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The Meaning of JESUS

TWO VISIONS

The Leading Liberal and Conservative Jesus Scholars Present the Heart of the Historical Jesus Debate

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Plus: Insights, Interviews, and More

❍ CHAPTER 3

THE MISSION AND MESSAGE OF JESUS

N. T. Wright

If we are to talk meaningfully about Jesus, there is no question where we must start. We must study him within the Jewish world of Palestine in the first century.

JESUS THE PALESTINIAN JEW

Jesus was a first-century Palestinian Jew. Whatever he said and did must have made sense, even if disturbing sense, within that context. However many other grids of reference we bring to him, we cannot skip this one. Certain specific things follow at once from this.[1]

Jesus belonged within a world where (what we call) theology and politics went hand in hand. Granted the particular theology and the particular politics, that is hardly surprising.

The theology was Jewish monotheism, whose first-century shape had been forged in the fires of persecution in the centuries since the Babylonian exile. First-century Jewish monotheism was not an abstract theory about there only being one god. The Jews believed *their* god, YHWH, was the only god, and that all others (including the "one god" of Stoics and other pantheists) were idols, either concrete creations of human hands or abstract creations of human minds. Jesus shared the belief that Israel's god was the only true god.

Monotheism went hand in hand with "election." The Jews believed themselves to be the chosen people of this one god. What happened to

Israel was therefore of universal significance. Many Jews of Jesus' day therefore supposed (for instance) that when YHWH finally acted to vindicate them, this would be the means of judgment and/or mercy coming upon the rest of the world. Jesus shared the belief that Israel had been chosen to be YHWH's special people, through whom the world would be addressed by its creator.

If there is one god, and you are his one people, but you are currently suffering oppression, you must believe that the present state of affairs is temporary. Monotheism and election thus give birth to (what I call) eschatology: the belief that history is going somewhere, that something will happen through which everything will be put right. First-century Jewish eschatology characteristically claimed that the one god would soon act within history to vindicate his people and to establish justice and peace once and for all. Jesus shared this belief.

More specifically, for many Jews in what we call the second-temple period (covering the last four centuries before Jesus and the first century after him), this hope was held within an implicit larger story, a metanarrative about YHWH, his people, and the world. This story, echoing the great foundation narrative of the Exodus from Egypt, had been decisively reshaped by the experience of the Babylonian exile and by the persistent belief, visible in texts and movements of various sorts, that this exile, in its deepest reality, was not yet over. Just as the language of exodus continued to dominate eschatology, so the language of return came to function as a second, and decisive, layer of metaphor, a lens through which Jesus' contemporaries viewed God's plans for their future.

They had, of course, returned home long since from Babylon. But exile was about more than geography. Exile was the state of political servitude, cultural domination, and above all theological unredeemedness that Israel continued to experience. It was a punishment for Israel's sin, the symbolic outworking of their god having given them up to their own devices, first copying, then suffering under, pagan idolatry. Thus, if foreigners were still their overlords, Israel's punishment was continuing. The great promises of forgiveness articulated by the prophets of the exile, notably Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, had not yet been fulfilled. The so-called postexilic writings speak of a liberation still to be accomplished. They employ, to describe this liberation, the language of return from exile, of new exodus.[2] Jesus shared this prevailing understanding of Israel's story and hope.

It was within this context, within a world on tiptoe with expectation, that Jesus began to announce, after the manner of a would-be prophet, that YHWH, Israel's God, was now at last becoming king. The first of these points is easily established: Jesus spoke of himself as a prophet, he behaved as a prophet, and when others referred to him in this way he did not correct them. The early church, which believed a good many other things about Jesus, would have had no interest in inventing this characterization.[3] The first stroke in my historical sketch of Jesus as a first-century Palestinian Jew is therefore: Jesus was *a first-century Jewish prophet.*

The second follows closely on the first: Jesus was a first-century Jewish prophet *announcing God's kingdom.* This was the very center of his mission and message. If he was indeed a first-century Jew, living, believing, and hoping within the worldview I have just outlined, we should be able to see something of what he meant.

The meaning of the phrase "kingdom of God" within first-century Judaism is of course a huge topic in itself. I propose to cut through the jungle of texts and discussions by highlighting two interesting phenomena from key moments in the story of the Jews in this period.[4]

The first is Josephus's description of the rebellion of Judas the Galilean, which took place in 6 C.E. The revolutionaries were inspired, says Josephus, by the belief that they should have "no master but God."[5] This attitude seems to have been quite widespread. Many, perhaps most, Jews longed for the day when they would not be ruled by the Roman emperor or even by the pseudoroyal house of Herod but would have God alone for their sovereign. The phrase "kingdom of God" (and such similar reverential phrases as "kingdom of heaven") denoted, not a *place* where God ruled, but rather the *fact* that God ruled—or, rather, that he soon would rule, because he certainly was not doing so at present in the way he intended to do. Other lords had usurped his unique role as the sovereign of Israel.

This hope was not merely political. It grew directly out of Jewish monotheism: YHWH, Israel's God, was the one God of all the world. Theology and politics, piety and revolution, went hand in hand.

