

EDITORIAL

The Eclipse of Jesus' Jewish-Christian Hope for the Future

Some of the most remarkable, radical and enlightening observations are buried in learned tomes. They have to be extracted from the wealth of less important information which surrounds them. In isolation they attract the attention they deserve. In his magisterial study of *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* G.R. Beasley-Murray without fanfare informs us that Christians have not been following Jesus — and on an issue fundamental to Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom. He writes:

The Kingdom of Heaven is fundamentally the Kingdom of earth. While the majority of Christendom has been in the habit of thinking of "heaven" as the place for which the children of God are destined, Jesus makes the startling statement that "the meek are to possess the earth" (Matt. 5:5). This accords with the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions almost in their entirety . . . The Kingdom of God comes from heaven to earth, and earth will be fitted to be the scene of such rule.¹

So entrenched and cherished is the belief that upon death Christians will depart to the presence of God in heaven, that the simplicity of Jesus' Messianic and Jewish outlook on the future of the earth has been eclipsed. Only a radical change of speech habits can reverse this situation. As long as "heaven-going" is presumed to come from the Bible, the words of Jesus will continue to be stifled. Following Jesus and relating to his spirit makes little sense unless we relate sympathetically to his teachings. He invites his followers to "inherit the earth," and, in the words of a heavenly chorus singing about Christian destiny, "to rule as kings on the earth" when he returns (Rev. 5:10).

Beasley-Murray has other gems to offer us in matters of eschatology. He helps us to see that there is a Jesuanic covenant which centers on the gracious gift of the future Kingdom to Jesus' followers. Such an arrangement between God and Jesus is no surprise in view of the Abrahamic land

¹ *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, Eerdmans, 1986, 163.

promise of which Jesus is the recipient according to Paul in Galatians 3:16, 19: “to Abraham the promises were made, and to his seed . . . who is Christ. . . . The law was added until the seed came to whom the promises were made.” Again, some may find it startling that Jesus is not only the promised seed, but also the *beneficiary* of the promises made to Abraham. Since the covenant promise of the land (Matt. 5:5) and the world (Rom. 4:13) were made *to* Jesus, it is natural to find him celebrating his joy at the prospect of that inheritance. As king of the Kingdom he declares his intention to share rulership with his followers who have endured suffering with him and for him.

Beasley-Murray says: “The connection of thought between the eschatological covenant ratified in the giving of the body and blood of Jesus (Luke 22:19, 20) and the covenanting to give the Kingdom to the disciples in v. 29 is especially striking. While the term covenant does not appear in v. 29, the verb *diatithemai* [to dispose by covenant] is closely related to it.”² Jesus therefore said: “I appoint the Kingdom to you by covenant as my Father appointed it to me.” The Kingdom of God of future hope is simply the land promised as an inheritance in perpetuity to Abraham, his seed and the faithful (Gal. 3:29).

Why do Christians find these grand promises about our destiny startling? Only because of the alien and intruding notion that the soul of man is innately immortal and therefore must go “marching on.” If the soul survives death, it must have somewhere to go. In the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament everyone, including Jesus, departs downwards to Hades/Sheol pending resurrection. Entrance upon “the next life” is only via resurrection (cp. 1 Sam. 2:6). But a pagan Greek influence was not successfully resisted either by the Jews or later the Christians. Early church fathers such as Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Lactantius and Hippolytus would be found out of step today. They protested the notion that anyone could “go to heaven” at death. They insisted on an interim residence in Hades pending the resurrection. Tertullian even pointed out that it was Plato who taught that the souls only of those who had developed homosexual love went straight to heaven.³

Both Judaism and Christianity yielded first to belief in a differentiated Hades with immediate rewards and punishments (contrary to the Bible) and finally to an immediate departure of the soul to heaven, without an

² *Ibid.*, 276.

³ *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 55.

intermediate visit to Hades. The pattern is strongly reminiscent of the scheme promoted in the Greek Orphic mysteries and later perpetuated by Plato.

No wonder that Jesus' sublime promise of the land or earth as the reward of the meek strikes a modern churchgoer as startling. He has been fed on Greek teachings mistakenly thought to be biblical.

— Anthony F. Buzzard