



Jesus, Apocalyptic, and World Transformation

By [David B. Batstone](#)

"It is often overlooked how ideologically explosive the notion of the kingdom of God was within Jesus' own social milieu. In first-century Palestine, it did not have the same metaphorical and strictly religious connotation that makes the term so safe within our own theological world. In fact, it evoked the memory and visionary impulse of Yahweh who acts to deliver Yahweh's 'chosen ones' from occupation and oppression at the hands of alien nations. Intrinsic to that symbolic universe is the conviction that the chosen suffer and the unjust prosper in the present day only because history stands at the brink of a great reversal."

New Testament research for most of the twentieth century has assumed that the kingdom of God [*he basileia tou theou*]¹ I was an apocalyptic image located within the social world of the Jesus of history.² Given the fact that kingdom statements are found more than one hundred times in the Synoptic Gospels,³ it has been presumed that the framework of Jesus' historical mission was intimately linked to his understanding of the kingdom of God.

Paradoxically, the vast majority of modern biblical scholars have also deemed it necessary either to eliminate or to reinterpret those

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¹ I will render *he basileia tou theou* as "the kingdom of God" due to its dominant use within the long history of the academic discussion. It is of note that some scholars have suggested alternative translations for modern usage on a popular level based on theological and gender-inclusive concerns, e.g., "reign[ing] of God" or "realm of God." Also of note, I will assume that "the kingdom of (the) heaven(s)" (*he basileia tou ouranon*) is used interchangeably with "kingdom of God" in the synoptics, "heaven" having replaced the divine name out of reverence for the sacred (cf. Matthew 13:11, Mark 4:11, Luke 8:10, Matthew 19:23-24).

² In 1975, Norman Perrin summarized three-quarters of a century of biblical research: "[I]n 1927 a conference of English and German theologians agreed that Kingdom of God was an apocalyptic concept in the message of Jesus, and from that moment forward this was accepted as a basic tenet ...," *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 35.

³ Joel B. Green, "Kingdom of God," in *The New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, edited by David Atkinson and David Field (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1992). Green also notes that kingdom appears only twice in the Fourth Gospel (3:3,5; cf. 18:36) and rarely in the remainder of the New Testament.



apocalyptic notions of the kingdom to make Jesus' message more relevant to the modern mind. Referential ideals of one type or another have been posed to explain "what Jesus really meant" when he made apocalyptic statements. Whether intended or not, the unfortunate consequence of this reinterpretation has been to minimize the value of Jesus' life and message for present ethical considerations and for the creation of modern theologies of culture.

Perhaps Rudolf Bultmann delivered the most convincing argument for a kerygma freed from its historical conditions. While accepting that Jesus assumed an apocalyptic framework, Bultmann maintained that, because this framework was based upon a prescientific cosmology, any literal interpretation of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom would mask the true nature of his actual message of "authentic existence." Hence, essential for Bultmann was Jesus' own self-understanding and not the determinative social world, specific activities, or contemporary challenges that placed that self-understanding within a particular historical context:

The real significance of "the Kingdom of God" for the message of Jesus does not in any sense depend upon the dramatic events attending its coming, nor on any circumstances which the imagination can conceive. It interests him not at all as a describable state of existence, but rather as the transcendent event.⁴

Bultmann's proposal has been essentially confirmed by other biblical theologians. They may not share his radical historical skepticism or his philosophical existentialism, but they hold nonetheless that Jesus, as the savior of the world, transcended any particular meanings an apocalyptic kingdom of God would have elicited within the religious and sociopolitical struggles of the Jewish nation and cult.

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In recent years, however, an increasing number of scholars have come to question whether Jesus actually proclaimed the imminent end of "the present age."⁵ These proponents of a "non-eschatological Jesus" hope to recover his dynamic significance for human culture, an element all too often marginalized in images of a Jesus who expects the cataclysmic end of the world. Like those advocating the dominant paradigm, proponents of this approach are persuaded that it is impossible to overcome the radical disjunction separating apocalyptic conceptuality from human history.

A key element in the current debate surely lies in how apocalyptic itself is to be understood. Many scholars treat "apocalyptic" virtually as a synonym for "eschatology," thus leading scholarship toward a

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 41.