The second moment which illustrates the same point comes from a hundred years after Jesus' day. The last great would-be messiah of the period, Simeon ben-Kosiba, led a rebellion in 132 C.E. It lasted for three years, until he and his followers were rounded up and killed by the

Romans. Ben-Kosiba had been hailed by the greatest rabbi of the period, Rabbi Akiba, as "Bar-Kochba," "son of the star," messiah.[6] But after his defeat the rabbis, in a move that would determine the shape of Judaism from that day to this, turned their faces away from revolution and focused instead on the private study and practice of Torah, the Jewish law. This move was summed up neatly by one of Akiba's disciples, Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Kanah, who said, "He who takes upon himself the yoke of the Law, from him shall be taken away the yoke of the kingdom and the yoke of worldly care."[7] In other words, devotion to Torah, studied and practiced within the Jewish community, offers a safe alternative to revolution. And the code ben ha-Kanah used for revolution is the phrase "the kingdom," or "the kingdom of God."

These two examples (which are of course only the tip of the iceberg) explain the popularity of the view that Jesus was a Jewish revolutionary. He announced the kingdom of God; he gathered followers around him; he marched on Jerusalem; he died the death of the failed revolutionary leader. What could be more simple?

But even a modest acquaintance with the complex gospel tradition suggests that things were never that simple. Jesus seems to have drawn not merely upon the current revolutionary ideology, but on the idea of the "gospel," the good news, which traces the kingdom theme back to the prophets, and particularly to Isaiah.[8] It will help to introduce a passage which draws together a good deal of the theology of Isaiah 40–55 and, in doing so, provides a central biblical statement of the coming kingdom of God, namely, Isaiah 52.7–12:

> How lovely upon the mountains are the feet of the one
> who brings good news, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion
> "Your God reigns!"
> Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices and shout for joy,
> because in plain sight they see YHWH returning to Zion.
> YHWH has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all
> the ends of the world shall see the salvation of our god.
> Depart, depart, go out thence, touch no unclean thing . . . for YHWH
> will go before you, and the god of Israel will be your rearguard.

Here are the three main strands of second-temple hope. When YHWH becomes king, Israel will return from exile, evil will be defeated,

and YHWH himself will return to Zion. None of this had happened in Jesus' day. Israel had not been restored. As long as pagans ruled, evil had not been defeated. Similarly, at no point in the second-temple period do we find any statement that YHWH has returned to dwell on Zion, in the renewed temple.[9] To invoke the Isaianic gospel, then, was to go beyond mere military revolution. It was to speak of the return from exile, the defeat of evil, and the return of YHWH to Zion.

The coming kingdom of God was not, then, a matter of abstract ideas or timeless truths. It was not about a new sort of religion, a new spiritual experience, a new moral code (or new strength to observe existing ones). It was not a doctrine or a soteriology (a systematic scheme for individual salvation or a general statement about how one might go to heaven after death). It was not a new sociological analysis, critique, or agenda. It was about Israel's story reaching its climax, about Israel's history moving toward its decisive moment.

The historian must assume that Jesus of Nazareth was gripped by a strong sense of vocation. All that we know about him suggests that he was powerfully aware, not just of a general numinous quality to the universe, but of the deeply personal presence and purpose, strength and guidance of the one he called "Abba," Father. If that makes him a "Spirit person," in Marcus's phrase, so be it, though I myself prefer to use as far as possible language that reflects the culture under discussion rather than importing categories from elsewhere, useful though that sometimes is. It also means that Jesus was aware, as many other Jews down the years—most recently his own cousin John—had been, that he had a particular vocation, a role to perform. That, we must insist, is not Christian retrojection. It is first-century Jewish history.

ANNOUNCING THE KINGDOM

What, then, did Jesus mean by his kingdom announcement? Let me anticipate my conclusion. Jesus was telling his contemporaries that the kingdom was indeed breaking into history, *but that it did not look like what they had expected.* The time of restoration was at hand, and people of all sorts were summoned to share and enjoy it, but Israel was warned that its present ways of advancing the kingdom were counterproductive

and would result in national disaster. Jesus was therefore summoning his hearers to *be* Israel in a new way, to take up their proper roles in God's unfolding drama, and he assured them that if they followed him in this way, they would be vindicated when the great day came. A good many of the parables not only articulate this message but also, in their very form, embody it.[10] This explains, among other things, why the announcement was so often made in a cryptic fashion: "If you have ears, then hear!"

In the course of all this, Jesus was launching the real battle for the kingdom. But it was a battle, not against Rome, but against the enemy that stood behind Rome. This battle, which would reach its own climax in events to take place in Jerusalem, was even now beginning in his public career, as his symbolic actions, and the teaching that surrounded them, generated opposition at various levels. His kingdom announcement itself would lead to the victory through which Israel's god would become king; but this victory, and the resulting kingdom, would not look like what Jesus' contemporaries had in mind.

