

Jesus

"Then I (Jesus) said: 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God . . . I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.'"

Hebrews 10:7; John 12:49

Between the last of the *Old Testament* prophets, Malachi, and the first of the *New Testament* prophets, John the Baptist, there was a gap of some four centuries, during which God was silent as the events unfolded which the four major prophets had foretold at His command.

With the Judean exile to Babylon, Israel ceased to be an independent nation and became a minor province in a series of larger empires. When Alexander the Great conquered the territory in 332 BC he introduced a policy of "*Hellenisation*" through which he hoped to create a world ruled by Greek language and culture—the third imperial ruler to reign from Babylon. Two of his four generals contended for control of Judea in a series of rebellions by the Judeans, or "Jews". The history of Israel as a nation had begun with four hundred years of divine silence from Joseph to Moses;

and it had ended with the same. The last words of Malachi the prophet from God had been:

“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, or else I will come and strike the earth with a curse.”¹¹⁶

The three empires of Daniel’s prophetic visions—Babylon, Medo-Persia and Greece—had dominated these four centuries, and under their rulers and subsequent off-shoot kingdoms the two former Israeli kingdoms of Ephraim and Judah became truncated into Samaria and Judea, tributary provinces to the predominating powers. At the beginning of the second century BC (198 BC), Judea was conquered by Antiochus III, “the Great”, and annexed to Syria. At this time, Judea was divided into five small sub-provinces—Galilee, Samaria, Judea (the three collectively known as Judea), Trachonitis and Peraea, under Roman imperial occupation but riven by periodic revolts led by Jewish zealots. In that four hundred years between Malachi and John the Baptist, the Babylon-exile Remnant Jews had returned to a much-reduced Israel (and which later had become known as Roman “*Palestine*”) and developed observance of a religion known as “*Rabbinical Judaism*” in place of a speaking God.

A combination of priests, scribes and *rabbis*, or “*teachers*” in the Babylon Exile, had bowdlerised what had been divinely revealed to them through *Moses*, the *Psalms* and the *Prophets* by independently creating a body of literature, and a system of theological administration, *which effectively removed God from their lives*. The body of literature was a compilation of traditional comments and rabbinical interpretations given the titles of *Mishna*, *Gemara* or *Talmud*, *Midrashim* and *Qabbala*, which eventually superseded the *Law of God* and *Moses*, and excluded God casuistically by arguing that their 613 “*palings*”, or “*hedges*”, were to preserve God’s awesome unapproachable majesty, loosely referred to as *Torah*, and as *Traditions* . . .

With the death of the *Old Covenant* prophets the nation of Israel was reduced to 50,000 returned exiles from Babylon to a much

¹¹⁶Malachi 4: 5-6

reduced Judah, plus a resident mixed variety of immigrant colonists known as “*people of the land*” and their offspring. They had rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and (with the inspiration and finance of non-Israeli tributary king, Herod the Great) the Temple, and re-established the Temple worship. Although they had a magnificent Temple building due to the support of the megalomaniac King Herod’s munificence, it was an empty sanctuary because there was no original *Ark of the Covenant* and no hovering *Shekinah Cloud of Presence*. But they had also brought back with them from Babylon other forms of worship, including the “*synagogue*”, an institutional practice of “church” religion which had been developed during their exile in Babylon when they were without the Temple services. The synagogues were community centres of prayer and Scripture readings and teachings, as well as centres of education and charity.

The Judaic ruling administration was given the name of *Sanhedrin*, or “Council”, a body of 71 Jewish religious and secular leaders in Jerusalem with Roman approval, constituting the highest Jewish tribunal, and drawn from the nobility, priesthood, elders, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were “*pious ones*” who resisted Greek influences, upheld the strictest forms of Jewish worship, revered the *Torah*, and the rabbinic *Traditions*. The Sadducees were mostly from the aristocratic class and more concerned with political than spiritual matters. Between these parties, groups, divisions and cliques - such as the pious Essenes and the extremist Zealots—gave form and substance to the religion of “*Judaism*” practiced by the Jewish people when the Roman empire became the dominant power in the Asia Minor region.

Judaism not only excluded God from the lives of the Jews it also excluded Jews from the lives of other people in its social isolationism¹¹⁷. It was unlawful for a Jew “*to associate with a Gentile or to visit him*”, and every Gentile child as soon as it was born was regarded as unclean. The Judaists claimed all the privileges of Moses’ *Law*, while casuistically evading its responsibilities. Having chosen to evade their divinely chosen destiny to enlighten the world, they created a destructively exclusive sectarian common creed,

¹¹⁷Acts 10:28

common life, common centre, and common hope. Their unrealized tragedy was that their self-generated Judaic socio-religious system had no validity except among themselves.

With the expansion of the Roman empire into the eastern Mediterranean region the Jews faced renewed dangers of national genocide, and in 168 BC they revolted under the leadership of a charismatic Jew called Judas Maccabaeus. When it looked as if he might be able to defeat the Romans he was revered as a Messiah; and, after his death, there was an increasing expectation of the Jewish long-awaited Messiah, as was the hope of the restored Davidic kingdom—of which apparently there was not an evident hereditary trace or representative left.

In Palestine, as the first century BC drew to a close, everything centred on the Judaic religion—institutions, customs, law, manners, relationships—*and the expectation of the prophesied Messiah*. In order to attract the support of the sceptical Jewish people the unpopular King Herod had built a magnificent Temple modelled on Solomon's, and this structure physically dominated the city of Jerusalem and was the focus of annual *Passover* pilgrimages by the Dispersed Jews of the world. The tax-exempt Temple treasury, generously supported by Jews everywhere, gave the Jewish religious leaders of the official *Sanhedrin*, or Council, in Jerusalem enormous influence through the millions of world-wide Jewry of the Diaspora, and created an uneasy balance of power between them and the Herodian political faction in Roman Palestine.

The chief beneficiaries of the post-Ezra Judaism were the rabbis, who were arbiters of all disputes, the final authority on everything pertaining to the Judaism created by their scribal ancestors. The rabbis of the institutionalized Judaism arrogated to themselves the authorities of Moses' Levitical priesthood, but with the focus on their self-serving misinterpretation of Israel's unique destiny of religion as ritual, instead of the historical prophets' interpretation of Israel's unique devotion to individual holiness.

Then John the Baptist, the first true prophet to appear in four hundred years, appeared out of the surrounding Judean desert. The post-Babylon *Remnant-Israel* was totally confused by the

appearance of the first prophet in over four hundred years, and his dynamic demand for Jewish repentance and baptism in anticipation of the expected revelation of the “kingdom of God” and the long-awaited Messiah. What was new about John’s message was the imminence of the universal “*kingdom of heaven*” (as distinct from their orthodox Messianic expectation of the “*kingship of Israel*”), the incarnation of a divine Messiah, and the spiritual individualizing of the kingdom of God in the person of the coming Messiah. Their Judaically inherited concept of a Messiah was national, political, legal, and moral rather than spiritual.

John the Baptist took up where Daniel¹¹⁸ and the other prophets left off, by declaring that the imminent advent of the Messiah would permanently establish the true spiritual relationship between king and kingdom, by introducing an everlasting righteousness, by sweeping away all creedal barriers, and by integrating all nations in this kingdom. As the prophets had foretold, the kingdom would be universal, holy and eternal.

