

The World at the Time of Jesus - a Careful Analysis of Judaism

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No study of Christianity is complete without a careful analysis of Judaism. Judaism is the foundation of early Christianity. Originally a sect of Judaism, Christianity owes much of its heritage to the Jews. Having evolved from the faith of Abraham, the laws and commandments of Moses, and the direction and guidance of the great prophets, Judaism was the religion Christ was taught as a child and sought to expand upon.

Jesus and his disciples were Jews and though influenced by Hellenic and Roman ideas were by birth and tradition Jewish. Many of the beliefs, customs, and rituals of the Christian Church were derived or based upon Judaism.

Abraham's belief that there is but one God, Yahweh, is the most basic Christian tenet and the foundation for Christ's proclamation that God is our Father.

Another example is the bread, wine, and candles of the mass which are the same symbols used by the Jews to begin and observe the Sabbath.

At the time of Christ and today the Jews were an unusual group of people. More tenacious and resilient than most people, the Jews endured extreme hardship and pain and made sacrifices that few others could have endured. The nation which God chooses is often an insignificant, suffering one. Only thus is it worthy of God's recognition and praise. The Jews were such a nation.

Persecuted and conquered by many nations, the Jews and their religion outlived all other religions of the Roman world. Their suffering and humiliation strengthened them and laid the foundation upon which the Messiah could come and upon which the Kingdom of God could expand.

As David L. Edwards points out in *Religion and Change*, a massive amount of "... heroism and saintliness (is) needed to build a religion."

Period of Preparation

Jewish history is a history of preparation for the Messiah and anticipation of the heavenly kingdom. But that kingdom does not come easily. Great passion and sacrifice are required. The suffering of the Jews was just the first step in the establishment of the kingdom. The reality was to come with the advent of Christ and in the wholehearted response of the people to his message.

Observing patterns in the history of God's preparation of the Israelites as a chosen people, a basic spiritual

principle can be seen. That principle, within which God always works, is that change takes place gradually and always through someone who serves as a channel, instrument, or focal point.

God chose Abraham to bring mankind out of a sinful age. The times were chaotic; there were many gods and Abraham made many mistakes. Nevertheless, he brought about a whole new level of understanding. His conception of one God, Yahweh, lasts even today. God had to start somewhere so he started with Abraham and through Abraham blessed the Hebrew nation.

God, having chosen the Israelites, led them through two thousand years of afflictions. Through hardship they became a resilient people. Upon that foundation of strength He sent Jesus, the man who was to become the restored Adam through whom all of humanity could be reunited with God.

Jesus and the Kingdom

A recent historical phenomenon is the renewed interest in the historical Jesus. Instrumental in this resurgence is the trend in nineteenth century thought toward a humanistic, realistic interpretation of the person of Christ.

Ever since the founding fathers of the Christian Church debated the nature of Christ, the questions of whether Christ was God or man have permeated Christian theology.

Commenting on this recent liberal, humanistic trend in theology, Albert Schweitzer says in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*:

The critical study of the life of Jesus has been for theology's school of honesty. The world has never seen before, and will never see again, struggle for truth so full of pain and renunciation of that of which the Lives of Jesus of the last hundred years contain the cryptic record.

Renouncing the supernatural and the dogma of the Church, David Strauss, Ernest Renan, and other nineteenth century theologians wrote biographies which depicted Christ as a man. To quote from Renan's book, *The Life of Jesus*:

He (Jesus) suffered great mental anguish and agitation.... His disciples at times thought him mad. His enemies declared him to be possessed... His natural gentleness seemed to have abandoned him; he was sometimes harsh and capricious... Sometimes his displeasure at the slightest opposition led him to commit inexplicable and apparently absurd acts.

Unable to accept the critical quality of these radical nineteenth century theologians, Albert Schweitzer concludes in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) that the core of Jesus' teaching was his proclamations concerning the imminent establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus anticipated the imminent intervention of God in history and the end of the old world and the establishment of a new God-centered world.

Theology of Hope

Many of Schweitzer's concerns and conclusions were revived in the 1960's through a new school of thought termed "the Theology of Hope." Essentially what Schweitzer and such "hope" theologians as Pannenberg and Moltzmann have in common is a belief in the eschatological nature of Christ's teachings.

Eschatology refers to the study of the theological doctrine of the last days and in this context the importance of the Kingdom of God in Christ's teachings.

A German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg opens his book *Theology and the Kingdom of God* with the statement:

The message of Jesus centered in the proclamation of the imminent Kingdom of God.... There is a striking difference, however between the preaching of Jesus and the place that the Kingdom of God occupies in contemporary theology. Gerhard Gloege wrote some years ago, "Generally speaking contemporary Protestant theology in all its fields has lost the basic idea of Jesus' preaching."

Dialectical theology disregarded Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God as an expectation regarding the concrete future. The intention of Jesus was an embarrassment, for it was all too obvious that his expectation of a cosmic revolution in the near future had been illusory. So theologians focused on Jesus' words about the presence of the Kingdom of God now....

In the New Testament, however, Jesus' message of the imminent Kingdom of God precedes every Christology and every new qualification of human existence and thus becomes the foundation of both.

In Jesus's message everything is dominated by the idea of the imminent Kingdom of God...

Over the centuries Christians have lost the core of Christ's teachings regarding the imminence of the Kingdom of God. This is understandable, considering it never "materialized" (Pannenberg's word).