Jesus' announcement was thus revolutionary indeed—doubly revolutionary, in fact. Not only did the kingdom challenge the power and policies of Herod, of Caiaphas, and of Rome itself, as the revolutionaries would have insisted, it also challenged the militant aspirations of the revolutionaries themselves. And it challenged, within all of that, the injustice and oppression that Jesus saw as endemic within his own society. These things hung together: a society that insisted angrily on its own purity toward outsiders would also maintain sharp social distinctions, and perpetuate economic and other injustices, within itself. At the purely political level, one could have predicted that someone who put his finger on all this would end up being attacked from all sides and even misunderstood by his own followers. But more of that anon.

We should not be surprised that Jesus, in making his kingdom announcement, kept on the move, going from village to village and, so far as we can tell, staying away from Sepphoris and Tiberias, the two largest cities in Galilee. He was not so much like a wandering preacher giving sermons or a wandering philosopher offering maxims as like a radical politician gathering support for a new and highly risky movement. But, again, we should not imagine that politics here could be split off from theology. Jesus was doing what he was doing in the belief

that by following this way, rather than the others, Israel's God was indeed becoming king. He was saying what people wanted to hear but challenging the ways they had heard and meant it.

Jesus was therefore announcing that the long-awaited kingdom was being inaugurated through his own work. The example of Bar-Kochba a century later serves to clarify a point that has long puzzled historians: someone doing what Jesus was doing was bound to be speaking of the kingdom as *both* present *and* future.[11] The "presence," though, was not simply an inner personal event, a new way of ordering one's private religious experience, nor was it yet a new way of understanding and reorganizing social or cultural conditions. Likewise, the "futurity" was not the expectation of the end of the world. Bar-Kochba believed that the kingdom was already present. He had, after all, already raised the flag of liberation. That is why he not only minted coins (itself a revolutionary act, a declaration of independence), but dated them with the year 1—much like the French revolutionaries, who in 1793 decided to restart the calendar.[12] Bar-Kochba also believed, however, that the kingdom was still future: he had not yet defeated the Romans or rebuilt the temple. Once he had accomplished those tasks, the world would see that the kingdom had in fact begun with his initial announcement. So it was with Jesus. He saw his initial announcement as the real beginning of the kingdom (a very different interpretation of the kingdom from Bar-Kochba's, but on the same historical map), even though major tasks were still to be accomplished—tasks that, he believed, would retrospectively validate his earlier paradoxical claim.

Jesus, then, was not just a prophet announcing the kingdom. He believed *that the kingdom was breaking in to Israel's history in and through his own presence and work.* This is the third layer of my historical portrait of his mission and message.

GATHERING SUPPORT

When Jesus told the story of the kingdom, it functioned as an invitation to his hearers to become kingdom people themselves, to seize the chance and to become the real returned-from-exile people of God. We can study this in a sequence of four moves: invitation, welcome,

challenge, and summons. At this point Marcus and I more or less agree: Jesus was, in his phrase, a "movement initiator."[13]

First, invitation. Jesus invited his hearers to "repent and believe the gospel." In our world, telling people to repent and believe is likely to be heard as a summons to give up personal sins and accept a body of dogma or a scheme of religious salvation. This is a classic occasion where we have to unlearn our normal readings (including our faith readings) of first-century texts and allow the first century itself to tell us what to hear instead. As we see in Josephus, the phrase means, basically, "Give up your agendas and trust me for mine."[14] This is not to say that Jesus did not give this challenge what we would call a religious or spiritual dimension. It is to insist that we cannot use that to screen out the practical and political challenge that the words would convey.

He was telling his hearers, in other words, to give up their agendas and to trust him for his way of being Israel, his way of bringing the kingdom, his kingdom agenda. In particular, he was urging them, as Josephus had, to abandon their crazy dreams of nationalist revolution. But, whereas Josephus was opposed to revolution because he was an aristocrat with a nest to feather, Jesus was opposed to it because he saw it as, paradoxically, a way of being deeply disloyal to Israel's God: specifically, to Israel's vocation to be the light of the world. Within that, Jesus challenged his contemporaries to abandon the attitudes and practices toward one another which went with that xenophobic nationalism, especially the oppression of the poor by the rich (a constant strand in much of his teaching). And, whereas Josephus was offering as a counteragenda a way that many must have seen as compromise, a shaky political solution cobbled together with sticky tape, Jesus was offering as a counteragenda an utterly risky way of being Israel, the way of turning the other cheek and going the second mile, the way of losing your life to gain it, the way of a new community in which debts and sins were to be forgiven. But before we get to this challenge, we must notice the welcome.

Jesus offered to all and sundry a welcome that, as we have already seen, shocked many of his contemporaries to the core. It was not that he, as a private individual, was associating with the wrong sort of people; that would not have angered the Pharisees. He was welcoming sinners into fellowship with himself *precisely as part of his kingdom announcement;* he was declaring that this welcome constituted them as

members of the kingdom. In Judaism, repentance and forgiveness were focused, ultimately, on the temple itself, where the sacrificial system existed to provide the way of restitution for those who, through their sin, had stained, fractured, or jeopardized their membership within Israel. Jesus was offering forgiveness to all and sundry, out there on the street, without requiring that they go through the normal channels. That was his real offense.