The Jews at the beginning of the first century AD were incapable of understanding such a kingdom because of the rabbinical indoctrination of their self-generated Judaism. They could comprehend the historical form of the Davidic kingdom from their writings and *Traditions*, but they could not understand the spiritual substance of the kingdom because they had no longer believed in or practiced a personal *Covenant* relationship with the God of the kingdom. The *New Kingdom* was a mystery which, John declared, would be revealed by the advent of the divinely-ordained Messianic king among them.

John the Baptist’s demand for repentance in the light of the imminent revelation of the mystery of the *New Kingdom*—or, rather, the full prophetic manifestation of the mystery of the *Old Kingdom*—had a remarkable response in Roman-dominated Judea/Palestine as tens of thousands agreed to be baptized by him in symbolic purification and regeneration. John prophetically proclaimed:

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He

¹¹⁸Daniel ch 7 vv 13, 14

*will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”*¹¹⁹

At the peak of the continuing unprecedented public response to John’s preaching he was joined by his second-cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, *whom John immediately proclaimed by divine revelation as the Messiah* in Isaiah’s prophetic terms, as **“Lamb of God”**¹²⁰, or **Servant-Messiah** rather than the traditionally expected **Ruler-Messiah**.

It happened with as unexpected an impact as his own dramatic appearance while he was baptising the increasing numbers of believers in the River Jordan. He was suddenly confronted by his second cousin Jesus, whom he had known since childhood was the expected Messiah because of his mother’s close relationship with her cousin, Mary, from the time of their supernaturally – provided pregnancies. When Jesus presented himself for baptism John was understandably reluctant, because he was baptising repentant sinners as a form of cleansing in anticipation of the coming Messiah, and he protested that Jesus ought rather to be baptising him. However, Jesus said to him meaningfully, *“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness”*.

When Jesus came up out of the water John became aware of a dove descending from heaven, and the voice of God declared, *“This is my beloved Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased.”* That appearance and divine declaration validated what Jesus had just declared about *“fulfilling all righteousness”*, and made his baptism a symbol of the sacrificial death and resurrection foretold by the prophets, which would effectively cleanse all believing participants and make them acceptable to God. John’s **“Lamb of God”** announcement of this **Sacrificial Messiah**, with the related Spirit-and-purging-fire baptism of true believers, prepared the way for the revelation of the mystery of the **New Spiritual Kingdom** foretold by Daniel and now to be preached by Jesus.

When Jesus left John the Baptist beside Bethabara he moved quickly through the crowd and turned westwards towards the

¹¹⁹Matthew ch 3 vv 11, 12

¹²⁰John ch 41 vv 25, 36

Judean desert. Before he had arrived at Bethabara he had already decided what his next move would be, and even the next few decisions. He had some years in which to reflect on his course of action. In anticipation of the monumental task before him Jesus had decided to withdraw from all people and face his greatest adversary alone. In that purpose he was different altogether from John, who had sought to purge himself from all lesser thoughts and motivations.

Jesus had known from his earliest childhood that he was set apart by God, as God Himself; since he could understand, his mother Mary had informed him of the supernatural nature of his birth and her visitation. He had been conceived by the Spirit of God, and that same Spirit had not been given by measure to him as it was to all other mortals. It had been given to him without measure from his conception and so he had looked and thought and decided about all things as God decided in the heavens—without the human restraints of sin which led to base motivations. It was not that he was not tempted like all others; it was just that in the temptations he turned instinctively to God, through the indwelling Spirit, for the power to overcome them, whereas others gave the temptations values and influences which ultimately overwhelmed them into sinful submission and defeat.

The primary task of Jesus was to redeem the human race from its subjection to the former Anointed Angel, Satan, the Great Adversary of all God's purposes. Following the Creation, Satan had established his sphere of angelic authority on the earth, as one of the angel-princes. Since his seduction of Eve and Adam into rebellion against God he had consistently sought to thwart God's purpose of redeeming humankind from its inherited and practiced disobedience of God, and to subvert all God's attempts to make His chosen people, Israel, a holy nation to enlighten the world.

So Jesus had been sent by God to initiate God's rule on earth, to establish the kingdom of God on earth as it was in heaven, to be what Daniel had described as "the stone cut out of the mountain without hands" which would destroy all other kingdoms—including, most of all, the kingdom of Satan. In this earthly body

which God had prepared for him he was the “seed of Adam”, the “seed of Abraham”, the “seed of David”, in order to fulfil all the purposes of God. As that “seed” God had said he would “bruise the head of Satan”.

So his first task was to confront Satan in the solitude of the desert before he launched his public ministry; because he knew that once he was committed to declare the good news of the kingdom of God every known—and even hitherto unknown—evil would be thrown against him by Satan and earthly authorities desperate to perpetuate their own power. His time on earth would be limited as all these powers, energized by the malignant forces of Satan urging them on, were hurled against him. In such a confrontation it would be easier to demand his death than for them to suffer the pain of discipline and change.

He was conscious of the unique parallel between his present situation and that of Moses personally, and of the people of Moses’ time corporately, in that God led them into the desert to be with Himself before they began their destined task. David, too, had to be alone with God in deserts and mountains before he became a king. Jesus’ task was so much greater than their’s, for the establishing of God’s kingdom on earth was the greatest threat to Satan since he had been cast out of heaven for his arrogance and ambition to be like God Himself.

What he had to say to men and women must come out of the crucible of his own experience—above and beyond the noisy confusion of philosophies and politics, and the corrupting demands of daily physical and material temptations—because it would have to have an even greater impact than that of John’s message, for it encompassed so much more. John had prepared the way with his message of repentance and judgement and mercy; but he, Jesus, would have to reveal God as a loving Father, establish God’s kingdom, demonstrate his credentials as the true Messiah—and do all this within the space of a few years.

Probably his greatest difficulty in the years ahead would be to get his followers to understand that his human experience was the same as theirs, in that he had to find his way through the demanding

pressures of everyday life in order to know, understand and do actions flowing from the mind and will of God. They would assume that he, as Messiah, was invulnerable to distraction and temptation, that he was divinely protected by God from them or any other potentially sinful experience. His incarnation by the Spirit of God through Mary at his birth was the only miraculous intervention by God in his life so far. But the knowledge of it had determined all his subsequent experiences, and Satan's knowledge of his incarnation and destiny had intensified his opposition at all times.

Jesus left the main highways, and branch roads, and passed through the scattered, suspicious Judean desert communities of peasants and nomads, scrabbling for a living for themselves and their scrawny sheep and nibbling goats. He went beyond them into the uninhabited white-sand wilderness where only the wild animals survived. With the minimum of food and water he pushed his body and mind to the limits of their endurance, beyond the demands of every physical sense and mental distraction, to the point where, eventually without food or water, he was face to face with Satan himself grappling in the realm of the spirit.

