

PARALLEL GUIDE 16

The Ministry of Jesus, Part I

Summary

Jesus proclaimed the “kingdom of God.” What does this mean? What was his ministry of proclamation by word and deed? How did this relate to the expression “Son of Man” and how did this relate to the Last Supper, his death and his Resurrection? The chapter concludes with a discussion of the parables of Jesus that describe the “kingdom of God.”

Learning Objectives

- Become familiar with the following terms and concepts:

basileia
mashal
nimshal
the “kingdom of God”
parable
consistent eschatology
realized eschatology
“Son of Man”

- Become familiar with the ministry of Jesus and how it proclaimed his message
- Learn to interpret the parables as expressions of “truth”

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. What does the term “kingdom of God” mean to you?
2. Worship traditions differ. How is the “kingdom of God” most clearly expressed in your tradition and where you worship regularly?
3. Where else have you experienced what you might describe as the “kingdom of God”?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Learning about the “kingdom of God” is a good opportunity to **consider its presence in your seminar**. How is your seminar an expression of God’s kingdom? What stories (parables) might express the nature of the “kingdom of God” in your seminar?

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Chapter 16 **THE MINISTRY OF JESUS, PART I**

Jesus the Proclaimer of God's Kingdom

According to Mark, immediately after John the Baptizer's arrest Jesus began to proclaim, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15; cf. Matt. 4:23; Luke 4:43). Undoubtedly Weiss and Schweitzer were right to insist that the center of Jesus' teaching was his proclamation of the kingdom of God. Their claim is supported by the criterion of multiple attestation, for every strand of tradition about Jesus witnesses to his proclamation of the kingdom. It is also supported in some measure by the criterion of dissimilarity since, although talk of God's kingdom is not unparalleled in either Judaism or Christianity, it does not occur with anything like the frequency that marks Jesus' own teaching. Thus the actual phrase "kingdom of God" occurs only once in the entire Old Testament (Wis.

10:10) and never in the Hebrew Scriptures (although there are related expressions: see below). On the other hand, as Bultmann used to point out, while Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom, the church tended to proclaim Jesus (1952, 3-4; cf. Luke 4:43; Acts 5:42).

God's Kingdom in Early Judaism

"Kingdom" in English versions of the NT translates the Greek word *basileia*, behind which lie Aramaic and Hebrew words meaning "reign," "dominion," or "sovereignty." This, clearly, is what the Hebrew word for kingdom means to the Psalmist:

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

(Ps. 145:13; cf. vv. 10-12)

In direct line with this usage, the rabbinic phrase "to accept the yoke of the kingdom of God" means "to accept God as sovereign." It asserts Israel's commitment as affirmed in the words of the Shema. Rabbi Joshua ben Karha (c. 140-165) is quoted: Why does the section [of the Shema], *Hear, O Israel* (Deut. 6:4-9), precede, *And it shall come to pass if he shall hearken [diligently to my commandments]*? So that a man may first take upon him the yoke of the kingdom of heaven and afterward take upon him the yoke of the commandments.

(m. Ber. 2:2)

We can find examples of the phrase from both before and after our period where it simply refers to God's continuing sovereignty over the world and by implication to the duty of God's people to respond to that sovereignty with obedience and love. At the same time, there is certainly a commonly expressed eschatological hope in the Judaism of our period, *the belief that God will redeem and restore Israel*. This hope can include varying ideas—a son of David, a new Moses, destruction of the Gentiles, admission of the Gentiles, and so on. Sometimes it is expressed in terms of the kingdom of God. When we reflect on the evils of the world (which were as obvious to first century Jews as to us), it would perhaps be surprising if the idea of God's eternal and unbroken sovereignty had not generated hope for full and future

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manifestation, as opposed to the partial and unsatisfactory manifestations of the present. As we see when we look more closely at the Lord's Prayer, prayer of the period looks for the future establishment of God's kingdom: "**May Thy kingdom be established in our days.**"

Hope for God's kingdom had clear political overtones. Any attempt to **make a division** is entirely unhistorical, not to say wildly anachronistic. There would be nothing in itself inappropriate in Rabbi Aqiba's recognition of Bar Kokhba as the Messiah at the time of the second Jewish War (*j. Ta'an. 68d; b. Sanh. 93b*). Despite the way that 1 Maccabees 4:46 has often been construed, Israel, in the period of the Second Temple, was looking for a prophet to announce God's coming act of redemption. Clearly there were candidates for the job. Josephus comments frostily on some of them in his *Jewish War* (6.285-88). These were men who believed, or claimed to believe, in a call from God to lead Israel to a new stage in its history, when Israel's story would come to its climax and its exile would end.

According to every strand of gospel tradition, Jesus' proclamation followed upon that of John the Baptizer. He had called Israel to "repentance" (a change of mind and attitude) "with a view to the forgiveness of sins." The Baptizer's words, in the ears of his hearers, would probably have been understood to refer to the forgiveness of *Israel's* sins (cf. Jer. 31:31-40; Ezek. 36:24-28). When they came for John's baptism, they were associating themselves with the hope of a national restoration. Then Jesus came, announcing that the promised kingdom was "at hand." (The question sometimes raised about this episode as to whether Jesus had

a consciousness of personal sin is largely beside the point. He certainly had a sense of Israel's sin, and it is with Israel that he associates himself.)