⁵ See Marcus Borg, "A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus," *Foundations and Facets Forum* 2/3 (1986), pp. 81-102; also his excellent survey of recent Jesus scholarship, "Portraits of Jesus in Contemporary North American Scholarship," *Harvard Theological Review* 84/1 (Jan., 1991), pp. 1-22



discussion of expectations of the end of human history and the coming of the "Son of Man." Since these concepts are assumed to be post-Easter in origin, notions of an apocalyptic Jesus are thus dismissed out-of-hand. Others use "apocalyptic" primarily as an adjective describing a specific body of literature. However, I understand apocalyptic quite simply as a cosmic vision of reality that announces a divine plan for creation's deliverance from bondage. Apocalyptic is a "disclosure" or "revelation," first witnessed by an announcing prophet, which is unfolding in the realm of spirit and which is, at the present moment, bringing human history to the threshold of a great reversal. It thereby delegitimizes the present superior position of those groups in opposition to the envisioned divine purpose.⁶

The rejection of the apocalyptic Jesus by the vast majority of New Testament scholars and biblical theologians, however, is not simply a case of semantics. The present study uncovers the deeper hermeneutical presuppositions that provide the basis for that decision, organizing the material into four oppositional themes: the particular real versus the universal ideal, time versus culture, the individual versus the sociocommunal, and a spirituality of world versus an aworldly spirituality. Though these four categories may rarely appear together as determinative elements within any given work and admittedly are somewhat artificial, they do serve to highlight the subconscious grid shaping the post-Enlightenment "quest for the historical Jesus." In carrying out a critical evaluation of Jesus research, past and present, I will suggest some signposts for a new paradigm, one that enables a reconsideration of the apocalyptic teachings and actions of Jesus.

(1) *The Particular versus the Universal*-The liberal school of the nineteenth century attempted to explicate the personality of Jesus, charting his progressive development from a Jewish teacher to the Christian messiah. For liberals, Jesus was essentially a religious genius who, through the realization of his own true being, achieved the divine-human consciousness held to be the ultimate possibility for all human beings. Relying primarily on the structure of the Gospel of Mark, these liberals highlighted the apparent alterations in the strategic activity of Jesus' mission, which they took to be clues to his own growing self-understanding. During the first stage of his public life, Jesus was thought to have fully accepted the popular Jewish ideas surrounding the coming age of God's earthly reign. However, due to the failures apparent in the practical outworking of that vision of reality, Jesus was led to see the transitory, limited nature of those beliefs and activities. He was compelled, then, to formulate his unique

⁶ This working definition is an amalgamation of what Paul Hanson presents as two separate definitions for "prophetic eschatology" and "apocalyptic eschatology," a distinction which I do not accept. See Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, second edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 11-12, 433.



proclamation of an inward kingdom of repentance within human consciousness.

The nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus, then, largely assumed that the meaning of Jesus for the modern age may only be uncovered once the concrete ideologies and specific options that conditionally shaped his life are fully shed. To that extent, it set up a false hermeneutical alternative: ultimate, transcendent truth or limited, historical experience.

If this rather Platonic notion of truth were merely a relic of the distant past, perhaps the above discussion might only be a pedantic recasting of a well-worn topic, but the fact is that the gulf between particular truth and its universal expression continues deeply to influence much of the discussion regarding Jesus of Nazareth.

For example, in a more contemporary work claiming to uncover the authentic voice" of Jesus, James Breech, who clearly operates more in the tradition of Bultmann than in the spirit of the nineteenth century, contends that, although Jesus "experienced kingdom," he held no conceptual content of the kingdom of God that would link it to his own culture. The issue for Breech pertains not only to the nature of historical truth but also to the question of its accessibility:

[T]here is absolutely no basis for assuming that Jesus shared the cosmological, mythological, or religious ideas of his contemporaries. The core sayings and parables are absolutely silent about such concepts as ... the end of the world, the last judgment, angels and the like. Thus we cannot approach Jesus as a "historical personage"... ⁷

It would be terribly misleading, however, to suggest that Breech represents the consensus of current New Testament scholarship. It would be more accurate to say there is no consensus. Especially in the last decade, though, there has been a significant movement to recover what can be known of Jesus as a first-century Mediterranean Jew who carried out his mission predominantly within a rural peasant society. The collective efforts of these scholars have been called the "third quest," and their results have given confidence that they "can sketch a fairly full and historically defensible portrait of Jesus."⁸ Though the movement has no singular methodology or unified orientation, it has generally posed Jesus as a wisdom teacher and prophet, vitally concerned for the renewal of Jewish faith and the future destiny, or restoration, of the Jewish people.