Eight hundred feet higher than the tropical abundance of Bethabara Jesus reached an exposed and scorched limestone ledge, with a wide, sweeping view of the heat-hazed desert. Beyond the shimmering heat waves of this empty—desolate wasteland there were ten thousand square miles holding a few million men and women comprising the chosen people of God, who had almost all forgotten or ignored their glorious destiny to be God's holy nation in the world, a model of God's love and joy, peace and prosperity.

Only thirty miles away from where he sat the city of God, Jerusalem, was a maelstrom of political intrigues, dominated by a Roman tyranny, exacerbated by the excesses of the new procurator Pontius Pilate. It was a cultural cesspool corrupted by Greek hedonistic indulgences, a religious bazaar where every kind of superstitious idea got a hearing and following, while the true spiritual values of their divine inheritance were ignored or mocked.

In the heat of the day, and in the silence of the night, Jesus grappled with the demonstrable powers of Satan evident

everywhere in Judea and the world. There was no doubt about it, Satan had made the world into his personal kingdom, and not just his divinely-bestowed angelic inheritance. Here the battle between him and Satan had to be fought—and won.

After forty days in the desert, when he was feeling the debilitating effects of his long fast and struggle, Jesus was approached in person by his great adversary, Satan—just as he had approached Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden. For Jesus, as for all Jews, the intrusion of Satan and angels into daily life, while unusual, was not a startling phenomenon. He did not just believe in angels as part of the primitive superstition of the time, derived from the Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians and others. The Jewish Scriptures had always taught the existence of a personal Satan and representative angels. The Law of Moses had been given by angels on Mount Sinai; the people of Israel were led by an Angel of the Covenant in the wilderness; angels had appeared to Abraham, the Patriarchs, Joshua, Balaam, Job, Samuel, David, Elijah, Daniel and Ezekiel, and to the minor prophets.

There was a divinely-appointed unitary administration of angelic created intelligences in the heavens reaching from the Throne of God downward and outwards, with clearly delineated ranking functions throughout the cosmos: seraphim, cherubim, thrones; dominions, powers, authorities; principalities, archangels, angels.

Just as there was God's powerful angelic kingdom, with judicial powers vested in a court of judgement in heaven, so there was a mighty kingdom of Satan, modelled on the divine pattern, but ruled over by Satan and his demonic fallen angels. Initiatory creative power was not Satan's to exercise, because of the limitations imposed on even his highest angelic status, but he still wielded immense power under the sovereign will of God. The Psalmist had described how these demonic fallen angels operated through their human minions on earth:

*“God presides in the great assembly;
He gives judgement among the ‘gods’:
‘How long will you defend the unjust and show
partiality to the wicked?”*

*Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless;
maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed.
Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the
hand of the wicked.
They know nothing, they understand nothing.
They walk about in darkness; all the foundations
of the earth are shaken'.
I said, 'You are 'gods'; you are all sons of the
Most High'.
But you will die like mere men; you will fall like
every other ruler."*

These were the malevolent powers manipulating emperors and kings, statesmen and generals, politicians and priests, to serve Satan's ends and to frustrate God's benevolent purposes for His creation. Rulers and philosophers and priests had created gods and demi-gods to explain the spirit-phenomena which they would not receive from God, and ended up worshiping gold and silver, bronze and wooden representations of their self-conceived mythical creatures.

It was the task of Jesus to make the kingdom of God real in the world, to reveal the true nature and person of God, to restore God's redemptive purposes in creation, to deliver all men and women from the bondage to Satan into which they had fallen, and to lead them into the glorious inheritance prepared for them by God. Deliverance of the nations—whether Israel or the Gentiles—from the human kings of political empires would have to mean deliverance of minds and spirits from the bondage of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. He must stand alone against the full power of the secular world, must pass sentence on all its accepted religious folly, and must create a new world of spiritual values.

He was not surprised, therefore, when Satan himself appeared to challenge him on the decision he had reached. Nor was he surprised by the temptations he presented. Satan had always been a magnificent presence, the highest of God's creation, more powerful

even than Gabriel and Michael, and it was in full demonstration of that power he now appeared to Jesus.

"If you are the Son of God", he said peremptorily, "tell these stones to become bread".

Jesus had prepared himself for Satan's attacks, keeping in mind the prophetic words of God to Satan in the Garden of Eden regarding their eventual confrontation over the destiny of the world: *"He (the Messiah) will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."* In other words, his own eventual triumph was assured, but he would be attacked and vulnerable at the point where he touched the earth. So, Satan had indeed attacked him at the level of fleshly indulgence when he was weakened by lengthy fasting.

"It is written", Jesus replied firmly, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

At the suggestion of Satan Jesus accompanied him by metamorphosis to the city of Jerusalem, and from the vantage point of the roof of the Temple Satan challenged him: *"If you are the Son of God throw yourself down, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands"."*

Again, Jesus was aware of Satan's tactics: to enter into a conflict of supernatural powers in which it was implicit that both of them were equal, the other significance of which was that Jesus was only supported from personal harm by angels.

Jesus answered him: *"It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test"*.

Then Satan spread out before Jesus a glittering panorama of his earthly power as angelic prince of the world: the kingdoms of the world, in all their material splendor. *"All of this", he said to Jesus, "I will give you if you will bow down and worship me."*

Jesus did not contest his authority, but he summarily dismissed Satan's implied claim to superiority over him.

"Away from me, Satan!" he declared; for the third time using God's own words to oppose him. "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

The three temptations just presented to him by Satan were the

three fundamental causes of all the world's unrest in Satan's relentless campaign to thwart God's purposes for men and women—whether political, social, economic or religious. They could be summed up in one sentence for each. First, there was "*the lust of the flesh*": to turn stones into bread to alleviate hunger pangs, or to enjoy personal pleasure without responsibility. Second, "*the lust of the eyes*": to perform a miracle for selfish reasons, to demonstrate personal prestige without responsibility. Thirdly, "*the pride of life*": to acquire personal possessions for enjoyment of power without responsibility.

These were three of the most corrupting and destructive temptations of humankind, the three basic drives of debased desires. He had demonstrated in his responses to Satan that it was possible to overcome them, whatever the circumstances, by calling on the words and promises of God.

His own personal confrontation by Satan had been a temptation to be a "Provider-Messiah"—giving food to the poor, health to the sick, comfort to the sorrowing, regardless of the individual consequences. Or to be tempted to be a "Miracle-Messiah", manipulator and purveyor of strange powers, the powers of the supernatural, the unveiling of the world's mysteries by demonstrated familiarity with its spirit mechanisms, like the occultic Egyptian, Babylonian and Greek philosophers. Or, finally, most seductive of all temptations, to be a "Caesar-Messiah", such as expected by all Jews, seeking to win over the kingdoms of the world as a greater than soldier-statesman Julius Caesar, or the slave-rebel Spartacus, or like the Jewish revolutionaries Judas Maccabeus or Judah of Gamala. He was in the direct line of succession of King David, and could start off with better credentials than the others, and John the Baptist had already shown what could be done with sincerity and oratory.

All of these options were legitimate in their way, and all of them were aspects of the Messiahship. But all of them on their own had failed, and would continue to fall short of God's declared purpose to redeem the world from the consequences of its rebellion and disobedience.

