

## ***Christian Destiny—2*** ***Christ our Hope (Part I)***

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*Professor Bruce contributes the second article in our series.*

The word 'eschatology' has come to bear such a variety of meaning that we have recently been urged by more than one scholar to impose a moratorium on its use. Since it occurs in the subject which has been prescribed for me, I cannot dispense with it completely; instead, I will define the senses in which I propose to understand it. Taking it in its traditional meaning of the doctrine of the 'last things', I apply it here not only to the end of a person's life (death and its sequel) but also, more particularly, to the end of a world-order and therefore, *a fortiori*, to the end of the last world-order of all. Having said this about the word, I will try to get on without it.

### **1. *The synoptic Gospels***

'The time is fulfilled', said our Lord when inaugurating His Galilaean ministry, 'and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent, and believe in the good news' (*Mark 1: 15*). His was not the only voice in Israel at that time which proclaimed the end of the current age and the imminent dawn of a new age which would be marked by the establishment of the kingdom of God. Any one who spoke in those days of the coming kingdom of God was bound to be understood as referring to that kingdom which, according to the visions of Daniel, the God of heaven would set up on the ruins of successive world-empires. This new kingdom would endure for ever; authority in it would be exercised by the saints of the Most High. Mark's summary of Jesus' Galilaean announcement is almost an echo of *Dan. 7: 22*, 'the time came for the saints to receive the kingdom'.

The difference between the announcement as made by our Lord and a similar announcement on the lips of others (such as, say, Judas the Galilaean) lay in the concept of the coming kingdom. Like the Zealots who precipitated the revolt against Rome sixty years after his own rising, Judas the Galilaean may well have based his conviction that the time was fulfilled on the calculation that the 'seventy weeks' of *Dan. 9: 24-27* were about to run out. Certainly he held that the saints of the Most High should take forceful steps to bring in the new kingdom: the saints whom he had in mind were of the order described in *Ps. 149: 5-9*, with the 'high praises of God... in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to wreak vengeance on the nations and chastisement on the peoples'. The cause of national liberation to which they dedicated themselves was no ignoble one, but their methods were deplored by Jesus as destined to involve themselves and many others in ruin.

'From the days of John the Baptist until now', said Jesus on a later occasion, 'the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force' (*Mat. 11: 12*). He drew a distinction between John and the men of violence, for John was His own precursor. John proclaimed the imminent dissolution of the current order and called on his hearers to prepare, by repentance and baptism, for the judgment which was to usher in the new age. This judgment with wind and fire was to be exercised by the Coming One whom John, in due course, came to identify with Jesus. Afterwards, during his imprisonment, John began to

wonder if Jesus was the Coming One after all, since Jesus' ministry differed so much from the ministry of judgment which he had predicted for the Coming One. But he need not have been in doubt: the message which Jesus sent back to John by his two disciples was designed to reassure him that the works which Jesus was doing were precisely those which the prophets had foretold as features of the new age. Above all, the proclamation of good news to the poor marked Jesus out as the Spirit-anointed speaker of *Isa 61. 1f*. This was the text which Jesus, in his synagogue sermon at Nazareth, claimed to fulfil, and the good news which it spelt out was the good news of the kingdom which Jesus announced.

Nothing was more determinant of Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God than His understanding of the God whose Kingdom it was. He appears to have been unique in calling God *Abba*—the term by which children in the family circle addressed their father or spoke about him—and so effectively did He inculcate this usage in His disciples that it was later carried over unchanged into the vocabulary of Greek-speaking Christians. The Heavenly Father revealed His character in acts of undistinguishing mercy to good and bad alike, and therefore His children, the heirs of the kingdom, should be merciful as He was merciful, not only to their friends but to their enemies (*Luke 6: 27-36*). This was indeed a far cry from the teaching of Judas and the Zealots.

The kingdom of God was present in Jesus' acts of healing and power, but present only in a limited degree. The disciples were still taught to pray, 'Thy kingdom come'. Jesus Himself was subject to restrictions until He underwent His 'baptism' of death (*Luke 12: 50*), but one day, before too long, those restrictions would be removed and the kingdom of God would be seen to have come 'with power' (*Mark 9: 1*).

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These two phases of the coming of the kingdom—temporarily under restrictions and subsequently with power—are paralleled in the experience of the Son of Man, who is inextricably bound up with Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom. 'The Son of Man' probably means 'the (one like a) son of man' who receives world dominion from God in the vision of *Dan. 7. 13 f*. It was not, however, a current designation of some expected figure of the end-time, and Jesus could therefore use it without the risk of His hearers' misunderstanding it because of earlier associations which it had for them. As used by Jesus, the designation pointed to Himself, in companionship with His followers—the 'saints of the Most High' who receive the kingdom in *Dan. 7. 18*. In order to receive the kingdom the Son of Man must 'suffer many things and be treated with contempt' (*Mark 9. 12; Luke 17: 25*), this experience Jesus took upon Himself alone on behalf of His people, 'giving his life as a ransom for many' (*Mark 10: 45*). The suffering Son of Man corresponds to the kingdom under limitations; to the kingdom coming with power corresponds the Son of Man coming in glory (compare *Matt. 16: 28* with its parallel *Mark 9: 1*). During His Palestinian ministry the kingdom of God was in process of inauguration; with His passion and triumph it was fully inaugurated, its powers being now unleashed.

When the Son of Man died and rose again, the kingdom came with power. We may compare Paul's contrast between Christ's being 'crucified through weakness' and now living 'by the power of God' (*2 Cor. 13: 4*), since he was 'declared to be the Son of God with power... by the resurrection from the dead' (*Rom. 1: 4*). In this new phase of His existence He directs the ministry of the kingdom, carried on by His followers in fellowship with Him and by the power of the Spirit, until its consummation in glory.

## **2. *The primitive church***

The apostles had no doubt that, with their Master's death and resurrection, the time of fulfilment had set in. Their conviction was confirmed by the gift of the Spirit, a long-promised token of the last days. The kingdom of God had come 'with power' in the events of Good Friday, Easter Day and the first Christian Pentecost. In the context of *John 14: 18*, it is with reference to the imparting of the Spirit that we are to understand the Lord's upper-room assurance to the disciples there recorded 'I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.' 'This is that which was spoken by the prophet', said Peter on the day of Pentecost, explaining the events which attended the descent of the Spirit (*Acts 2: 16*). Perhaps even the accompanying words in *Joel 2: 31* about the darkened sun and the blood-red moon reminded some of Peter's hearers of the phenomena which Jerusalem had witnessed on Good Friday.

The ingathering of the nations was a further feature of the age of fulfilment which the apostles and their colleagues took seriously. James at the Council of Jerusalem invokes the prophecy of *Amos 9. 11 f.* which tells (in the Septuagint version) how on a coming day 'the residue of men will seek the Lord, even all the nations that are called' by His name (*Acts 15: 16 f.*).

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