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# OUR LORD'S TEACHING CONCERNING HIS PAROUSIA: A STUDY IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

by J. K. HOWARD

**D**R. HOWARD, a medical missionary in Zambia, recently gave us a study of the problematical reference to baptism for the dead in 1 Cor. 15: 29. He turns now to a much more crucial New Testament problem—our Lord's eschatological teaching. This first instalment will be followed by two more, dealing respectively with the Markan parables and sayings and with the Olivet discourse.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**I**T might almost be said to be axiomatic that eschatological teaching formed an integral part of the primitive Gospel, and, indeed, was inseparable from it. To take but one example of the many, the main theme of Paul's preaching at Thessalonica would seem to have been "Christ the Coming King". In part this emphasis arose out of the recognition by the apostles that in Jesus of Nazareth, whom they declared to be the promised Messiah, the last days had come, the future age had entered into the present. In Christ men were able to taste "the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6: 6), and enter into its life. Thus, on the day of Pentecost, Peter could stand and proclaim that the Old Testament prophecies had reached their fulfilment, the last days had dawned, the Messianic Age had begun. That the sin and misery of the present age had not been finally banished was, nonetheless, obvious, and consequently the apostles pointed forward to a time when Jesus, the one "despised and rejected", now exalted and made "both Lord and Christ", would come again as Judge and Saviour, and introduce the ultimate *eschaton*. The early preaching thus "presented men with a statement of the power and of the authority of Jesus Christ, of his sacrifice, his victory, his glory and his final lordship."<sup>1</sup> Such a proclamation was by its very nature bound up with eschatology, and the Christian Gospel continues to be rooted in it, an eschatology in part "realized", to use the phrase of C. H. Dodd,

<sup>1</sup> W. Barclay, *Many Witnesses, One Lord* (1963), p. 113.

and in part still "anticipated", for the full revelation of the Kingdom of God, which came in the person of Jesus Christ, remains a future event. The age of redeemed mankind began in Christ, in the great events of Easter, and in Him men may partake of the divine life, but the full expression of redemption must await the Parousia. Indeed, we may say that Easter loses its major significance unless it be proclaimed within the context of a final consummation.

Now it is clear that this apostolic preaching was derived from two sources. There was firstly the apostles' own experience of the events of the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of the Lord, events of which they could unhesitatingly say that they had been witnesses (Acts 2: 32; 3: 15, etc.). Then, secondly, their preaching stemmed directly from the teaching of Jesus Himself, His various words and sayings which had become rooted in their consciousness over the years in which they had walked with Him. It is our task in this study to elucidate the main lines of teaching which our Lord gave concerning His Parousia, the climactic event of anticipated eschatology, a teaching which must have clearly provided the foundation for any further development of Christian eschatology. Our study will be confined to Mark's Gospel, which is generally agreed to be the earliest of the Synoptic Gospels, although post-dating the Pauline Epistles. It is generally accepted that Mark utilized a tradition which was derived from eye-witness accounts, and, if the testimony of Papias, quoted by Eusebius,<sup>2</sup> is valid, then that eye-witness was the apostle Peter, and underlying this Gospel we have the preaching of Peter himself. Indeed, it is not going beyond the evidence to state that, in a sense, Mark's Gospel is simply an expansion of the apostolic kerygma, a possibility borne out by the work of C. H. Dodd who has demonstrated that the connecting summaries linking together the various units of narrative or teaching correspond closely to the outline of the apostolic teaching recorded in the Acts.<sup>3</sup> It is, however, only right to point out that not all, by any means, have accepted Dodd's conclusions in this regard, yet even so, it seems clear that in Mark we are dealing with a tradition which goes back to the events themselves. One other matter should be noted at this stage. In view of the fact that Paul's preaching, on his own testimony, did not differ from that of Peter and the other apostles (1 Cor. 15:

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, iii. 39.

<sup>3</sup> See C. H. Dodd, "The Framework of the Gospel Narrative", *Expository Times*, xliii (1931-32), pp. 296ff.; also *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (1963 edn.), pp. 46ff.

11), it is to be expected that, despite assertions to the contrary, his eschatological teaching will also be essentially identical with that of the others, since, in the first place, they both arise from the teaching of Jesus Himself. It will therefore be also a part of our purpose to demonstrate, albeit briefly, that this oral tradition of our Lord's teaching, embodied in Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels, also underlies the eschatological teaching of Paul, so that we may say that, in general, New Testament eschatology follows broadly unified concepts, originating, in the first place, from the teaching of Jesus.