That was the fundamental issue—not status, or power, or possessions, or even life itself, but obedience to God and his written and spoken commands. Obedience unto death if necessary. Power willingly subordinated to love, which itself was a primary characteristic of God and was the first law in the kingdom of God. A man could die for a cause; he could die for a friend; but to die because of love for an enemy, in order to save him, using divine power in the service of love, was the primary task of a God-sent Messiah—to be a “Redeemer-Messiah” through love. That commitment could and would be summed up in the three responses he had made to Satan: one, to live by the revealed word of God alone; two, to do nothing not commanded by God; three, to acknowledge by every word and deed that they explicitly came from a loving God.

God’s purpose through him was to establish a spiritual kingdom on earth as it was in heaven, a kingly rule based on love in which service to others rather than dominion over them would be the pre-eminent feature. The goal of that purpose was to enable all men and women everywhere to have an unclouded relationship with their Holy Creator—to be holy as He is holy—at all times and in all circumstances. This was the destined task given to Israel, which they had forfeited through disobedience. Israel would be first given an opportunity to repent and return to God for forgiveness—as John had begun to preach—and then if the nation of Israel neglected or refused the offer other nations would be challenged to respond.

To accomplish this he must choose and train a small group of dedicated men and women who would be prepared to die for this cause—and that perhaps soon; then, later, a larger group, time permitting, to cover the whole of the country with the news of the kingdom to the people of Israel. When a sufficient number of Jews had been discipled as a nucleus of that kingdom it would be their responsibility to carry the good news of God’s kingdom to all other nations of the world.

The preaching of the two God-authenticated and gifted prophets, John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, had an electrifying effect on the Jewish people, and they responded in even greater thousands to

the message of repentance and baptism being preached by the two prophets. The public interest and excitement was intensified when Jesus publicly demonstrated his supernatural powers with increasingly marvellous miracles of healing the sick and even raising the dead as indisputable divine “*signs*” requiring the recipient to recognise him as the promised Messiah of the prophets.

From the time when John was put in prison by Herod because of his uncompromising demand for holiness of life even from the ruling Herod family, Jesus began his own distinctive public ministry: the imminence of the kingdom of God, and the need for Israel’s repentance and holiness, as a prelude to the expansion of the message to the other nations of the world: “***From that time Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’***”¹²¹.

There are a number of ways in which the importance of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ life and subsequent teachings may be assessed. In the four *Gospels* Jesus is quoted teaching statistically about the kingdom 47 times in Matthew, 13 times in Mark, 31 times in Luke, and five times in John. A survey of the completed *New Testament* shows 119 passages where the expression “*kingdom*” occurs; an analysis of which indicates that it meant comprehensively the rule of God which is manifested in and through the Church, grows in the face of opposition, and will triumphant be ultimately at the second coming of the Messiah in the new heavens and new earth.

The unique “*message of the kingdom*” presented by Jesus was in three time frames: (i) it was *present* (“*at hand*” — Matthew 4:17) in the person of God’s own Son, Jesus himself; (ii) it was *preached* in seven mystery parables (Matthew 13) followed later with others by Jesus, as fulfilled in that time; and (iii) it would be *prophetically* realized in completion at the second coming of the Messiah as King as foretold by David and Daniel (Matthew 24-25).

These three aspects of the “*kingdom of heaven*” were taught predominantly by Jesus in five distinct segments of his three-year life, each segment terminated with the expression “*When Jesus had finished, or ended . . .*” For example, (when he ended his “*Sermon on the Mount*” (Matt 7: 28); (ii) when he sent the twelve disciples to preach “*to Israel*” on their own (Matt 11 v 1); (iii) when he finished

¹²¹ Matthew ch 4 v 17

recounting and explaining the seven “*mystery parables*” and turned away from Israel and his own family to “*the world*” (Matt 13); (iv) when he introduced the subject of the “*Church*” and its relation to the kingdom (Matt 19:1); and (v) when he provided the details of the end of the world at his second coming (Matt 24-25)

These explications of the kingdom of God are presented in different forms, such as “*kingdom of heaven*”, “*kingdom of the Messiah*”, “*kingdom of our Lord*”, “*kingdom of Jesus*”. Some of them, according to circumstances, customs, or subject matter, differ in presentation but not in generic substance. For example, some Jews were reluctant to use the name of “*God*” and used the neutral expression “*heaven*” instead. The use of “*kingdom of heaven*” at other times was related to the contrast with the “*kingdom of God on earth*” to some degree. The “*kingdom of the Messiah*” was taken to mean the *future rule* of the Messianic age. The “*kingdom of Jesus*” related to the *interim living history* period—“*the kingdom and patience of Jesus*”.

But, whatever aspect of the presentation, there was no doubt that the important teaching emphasis of Jesus was fundamentally concerned with the explication of the kingdom of God. In his first personal encounter with an individual—Nicodemus, a highly respected Jewish leader—he confronted the bewildered and noted Sanhedrin official with the categorical *theological odium* assertion: “*I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*”¹²².

This esoteric characteristic of the kingdom of God as spiritual regeneration of the individual to a traditionalist Jew was anathema, and was further emphasized by Jesus’ explanation that it required being “*born by water and by the spirit*”¹²³. Also, later, in selecting the Twelve Apostles, Jesus made it clear that only they were initiates of the arcana of the “*mysteries of the kingdom*” in the words: “*The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them*”.¹²⁴

Therefore, although the general knowledge of the kingdom of God was known to all Jews through the ancient Scriptures from Abraham onwards, Jesus was emphatic that they did not know the “*mysteries*” of that kingdom. It would only be known to those who

¹²²John 3:3

¹²³John 3:5f

¹²⁴Matthew 13:11

listened to and obeyed his teachings. Later, when he sent out the Seventy disciples on their evangelistic missions, their principal task, he told them, was to declare, "*The kingdom of God is near.*"

Most of Jesus' teachings of the kingdom in its varied forms were couched in the form of "*parables*"—earthly stories with heavenly meanings—and, in the 29 parables Jesus used, 17 of them definitely include explicatory aspects of the kingdom of God. The other 12 parables, while not mentioning the kingdom of God *per se*, in more than half of them it was clear that the concept of the kingdom of God was paramount. The mission of Jesus, therefore, in manifesting the kingdom of God to and through his disciples was four-fold: (i) *to delineate the New Israel* prophesied by Isaiah; (ii) *to define the New Covenant* prophesied by Jeremiah; (iii) *to deliver the New Kingdom* prophesied by Daniel; and (iv) *to declare the New Temple* prophesied by Ezekiel.

In *delineating the New Israel*, he taught that it was not Abraham's fatherhood of Israel that was acceptable to God, but his faith. Abraham's fatherhood at a hundred years of age was a physical phenomenon provided by God; his faith was a personal expression of his belief in the existence and divine power of God. In *defining the New Covenant*, Jesus said he personally would die vicariously for sin, and not an animal, thereby delivering through his sacrificial death all who were in bondage to sin. In *delivering the New Kingdom*, he declared he would conquer Satan and confer authority to disciples to use "*keys*" to enable entrance through a "*Church*" for all Gentiles as well as Jews. In *declaring the New Temple*, he stated he would destroy the existing institution of rituals and build a "*church*" of spiritual values. All of these prophetic fulfillments would be incorporated in the universal kingdom of God.