With the invitation and welcome went a challenge. Subsequent generations of Christians have long allowed themselves to treat Jesus' challenge as simply a timeless ethic, a new moral code. But this misses the point. The challenge was grounded in eschatology. Jesus was challenging his contemporaries to live as the new covenant people, the returned-from-exile people, the people whose hearts were renewed by the word and work of the living God. Call Jesus a "social prophet" if you will; but his social prophecy grew directly out of his sense of what time it was. His critique of, and warning to, his contemporaries, and his challenge to a different way of being Israel, were based on his firm belief that he was charged by Israel's God with inaugurating the kingdom.

Not all of Jesus' hearers could literally follow him on his travels. But all could practice his way of life, a way of forgiveness and prayer, a way of jubilee, a way which renounced xenophobia toward those outside Israel and oppression of those inside. This is the context, I suggest, within which we should understand the material in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. It is not simply a grand new moral code. It is, primarily, the challenge of the kingdom: the summons to Israel to be Israel indeed at the critical junction of her history, the moment when, in the kingdom announcement of Jesus, the living God is at work to reconstitute his people and so fulfill his long-cherished intentions for them and for the whole world.

Ultimately, the challenge Jesus offered was the challenge to a crazy, subversive wisdom in which ordinary human wisdom, and conventional Jewish wisdom, would be stood on its head. To take up the cross and follow Jesus meant embracing Jesus' utterly risky vocation: to be the light of the world in a way the revolutionaries had never dreamed of. It was a call to follow Jesus into political danger and likely death, in the faith that by this means Israel's God would bring Israel through its present tribulations and out into the new day that would dawn. Again,

call Jesus a "wisdom teacher" if you wish; but his utterly subversive wisdom was not a generalized teaching about how to live counterculturally, but the challenge to recognize God's moment and act accordingly.[15] This challenge belongs exactly on the map of first-century Jewish kingdom expectations.

In and through this kingdom agenda, we glimpse Jesus' further goal, out beyond the reconstitution of Israel. Here we need to remind ourselves of the fundamental Jewish perception that, when YHWH does for Israel what he has promised to do, this action will spill over to the Gentile world. Sometimes in second-temple Jewish thought this results in a purely negative picture: when Israel is restored, the nations will be condemned. At other times, notably in Isaiah, the vision is positive: God's rescue of Israel will mean that salvation itself spreads to the whole world. Jesus seems to have envisaged the latter alternative. Many will come from east and west and sit down at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God.[16]

All this means that we can add a fourth stroke to our historical portrait of Jesus. He was a first-century Jewish prophet, announcing God's kingdom, believing that the kingdom was breaking in through his own presence and work, and *summoning other Jews to abandon alternative kingdom visions and join him in his.* But what would happen if they refused?

WARNING OF IMPENDING JUDGMENT

Many of Jesus' contemporaries looked eagerly for the judgment of their God to fall on the nations, on the Babylons and Romes that had oppressed Israel. In such coming judgment they would find their own vindication, as when a defendant in a lawsuit sees her or his attacker condemned. In classic prophetic style, however, Jesus announced that God's judgment would fall first and foremost on Israel itself, because it had failed to respond to the summons to be the light of the world, living instead by oppression and injustice within its own society and by violence, actual or intended, toward those outside. The vindication of God's true people would consist, therefore, in God's endorsement, not of the nation, but of those who followed the true way; these consisted,

basically, of himself and his followers, seen as the true representatives of Israel.[17]

Many have traditionally read Jesus' sayings about judgment either in terms of the postmortem condemnation of unbelievers or of the eventual destruction of the space-time world. The first-century context of the language in question, however, indicates otherwise. Jesus was warning his contemporaries that if they did not follow his way, the way of peace and forgiveness, the way of the cross, the way of being the light of the world, and if they persisted in their determination to fight a desperate holy war against Rome, then Rome would destroy them, city, temple, and all, and that this would be, not an unhappy accident showing that YHWH had simply forgotten to defend them, but the sign and the means of YHWH's judgment against his rebellious people. This was not simply the present and local aspect of Jesus' opposition to a more general phenomenon called "the domination system"; it was the unique and decisive challenge to the people of God at the crucial point in their history.

Jesus' warnings are focused in the so-called Little Apocalypse of Mark 13 and its parallels. I have argued elsewhere, against the trend of much twentieth-century scholarly and popular readings, that the chapter is to be read as a prediction not of the end of the world, but of the fall of Jerusalem.[18] When the Old Testament prophets speak of the sun and the moon being darkened, the stars falling from heaven, and so forth, they do not intend that this language be taken literally. They are using well-known metaphors to *denote* concrete events—major political or social upheavals—and to *connote* thereby the cosmic or theological significance which they believe those events to possess.