Even within this third quest, however, the relationship between

⁷ James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 218; see also pp. 11-12, 29.

⁸ Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 15. See also A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); E. p. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); John Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (New York: Seabury, 1982); Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); and John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992).



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ultimate truth and contingent history often lies hidden and in unresolved tension. To cite one example, Bruce Chilton argues forcibly that Jesus believed the kingdom of God had come in power through his own teaching and activity and that he urged anyone who would fully accept it to enter its reality. Yet, Chilton maintains that Jesus rejected the "myths" associated with the language of the kingdom in first-century Palestine, "whether nationalistic, localized, cultic, legalistic or apocalyptic."⁹ To think otherwise, Chilton fears, would fix Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God spatially and temporally within a limited world of meaning that compromises its character as divine transcendence.¹⁰

It would seem more consistent with a method that stakes its ground in history, however, to take the particular as one's starting point. The reason Jesus' life has universal import for the redemption of humanity and the total scope of reality is that he embodied his message and cause in history. It is only through historical mediation that revelation reaches us at all. In other words, truth has meaning for us only as it becomes incarnate.

Of course, such assertions are met with protests by those who see their own absolute truths threatened by the uncertainties of historical relativism. Nevertheless, we may wish to proclaim the necessity of absolute truths, but we are still faced with how we, a people of limited perception and experience, may come to understand them. We cannot escape history any more than we can escape the air we breathe.

Even though it is not possible to determine with certainty the religious, cultural, and sociopolitical significance of the kingdom of God in the world of Jesus, it surely would have evoked specific images in the minds of his hearers. Rather than transform him into a *sui generis* figure by recasting that message into preconceived ideals that might rest comfortably with our age, it would seem more appropriate to pursue the social realities of Jewish peasantry in Jesus' own day and to investigate the history of other first-century prophets and religiously inspired movements that pursued the transformation of their culture.¹¹

Biblical scholars have too often assumed that transcendent religious ideals are the primary or, at times, the sole motivating force of history. They ignore the social obligations, local movements, political struggles, and religious conflicts that would lead to a fuller understanding of the historical context. Typically, they have interpreted

cultural symbols and meaning systems within a realm of free-floating ideas existing apart from society's traditions, institutions, relational networks, and

⁹ Bruce p. Chilton and J.I.H. McDonald, *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987), p. 69. See also Bruce Chilton, "God in Strength" in *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, edited by Bruce Chilton (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Chilton, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 23.

¹¹ Richard Horsley has carried out some exciting work in this direction. See particularly two of his works: *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) and *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*.



practical structures. For that reason, biblical scholarship often reflects a schizophrenic split, between the real and the ideal, between the particular and the universal, between text and context.

(2) *Time versus Culture*-The "failure" of the kingdom of God to arrive is a primary hermeneutical key in modern Jesus studies.¹² Since the consensus of that research maintains that Jesus expected an imminent kingdom of God, scholars have been compelled either to transpose a transcendent, non-material referent onto Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom or, somehow, to adjust to the "fact" that he had wrongly foreseen the immediate end of the world.¹³ Faced with these options, the majority of scholars, in an attempt to salvage the eternal significance of Jesus for Christian theology, have highlighted the redemptive meaning of his own personal destiny and the obedience he rendered to his God.

The presumption of imminence is itself undergirded by the assumption that Jesus was primarily preoccupied with the end of time; the kingdom of God would soon arrive to bring about the end of the physical world and its linear flow of natural history. On that basis, New Testament scholarship has operated predominantly in the tension "between the already and the not yet," despite the seeming incongruence of this view with the life and teachings of Jesus.

