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The Coming Kingdom in Jesus' Words

Darrell Bock

KEYWORDS

| Kingdom of God | Eschatology |
| Israel | Jesus | Acts |

ABSTRACT

Noting that the kingdom is already, not yet and that Jesus' outline of what is to come only starts the biblical discussion of the end, this study traces six themes from Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom to come. It also considers some "until" texts in Luke-Acts that show hope for Israel's restoration. Finally there is a look at Acts 1:6-8 showing Jesus taught the hope for Israel's restoration. The hope of the end is the hope of shalom, justice, and the vindication of the saints.

INTRODUCTION

To discuss the coming Kingdom in Jesus' words in a short lecture is a little like saying, "Cover the reality of the universe in fifteen



pages.” Here is what Jesus scholars recognize as the major theme of Jesus’ teaching. As we heard from Derek Kinder, what Jesus has to say about the kingdom is that it is now and not yet, as it was arriving with his ministry but would be consummated in the future. One of the innovations of Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom is that what the OT tended to present as one package and side by side, Jesus split up into a process that involved his two comings. Understanding that the coming and saving work of the Messiah, the eschatological figure of promise, would not take place all at once, but in two comings, is one of the things that Jewish people struggle to understand about Jesus. When they question Jesus being the Messiah because *shalom* and deliverance have not come in full, they are struggling with seeing that the kingdom comes in two steps: arrival and consummation. So getting what Jesus says about the kingdom is important, not just for eschatology, but for understanding the program of God in terms of salvation.

I will briefly mention antecedents to the kingdom hope in Judaism and the already arrival of the kingdom with Jesus before turning our attention to themes tied to the consummation. I will then close with a very important discussion on Acts 1:6-8. I begin with a caveat. The epistles fill in detail on the end that Jesus does not cover. We know this because Paul in 1 Thess 4 refers to revealing a word of the Lord when he discusses the taking up of the saints in that text. This means that what he reveals is fresh prophetic revelation. The Word of the Lord is a technical expression in the OT in many contexts for a prophetic declaration (Gen 15:1; Isa 1:10; Jonah 1:10). In addition, the book of Revelation goes into a great deal of detail about the end that Jesus does not address. So not everything we know about the end comes from Jesus. This observation is important because those who argue to build an eschatology starting and ending with Jesus in a Christocentric focus risk missing what gets added to

the eschatological calendar by later revelation. The very fact we have the book of Revelation as the last part of the NT canon should alert us to the fact that what Jesus says about the end is important, but what is said about the end does not end with Jesus. What we do know is that for Jesus, the end is ultimately about the completion of God's faithfulness in redemption and the vindication of the righteous.

JEWISH ANTECEDENTS TO THE TERM KINGDOM OF GOD

Interestingly, the term "kingdom of God" is not that prevalent in the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact it does not appear once! References to your kingdom (Ps 45:6), His kingdom (Dan 6:26), or to an everlasting kingdom (Dan 2:44) do exist. What is emphasized is God's rule and the hope of *shalom* in a dynasty out of the house of David to come (2 Sam 7:7-17; Ps 2 and 100; Dan 2 and 7). What Second Temple Judaism said primarily of the kingdom is that it would be a time of judgment for the nations and of vindication of the saints (*1 Enoch* 9:4-5; 12:3; chap 25; 27:3 81:3, tied to a Son of Man figure in chaps. 39-71; *Pss Sol* 17-18; *2 Baruch* 36-40; *4 Ezra* 7:28-29; 12:32-34; 13:26). Satan will be defeated in that time (*Assumption of Moses* 7-10). As we shall see, Jesus will reinforce these themes and work with many of them. To invoke the kingdom is to look to the deliverance of the saints from her enemies, something Luke 1:68-75 also affirms in the words of that hopeful saint Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, when he looked for the deliverance out of the house of David from all our enemies so we could serve God "without fear in holiness and righteousness all the day of our lives" (vv. 74-75).