The religious background against which our Lord fulfilled His ministry was one of intense and eager nationalistic and eschatological expectation. The hope in the popular mind was that God would soon enter into the affairs of the world in order to deliver Israel from Roman bondage, restoring her former, but now lost, glories, and at the same time, almost incidentally inaugurate the future age. Messianic movements abounded, and Jewish aspirations were being constantly fanned to fever heat as prophets, pretenders and political agitators followed one another in rapid succession across the troubled canvas of Jewish history. Such hopes were, however, doomed to disappointment, being dashed to the ground as in every case these men proved to be but vain hopes. Nonetheless, after each collapse of their aspirations hope dawned afresh with undiminished ardour and unquenched zeal. As Bultmann has put it, "men long for the end; and the greater the oppression, the more excited the expectations and the more certain the conviction that the end is at hand and the greater their eagerness for its dawning."<sup>4</sup> It is thus hardly surprising that when John the Baptist appeared by the banks of Jordan, proclaiming the immediate appearance of the Kingdom of God, it was like setting a light to dry tinder. Such was the setting into which Jesus came proclaiming a message centred, like that of John, in the immediate expectation of the Kingdom of God: "the time has come, the Kingdom of God has arrived, repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1: 15). These are words which, we may note, are also strongly reminiscent of the message of the apostles, recorded in the Acts.

Although the Kingdom of God was the central and dominant theme of the teaching of the Lord, His was a message which had little in common with the ardently nationalistic hopes of contemporary Judaism. The message of Jesus was essentially one of

<sup>4</sup> R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting* (E.T., 1960), pp. 94f.

“cosmic eschatology”, a message which had more in common with the apocalyptic writers than the Zealots, and indeed, Christ borrows extensively from both the language and the ideas of the apocalyptists as He describes future events and the purpose of His own mission. On the other hand, the message of Jesus differed in several important respects from that of the apocalyptic writers. In particular, it is important to observe the emphasis that He placed upon the present fact of the Kingdom of God; for Him the Kingdom of God was now, it had already appeared. He could say, “the Kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1: 15); it had come close to men in His own person, and was confronting them with its challenge. In the preaching of Christ the advent of the Rule of God, His Kingdom, was not put off into the indefinite future, but rather it had already arrived, the future had become present.

The parables of Jesus afford perhaps the clearest illustrations of His concepts of the Kingdom of God, and those who listened to His words, and understood His teaching, would have been forced to one conclusion and one only, that the “End” had come, and human destiny was facing a never before experienced crisis. His whole teaching was charged with this dynamic idea that in Himself the Kingdom of God had come and was being evidenced both in His mighty works and in His teaching. His miracles demonstrated that the powers of evil were crumbling before the authority of the New Age, the strong man had been bound, and his goods were being plundered. In Jesus the power of God was operative in an entirely new way: “if I by the finger of God cast out demons, then is the Kingdom of God come upon you” (Luke 11: 20). In Christ the sovereign power of God was, through its effective operation, confronting men and women with His demands, so that, as C. H. Dodd has put it, “the ‘eschatological’ Kingdom of God is proclaimed as a present fact, which men must recognize, whether by their actions they accept or reject it.”<sup>5</sup> To accept the Kingdom of God is the equivalent of accepting the demands of God in Christ, and to accept this is to receive the life of that Kingdom, designated “eternal life”. Indeed these expressions, “the Kingdom of God” and “eternal life”, may be considered as almost identical and interchangeable (cf. Matt. 24: 34, 36; Mark 10: 17, 24, etc.), and what is the Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Gospels becomes the eternal life of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>6</sup>

The proclamation of the present rule of God, the fact that the Kingdom of God has entered history, also necessitated the pro-

<sup>5</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1961 edn.), p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> See W. F. Howard, *Christianity According to St. John* (1946), p. 112.