Indeed, in recent years the legitimacy of that hermeneutic has come under serious challenge. Bruce Malina, for instance, doubts whether anyone in the first-century world would have defined present reality in such future-oriented categories. In traditional peasant societies, which are pre-Einsteinian, pre-Industrial Revolution, pre-Enlightenment, pre-Newtonian, and pre-monastic, time is predominantly "present-oriented, functional, and non-directional."¹⁴ Time is rarely, if ever, viewed in traditional cultural settings as an abstract concept removed from the patterns and rituals that relate it to the ordering of social life. In that sense, the past and the future do not exist apart from some direct, organic link to a presently-experienced person, event, or process; the forthcoming is itself already on the horizon of the present.¹⁵

For those of us who regulate our daily lives by the calendar and the clock, such a way of thinking is distinctively alien. We would do well,

¹² In fact, Schweitzer, whose work was important for twentieth-century Jesus research, based his reconstruction of Jesus' life on a triple miscalculation. See Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956; first German edition 1906).

¹³ Even C. B. Dodd's "realized eschatology," with its emphasis on the kingdom of God as both present and future, does little to resolve this problem. It is still ultimately dependent on the future, imminent kingdom becoming proleptically realized in the present. If Jesus indeed based the content of his mission on the end of natural history, then the "failure" of that event to transpire in the last 2000 years is still a historical problem for those who follow Dodd's model. See C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, revised edition (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1961).

¹⁴ Bruce Malina, "Christ and Time: Swiss or Mediterranean?", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51 (January, 1989): pp. 19, 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 17.



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however, to imagine how strange our own temporal orientation would be to other cultures, past and present. The gap between cultural paradigms is depicted exceptionally well in the movie *Black Robe*, a film that narrates the awkward and often tragic relationships established between North American Indians and the French Jesuit missionaries who came "to bring them salvation." The Huron tribe is convinced that the clock is the god of the foreigners because it seems to determine their activities throughout the course of the day and is symbolic of their anxiety regarding immortality, where time has no end. The Jesuits, for their part, are frustrated by their inability to communicate to the Indians the urgency of making a decision regarding their future eternal destiny independent of present social relations and transactions. The result is confusion and gross misunderstanding.

Looking beyond our own cultural myopia, it is likely that first-century Jewish language about "the end" referred neither to linear historical time nor to the demand of bringing people face to face with eternity. Apocalyptic language was directed to the qualitative dimension of life and, in that respect, to the resolution of the present historical crisis; it indicated "a depth experience rather than an objective future expectation."¹⁶ In that respect, it presented "the end" as the fulfillment of a promise, God's fidelity in the midst of suffering, frustration, and hopelessness.

The summary of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom provided by the Gospel of Mark informs the reader that "the time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has drawn near!" (Mark 1:15). Even though many scholars begin their apologetic for a thoroughly imminent eschatology here, this verse actually appears to signal a propitious moment, or *kairos*, for the vision and hope of a new and present reality. When tradition and meaning are transmitted through ritual activity-natural processes (for example, childbirth, puberty,

and seasons), archetypical stories, and myths-things are done when the *kairos* is right. Given the crisis of the moment it is time to "repent and believe the good news."

It is extremely doubtful that Jesus viewed time as a linear progression running from past to present toward a future consummation. In the first century, time was thought to move in terms of generations, epochs, and ages; the end of one was understood as the beginning of another. The danger of using "last," "final," or "end" in our own post-Enlightenment universe to describe apocalyptic expectations of the first century is that their vitality becomes bifurcated and compartmentalized. In our modern conceptual world, the language of apocalyptic communicates an otherworldly, ahistorical hope, while, in the first century, it was a dynamic critique of the inherited symbols, rites, institutions, and relational networks that ordered the "present age."

More specifically, Jesus saw himself standing at a threshold of

¹⁶ John J. Collins, "Apocalyptic Eschatology as the Transcendence of Death" in Chilton, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 76.



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history: "Truly I say to you there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1 and parallels). The corrupt age was passing away, and the new age of God's reigning was drawing near. Jesus' teachings defined the character of that kingdom within his particular culture: The social scripts of a poor beggar are reversed with those of a callous rich man (Luke 16:19-31); the repentant, though despised, publican is accepted before the "righteous" Pharisee (Luke 18:10-13); the laborers in the vineyard regain the land controlled by a greedy, absentee landlord (Matthew 20:1-16; Mark 12:1-12); a desperate and persistent widow receives mercy from, of all people, a judge (Luke 18:2-6); a peasant farmer is miraculously able to find the land and seed he needs in order to cultivate a sustainable harvest (Mark 4:1-9). Even without reference to his acts of healing and caring, Jesus does not sound like one who is anxiously awaiting the end of all material creation and its corresponding history.

