 20:17). He expected to be three days

in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40), and Peter saw Psalm 16 as crucial information proving that Jesus died and went to Sheol/Hades before he rose. This of course was the standard procedure for the dying throughout the OT. Indeed the state of the dead in that 77% of our Bibles is exactly as Ecclesiastes 9:5 describes it: "The dead know nothing." Keil's comment here is most telling, as he reflects on the somewhat desperate attempts of commentators to get rid of this information which fits badly with received ideas of what it means to die:

In vain do the Targum, Midrash and the older Christian interpreters refer Ecc. 9:5 to the *wicked dead* [only]; others regard the writer of Ecclesiastes as introducing the discourse of atheists, and interpret, under the influence of monstrous self-deception, verse 7 as the voice of the spirit as opposing the voice of the flesh. But what Ecc. 9:5 says here only in a particularly rugged way is the view of Hades [death] predominating in the OT.<sup>14</sup>

The misunderstanding of "soul," which in the Bible means the person himself or the life of a person, has continued to cause trouble in the millennial passage in Revelation 20. What John saw there was "the souls of those who had been beheaded" (v. 4), who then came to life and began to reign with the Messiah for the 1000 years at "the first resurrection" (v. 5). We should give up the idea that "soul" here implies an immortal and separable part of man which survives death. We can take courage from the remark of the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* which states: "No biblical text authorizes the statement that the 'soul' is separated from the body at the moment of death."<sup>15</sup>

What John witnessed as "the souls of those who had been beheaded" was simply "those *persons* who had been beheaded." If we compare this sort of language with Romans 2:9, 10, we find that in Romans there will be wrath upon "every soul of man" and in the next line upon "everyone." "Soul" is nothing more nor less than the whole person or individual. This is also the case in Revelation 18:13 where "souls of men" are simply human persons. Revelation 20:4 means that John saw those *individuals* who had lost their heads for the faith. They now came to life in the vision and *began to reign* with the Messiah. This of course is the Christian hope

<sup>14</sup> Keil and Delitsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Hendrickson, 1989, Vol. 6, 361.

<sup>15</sup> G. A. Buttrick, ed., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962, Vol. 1, 802.

of all of us, and one of the great driving motifs of the New Testament. It is also plain premillennialism.

Are there signs that “soul” can be rescued from its long exile in alien Greek philosophical territory? Can it be reinstated in its own native Hebrew environment as the word to describe living creatures, both man and animals, mortal and in the case of man needing to gain immortality through the spirit, through belief in the Gospel of the Kingdom and through resurrection at the Parousia?

A recent event in the Anglican world gives us reason to hope that others are thinking about the biblical view of man. I was so excited by what George Carey, the present Archbishop of Canterbury, had written about surviving “soul” not being part of true Christian vocabulary that I penned the following to the Most Reverend Lord Archbishop:

In a class on biblical eschatology here at Atlanta Bible College, we used sections of your most interesting book *I Believe in Man*. I wondered whether I might be permitted to reflect on a couple of points you raised in your last chapter, “The Destiny of Man.”

As one born and bred in the Church of England, and having “gone back to school” (as Americans say) to get a degree in theology and then to teach in a Bible College since 1981, I now realize that I earlier had only the vaguest notion of the various options in eschatology.

Following the excellent work of the biblical theologians of the 60s (Alan Richardson was particularly helpful), I am now fully convinced that, as you say, “man is by nature mortal” (p. 163), that “the ancient Greek concept of the immortality of the soul is at complete variance with the idea of the resurrection” (p. 167), that “it is impossible to conceive of personality or the self existing without a body” (p. 167), and that “a body-less soul is therefore alien to the Christian faith.”

If, as you further state, “we [Christians] do not step out with the immaterialist who postulates an immaterial soul over and above his physical body,” why is it that the average Church of England churchgoer (and members of the mainline denominations in general) *does* in fact believe in just such a surviving soul, based on what is the clear implication of funeral sermons and what appears to be the accepted consensus amongst the clergy?