In the same way, the language in Mark 13.24–27 about the sun and the moon being darkened, and particularly about the Son of Man coming on the clouds, should not be taken in a crassly literalistic sense.[19] This language is borrowed from Isaiah 13, Daniel 7, and elsewhere, passages that refer to the collapse of great pagan empires and the vindication of God's people. "The Son of Man coming on the clouds" in Daniel would not be read by a first-century Jew as a reference to a human figure floating downward toward the earth on a concrete cloud. It would be read as the vindication—the coming to God—of his true people, after their suffering at the hands of the great

Beast, the evil empire that had opposed God, his purposes, and his people. Without going into more detail about the usage of the much-debated phrase "Son of Man," I submit that this reading makes sense within both first-century Judaism and the work of Jesus. Unargued attempts to continue to read the phrase in the old way, whether (as with many conservatives) to insist that Jesus must therefore have predicted his second coming or (with many others) that, because that is what the words mean, Jesus could not have spoken them, need to address this detailed historical argument.

Thus, a fifth stroke in the sketch. Jesus was a first-century Jewish prophet announcing the kingdom of God, believing that this kingdom was inaugurated with his own work, summoning others to join him in his kingdom movement, *and warning of dire consequences for the nation, for Jerusalem, and for the temple, if his summons was ignored.*

THE CLASH OF SYMBOLS

It is scarcely surprising, in view of all that has been said so far, that Jesus clashed with his contemporaries on many points. There were, after all, plenty of other first-century Jews with agendas, aspirations, and ambitions, most of which Jesus was cutting across. It is vital to realize, though, that such clashes have to do with eschatology, not ethics or religion. Jesus was not "attacking Judaism" but telling his fellow Jews that their moment had come and that they were in danger of missing it. He was not criticizing Jewish religion and offering a different variety, but appealing to Israel's own story and foundation texts to criticize what he saw as deep corruption both within the Jewish society of his day and in widespread Jewish attitudes toward the rest of the world. He stood, in other words, within the noble Jewish tradition of *critique from within.*

He was not, then, in any shape or form, anti-Jewish. Jesus clearly knew that there was a wide spectrum of belief and practice among his contemporaries; nevertheless, like the biblical prophets before him, he denounced "the nation" for its widespread rejection of what he saw as God's will, and its embracing of ways of being Jewish which he regarded as unwarranted, disloyal to YHWH, and disastrous. The prophets

had spoken out against the nation, and, though they sometimes were denounced as disloyal,[20] they always claimed the high ground of speaking YHWH's word to his people. The Pharisees were deeply critical of most of their contemporary Jews. The Essenes regarded all Jews except themselves as heading for judgment; they had transferred to themselves all the promises of vindication and salvation, while they heaped anathemas on everyone else, not least the Pharisees. Jesus belongs within the first-century world of rival eschatologies, not within the twentieth-century world of "patterns of religion." Like other would-be reformers, he claimed that he was the one who was truly loyal to Israel's God and his purposes, warning the others about the perils of disloyalty, challenging them to join him in the true way of being Israel at the vital turning point of history, and declaring that he, and his way, would be vindicated by God.

The clashes took place, as clashes often do, over symbols rather than ideas.[21] The beliefs of Judaism I outlined at the start of this chapter were encoded in a variety of symbolic practices that flew the flag of national identity. Supremely, of course, Jews kept the Torah and revered the temple.

Torah meant, not least, sabbath and food laws. Worshiping in the temple in Jerusalem, when one was able to get there (which many did, particularly for the great annual feasts), made the same point: this was the city where the one God had promised to dwell forever.

Adherence to, and defense of, the land of Israel functioned in the same way. So did loyalty to the family: the one God had made promises to "Abraham and his seed." Family members could ultimately opt out, and outsiders could opt in by abandoning idolatry and, in the case of males, becoming circumcised. But Israel, the people of the one God, thought of itself as a blood family. The symbols encoded the theology, and turned it into flesh and blood. This was the symbolic universe that Jesus lived within, and which his form of loyalty to Israel's God and ancestral heritage would turn upside down.

In particular, Jesus' clash with the Pharisees came about not because he was an antinomian, or because he believed in justification by faith while they believed in justification by works, but because *his kingdom agenda for Israel demanded that Israel leave off its frantic and paranoid self-defense, reinforced as it now was by the ancestral codes, and embrace*

instead the vocation to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. To do this would mean, also, abandoning the practice of oppression and violence within the society itself: inward corruption was the other side of the coin of militant nationalism. Jesus was announcing the kingdom in a way that did not reinforce but rather called into question the agenda of revolutionary zeal that dominated the horizon of many of his contemporaries, not least the leading group within Pharisaism.

The various clashes reported during Jesus' itinerant public career reached their head when he arrived in Jerusalem and confronted the temple. The temple was the symbolic heart of Judaism: by design and in hope the dwelling place of YHWH himself; the place of sacrifice, to forgive sins and celebrate the fellowship between God and Israel. In consequence, it was the center of Israel's political life, the power base of the priestly elite who, along with the Herodian house, ran second-temple Judaism at this time.