The *New Remnant*, *New Kingdom*, and *New Temple* would all be incorporated with a regenerated *New Israel* in a *New Covenant*. This *New Covenant*, validated by his anticipated sacrificial death and resurrection, Jesus taught, would be more comprehensive than the *Old Covenants*. It would include "*a people who were not a people*", be a "*treasured possession*" from the nations instead of a single favoured people like Israel, a "*circumcision of the*

heart and not of the foreskin”, a single body of Holy Spirit-indwelt priests instead of a tribal priesthood.

Just as God had appeared and spoken to His chosen servants in delivering the *Old Covenants*, He appeared and spoke on three occasions *to confirm the New Covenant* to and through His Son, Jesus: at Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist¹²⁵, on the Mount of Transfiguration,¹²⁶ and at Jesus’ specific request¹²⁷

The Mount of Transfiguration occasion was possibly the most significant because all representative symbolic elements of past and future kingdoms of God were figuratively present: (i) *Jesus*, radiant in divine glory, “*face like the sun . . . garments white as light . . . transfigured*” as in the *eternal kingdom of God*; (ii) *Moses*, representing the redeemed and the *Law*, and who forged the Twelve Tribes into a single *community kingdom of God*; (iii) *Elijah*, who, as the first of the “sign prophets” challenging the political/religious powers of Ahab/Jezebel, and his translation to heaven without death, epitomised the *messianic kingdom of God*; and (iv) *Peter, James and John*, representing regenerated Israel in the *millennial kingdom of God*.

The *New Covenant* was not only confirmed by God it was also consummated by Jesus’ death on the cross as a sacrificial Lamb. At the Last Passover Supper, when he instituted the new sacramental “feast of remembrance”, he declared: “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you*”.¹²⁸ Later, the writer of the *Book of Hebrews* said: “*Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin*”. Just as under the *Old Covenant* everything in the Tabernacle and Temple was only “*made holy*” when it was “*sprinkled by blood*”, so in the *New Covenant* there was no approach to the Father/God except through the sacrificial offering of the blood of His Son, Jesus. Jesus stated categorically:

*“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me you would know the Father as well.”*¹²⁹

Then there was Jesus’ five-fold *New Covenant* confirmation regarding the new spiritual body, the Church, to replace the old

¹²⁵John 1:13; Matthew 3:27

¹²⁶Matthew 17:1f

¹²⁷John 12:27-28

¹²⁸Matthew 26:26-28

¹²⁹John 14:6

ritualistic Temple and sacrificial offerings: (i) *"I will build my Church . . ."* (Matt 16:18); (ii) *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom . . ."* (Matt 16:19; 18:18); (iii) *"I will be present where two or three are gathered in my name . . ."* (Matt 18:20); (iv) *"I will send the Comforter (Holy Spirit) to you . . ."* (John 7); and (v) *"I will prepare a place for you . . ."* (John 14:2).

Jesus' close relative, friend, associate prophet, and Messianic forerunner, John the Baptist, did not understand this comprehensive New Covenant Kingdom vision and mission of Jesus. From his prison he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, *"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"*

Jesus replied:

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."¹³⁰

It was apparent that John knew of the kingdom of God, because he had preached about it, was imprisoned because of it, and would die for it. But it was equally apparent that even after thirty years' association with Jesus he did not understand Jesus' version of the kingdom or of the *New Covenant*. In John's traditional view of the kingdom, it seemed as if Jesus did not know, or was not doing, what was necessary—no mobilizing of the people, no inspirational historical proclamations, no gathering of an army, no cultivating of a political elite, no challenging of the Roman occupiers of God's Promised Land. From John's prison cell Jesus appeared to spend his time walking around the country, telling stories, healing a few people, and provoking the religious authorities with miracles and breaches of the Sabbath.

In his response to John's question Jesus identified his concept of the kingdom as an extension of John's when he said, *"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it . . ."* What had uniquely characterized the kingdom of God in the past eighteen months of John's and Jesus' preaching was the evidence of a unique *spiritual force* in distinctive individuals, transforming the lives of

¹³⁰Matthew 11:4-5

tens of thousands of people in Judea—a spiritual phenomenon, although foretold by Daniel in his vision of an irresistible “*stone cut out of the mountain without hands*”—that had not existed prior to their arrival on the scene with their unique message of repentance, purification and righteousness. A new form of spiritual power had been unleashed which was unconquerable and which in time would overcome nations and spread throughout the world¹³¹. Jesus defined this new spiritual power in another statement when he said: “*If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*”¹³²

Wherever he was, and whatever he taught, the predominant concern of Jesus was to establish the kingdom of God. It was the master passion of his life, the fundamental emphasis of all his teaching and actions. There were three major concepts of the kingdom of God taught by Jesus, within which the many minor concepts were presented: (i) the kingdom of God is the room in which the rule of God is registered in perception; (ii) the kingdom of God is the realm in which his rule is recognized in performance; and (iii) the kingdom of God is the response in which his rule and realm are realized in praise. These were fundamental definitions of Jesus’ kingdom of God. The kingdom of God begins in a personal face-to-face encounter when God is recognised as “Lord”. In the kingdom of God He does not just reign; **He** rules and is obeyed without question. The realm of God is where He places His Name and is served with knowledge, understanding and wisdom. The response to God is when his purposes as well as his commands are obeyed in totality—not just selectively—and their consequence is worship.

In a totally different context but still with primary interest in the kingdom of God, speaking of concern for and treatment of children, Jesus said:

*“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”*¹³³

¹³¹ Daniel 2:34-36

¹³² Matthew 12:28

¹³³ Mark 10:14-15

This was the only occasion in which it was said that Jesus was “angry”, “indignant”, “furious”, and it related to the misconception by his disciples of the importance of children and the nature of the kingdom of God. If the children wanted to come to Jesus it was important to the conception of the kingdom of God for them and others to know that they were welcomed. Secondly, it was also important to understand that entrance into the kingdom was not based on age, or status, or merit, or achievement, but on the receptive and responsive attitude shown by children.

These ideals were demonstrated in the words of the so-called “*the Lord’s Prayer*”¹³⁴: “*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” In heaven, God was not only obeyed but also understood and worshipped. In all the visions of the *Throne of God*—Moses’, Isaiah’s, Jeremiah’s, Daniel’s, Ezekiel’s—the *cherubim*, *seraphim* and angels were in attitudes of total obedience and worship. In that kingdom of God, Jesus also said, flowers flourish to the glory of God, dying sparrows attract the compassion of God, hairs on the heads of faithful servants are counted by God, and children have angels representing them close to the person of God. In Jesus’ presentation of the *New Kingdom* nothing and no-one was excluded from attaining to it—if its conditions were observed. His abiding passion was the restoration of the lost kingdom forfeited by *Old Israel* under the *Old Covenant*, and its replacement by the *New Kingdom* based on the *New Covenant*.