One's understanding of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus, therefore, is at least partially a product of the conceptual universe within one's hermeneutical framework. One approach utilizes static categories of time and world: There is a singular, monistic world moving through time to a predetermined end. Since the new heaven and new earth have failed to arrive in order to put the old world to an end-neither in the life of Jesus (as he so eagerly anticipated) nor in the subsequent two thousand years of human history-the primary theological problem revolves around time. Once linear time (or its end) is held up as the primary factor for understanding the kingdom of God, one is forced to eliminate that metaphor as meaningful for historical faith in a modern world.

The meaning of the kingdom of God shifts radically once reversal-of-culture replaces end-of-time as the hermeneutical key. Time and world are sustained in a fluid relationship, not fixed by determined points in chronological time but by the social relationships that maintain that world. Put in contemporary terms, in the old age the vast majority live in dire poverty, while war and consumption threaten the very survival of the planet. The limit of that world is marked by a selfish mentality. But within time (and not at its linear end), that seemingly invincible age will crumble and give way to a new age bordered by a communal spirit. The central theological problem is the creation of this new age, preparing its coming.¹⁷

(3) *The Individual versus the Sociocommunal*-For the last two centuries biblical scholars have more often than not limited the significance of Jesus' life to the demands of the individual, largely

¹⁷ See David Batstone, *From Conquest to Struggle: Jesus of Nazareth in Latin America* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), pp. 188-89. There I give a practical example of this hermeneutical conflict between time and culture by reference to a dialogical Bible study from the *The Gospel in Solentiname* by Ernesto Cardenal (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976).



ignoring his challenge to the broader society. His message, full of metaphors relating to every aspect of human and cosmological reality, has regularly been stripped of its rich historical import and reduced to a concern for personal morality and meaning.

By and large, recent scholarship is considerably more aware of the centrality of community in the New Testament and has moved beyond a narrow preoccupation with the redemption of the individual. Especially within the third quest, considerable efforts are being made to understand Jesus' message to the Jewish people as a nation and, concurrently, his call to the disciples to fashion a new community. Frequently highlighted is the fact that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God incorporated a historical demand for justice in word and deed. Jesus' offer of grace to all people is consistently taken by these scholars as a challenge to break down those barriers that prevent communion with others who differ from oneself in terms of race, class, gender, or circumstance.

Even so, the individual often still functions in contemporary scholarship as the primary datum for religious reflection. Even when sociocommunal transformation is taken into account, there tends to be a strong bias toward the belief that change starts with the individual and indirectly works itself out to the wider society. This perspective is rooted in the widely held conviction that Jesus never addressed the larger social and political issues of his day, but oriented his mission only toward the conversion and well-being of individuals.

It is quite unlikely, however, that any first-century person would have perceived himself or herself to be autonomous from a social network. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz points out, the concern for individual self-realization and development is distinctively a concept of a postindustrial society:

The Western notion of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.¹⁸

In that light, it is practically meaningless to speak of the transformation of the premodern, Mediterranean individual without addressing in the same breath that person's relationship to, or exclusion from, the kinship network and the larger sociopolitical structures.

In a postindustrialized world, it is hard to imagine life in a culture where social status is primarily preserved or changed through a network of relationships rather than by means of material acquisition or personal achievement. In the social world of Jesus, however, relationships were arranged in a closed universe of "limited good." The benefits or losses experienced by one person or household directly

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 59.



affected the status of others within the group. Human behavior was profoundly determined by reciprocal obligations, set in vertical or horizontal relationships, and within one's status in the household itself.¹⁹