If “it is a false trail to look within the human body for an immortal ‘soul,’ mind or residual self which *somehow* survives the destruction of the flesh” (pp. 172, 173), might it be possible to initiate (in this decade of evangelism) an exciting return to biblical

teaching on this fundamental question of the nature of man, death and hope? Surely a more vigorous Christianity would result from a clear view of the future, as the Bible presents it. By asserting the hope of resurrection of the whole person and of all the faithful at Christ's return (1 Cor. 15:23), we would immediately bring understanding to our personal Bible study and enjoy the immense advantage of reflecting the voice of the apostles. Though the corporate resurrection of the faithful is clearly laid out in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4, many read these passages (and hear them preached at funerals) in the confusing shadow of a preconceived notion that the individual's moment of death is the instant of immediate conscious glory in heaven.

Far outweighing the moment of death is the hope for the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth and the resurrection which introduces it. This view of the future pervades both Testaments.

You observe what I think many of us can confirm that "sermons and talks on eschatology are rare indeed in Christian congregations" (p. 177). This must be because our accepted traditional teaching confuses the whole issue by speaking of "souls" departing their bodies at death. This must lead to a loss of the central NT teaching on resurrection from Hades as the only way out of death. The God of the Bible is one who "brings down to the grave and raises up." But I seemed in those early days to be presented with a prospect of going up without having to go down at all! Jesus emerged from the "heart of the earth" or Hades only via resurrection. And his experience is the model for our own expectation.

An appeal for a reform of basic Christian thinking along these lines is nothing new. The report in memory of Archbishop Temple, "Towards the Conversion of England" of 1945, contained in section 53 the assertion that "the idea of the inherent indestructibility of the human soul (or consciousness) owes its origin to Greek, not to Bible, sources." It seems to me that so far we have merely talked about the biblical view of death. Nothing has been achieved in terms of a revolution of thought to bring pulpit and pew into line with the Hebraic biblical view of man as a unity in need of resurrection *from* death, not survival of death. It is not surprising that eschatology is not a vital subject in the church when our own teaching about surviving disembodied souls has made the NT so difficult to understand. The great virtue of Hope is undermined if not abandoned when we do not share the clear expectation of Jesus and the early church of a future, corporate "awakening" from death.

I write as one brought up in the Anglican community who was not exposed to biblical teaching in any depth until my 20s. What has been such a comfort to me is a clear view of the destiny of man

as needing to be resurrected from death and of that resurrection being an event of the eschatological future. The whole matter of the Parousia is brought into focus when we abandon the false notion that the dead survive immediately. Traditional teaching (to which Tyndale also objected) changes the Bible's insistence that resurrection is essential for the gaining of immortality.

Thank you again for your encouraging teaching about the mortality of man. Our prayer is that a campaign might be launched so that the desires of the 1945 committee and the wisdom of the Bible theologians might bear fruit in the lives of many in England and the Christian West.<sup>16</sup>

#### IV. JUDGING

Also under the heading of what the Bible promises for the future is the matter of the saints "judging" the world (1 Cor. 6:2, etc.). An adjustment of this misleading word "judge" is needed. To judge in the Bible is not simply to pronounce sentence and condemn the evil. That is only one function of the judge. "Judging" encompasses a much wider idea. It means to exercise administrative office as of course the "judges" of the book of Judges did. They were in fact political leaders of Israel, and so the saints are designated for a similar office in the coming age of the Kingdom. Moffat has rescued the real meaning from the obscure translation "judge." I think you will agree that this rendering has life and meaning: "Don't you know," Paul chides the Corinthians, "that the saints are going to *manage the world*? And if the world is to come under your jurisdiction are you unable to settle these trifles in the church?" (1 Cor. 6:2, 3). Paul further warns that certain categories of persistent sinners will not inherit the Kingdom (v. 9). These complementary statements well define the Kingdom of God. To inherit the Kingdom is to become part of the executive administration of the Kingdom, to become a king with Jesus. Eric Sauer captured the idea beautifully when he wrote that to be a member of the Christian church in the Bible means to be a member of "the ruling aristocracy, the official executive staff of the coming Kingdom."<sup>17</sup> I am amazed that almost nothing is made of these extraordinary promises in preaching. Of course the whole idea of the royal future of believers comes out of Daniel 7, where some four times it is said that the "time is going to come when the saints possess the Kingdom and all nations and tongues are going to serve and obey them" (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27,

<sup>16</sup> Written on January 25, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> *From Eternity to Eternity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, 93.