As has been noted, Jesus’ first public mention of the kingdom of God was to an individual, Nicodemus, a ruler in the Temple; and his last public mention of the kingdom was also to an individual, Pilate, a representative of the Roman empire. To Nicodemus, Jesus presented the kingdom of God as *a spiritual power of new source*—“*born of the Spirit*”. To Pilate, Jesus presented the kingdom of God as *a spiritual power of new provenance*—“*from another place*”¹³⁵. Jesus lived preaching the *values* of the kingdom of God; and he died defending its *virtues*.

There were five principles of the kingdom of God which Jesus impressed his on his disciples were to be emphasised: (i) the kingdom of God must be entered; (ii) the kingdom of God was

¹³⁴This should properly be described as “the Disciples’ Prayer”, because it was given in response to their request. The personal “Lord’s Prayer” is given in John’s Gospel, chapter 17.

¹³⁵John 3: 8; 18:36

inseparably associated with change; (iii) the kingdom of God was an inheritance with unavoidable responsibilities; (iv) the kingdom of God had responsibilities both Godward and manward; and (v) the kingdom of God would involve catastrophic processes in personal and universal terms.

Jesus made a clear historical division relating to the kingdom of God when he said *“the Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached and every one is forcing his way into it”*.¹³⁶ An individual could not be born into the kingdom of God through racial, tribal, family, fortune or favour, but only by expressed faith in the provision of God. An individual had to forcefully suppress all natural claims, and equally forcefully lay hold on God’s provision of new birth into the family of God in order to enter the kingdom of God. Entrance into the kingdom of God was by a process of *revolution*, not *evolution*. Change was an essential part of the kingdom of God in order to attain the divine goal of the creature being made holy as God is holy. Jesus declared explicitly:

*“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*¹³⁷

There were two fundamental conditions attached to entering the kingdom of God: (i) *“unless you change”*; and (ii) *“become like little children”*. In both of these categorical statements they are introduced by Jesus with the strongly affirmative words *“Verily, verily”* (“I tell you truly”). The first condition, *“change”*, meant *“a complete orientation of the individual’s life”, from self-interest to God’s direction*. The second condition, to become child-like, was not just in innocence or naiveté, but in dependence and humility, in a willingness to learn and accept guidance and discipline. The dividing line between what was due to God and to an earthly ruler was made abundantly clear when Jesus said, *“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”*, he was not legitimizing Caesar’s moral rule over an individual, but the citizen’s social responsibility to the State.

Jesus was being asked at the time about paying taxes, not about

¹³⁶Luke 16:16

¹³⁷Matthew 18:3

priority of allegiance. Paying taxes was the responsibility of every citizen, but acknowledgment of superior rule belonged to God alone, as Jesus made clear in his categorical statement to Caesar's representative, Pilate; "*You would have no power over me except it were given you from above.*" The only separation in the world that Jesus recognized was that between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, not between Church and State. The person who enters the kingdom of God has no prior allegiance to the State, only a financial responsibility. Only forceful individuals proclaiming spiritual values above material considerations are worthy to enter the kingdom of God.

Ultimately, entrance into the kingdom of God is acceptance of a gift of God, and not acknowledgment of a religious process. Jesus declared: "*Your Father has **been pleased to give you the kingdom.***"¹³⁸ In his "*Sermon on the Mount*", Jesus made a point of emphasizing among other Beatitude spiritual rewards that it was only the "poor in spirit", and the "persecuted" who inherited the kingdom; the others would be "comforted", "filled", "see God", "inherit the earth", and "called the sons of God" — rewards for services rendered, but not family inheritance as a gift of God.

The *Sermon on the Mount* comprised a *New Covenant Ten Beatitudes of Jesus* as a counterpart of the *Old Covenant Ten Commandments of Moses*. These Beatitudes, as the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel had foretold, were written by the Spirit on the hearts and minds of believers and practitioners. The "*poor in spirit*" are those who approach God with "*a lowly and contrite spirit*" acceptable to God, those who "*serve rather than be served*", because in the kingdom of God those who take the lowest place are rewarded, and those who are most conscious of their weakness and dependence are placed first.

Those who are "*persecuted because of righteousness . . . because of me*" like the "*poor in spirit*" also inherit the kingdom of God. To the other spiritual qualities these were individuals who were not only prepared to suffer, but also glad to do so, in order to attain the perfecting of holiness in their lives exemplified in Jesus himself. There were those who would be rewarded for their commitment to

¹³⁸Luke 12:32

“hunger and thirst for righteousness”, for which they would be “filled” with satisfaction according to the measure of their commitment.

But there were others who would go beyond that, who would be heirs of the kingdom of God, because they suffered; not just in the cause of right conduct, but also because of their identity with the sufferings of the Messiah. The distinction was clear between the reward for righteousness proportionate to the commitment, while the inheritance for suffering would be association with the Messiah in being *“conformed to his likeness”* in the millennial administration of the kingdom of God in time and eternity. They will rule with him as *“overcomers”* in his millennial kingdom; the merely conformists, the sleeping virgin-guests with oil-less lamps, would be servants only in his kingdom, shut out from the bridegroom’s celebrations. The important distinction of proportionate *rewards* for particular spiritual qualities, and the associated *inheritance* of the kingdom of God for identifying with the Messiah, was further articulated by Jesus when he was emphasizing the nature of the inheritance of the kingdom:

*“Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called **least** in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called **great** in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*¹³⁹

Both of these categories of *reward* and *inheritance*—*“least”* and *“great”*—*were in the kingdom*: the former, those who *“break the least commandment”* and *“teach men so”*, were *“least in the kingdom”*; and the latter, *“those who practise these commands”* and *“teach others”*, were *“great in the kingdom”*. It was also stated by Jesus that there was a form of righteousness practiced by the professional religionists which had to be surpassed before anyone could enter the kingdom of God. The *“surpassing righteousness”* was defined in the 29 parables of Jesus, 17 of which definitely mentioned the kingdom of God. The other 12 parables involved the concept of the kingdom in some way.

¹³⁹Matthew 5:19-20

Jesus presented these true ideals of the *New Kingdom* in contra-distinction to the false ideals of the kingdom of Satan with the dead rituals of Judaism. They formed the focus of his personal confrontation with Satan before he began his public ministry, and they constituted the underlying, starkly polarized, theme of all he taught: “*You cannot serve God and Money*”; “*You are of your father, the devil*”; “*No man can serve two masters*”. Those he addressed, he declared, were not just motivated by theoretically false ideals; they were living under the false rule of a false god. Even the rulers of the world operated under a false concept of rule: namely, a hierarchy of “*lordship*” based on privilege or wealth. The true ideal manifested in the kingdom of God was a relationship of servant-hood based on love and obedience to God.

Once it was clear to Jesus that his disciples understood the kingdom, and after Peter had acknowledged him as the Messiah, Jesus concentrated his teaching on the catastrophic personal and universal consequences—first for himself, and then for those who chose to follow him:

*“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day raised to life . . . If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*¹⁴⁰

Jesus now taught that the establishing of the kingdom of God involved four further important developments: (a) *Church*; (b) *Crucifixion*; (c) *Conflict*; and (d) *Coming again*.

With the disciples’ understanding of the truth of the *New Kingdom* clearly established, Jesus immediately introduced for the first time a completely new universal concept (“*my Church*”), and new mediation principle (“*I will give you the keys of the kingdom*”), as part of the *New Covenant* and *New Remnant Israel* . . .