It is quite unfortunate that, in identifying the aims of Jesus, mainstream biblical scholarship chooses to set religious renewal over against political transformation. It is also extremely doubtful that anyone in first-century Palestine would have made that distinction. The Romans permitted surrogate Jewish leaders to run the daily affairs of their own people as long as they maintained the social order and expedited the collection of taxes. That explains why those who controlled the media of salvation in the Jewish cult were also in a position to define the socio-political structures; the social constructions of clean/unclean, religious purity/defilement, and sacred/ profane served a vital ideological function. By "generating a series of rules for maintaining an appropriate relationship to the power, the religious establishment was able quite overtly to control and arrange a network of social obligations and indebtedness."²⁰

It is not difficult, therefore, to comprehend why Jesus' message of the dawning "new age" was such a threat to the religious and political authorities of his day. His judgment of the

"present age" would have likely stunned the Sadducees, who controlled the Temple and likely used its power to sacralize the collection of taxes from the rural poor, and would have incensed the Pharisees, who functioned as the theological guardians of that social order. Jesus' bitter denunciation of those who had perverted the true character of the Law for their own ends may also be understood in this context. The central issue for Jesus was not the ultimacy of the Law, but the dominance of the world that had the Law as one of its pillars. Law places a religio-ethical sanction on a given construction of reality; "world is usually accepted not merely as 'what is' but more insidiously as 'what must be,' or 'what ought to be,' or 'what has been ordained to be.'"²¹

It is often overlooked how ideologically explosive the notion of the kingdom of God was within Jesus' own social milieu. In first-century Palestine, it did not have the same metaphorical and strictly religious connotation that makes that term so safe within our theological world. In fact, it evoked the memory and visionary impulse of Yahweh who acts to deliver Yahweh's "chosen ones" from occupation and oppression at the hands of alien nations. Intrinsic to that symbolic universe is

¹⁹ Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), pp. 89-90.

²⁰ Sheldon Isenberg, "Power through Temple and Torah in Greco-Roman Palestine," *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults*, edited by Jacob Neusner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), p. 27,

²¹ William R. Herzog, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Discovery of the Apocalyptic Jesus," *Pacific Theological Review*, 19/2 (Spring, 1985), p. 35. I am greatly indebted to Herzog for introducing me to the vision of apocalyptic as a metaphor for world transformation. See also Herzog, "Apocalypse Then and Now: Apocalyptic and the Historical Jesus Reconsidered," *Pacific Theological Review*, 18/1 (Fall, 1984).



the conviction that the chosen suffer and the unjust prosper in the present day only because history stands at the brink of a great reversal.

Though Jesus surely must have been aware of the politically contentious baggage that accompanied the use of apocalyptic imagery, it does not appear that he balked from utilizing it to challenge an age presenting itself as immutable and immortal. It is inconceivable that the people of his day would have interpreted the language of the "kingdom" or the "restored Israel" or the "new temple" as innocuous references to the ruling and redeeming activity of God solely within the lives of individuals. It was a culturally relevant discourse casting dynamic judgment on the existing social structures and suggesting alternative foundations. The message is clear: This corrupt world is coming to an end; prepare for the dawning of a new age.

When the gospel is limited to a modern conception of personal existence, those realities grounded in a wider social existence are estranged from the realm of religious experience. Once that meaning-world is accepted, one can only assume, as did C. H. Dodd, "that history in the individual life is the same stuff as history at large; that is, it is significant in

so far as it serves to bring men [sic] face to face with God."²² A system of social ethics based on historical realities has slight place in a world successfully "demythologized" of the world of Jesus, for then everything revolves around the ultimacy of the individual.

(4) *A Spirituality of World versus an Aworldly Spirituality*-Most contemporary theologians find it an arduous task to identify a world of spirit in a culture that nearly exclusively employs rational categories of experience. Spirituality is inherently problematic in our day because our language and conceptuality are so thoroughly tied to a materialistic and technological cosmology. To speak of the existence of another world of reality, one is required to turn to "fictional" categories-story, analogy, picture-to transcend, or at least to distance oneself from, the "real world." That pertains not only to our more patterned ways of conceiving of spirit-celestial personalities such as gods, angels, or demons-but also to the more intangible qualities of experience, such as love, hope, joy, patience, gentleness, and goodness.