The temple possessed enormous royal significance, and here we begin to see where these clashes were ultimately leading. David had planned the first temple, Solomon had built it; their two greatest preexilic successors, Hezekiah and Josiah, had restored it. The Maccabees cleansed the temple, and thus, despite having no Davidic connection, became kings for a hundred years. Herod, having received the throne from the Romans, was eager to make it good by rebuilding the temple. The messiahs of the war years, Menahem and Bar-Giora, appeared in the temple, the former to be killed by a rival group, the latter to be taken captive by the Romans and killed during Titus' triumph in Rome. The last great messiah, Bar-Kochba, minted coins depicting the facade of the temple, which, no doubt, he was planning to rebuild. Temple and kingship went hand in hand.

There was, simultaneously, a popular critique of the temple. The Essenes believed in the temple but were passionately opposed to the present regime and hence to the present temple. The Pharisees in this period were beginning to develop the view that study of Torah would count as the equivalent of worshiping in the temple—a helpfully democratic ideal, especially for Jews in Diaspora. Many poorer people in Judaism regarded the temple as a symbol of corrupt and economically oppressive power structures; when the rebels took over the temple early on in the war, one of their first acts was to burn the records of debt kept

there. Jesus' action in the temple has some relation to this larger picture of Jewish disquiet, though it transcends it. Once again, we are dealing not with religious or ethical critique so much as eschatological agendas.

What then did Jesus do in the temple, and why did he do it?

Jesus' temple action was an acted parable of judgment. In casting out the traders, he effected a brief symbolic break in the sacrificial system that formed the temple's main raison d'être. As Josephus realized in a similar context, the cessation of sacrifice meant that Israel's God would use Roman troops to execute upon the temple the fate that its own impurity, its legitimation of oppression, and its sanctioning of nationalist resistance, had brought upon it. Israel's God was in the process of judging and redeeming his people, not just as one such incident among many but as the climax of Israel's history. Jesus saw the present grievous distortion of Israel's vocation, outward toward foreigners, inward toward the poor, symbolized catastrophically in the present attitudes toward the temple: a symbol that had gone so horribly wrong could only be destroyed.[22] This judgment would take the form of destruction by Rome. (No wonder people said Jesus was like Jeremiah.)[23] This would be followed by the establishment of the messianic community, focused on Jesus himself, that would replace the temple once and for all.

Jesus' action symbolized his belief that when YHWH returned to Zion he would not after all take up residence in the temple, legitimating its present functionaries and the nationalist aspirations that clustered around it and them. Jesus' symbolic actions, and the sayings with which he explained them, undergird the picture of Jesus as a prophet announcing the kingdom of God, but in a deeply subversive way. The national flags of Judaism may once have stood for Israel's vocation to be the light of the world. Now that they had come to stand for Israel's determination to keep the light for itself, Jesus opposed them on the grounds of loyalty to Israel's deepest traditions and vocations.

Various obvious features of Jesus' public career, such as the call of twelve disciples, spoke volumes about his aims and agenda. His regular healings were themselves the symbolic expression of Jesus' reconstitution of Israel. In the so-called messianic rule from Qumran, the blind, the lame, the deaf, and the dumb are excluded from membership in the eschatological community of the people of God.[24] Qumran tried to

create a restored community by keeping people out. Jesus created his by healing them and so bringing them in. His healings were the sign that the kingdom of God, the real return from exile, was happening in and through his own work.[25]

Along with this agenda went Jesus' creation of what the anthropologists might call a fictive kinship group. "Here are my mother and my brothers; everyone who hears the word of God and does it." The latter group seems, remarkably, to consist of those who hear the word of *Jesus* and do it. This renewed family was open-ended: the poor, the children, the tax collectors, and the general riffraff of society were invited to belong. Jesus' table fellowship with sinners—what John Dominic Crossan refers to as his "open commensality"—became one of the central symbols of his whole agenda. It spoke of the eschatological banquet, the messianic celebration. It challenged, symbolically, other contemporary construals of and agendas for the kingdom of God.

All is focused, once more, on the temple. Jesus acted in such a way as to indicate that he saw his own movement as the god-given replacement for the temple itself. The controversy about fasting points in this direction: Israel's fasts commemorated the temple's destruction,[26] and Zechariah had promised that the great fasts would eventually turn into feasts.[27] This, however, would come true only when YHWH restored the fortunes of his people, when the messianic banquet would take place. That is what Jesus is hinting at when he speaks of the wedding guests not being able to fast while the bridegroom is with them.[28] This is not timeless teaching about religion or morality. It is a claim about eschatology. The time is fulfilled; the exile is over; the bridegroom is at hand. Jesus' acted symbol, feasting rather than fasting, brought into public visibility his controversial claim, that in his work *the temple was being rebuilt.* Metaphorically, of course; but the metaphor denoted something concrete, namely Jesus himself and his community and movement, not something abstract, such as a new ideal or spirituality.