*“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰Matthew 16:21-24

¹⁴¹Matthew 16:18-19

The Scriptures immediately record a new emphasis from the previous almost three years of teachings about the *New Kingdom*, to the remaining few months' imminence of his death and resurrection: What is of greater significance than Peter's mediating function was that Jesus placed his statement regarding "*my Church*" in immediate proximity with the kingdom of God—twice—and in opposition to the kingdom of Satan ("*the gates of Hades will not overcome it*"). The clear implication of Jesus' words was that the "*Church*" was a spiritual entity militantly active, and was triumphant over the implacable opposition of Satan. It would replace the dead rituals of Temple and Babylonian Judaism, but it would still include believing Jews who recognised him as the Messiah, the Anointed of God.

What it was NOT was a universal entity distinct from the people of Israel. Jesus did not separate the Church from the kingdom. He had just confirmed Peter's confession of himself as the Messiah of the kingdom of God. But until that moment the kingdom had been a Jewish concept - the gospel of the kingdom preached by himself and his disciples to the house of Israel exclusively. But just as the anticipated death of Jesus in being lifted up on the cross was a way of reconciliation to God for the whole world, greater than the Temple sacrifices, as Jesus had said to Nicodemus, so was the Church a greater means of reconciliation to God than the *Laws* of Moses in the kingdom. The *Law* could make nothing and no-one perfect, but death—of the body, or of self—could.

The word for "*Church*" which Jesus used was a common Greek word, *ekklesia*, meaning "*an assembly of people called together for a special purpose*". It had been used in the *Old Testament* Scriptures to denote the people of Israel as a religious unit, or congregation, so the term was familiar to all Jews. It was Jesus' use of the word to designate a personal and universal entity within the kingdom of God which was new.

The pictorial imagery used by Jesus provided two totally new concepts: (i) the use of the word "*build*" indicated *building a house*, using the word "*house*" in its most comprehensive sense—e.g. "*the house of the Lord*"—but also in its single unit sense of adding brick to

brick (“*living stones*”), or individual to individual; and (ii) the use of the word “*prevail*”, in the confrontation with Satan, indicated **a body of people at war**. “*The Church of the Messiah*”, therefore, would be a **Mediatory Building** composed of identifiable individuals (as in a “*House of Justice*”, or law building); and also a **Militant Body** composed of committed spiritual warriors (as in the hymn “*Like a Mighty Army is the Church of God*”) engaged in total war with Satan.

The *Church of the Messiah* would be the centre of moral authority and spiritual power in family, community and nation. This was enshrined in its manifesto: “*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*” The divine principles practiced in daily living in the world, and the discipline associated with their breach, were the responsibilities of spiritually equipped people in the Church, and not the chartist proclamations of an institution and enforced by committee. The spiritual power would be evident in the spiritual presence of the Messiah in even small gatherings (“*For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them*”); and in the perceptions of spiritual decisions of spiritual people (“*If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven*”).

It is significant that the two explicit references to the Church made by Jesus occur in *Matthew’s Gospel*, recognized by commentators as “*the gospel of the kingdom.*” A modern analogy would be: the Kingdom is the vehicle of God’s purpose; while the Church is the engine. The design and structure and parts of the vehicle are all distinctive and essential to the whole; but the most important item is the engine which gives the vehicle its meaning. The analogy could be taken further by adding that empowerment for both engine and vehicle would be provided by the “*fuel*” of the promised Holy Spirit to come.

William Blake described his view of the struggle for comprehension in the words of his poem:

*“Jesus said, ‘Wouldst thou love one who had never died
For thee, or ever die for one who had not died for thee?
And if God dieth not for Man and giveth not Himself*

*Eternally for Man, Man could not exist; for Man is Love
 As God is Love: every kindness to another is a little death
 In the Divine Image, nor can Man exist except by Brotherhood.¹
 He who would see the Divinity must see Him in His Children.
 One first, in friendship and love; then a Divine Family, and
 in the midst
 Jesus will appear; and so he who wishes to see a Vision, a
 perfect Whole
 Must see it in its Minute Particulars."*

Finally, Jesus made it clear that the kingdom of God was being removed from unbelieving Old Israel who would not recognise him as God's Messiah, and be given to people who would practice its principles: *"I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."*¹⁴²

With the initiation of the *Church of the Messiah* the responsibilities of the kingdom of God were transferred to a new theocracy, which would be more different and more glorious than David's democratic-theocracy nation was to Saul's democratic failure. It would be Daniel's prophesied:

"The sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom and all rulers will worship and obey Him."

In order of time and sequence Jesus mentioned his Church before his Cross, although historically the latter preceded the former in physical manifestation. Both the Church and the Cross were intimately intertwined with the kingdom of God, different but not divided. Just as the *Old Israel Covenant* was launched with the symbolic death of a lamb and shedding of blood of the Passover Feast, so the *New Covenant Church* was launched with the death of the Lamb of God and shedding of his blood, and the participation of all in the symbolic eating and drinking of bread and wine in the Communion Feast.

The crucifixion, Jesus said, would be physical for him, and

¹⁴²Matthew 21:43; 24:1; 28:13; 27:19

perhaps physical for them (“*you cannot drink my cup . . . but you will drink from my cup*¹⁴³ . . .”); but it was certainly spiritual for everyone—“*anyone . . . must deny himself . . . take up his cross . . . follow me . . .*” Jesus declared that in order to establish the *New Kingdom* and *New Church*—the two were not synonymous—it was essential that he or she be metaphorically crucified. That over-riding necessity was determined by the need for cosmic redemption foreshadowed in God’s revelations to Old Israel.

Isaiah had prophesied concerning him as the Servant-Messiah that he would be “*smitten by God . . . afflicted . . . pierced for our transgression . . . crushed for our iniquities . . . cut off from the land of the living . . . to cause him to suffer . . .*”¹⁴⁴ All of this was required of the promised Redeemer-Messiah in order that a *New Covenant* and *New Kingdom* might be established with new-born citizens delivered from the bondage of the kingdom of Satan.

This would be the difference between *Old Israel* and *New Israel*, between the *New Kingdom of God* and the *Church*. The pre-Jesus kingdom of God had “*first-born*” God-honouring moral citizens only, like the righteous Nicodemus, or the believing Roman centurion. The *Church* would have “*twice-born*” citizens filled and activated by the Spirit of God. The divinely justified citizens of the kingdom of God would be “*saved*” by Tribulation purgation in the end-time of “*God’s wrath*”; but the sanctified overcoming saints of the Church of the Messiah would rule over the citizens of the kingdom of God in association with the Messiah-Ruler because they, too had suffered “*death of self*¹⁴⁵” with him (eg the wheat and chaff, sheep and goats, wise and foolish virgins of the parables). As a Servant-Messiah, Jesus was “*made perfect*” as high priest by the things he suffered on behalf of others. As inheritors in the kingdom of God the saints of the Church would be considered worthy of rule by suffering while being transformed “*into his likeness*”.