clamation of the present reality of judgment. The arrival of the Kingdom of God was inevitably associated with the arrival of the divine judgment. Thus John the Baptist looked forward to the One whose coming would initiate the fiery baptism of judgment (Matt. 3: 11), a judgment which those who submitted themselves to John's baptism and the obligations which went with it would escape. Thus, the appearing of Jesus Christ was not only the appearing of the Kingdom of God but also the appearing of the judgment of God, so that He Himself could say, "now is the judgment of this world" (John 12: 31). This is the judgment that each man must face as he comes beneath the crisis resultant upon the coming of Christ into the world. The final revelation of this judgment, however, must await the final consummation, for—and here is the great paradox—the Kingdom of God is also future. Because of this the Lord can teach His disciples to pray, "Thy Kingdom come", and at the Last Supper He can look forward to the completion of His work in His Passion in the coming Kingdom (Luke 22: 18). It is the teaching of the Lord concerning this final consummation which will concern us, for the final revelation of the Kingdom of God and the judgment of God is dependent upon His own Parousia. Thus the apparent paradox of the Kingdom of God being at one and the same time both present and future is to be explained by the fact that it is inextricably bound up with the person of Christ Himself. Indeed, it has been suggested that for the writers of the Gospels we might almost go as far as to say the Jesus *is* the Kingdom, a view given some weight by the frequent parallels between a reference to the Lord and one to the Kingdom of God (cf. Mark 10: 29 = Matt. 19: 29 = Luke 18: 29, and Mark 9: 1 = Matt. 16: 28, etc.). Thus, as Cranfield has put it, "the Kingdom has both come and is still to come, because Jesus has come and is to come again. The prayer of Matt. 6: 10 is equivalent to 'Marana tha' (1 Cor. 16: 22) and 'Come, Lord Jesus' (Rev. 22: 20)."<sup>7</sup> Entrance into that future Kingdom, which will be revealed at the Parousia, is dependent upon the attitudes evinced to that Kingdom as it is now—in fact, upon the answer given to the question, "What think ye of Christ?" Thus, the tension between an eschatology "realized" and "anticipated" is resolved; the last days have come in the revelation of the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but the final consummation, the ultimate unveiling, must await the Parousia of Him who was made both Lord and Christ.

<sup>7</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *St. Mark*, in the *Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary* (1963 edn.), p. 66.

At this stage of our discussion it may be as well to note that the contrast between these aspects of the Kingdom of God, between the Kingdom which was present and manifest in Jesus during His earthly ministry, between the Kingdom present now, continuing as a result of the presence of the Risen Christ in His Church through His Spirit, and between the Kingdom yet to come at the glory of the Parousia, is a contrast, not so much between the partial and the complete, as between the veiled and the manifest, the hidden and the revealed. It is also essential to note here that the Church is not the Kingdom of God, although its members are citizens of the Kingdom; rather, the Church is the Messianic Community, the Community of the Future Age within the present "interim", awaiting the revelation of the Kingdom of God in its full and final form. At the Parousia every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil. 2: 11), but although the intervention of God in the first advent of Christ was a decisive event, an event which presented men with a present and vitally real crisis, it left them with an opportunity of making their own choice, for the Kingdom of God was then, and still is, in "mystery". Thus, in Jesus Christ the Kingdom of God was revealed, "not in such a way as to make assent unavoidable, but in a way that still left room for men to make a personal decision."<sup>8</sup> To decide for the sake of the Kingdom of God is to enter into an immediate and ultimate deliverance, but it also involves "complete renunciation, [it] brings every man face to face with the ultimate *Either-Or*. To decide for the Kingdom is to sacrifice for it all things else."<sup>9</sup> To those who had been prepared to make that sacrifice Jesus revealed the truth of the ultimate revelation of the Kingdom of God, the completion of the "End" which His coming had inaugurated, and which would be coincident with and dependent on His own Parousia.

This teaching of Jesus concerning "anticipated" eschatology was confined to the immediate circle of His apostles and often only to the inner core of them (Mark 13: 3, etc.). It was thus in a sense a form of teaching which could be designated "esoteric", but we must take care not to overemphasize this. It was not so much a *disciplina arcana* after the manner of the mystery religions, designed to safeguard the sacred things from profanation, a form of esoterism which Jeremias<sup>10</sup> has attempted to demonstrate in the New Testament, but rather this comparative secrecy was part of

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (E.T., 1958 edn.), p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (E.T., 1955), Ch. 3.

the Messianic "veiledness" of Jesus. The Messiahship of Jesus was something which was only openly proclaimed at His trial, and only then after He had been adjured before God by the high priest. Apart from this His Messiahship was something revealed only to spiritual insight, as in the case of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8: 27ff.). Thus it was that the Lord used the ambiguous designation "Son of Man" as His self-description, a phrase with marked apocalyptic and eschatological overtones, but also capable of meaning no more than "a man", "anyone". In the same way His eschatological teaching, with its obvious and direct bearing upon the fact that He was the Anointed of God, was also revealed only to His close associates. This eschatological teaching may be broadly divided into two main groups. There was, firstly, that teaching concerning the full revelation of God's Kingdom and His own Parousia which was largely delivered in parabolic form, to which may be added the occasional isolated saying. This teaching, we shall see, was largely concerned with drawing the contrast between the present "veiledness" of the Kingdom of God and its glorious manifestation at the Parousia. Then, secondly, there is the large block of teaching gathered into one place as the "Olivet Discourse" which was specifically concerned with the events of and preceding the Parousia, and it is to a consideration of these two groups of material as we have them in Mark's Gospel that we must now turn our attention.

*(To be continued)*

*Kasama, Zambia.*