Many in Judaism were looking for a prophet of the coming redemption. The most obvious and immediate characteristic of Jesus is surely that he appeared to his contemporaries to be such a person, and to be making such a claim. He had, as N. T. Wright puts it, "the public persona of a prophet" (1996, 197, cf. 163-68)—which is precisely the way in which the synoptic tradition says he was perceived by both the indifferent and the sympathetic (Mark 6:15; 8:28). Other prophets spoke and acted in ways that evoked the history of Israel; other prophets came, understandably, into conflict with the authorities; other prophets perished for their pains. On this basis we can immediately make sense—good, historical, first-century Jewish sense—of entire sections of the words and deeds ascribed to Jesus in the tradition: his calling followers, his announcing the kingdom, his warning of judgment to come, and his feeding his followers in the wilderness in ways that recalled the Exodus.

What Did Jesus Teach About God's Kingdom?

Jesus' message of the kingdom, like all similar Jewish messages, came as a proclamation of the one true God in opposition to all pagan gods or powers. What separated Jesus from other messengers such as Judas the Galilean or Simon Bar-Kokhba was this: Jesus taught a way to the kingdom that came through peace, love, and a cross. "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." The sayings collected in the Sermon on the Mount make clear that to fight the battles of the kingdom with the enemy's weapons—the weapons of the pagan—would mean that in fact **the enemy had already won**. "You

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are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" (Matt. 5:13). The Roman soldier who commands the Galilean peasant to carry his baggage is therefore to be met with courtesy and generosity (Matt. 5:41). Enemies of the state are not necessarily God's enemies. If Israel is really the child of its heavenly father, it will love them and pray for them (5:43-48). In particular, as emerges in the final two antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' followers are **"not to make common cause with the resistance movement"** (Wright 1993, 290).

We must fit the widely attested traditions of Jesus' repeated differences with the Pharisees over Sabbath and food laws into this context. Maintenance of these traditions of purity was, in the eyes of many, precisely what constituted Israel's identity, its separateness from "the nations" (Philo, *Special Laws* 115-16; Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.147, 178-98). For that purity its heroes and heroines had been, and were, prepared to die (see 1 Macc. 2:23-68; 2 Macc. 6:1-19). Here there was no distinction between politics and piety such as would later be attributed to Johanan ben Zakkai; here the piety was a mark of the politics. **"Zeal" for the Law meant willingness to defend it, if necessary, by violence—in other words, armed resistance, in the spirit of Phinehas and Elijah**, (Num. 25:6-8; 1 Macc. 2:25-26, 41-44). Jesus, by contrast, seems to have regarded Sabbath and food laws not as bad, but as simply irrelevant to the kingdom he was proclaiming: "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (Mark 7:14b-15; cf. G. Thos. 14).

In this context we see Jesus' action against that other great symbol of Israel's identity and purity, the Temple, the tree without fruit whose coming destruction under divine judgment Mark understood him to have enacted prophetically (11:12-25). Here again Jesus challenged something for which Israel's heroes had died, and would die again—but "if YHWH was to return in judgment as well as mercy . . . then the present Temple, which in Jesus' day meant Herod's Temple, was under judgment" (Wright 1993, 415).

The upshot of the conversation with the "good" scribe (a tradition the church was not likely to have invented) was that, in kingdom terms, to concentrate on the fundamental aspects of Torah—the love of God and the

love of neighbor—was more important than the entire sacrificial system (Mark 12:28-34). “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13; 12:7; cf. Hos. 6:6). In this Jesus stood foursquare within the tradition of the prophets (cf. Isa. 1:10-17; Jer. 7:16). In a similar vein is the “Q” passage at Matthew 11:5-6 // Luke 7:22b-23 (a passage that even Bultmann regarded as representing an authentic word of Jesus [1963, 23, 126]):

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.

What is being claimed here? First, that something for which the prophets looked (cf., e.g., Isa. 35:5-6 and 61:1) is already at work in the world, and blessed are those who accept it—but woe, by implication, to those who do not! Next, the passive verbs that dominate the passage (“are cleansed. . . are raised. . . have brought to them”) all speak

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of God’s action. This is God’s kingdom—it is not a human achievement! Finally, it is a kingdom concerned with the well-being of those in Israel who in the present age are on the fringes of society or even regarded as no longer part of society at all—the blind, the sick, the dead, and the poor. To them the kingdom offers restoration and renewal: healing, good news, and the reversal of death.

The record of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom is always consistent with this. The kingdom belongs to “the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3), and those who come must be willing to accept it as children (Mark 10:15). Yet the one who proclaims it also calls “sinners” to repentance (Mark 2:16) and says that he is sent to the “lost sheep” of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:6). In language that is reminiscent of Isaiah 25:6, the kingdom is also compared to a banquet to which many from east and west will come (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:28-29; cf. Isa. 49:12).