It was now time for Jesus to emphasize once more the importance of what work they were being called on to perform if they chose to follow him all the way into his particular vineyard. He said to them:

“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed

¹⁴⁴Isaiah 53:1f

¹⁴⁵Romans 8:17: II Timothy 2:12

into the hands of the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"

This was the first time that Jesus indicated both Jews and Gentiles would be involved in his death, the former to condemn and the latter to execute. The disciples knew, without elaboration, that this meant death by crucifixion. The disciples were now totally confused, beyond further astonishment, and filled with a nameless fear. The forecast of Jesus' imminent death in Jerusalem was bad enough, but the fact of it being by the accursed crucifixion was completely beyond comprehension. Had not God said: "*Cursed is anyone hanged on a tree*"? How then could a God-cursed individual rise on the third day after such a death? ***And how could he be the Messiah?*** They were afraid to ask him any more questions. Just as they were beginning to understand some aspects of his teachings regarding the kingdom of heaven, of the need for dying as a sacrifice—they were faced with the absolute divine unacceptability of death by crucifixion.

With Jesus' entry into Jerusalem the opposition to him intensified. He had cleansed the Temple, driven out the illicit traders, denounced the vested interests of the professional religionists, and scathingly bested them in their theological sophistries. When they questioned his authority for the actions he recounted a story based on the prophet Isaiah's "*Song of the Vineyard*"¹⁴⁶, with its good and bad grapes:

The stark reality and centrality of the cross in relation to the Church became evident soon afterwards when Jesus was confronted on the street by a rich young Jew, who asked him, "*Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?*" Jesus replied at the level of his question: "*If you want to enter into life, obey the commandments.*"

Every Jew knew the Prophet Micah's words: "*He (God) has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*". The rich young Jew said that he had kept all the six commandments stated by Jesus, but still lacked something. Jesus told him:

¹⁴⁶Isaiah chapter 5

“If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, take up the cross and follow me.” ⁽¹⁴⁷⁾

So long as it was only a question of theology and moral imperatives the rich young Jew was at ease—or, at least, only mildly disturbed by a conscious lack of something vital—but when Jesus confronted him with the practical requirements of one unstated commandment—*“Thou shalt not covet”*—the rich young Jew was faced with the conviction that his possessions were greater than his desire for eternal life and he turned away from Jesus. He had been offered the perfect life: nothing for self in this life except death, and indescribable riches in heaven, but he was not interested in the transaction.

His problem was the man facing him, the Son of God. He had sought to evade the issue of this incarnate challenge by addressing him as *“Teacher”* like any rabbi, and his sophistry had been exposed. He was facing God-in-man and asking for the key to the mystery of life, and had been told the price: death. True discipleship was not the sacrifices of self-chosen intellectual excitement, or physical adventure, but abnegation of life in obedience to God.

When Jesus told his disciples that the young man’s problem was his dependence on riches, and that *“it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven”*, the disciples *“were greatly astonished”* and asked him: *“Who then can be saved?”* Everyone that they knew was trying to make money, and if they had to do what Jesus had said to the rich Jew—*“go sell your possessions and give to the poor”*—then not many would qualify for salvation. Perhaps Jesus meant his words only for the rich young Jew, and not for anybody else? Were not riches a sign of God’s beneficence as a reward for personal piety?

Jesus quickly disabused them of their hopes: *“With man this is impossible,”* he said, *“but with God all things are possible.”* Only God could persuade a man to choose a cross on earth for a crown in heaven. The issue with the rich ruler was not the virtue of earthly poverty, but the value of heavenly perfection—if he wanted to *“be perfect”* then the only way was the way of denying one’s self, taking

¹⁴⁷Matthew 19 vv 16-21

up the cross, and following Jesus. Jesus had not been talking of earthly riches, but of obstacles to entering the kingdom of God—the true wealth—and present earthly riches being a goal rather than future heavenly treasure.

As they gazed at him in astonishment Peter, with barely concealed resentment, said: *“We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”*

Jesus replied:

*“I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”*¹⁴⁸

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John Oxenham described it in his poem:

*“ See there! God’s signpost, standing at the ways
Which every man of his own free will must go -
Up the steep hill, or down the winding ways,
One or the other, every man must go.*

*“He forces no man, each must choose his ways,
And as he chooses so the end will be;
One went in front to point the Perfect Way,
Who follows fears not where the end will be.”*

The instruments of that crucifixion were the corrupt practitioners of a debased rabbinical Judaistic religion, the arrogant military power of a dictatorial Rome, and the hypocritical self-will of an avaricious world. In a travesty of Jewish religious justice, a Roman political trial, and mass hysteria, each connived with the other to indulge their perverted interests.

The Jewish religious enquiry began as a routine episode, Jesus being asked who his followers were and what he was teaching. Jesus promptly referred his interrogators to his public statements, by

¹⁴⁸Matthew 19 vv 28-30

which he should be judged and not by his personal account. If he had done wrong, he said, it should be proved in the appropriate *Law of Moses* legal manner; if not, then he should not be there.

But the trial of Jesus was not to determine his guilt or innocence; it was to find a means to put him to death. During the early hours of that night's proceedings, the Jewish Sanhedrin could not find cause for death, and so Jesus was taken to the *Praetorium*, not as one condemned to death but as "*worthy of death.*" The legal restriction against Jews trying capital cases under Roman law was thus recognized, but it was made clear that the Jewish religious leaders wanted Jesus condemned to death under Roman criminal law. This would ensure that Jesus would be crucified as a criminal, thereby eliminating all possibilities of him being claimed as a Messiah, because of the well-known curse associated with hanging on a tree.

The charge which would accomplish this goal was that of a "*fanatical seducer of the people, who created public disorder.*" But this collapsed when the divergent testimony of the false witnesses was exposed. The only issue remaining to Caiaphas, the devious high priest, was one that he had sought to avoid: the Messiahship of Jesus. Was Jesus Messiah or not, based on his own personal testimony? Both Jesus and Caiaphas knew that the high priest had no right to ask him to incriminate himself by replying to such a question, and Jesus pointed this out when he said that only a few days before the religionists had refused to discuss this possibility.

Finally, the high priest arbitrarily invoked his spiritual authority and adjured Jesus "*by the living God*" to state whether he were the Messiah, and so divine, as Jesus had publicly claimed. Jesus replied in unmistakable terms that he was indeed the Messiah—and his answer was declared blasphemous. However, although the formal sentence of death was passed by general consent of those present, it was not formally announced as such by the president of the Sanhedrin as was required. Interestingly, neither then nor later did the Jewish people, nor their leaders, answer the simple question at the core of the trial: *was Jesus the Messiah as he claimed, or a blasphemer as he was charged?*

The resurrection of Jesus shocked the disciples as much, if not

more than, the religious leaders. Some did not believe the reports of others who claimed they had seen and spoken with Jesus. It took several personal appearances, and a shared meal, before the disciples believed; and a public gathering of a few hundred people, and, finally, the ascension of Jesus into heaven in the company of two angels, before they were convinced.

His final words to them on those occasions were related to his return to earth in the future. The disciples had asked him if he would “*restore the kingdom to Israel*”, and Jesus replied:

*“It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*¹⁴⁹

Chapter 8

will be available on this site on the 1st September 2011

¹⁴⁹Acts 1:7-8