The notion of another layer of reality lying beyond, behind, or in the midst of sensory perception is the heritage of nearly every pre-industrial culture. Though the particular forms of this spirituality are as diverse as the cultures themselves, this "primordial tradition," Marcus Borg suggests, consistently maintained two essential claims: (i) spiritual reality is the ground for all being and meaning, and (ii) the world of spirit is known not merely through rational reflection or primal need, but through an actual encounter with it.²³ Therefore, the people of a "primordial tradition" could more easily allow an overlapping perception of spirit and nature in defining their experience of the world.

²² Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 152.

²³ Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, pp. 26-27.



Unfortunately, these nuances of cultural orientation have been lost on much of Western biblical scholarship. Apocalyptic has commonly been deprecated either because of its metaphysical and cosmological dualism or because it is conceived as an otherworldly concept which merely offers the suffering and alienated an escape from real life. Paul Hanson, for example, who has influenced a generation of scholars regarding the meaning of apocalyptic, claims that "prophetic eschatology is transformed into apocalyptic at the point where the task of translating the cosmic vision into the categories of mundane reality is abdicated."²⁴ Given a modern cosmology, which establishes spatial distinctions between the mundane and the supramundane, Hanson's definition instinctively rings true. However, depictions of heavenly bodies that operate with intentionality, miraculous events that bend what we expect from nature, and battles that occur between spiritual forces are integral to mundane experience within a primordial world-in other words, to the world of the biblical testimony.

In the Gospels, the intersection of the material and spiritual realities is most clearly demonstrated in the kingdom parables, but it is also evident in the more cosmologically-based apocalyptic discourses, such as Mark 13. This "sermon" is introduced by a prologue: Jesus denounces the Temple-based system, which serves the interests of a small, wealthy oligarchy while burdening, or at least ignoring, the majority of the poor population (12:38-44). Though the disciples are in awe of the apparent permanency and sacredness of the Temple, Jesus informs them that it will one day be judged and destroyed (13:1-2). The disciples' subsequent query about the "end of the age" is met by a mixture of warnings and cosmological signs, which many biblical interpreters have taken to be Jesus' abdication of historical reality in favor of vindication in a future heavenly realm. There will be an outbreak of calamity, wars between nations, civil strife and violence, persecution of believers, earthquakes, plagues, and famines (13:7-13). Then the sun will be darkened, the moon will turn to blood, stars and planets will fall from the heavens, all of which will convulse the entire cosmos (13:24-25). Does that not spell the end of the natural world and its history?

Perhaps not if the cultural universe within which it was spoken held an expanded vision of the dynamism of spirit linking the cosmos to the historical process and to the formation of the social order itself. Certainly the words of Philo of Alexandria suggest just that:

The complete whole around us is held together by invisible powers ... which the creation has made to reach from the ends of the earth to heaven's farthest bounds, taking forethought that what was well bound

²⁴ Paul Hanson, "Old Testament Apocalyptic Re-examined," *Interpretation* 25 (1971), p. 476.



should not be loosened: for the powers of the Universe ... are chains that cannot be broken.²⁵

The correspondence between the heavens and the earth indicated in this passage suggests that what the powers bind on earth are integrally related to that which is bound in the heavens.

A related cosmic vision may be discovered in the Roman religious world, a syncretistic collage of astrology, temple cults, and nature religions, which aimed to consolidate to Roman rule the consent of the gods, the sun (nearly always associated with the "divine" emperor), the stars and planets, and every other spiritual power. In this context, Jesus' apocalyptic sayings indicate a direct challenge to the sacred legitimacy of the present order. The utter chaos in the heavens and the insufferable turmoil on earth proclaim that the divine Spirit of truth "has no longer consented to the 'peace of Rome' which had been fortified by appeals to the fruitfulness of the earth and the security of its people."²⁶ In that

respect, Jesus' prophetic message of denunciation and announcement hearkens back to a similar apocalyptic vision proclaimed by Isaiah: "On that day Yahweh will punish the host of heaven in heaven, and on earth the kings of the earth.... Then the moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed; for the Lord of hosts will reign... " (Isaiah 24:21-23).²⁷

In sum, apocalyptic was a dynamic medium of spiritual power and life in the social world of Jesus. When it addressed the spiritual agencies, or "principalities and powers," considered the purveyors of darkness and light within the mundane world of daily life, it was at the same time also treating a profoundly cultural reality. It offered a way of looking at the world that rejected the dominant powers as the ultimate point of reference for the world and posited another horizon where justice may reign.