ARRIVAL:
THE ALREADY KINGDOM

The already arrival of the kingdom is tied to Jesus' presence and activity. So in Luke 11:20, he says that if he casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul, then the kingdom of God has come upon (*ephthasen*) them. The key verb here *phthanō* means to arrive or reach a goal (Rom 9:31; 2 Cor 10:14; 1 Thess 2:16). In Luke 17:20-21, he makes the point that people do not need to hunt to find the kingdom of God for it is in their midst. In his parables of the leaven and mustard seed, the kingdom starts out small, like a small mustard seed or a pinch of leaven, and grows into a place where one can find shelter or that permeates the whole loaf. These teachings picture the in-breaking of the kingdom with the coming of Jesus. John the Baptist is the last of the old era as the law and prophets were until John, but now the kingdom is preached (Matt 11:12; Luke 16:16). At the Last Supper, Jesus says the new covenant is poured out in his blood, clearing the way for the forgiveness and promise of God to give the enabling power of the Spirit to those who are now cleansed by his work (Luke 3:16; 22:19-20; 24:49; Acts 1:4-5; 2:30-39; 11:15-18). Luke 14:15-24 shows that Israel's rejection does not postpone the kingdom; the invitation to sit at the banquet and celebrate blessing takes place now with others now invited, even as those seemingly first in line have missed the blessing in the current time because they did not come when invited.

In sum, God's active rule begins with Jesus' work, involves the coming of the Spirit, and points to the defeat of Satan. It functions on the earth today in a limited way among those in whom the Spirit of God is active. The active realm of the kingdom is in the believing community, but there is a claim Jesus has on all people because he is God's chosen one in the way of salvation

(Matt 7:13-14, 21-27). For evidence of the claim on all people, Jesus says the seed of the kingdom is sown in all the world, which is the field for the sowing of kingdom presence (Matthew 13:38). To fail to enter into that realm now means exclusion from blessing later, when the consummation comes.

CONSUMMATION:
THE NOT YET KINGDOM TO COME

In thinking about the consummation and Jesus' teaching, I'd like to survey six points that emerge from what the gospels record.

First, when we think of the consummation of the kingdom program, the words of Jesus introduce a tension between its being imminent, capable of coming at any time, even soon, and the idea that it will be long enough that some will lose faith. Numerous parables portray the coming as something for which one must stay alert because the exact time is unknown and its coming is unexpected and sudden. So images are used like a thief coming in the night (Luke 12:39; Matthew 24:43). It will be visible and sudden like lightening (Luke 17:24; Matthew 24:27). It will be unexpected (Luke 12:40; Matthew 24:44) It will be like the days of Noah and Lot, when judgment comes suddenly in the midst of life (Luke 17:26-30; Matthew 24:44). The vindication is soon and yet long enough that when the return takes place, Jesus asks if the Son of Man will find faith when he comes (Luke 18:8). The suggestion is that some will not persevere by the time the return happens. Part of the point about the immediacy of the return appears to be that it is the next thing on the eschatological calendar. Yet the gospel must make its way into all the world (Mark 13:10; Matthew 24:14). This is not something that can be figured out, despite the many efforts of people trying to do so.



Jesus said even the Son does not know the time along with the angels (Mark 13:32). If Jesus does not know, we cannot figure it out. So the call is to stay alert since you do not know when it will take place (Mark 13:33).

Second, the consummation is a time of judgment and redemption by the Son of Man. Much of the end of the Olivet Discourse makes this point, as the elect are gathered from all the corners of the earth (Matthew 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:25-28), as do parables about the separation that comes to humanity at the end. So wheat is separated from chaff and good fish from bad fish (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50). What is redemption for the elect means judgment for those who have not embraced the hope of God. The saints are gathered as people are separated into sheep and goats in a parable that expresses the separation in terms of the nations (Matthew 25:31-46).

Third, associated with the events of the end is the desecration of the temple by the antichrist, a person standing where he ought not be (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14). The event is described in a pattern prophecy where Rome's destruction of the temple in AD 70 is seen as a parallel to what the desecration of the end will look like (Luke 21:20). The language of the abomination of desolation in Matthew comes from Daniel 9:27 and points to the antichrist figure. The model for this eschatological picture was Antiochus Epiphanes, whose march into the Holy of Holies at the start of the Maccabean War in 167 BC was seen as desecration of the highest order. In the end, there will be chaos around Israel as there was then. The text also assumes a temple rebuilt by the time of the end.