GNB, RSV). Politically dangerous material, you would think. No wonder, then, that Jesus expected one day to say to those who had used their talents successfully in his service, “Be promoted and take your position as leader over five or ten cities” (Luke 19:17).

I want to show the centrality in the Gospel of this challenging future for the believer. The fact is that Jesus makes royal office the heart of the covenant he made with the disciples just before he died. Much is said in preaching about the shedding of Jesus’ blood for our sins. But much less is said about the covenant and the contract which was thus ratified by that shedding of blood. As is well known, covenants in the Bible are always brought into force with blood. So Moses in Exodus first made known what God expected of Israel and what God promised them for obedience. Then he took blood and inaugurated the divine covenant by pouring the blood on the documents containing the arrangements God made with His people (Ex. 24:7, 8). The covenant constituted Israel as God’s executives and priests responsible for taking the knowledge of God to the world (Ex. 19:5, 6; 24:1-8). And so it is with the New Covenant. Jesus had just finished speaking of his own covenant blood, to be remembered in the practice of the Lord’s supper (Luke 22:20). He then went on to say: “Just as my Father has *covenanted* with me to give me a Kingdom or royal office, so I covenant with you to give you royal office, and you will take your places on thrones to administer the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:28-30; Matt. 19:28). He was referring to the future regathering of the tribes in the land, an event which had been often envisaged by the prophets of Israel. In this passage at the Last Supper Jesus says: “Just as the Father has covenanted with me to give me a Kingdom . . .” So not only is there an Abrahamic covenant promising the blessing of land and progeny (Gen. 12; 15; 17; Ps. 105, etc.), not only is there the celebrated Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17) which builds on the Abrahamic covenant and provides for the monarchy and the monarch of the Kingdom or promised land, but there is finally the *Jesuanic covenant* on which those earlier pacts converge. Jesus Messiah is the object of all the promises (Gal. 3:16, 19) and himself the sovereign destined to inherit the Kingdom, as the promised land of the future, the inhabited earth of the future as Hebrews 2:5 puts it. Hebrews calls this “the greatness of salvation” (2:3). I should think so. The Christian faith invites us to share the government of the world, with immortality thrown in as a bonus!

Thus truly the Bible is the account of how God intends to bless the nations through His arrangements with Abraham, David, Jesus and the

faithful. What a wonderfully coherent narrative this gives us! How sublimely simple yet profound this is. The Bible is indeed, as someone has said, a pool in which children may paddle and elephants may wade. The story is as comprehensible and gripping to the uninstructed seven-year-old as it is to the seasoned student. All is based on the Land and the Landowner, the Man and the Message. All goes back to Genesis 12, Daniel 7, Psalm 110 and Psalm 37. No wonder that we and the Christadelphians adopted and should never forget the early creed of Acts 8:12. This encapsulates the biblical story so well. "When they believed Philip as he preached the Gospel about the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ they were submitting to baptism, both men and women." This is the essence of Abrahamic Faith, and these truths have been recovered sometimes at the cost of blood, and never without much toil.