II

Apocalyptic imagery will always be rejected as long as it is assumed that its primary referent is to a modern, scientific image of the natural world, the life of which will come to a close with the arrival of God's kingdom. However, it takes on profound meaning once "world" is conceived as a symbolic universe, which simultaneously reflects and determines the reality of a human culture.

Though a culture's dominant group nearly always seeks to legitimize the existing social arrangement by weaving a complex quilt of myths, ideals, values, practical knowledge, and anticipations that establish

²⁵ Philo of Alexandria, *De. mig.*, p. 181; see Walter Wink, *The Powers: Naming the Powers, Volume I* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 160.

²⁶ Herzog, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Discovery of the Apocalyptic Jesus," p. 33.

²⁷ Cf. the victory song of Judges 5, in which Yahweh and the heavenly hosts are allied with the stars in their courses as they battle against Israel's Canaanite enemies and the apocalyptic vision of Daniel 7, where Michael and the other heavenly agents fight supramundane demonic forces allied with the imperial court of Antiochus Epiphanes.



that reality could not be otherwise, in truth, any given social world is a willful arrangement. The rules, laws, attitudes, identities, representations, roles, and intentions practiced by the people who comprise any human society are neither ordained by the heavens nor ruled by anonymous historical forces. Cultural systems are humanly constructed worlds relying on a foundation of values for their production and a universe of meaning for their sustenance. For that reason, religion is often a crucial source for ideologies that sanction a cultural system because "with its legitimating force, any social construction of reality, including its prejudices, distribution of wealth, class or rank stratification, policies, and exploitation, becomes the Divine construction of reality."²⁸

In representing the world of Jesus and his culture in ways that open up new meanings, care must be taken not simply to substitute supposed universal sociological principles for their theological counterparts.²⁹ For instance, in some streams of scholarship, it has been fashionable to interpret apocalyptic movements of the first century by comparing them to sects, cargo cults, and other millenarian movements from a variety of cultures, eras, and geographical locations.³⁰ But by seeking to glean sociological principles that might provide a framework for every historical situation, past or present, that approach fails to recognize the distinctiveness of cultural traditions. As Richard Horsley rightly argues, it would seem more appropriate to "learn ... from the social scientists how to analyze ever more precisely the actual social forms current (at various levels) in Palestinian Jewish society at the time of Jesus" and to examine how, within that historical context, the myths and traditions of their own religious and racial heritage were appropriated by specific individuals, institutions, communities, and social movements.³¹

Philosophical idealism to the contrary, meaning is to be found not merely in texts, symbols, or theological or sociological ideas, but is defined and refined in concrete, historical experience. So Jesus invited and inspired his hearers to make specific, historical choices that broke with the powers of evil to create the conditions by which new worlds might be generated. His works of compassion and his parabolic teachings of reversal provided "glimpses of another world where the power relations and social givens of this world are suspended and examined, perhaps even subverted and shattered."³² Jesus' historical

²⁸ William Herzog, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Discovery of the Apocalyptic Jesus," p. 33. For further discussion, see Batstone, pp. 104-119.

²⁹ Horsley, "Prophets of Old," p. 436.

³⁰ E.g., see John Gager, *Kingdom and Community The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975); Howard Clark Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); Alan F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

³¹ Horsley, "Prophets of Old," p. 436.

³² Herzog, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Discovery of the Apocalyptic Jesus," p. 35.



mission was not only directed toward the "millenarianistic" envisioning of another world, but it also sought the actual transformation of human history itself.

A reconsideration of the apocalyptic teachings and actions of Jesus will locate him squarely within his social and historical world. His proclamation of the arrival of God's reign may properly be seen as reversing the value judgments of a world that held up its own construction of reality as ultimate. It is because Jesus fleshed out in the midst of his own exigencies the values and spirit of a living, compassionate God that his life and message are so significant for modern theology and ethics, which also must speak truthfully and meaningfully to the inescapable challenges of the present historical

moment. Indeed, the *kairos* is now, and our global community cries out for the "good news" of an approaching dawn when love and justice will reign.