The same must be said of Jesus' offer of forgiveness. The Jerusalem temple claimed control of the means of forgiveness; Jesus challenged this with his actions and sayings. His exchange with a scribe, reported only in Mark 12.32–4, is highly significant: to love God with all one's heart, and one's neighbor as oneself, is worth more than all burned offerings and sacrifices. It is to this man that Jesus says, "You are not far

from the kingdom of God." God's kingdom was precisely about replacing the temple system with the renewed heart, which, itself celebrating the forgiveness of God, would love God and neighbor in the way that the Shema, the daily prayer of the Jews to this day, indicated as the heart of Jewish practice. Jesus was claiming to offer all that the temple stood for.

Jesus' critique of his contemporaries' symbol system led, as we saw, to his action in the temple. His own positive symbols led to the Last Supper: the young Jewish prophet reclining in table fellowship with his twelve followers, celebrating (perhaps on the wrong night) the meal that in itself and its biblical allusions spoke of the coming kingdom, of the new exodus, of forgiveness of sins, of covenant renewal, and that did so in a setting and context that formed a strange but deliberate alternative to the temple.

The sixth stroke of my sketch is therefore as follows: Jesus was a first-century Jewish prophet announcing and inaugurating the kingdom of God, summoning others to join him, warning of the consequences if they did not. *His agendas led him into a symbolic clash with those who embraced other ones, and this, together with the positive symbols of his own kingdom agenda, point to the way in which he saw his inaugurated kingdom moving toward accomplishment.*

JESUS' IDENTITY

When we put together Jesus' temple action and Last Supper, we discover that at the heart of Jesus' prophetic persona lay, not just the simple announcement of God's kingdom, but the claim, implicitly, to be the king that was to come. We know of several other royal or would-be royal movements in the first century; Jesus' movement is not quite like any of them, but it is not that different, either. To suppose that because the early Christians regarded Jesus as messiah, any suggestion that Jesus himself shared this belief *must* be a retrojection from later Christian theology is to let the hermeneutic of suspicion play dog-in-the-manger to actual historical reconstruction.

To address the question historically, we must start with Jesus, as we have seen him, at the head of a movement through which, he believed,

the long-awaited kingdom was dawning. All the signs are that he regarded his own work not simply as pointing forward to this kingdom, but actually as inaugurating it: his actions only make sense if he believed that through them the kingdom was in some sense present, not simply future. These two cannot be played off against each other. On the contrary, the strange presence of the kingdom during Jesus' lifetime actually points forward to a crisis event through which it will come in a fuller reality. The example of Bar-Kochba, already noted, not only reminds us of how presence and futurity might go together in a second-temple kingdom announcement; they also reveal the agenda that would carry one from the first to the second. Evil (the Romans) had to be defeated and the temple rebuilt.

Jesus, I suggest, believed himself to be bound by a similar vocation, with the all-important difference that his agenda involved neither violence nor bricks and mortar. He believed himself called to take on the real enemy, of which Rome, as many of his contemporaries would have agreed, was but the symbol and pawn. And what was that real enemy? Evil itself, threatening God's kingdom and people through Rome, but itself a suprapersonal, supranational power, sometimes capable of being referred to under the quasi-personal language of "the accuser" (in Hebrew, "the satan"). There is excellent evidence that Jesus saw himself engaged in a running battle with this enemy throughout his short public career and that he saw these skirmishes pointing toward a greater showdown yet to come.

But what weapons could he use to fight such a battle? As we saw earlier, he denounced the use of military action, and he advocated the deeper revolution of loving one's enemies, taking up one's cross, losing one's life in order to gain it. This, it gradually appears, was not simply a way of life he urged on his followers, an ethic to be implemented at any time and place where people felt bold enough to do so. It was, much more sharply, an agenda and vocation to which he knew himself called, and that he announced as the way of being God's true Israel. It was his own fresh construal of the law and the prophets, the controversial way by which, he proposed, Israel's God would make Israel at last what it had always been called to be, the light of the nations. And, like other Jewish would-be leaders and messiahs before and since, Jesus believed himself called to go ahead of the people and fight the battle on their behalf. Like

David taking on Goliath, he would face the enemy of God's people alone, choosing the strange weapons that matched his own vision.

He would not only fight the true battle; he would also build the true temple. Jesus' action in the temple, complex and controversial though it has proved in historical discussion, seems to me to have been a clear symbolic action designed to declare God's judgment on the present temple.[29] Such an action must have implied, within second-temple Jewish expectations, that some form of replacement temple was envisaged. The symbolism of many of Jesus' actions spoke powerfully about what sort of temple he envisaged. Like the Essenes, he saw his own community as the true temple; or rather, he saw himself as the place and means of doing, decisively and eschatologically, that for which the temple had stood.