Fourth, the apostles will judge the twelve tribes of Israel in the consummation (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:28-30). The apostles may be facing persecution now but vindication will come when they exercise authority over the nation. Jesus' coming and their association with him gives them this coming prerogative.

Fifth, Israel is judged until she says “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Luke 13:34-35). This is a vitally important text. It presents Israel’s rejection as temporary and assumes that one day she will turn back to God. The picture is of an exilic- like judgment as the desolate house is language from Jeremiah 12:7 and 22:5-6. The picture is of Jerusalem under judgment and overrun. It is the realization of the threat made in Luke 13:6-9, that if the nation did not bear fruit she would be cut out of the garden. In context, she is unprotected as she failed to allow God to gather her under his protective wings. Exposed, because of unbelief, she is under and succumbs to pressure from the nations. This is not just the temple that is in view. Acts 2:36 shows how house can refer to people. The context here, throughout Luke 13, is of the nation’s lack of response.

There is more to that judgment than a building; a nation is at risk until she returns to embrace the sent Messiah as the one to come sent by God. However, the very fact that an “until” is uttered shows Jesus anticipates a turning back one day. In Acts 3:18-22, Peter issues a call for such a turn to Israelites living in the time of Jesus. Nothing about what is said here allows for any form of a dual covenant that says Jews are blessed as a people simply because they are Jewish. To share in redemption, they must respond to the redeemer and Savior-Messiah God has sent. A second Lucan “until” text adds to this picture. In Luke 21:20-24, Jesus declares that Jerusalem will be trampled down until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled, a remark that suggests that there will be a future time when Israel will again be front and center in God’s program. There is no other way to explain these “until’s” that can explain their presence, especially when placed alongside Romans 9–11 as that has to be about ethnic Israel for Paul is discussing those he weeps over and longs to see saved. That cannot be a redefined Israel in any sense.



Finally, this is the time of salvation for the saints; the vindication Jewish texts always longed for at the end with its hope of *shalom*. Luke 21:28 says when the Son of Man returns, they can lift up their heads for redemption is near. Matthew 24:31 says this will be the time when the Son of Man gathers his elect from the four corners of the earth.

There is precious little detail here other than the result. Judgment comes. The righteous are affirmed and delivered. All is made right in the world. A separation takes place among people.

This is how Jesus portrays the end. It is God being faithful in vindicating those who have embraced the one he has sent to deliver them.

ACTS 1:6-8:
KINGDOM, ISRAEL AND MISSION

A crucial text in thinking about the restoration of the kingdom is part of the last topic Jesus addressed before his ascension. In Acts 1:6-8, the apostles ask Jesus if this is the time he will restore the kingdom to Israel. The very fact this question is asked reveals what Jesus has taught the apostles, for they ask it having spent 40 days with Jesus and with him having expounded the hope of the Hebrew Scripture about the Christ to them (Luke 24:44-49). There is a strand of interpretation that argues that this question expressed the wrong hope. The idea that the kingdom and Israel had a future missed the boat on where Jesus was taking the kingdom program. The question, however, is a natural one given what the Hebrew Scripture taught about the consummation and Israel (Isaiah 42:1; 44:3; 59:21; Ezekiel 36:24-28; 37: 14; the dry bones of chapter 39; Joel 2:28-3:1). Craig Kenner gets this right in his commentary when he says, “Some view this question as

shortsighted, but the context specifies the problem is with timing (Acts 1:7), not with content.” He goes on to note a series of texts in Luke-Acts that affirm hope of Israel’s restoration (Luke 1:32-33; 54-55, 68-74; 2:32, 38; 22:15-16, 30; 24:21) and to argue Luke’s view of eschatology is shared with Paul (Rom 11:15-26).¹ Luke sees a restoration for Israel.² There is no indication in Luke that this was a wrong question or inference about the kingdom program. In fact, Peter’s Spirit-inspired speech in Acts 3 reinforces this view as he preaches a hope for Israel. In 3:18-22 he calls Israel to repent so that the time of refreshing can come to the nation in alignment with what the prophets of the Hebrew Scripture teach. Nothing about what Peter says suggests this reading of hope for Israel needs reframing and applies rather to others.