Paul, not Jesus, stressed the crucifixion. Luke records that Jesus "... went through the cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God." (Luke 8: 1)

In anticipation of the imminence of the Kingdom, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." His was a kingdom of hope on earth, not in the sky.

Jesus was not talking about an utopian ideal, never to be realized, but of reality -- a physical kingdom in which all men would live on earth as brothers.

Yet the kingdom Christ foretold never "materialized," causing what Pannenberg describes as an "embarrassment" to Christians.

Apparent Contradiction

No one has ever been able to adequately explain the apparent contradiction between Christ's teachings regarding a world without war and the realities of the human condition. How does one reconcile the utopian demands of the kingdom of heaven with the hardships, pain, and suffering of this world.

Some say Christ was disillusioned. Others believe the kingdom was not of this world but a spiritual one. Most people are not even aware of the contradiction. For the majority of Christians "Jesus came to die." They are unaware of alternative explanations.

Pannenberg's thesis is that Christ himself realized the kingdom on a personal level and universal fulfillment awaits the Second Advent. Though an interesting and plausible explanation, such a view fails to explain why the kingdom was not realized for everyone two thousand years ago.

Some theologians -- Schweitzer, Pannenberg, and others have understood the inadequacy of the orthodox view that Jesus came to die and have understood the centrality of the kingdom to Christ's message, but no one has been able to provide a complete explanation of the contradiction between Christ's teachings concerning the imminence of the kingdom and the failure of such a kingdom to materialize.

The kingdom Christ described was more than a spiritual paradise to be realized after this life; it was a tangible, visible "kingdom on earth" in which all men could live as brothers. The Jews and the Semitic people were practical people unimpressed with unrealistic, unreal interpretations of life. Jesus spoke to them in parables and symbols that they could understand; he spoke of realities -- real people and real life situations, not in abstractions.

Albert Schweitzer claims that recent scholarship has made it more difficult to accept the view of Jesus' kingdom as an unrealizable ideal. In *The Kingdom of God and Primitive Christianity*, Schweitzer contends:

Early scholars assumed that Jesus interpreted the Kingdom of God in a spiritual way and that he'd rejected current Jewish expectations of the Kingdom of God. This view was held so long as all four Gospels were regarded as equally authentic sources of knowledge.

When, however, it became necessary to regard Matthew and Mark as the only real historical sources, it became much more difficult to maintain the view that Jesus had a spiritualized conception of the Kingdom and his Messiahship.

The Kingdom at Hand

From the beginning of his ministry the essence of Christ's teaching was "Repent, for the Kingdom is at Hand." (Matt. 4:17b)

In *Theology of the New Testament* F. Bultmann comments:

Jesus' message is the Reign of God. Now the time has come. The Reign of God is all immediate, impending irruption in which the present course of the world (that under the influence of Satan) will be destroyed.

A. Silver in *Messianic Speculation in Israel* agrees:

Jesus' message was apocalyptic, not prophetic.... He ardently strove to warn them of the approaching

catastrophe, and became perturbed and impatient because the people did not realize it: "Ye hypocrites."

The crash and doom of the world was at hand and therefore there was no time for the ordinary pursuits of life.

The unquenchable fires of Judgment are upon us. Therefore, "Seek ye first His Kingdom and His righteousness."

The kingdom would be like a mustard seed, growing from a tiny seed into the largest of trees. The time had come for the long awaited kingdom, and God had sent His Son to usher it in. The world of universal peace and brotherhood prophesied in Isaiah 9 and 11 was being realized. All men were to be transformed and made new, and Christ would reign as their head forever.

Where Is The Kingdom?

How is one to account for the failure to establish the kingdom Christ proclaimed? Where is the kingdom he described?

Jesus' teaching has its foundation in the apocalyptic scriptures of the Old Testament and the proclamations of the prophets. At the time of Christ the expectation of a supernatural event surrounding the advent of the Messiah was widespread. The fervent hope of the Jews for alleviation of their suffering was to come with the Messiah. Therefore, John the Baptist's and Jesus' words announcing the approaching kingdom were truly the Gospel -- "good news."

As the chosen people, the Israelites were the focal point of God's dispensation. In preparation for the advent of Christ, God had formed a nation and to that nation sent prophets to prepare the way. Six centuries before Christ, Daniel had prophesied:

... and, behold, there came with the clouds of heaven one like unto a son of man, and he came even to the ancient of days.... And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a Kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.

Obviously because of this passage and other prophecies regarding the Messiah, many believed that Christ would come in a supernatural way from the sky. Thus, when Jesus, a humble man, appeared in the flesh few could believe in him and all but a few rejected him.

The threat to the Jewish religious establishment was not merely Jesus' message of the kingdom, it was his message of repentance -- the need for each individual to become "restored in heart" before being fit to enter the kingdom. The concept that one had to change oneself, and beginning at a focal point (i.e. Christ) build the kingdom was a threatening one to these chosen people.

Secondly, Jesus hardly fit the image of the great world leader that many anticipated. The "Son of Man," not even prominent in the Jewish hierarchy, possibly even the illegitimate son of a poor, young maiden, was hardly the one chosen to announce a kingship or kingdom. Consequently, his plea for people willing to help in the great task of restoring the world was sorrowfully rejected and he became... despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...." (Isaiah 53:1-4)