#### V. "ETERNAL" OR "EVERLASTING LIFE"

One final shift of terminology will bring that Abrahamic faith into sharper focus. The term "everlasting" or "eternal life" is a poor representation of its very Jewish original. The phrase *zoe aionios*, known to us all as everlasting or eternal life, really means the Life of the Age to Come or the Life of the Coming Kingdom, which is the same thing. Our good friend, the late Dr. Nigel Turner, remarks in his excellent *Christian Words*: "It would be imprecise to translate *aionios* as 'eternal' . . . It means 'belonging to the future age or dispensation.'"<sup>18</sup> Dr. Turner used a characteristic British understatement. "It is imprecise" to translate *aionios* as "eternal." It is in fact very un-Jewish to render the word as "everlasting" or "eternal." This is much too vague and helps to veil the whole idea of the future Kingdom of God on the earth in the Age to Come. It clouds and befogs the great cardinal virtue of Hope. It allows for all sorts of alien philosophy to invade the faith and gives support for life in heaven as a bodiless spirit, which is something Jesus said nothing about. In addition the rendering of *aionios* as "eternal" in Matthew 25:41 causes the average reader to think of an *eternal* punishment for the wicked, an idea which John Stott has recently given up,<sup>19</sup> and if reports are correct, many in the Anglican community have recently renounced. A strong case can be made for the destruction of the wicked based on the fact that the

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<sup>18</sup> T & T Clark, 1980, 452, 455.

<sup>19</sup> See "John Stott on Hell," *World Christian*, May 1989.

fire which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah is also “eternal” (*aionios*), that is “having to do with the future age of the Kingdom” (Jude 7). The fire is not still burning. What Jude meant was that the ancient fire which destroyed those evil cities was of the same sort as that which will destroy the wicked in the future. Supernatural fire is what is meant, not eternal fire.

I have found that the translation of *aionios*, wherever it appears, as “having to do with the coming age” or “belonging to the coming age” throws a flood of light on the text and saves us from much misinterpretation. How clear it is, for example, that in 2 Corinthians 5:1 Paul has in mind the *future resurrection body* of the believer which we “have,” i.e. we have it as something God has prepared for us. And it is *aionios*, a body fitted for the coming age of the Kingdom of God on earth. It is a body which enables us to maintain our identity. It will be a body animated by spirit and never subject to death.

## VI. THE CHRISTIAN DESTINY

I must mention, finally, two other items in my list of suggestions for a return to the language of the Bible. Firstly the phrases “when I get to heaven,” so and so “has gone to heaven,” “we will meet in heaven.” This popular parlance is very different from the language of Jesus, who always speaks of “entering the Kingdom of God” or “inheriting the Kingdom of God” or “inheriting the earth” (Matt. 5:5).<sup>20</sup> This language is shared by Paul, who sometimes varies it with an expression like attaining “glory.” This conveys exactly the same goal, but in a manner less calculated to arouse the anger of the watchful Roman empire, for whom “Kingdom” would be provocative.

Secondly, few phrases could be more unfair to the Bible than the “consummation of the Kingdom” or “the end of time.” What our Christian writers expected was really the *inauguration* of the Kingdom, for which Joseph of Arimathea was waiting (Mark 15:43), for which Jesus said pray “Thy Kingdom come,” and which is expected to arrive not at the “end of time” or history, but at the *end-time* or the end of the present evil age which will mark the beginning of the Age to Come, and the consummation (*sunteleia*, Matt. 24:3), not of the Kingdom, but of the present evil age.

<sup>20</sup> The GNB obscures the whole promise here by paraphrasing, “They will receive what God has promised” — and the reader is left wondering what God *has* promised.



In this biblical sense Christians are the true “new agers,” and they expect the blessing of Abraham to go worldwide on a massive scale unknown in “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). That will be the time when Messiah comes to rule personally and locally with his saints. We join the believers of all ages who have cried “Maranatha,” may the Lord Messiah return! With that hope we shall now pursue the task of playing our part in the fulfillment of Matthew 24:15: “This Gospel about the Kingdom is to be proclaimed to all the nations, and then the end of the age will come.” Therein lies Christian service in the truest and most Abrahamic sense.

Words are slippery things, and in the hands of philosophically-minded translators, they can do much to dim the brilliance of the Bible Message of the Kingdom and the Messiah (Acts 8:12).