What is at stake here is the promise, word and faithfulness of God. God made covenant commitments to Israel. Even though it is clear that the gospel, kingdom, and salvation benefits extend to the nations, and fulfillment comes through Christ alone, nothing in making that affirmation means Israel has lost her place and the potential for hope in that program that God initially committed himself to for them in the covenants. Gentile inclusion does not mean Israelite exclusion. One can have both. Scripture affirms both. So does the Christ who stands at the center of all fulfillment.

As we already have suggested, Jesus does not put into question the apostles’ question. He does not challenge its premise. Jesus merely replies that the issue of timing is the Father’s business. He will not tell them when the kingdom will be restored to Israel.

1 Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Introduction and 1:1–2:47* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 2012), 683. So also Eckhard Schnabel, *Acts*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 76, esp. n. 37. He also lists a series of Hebrew Scripture texts (Isaiah 2:2-4; 49:6; Jeremiah 16:15; 23:8; 24:6; 31:27-34; Ezekiel 34–37; Hosea 2:3; 11:11; Amos 9:11-15; Ps 14:7; 85:2

2 *Ibid.*, 687, “Jesus does not deny that Israel’s restoration will come.”



God will do it in his time. The disciples are not on a need to know basis for this question. The eschatological clock is completely in God's hands.

In the meantime, the disciples have a priority assignment. It is the mission of believers—their calling. It is to receive the enablement, the power which the Spirit of God will give to them and engage in the mission of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. They are to start in Jerusalem and go to the ends of the earth. The phrase “ends of the earth” has Hebrew Scripture roots from Isaiah 48:20, 49:6—a Servant song, and Jeremiah 10:13. A priority for the disciples over figuring out the timing of the end is mission, taking the gospel into the world, all of it for both Jew and Gentile. Mission and ministry have a priority over eschatological star-gazing. When it comes to eschatology, one is to stay alert because the end could come at any time. The task is not to seek escape from this world but to engage it with the hope of the gospel. Interestingly, this is Jesus' last word about the kingdom program during his ministry on earth. Making sure eschatology is properly prioritized in relationship to mission was a final concern Jesus left for his disciples.

CONCLUSION

In sum, Jesus actually says very little about what the kingdom will be at the end. There will be victory, peace, justice, shalom, and vindication for the righteous. There is no discussion of how the kingdom is structured or what it will be like. The apostolic teaching in Acts and Paul suggests that the OT tells us much of that story. The emphasis is on the accountability and blessing that comes with the consummation of the kingdom. The point is that all will be held accountable for how they have associated themselves with the kingdom and its hope. That situation and

that need is the same for Jew and Gentile.

Still there are a few key points Jesus' teaching about the kingdom to come makes.

First, Jesus' teaching about the kingdom tells us it comes in stages, not all at once. Things the Hebrew Scripture said Messiah would do that Jesus has not yet done will be accomplished in the consummation phase of the kingdom program that is already and not yet. People cannot charge Jesus with not being the Messiah because things were not done that Scripture said the Messiah would do, because Jesus' kingdom program is not yet complete.

Second, the end will be a time tied to judgment and world conflict swirling around Jerusalem, but also means of vindication for the saints.

Third, the timing of the coming of the consummation of the kingdom is unknown, so those who believe should stay alert to its coming.

Fourth, with the return will come a restoration for Israel in the kingdom program of God. She will turn and embrace her Messiah Jesus. Much of that story is already told and detailed in the Hebrew Scripture. When promise and restoration are raised, that hope and its story are already well known.

Finally, in the meantime, saints are to be hard at work drawing on the enabling power of God's Spirit to preach and represent the gospel to a needy world. For what both the nations and Israel need is to respond to the hope, life, and forgiveness that God so graciously offers through Jesus, Messiah of Israel and Lord of all. So we pray may his kingdom come, may his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The proper response to eschatological hope is to be engaged in the mission that draws people into that kingdom to come.