Jesus therefore believed himself to be Israel's messiah, the focal point of its long history, the one through whom Israel's God would at last deal with its exile and sin and bring about its longed-for redemption. This, I must stress, is not a particularly odd thing for a first-century Jew with a strong sense of God's presence and purpose, and a clear gift for charismatic leadership, to think. Others thought much the same, with local and personal variations. Of course, saying "Jesus was the messiah" remains controversial and from the historical point of view unprovable: it involves the claim to know that the God of Israel had indeed uniquely anointed Jesus. But to say "Jesus acted and spoke in ways consistent with his launching a veiled claim to be messiah, and inconsistent with his having no intention of making such a claim" is a historical hypothesis that, I believe, can be powerfully sustained.[30]

This, it seems to me, is actually implied in Marcus's account of Jesus. If Jesus was all the things Marcus says he was, then, in a century that saw many would-be messiahs and royal personages come and go, leading movements, announcing the kingdom, going to Jerusalem, saying and doing things about the temple, it is highly likely that Marcus's "Jewish mystic," if he was indeed a Spirit person, a social prophet, and a movement initiator, would have faced the question both from onlookers and from within his own heart and mind: was he, then, the messiah? Several other first-century Jews thought they were and had followers who agreed with them. Why should Jesus not have belonged in their number? I am very happy that we should analyze Jesus with all

the tools, cross-cultural and otherwise, at our disposal. But when all is said and done, the categories of Jesus' own world matter, too, as Marcus would be quick to insist.[31] Even Josephus could tell people to believe in him;[32] I can imagine Judas the Galilean and Bar-Kochba telling people to believe in them. If Jesus really was, as Marcus allows, a "movement initiator," why should he not have done the same?

If Jesus did in any sense believe that Israel's God was calling him to take up the vocation of messiah, certain things follow. Any first-century would-be messiah must have believed, as Bar-Kochba a century later than Jesus certainly believed, that if his claim were true it belonged within the larger claim, that this was the moment Israel had waited and longed for. I call this sort of belief eschatological, and I note both that it is sometimes, though not always, expressed in what many call apocalyptic language, and that it always implies some kind of political stance.[33] It has to do with a sense of history reaching its unique climax. A new ethic, social critique, or spirituality can find a home within an eschatological belief and agenda, but by themselves they do not add up to it. Adding "prophet of the kingdom" to the end of a noneschatological list of characteristics of Jesus does not produce convergence with a through-and-through eschatological reading. If Jesus is really to be earthed in first-century Judaism, this seems to me nonnegotiable: the eschatological longing, the readiness to see in a new movement the possibility that this might be God's great, final, decisive hour with Israel and the world. The reason I find myself, as a historian, locating Jesus within this world of eschatology is because nothing else seems to do justice to his context or his position within it.

As I follow this path, I discover a Jesus who was not simply an example, even the supreme example, of a mystic or Spirit person, such as one might meet, in principle, in other cultures. I find, rather, the Jesus I have just been describing: Jesus as a first-century Jewish prophet announcing and inaugurating the kingdom of God, summoning others to join him, warning of the consequences if they did not, doing all this in symbolic actions, *and indicating in symbolic actions, and in cryptic and coded sayings, that he believed he was Israel's messiah, the one through whom the true God would accomplish his decisive purpose.*

That purpose, though, would not be accomplished simply by repeating Jesus' message and symbolic actions until more and more

people were persuaded. It would come about through the decisive events to which his two great symbolic actions pointed. If the temple action spoke of messiahship, the Last Supper pointed to the cross. But that is the subject of another chapter.

KINGDOM THEN—KINGDOM NOW?

This picture, I believe, makes very good sense historically. Jesus' critique of his contemporaries was critique from within; his summons was not to abandon Judaism and try something else, but to become the true, returned-from-exile people of the one true God. He aimed to be the means of God's reconstitution of Israel. He would call into being the true, returned-from-exile Israel. He would challenge, and deal with, the evil that had infected Israel itself. He would be the means of Israel's God returning to Zion. He was, in short, announcing the kingdom of God: not the simple revolutionary message of the hard-liners, but the doubly revolutionary message of a kingdom that would overturn all other agendas, including the revolutionary one. He was a prophet, announcing and inaugurating the kingdom, summoning followers, warning of disaster, promising vindication, clashing symbolically with other agendas, implicitly claiming messiahship, and anticipating a showdown. He was, in other words, a thoroughly credible first-century Jew.

What relevance has such a person for the world, the church, or the Christian today? It all depends. If Jesus' project as I have described it simply led to a messy death and nothing more, not very much. Who wants to follow a two-thousand-year-old failure? Why would anyone take seriously the subversive wisdom of a strange teacher, however fascinating, who believed that Israel's God was going to act through him to save Israel and the world, but who managed not only not to save himself from death but not to deliver Israel and Jerusalem from the crushing disasters of 70 and 135 C.E.?

If, however, Jesus' death did accomplish the real defeat of the evil that had infected Israel along with the rest of the world—if, in other words, his actions in Jerusalem did somehow accomplish the kingdom of God in the revised sense that he had been announcing all along—then this was good news not only for Israel but for the whole world.

The early church, clearly, thought this was the case. They gave as their reason one thing and one thing only: after his shameful death, Jesus had been raised from the dead. The practical, theological, spiritual, ethical, pastoral, political, missionary, and hermeneutical implications of the mission and message of Jesus differ radically depending upon what one believes happened at Easter. That, too, is the subject of another chapter.