The proclamation of the kingdom is “gospel” (*euaggelion*): that is, good news. Yet in some ways it is bad news. It would be idle to pretend that in various respects it implies anything other than a critique of our human order. **It is bad news for those who will not accept it. Because it is God’s kingdom, all systems of power and authority are called into question by it. Its concern for the poor is bad news for individuals and institutions that ignore the poor.** Its concern for restoration and renewal of those who are oppressed is bad news for oppressors. Because the kingdom is God’s banquet freely offered, woe to those who are so dignified, or so proud, or so pure, or so something that they lose it (Matt. 8:12)! The kingdom offers grace to sinners—but sin is not therefore legitimized by the kingdom. Sinners may, and must, repent (“think again”).

Was the Kingdom Future or Present?

Did Jesus expect the kingdom to be established in the near future (as Weiss and Schweitzer claimed—the view is sometimes called “consistent eschatology”), or did he understand it to be already present in his own work and ministry (as Dodd believed—and coined the term “realized eschatology”)? An enormous amount has been written on this subject. We need not, and should not, choose between the two basic possibilities, except in specific cases. The nub of the matter was brilliantly stated some years ago by G. B. Caird in a scholarly and delightful book called *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*:

The debate between those who hold that Jesus declared the kingdom of God to have arrived and those who hold that he declared it to be imminent is reducible to its simplest terms when we recognize that the parties to the debate have differently identified the referent. If Jesus was referring to the final vindication of God’s purposes in the reign of justice and peace, where the righteous are to banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:28-29), it is mere nonsense even to suggest that this was present on earth when Caiaphas was High Priest and Pilate Governor of Judaea. On the other hand, if Jesus was referring to the redemptive sovereignty of God let loose into the world for the destruction of Satan and all his works (Matt.

12:28; Luke 11:20), it makes nonsense of the whole record of his ministry to suggest that for him this still lay in the future.

(1980, 12)

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Jesus was a prophet. He was not a fortune teller or a wizard. Hebrew prophecy means insight, not knowledge of the fates. The prophet Jonah foresaw, without conditions, the destruction of Nineveh in forty days. Nineveh repented, and Nineveh was not destroyed. That did not make Jonah a false prophet. His message was from God (Jon. 3:1-10). Prophetic foresight is insight. So with Jesus: he appears to have believed that God's sovereignty would be manifested "with power" in the lifetime of some who knew him:

And he said to them [the disciples], "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death **until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.**"

(Mark 9:1)

What happened was Jesus' own vindication and exaltation, his followers' experience of the Holy Spirit, proclamation of the Word going forth from Zion, and the incorporation of Gentiles into the people of God. No doubt, as the NT makes clear, that left (and leaves) much to anticipate. It is, as Saint Paul was to put it (and later Polycarp), a "down payment" (*arrabōn*) (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; cf. Eph. 1:14; Phil. 8:1). "The sufferings of this present time" are not ended. For many it provided a sense of a renewed and restored Israel. It thus vindicated Jesus as, among other things, a true prophet, and convinced many that in Jesus' ministry and the events that followed from it, God's sovereignty had been manifested in a new and decisive way. A new age had dawned. For its complete and final manifestation they could and can only continue to hope and to pray.

Jesus' Self Understanding

Granted Jesus' prophetic proclamation, what were his own aims and intentions? Where did he see himself fitting into the kingdom? Was he simply its prophet, or something more? It is clear from other sources that hope for the coming of the kingdom in Judaism was by no means always associated with hope for a Messiah. God's kingdom meant essentially the sovereignty of God. William Wrede, as we have seen, called into question the whole application of the messianic title to Jesus. What was Jesus' view? Did he have one?

Let us begin with some of the better-attested events of Jesus' ministry. **The appointment of the Twelve signified a restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel.** If Jesus taught his disciples that there was to be a kingdom and that *they* would have a role in it, then clearly, at least by implication, he taught that he too had a role to play. Other actions of Jesus point in the same direction. They also serve to distinguish Jesus from what we know of other messianic pretenders of the period such as Theudas (Acts 5:36). According to Josephus, Theudas and others seem to have thought that they would be vindicated by spectacular eschatological miracles. Theudas expected to part the waters of the Jordan (*Ant.* 20.97). Jesus, by contrast, did not make grand gestures or promise great events that were designed to convince all. There are prophetic and symbolic actions, but they are not miracles. There are miracles, but the miracles, so far as we can see, are never put forward as substantiating his claim. We can go further. Jesus deliberately demonstrated, by riding on an ass into Jerusalem, that the claim to a special role in God's kingdom was being made by one who

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was "meek and lowly." It is Matthew, of course, who has looked up the passage and quoted the words "humble and riding on a donkey" (Matt. 21:5, quoting Zech. 9:9), but the action surely spoke for itself. Jesus saw himself as one who was a servant of all (Matt. 20:28a // Mark 10:45a), not their glorious leader in a

triumphal march through parted waters (Sanders 1985, 235).

The prophetic act in the Temple, whatever its precise significance, clearly implies authority in the one who carries it out. We need not suppose that Jesus seriously expected the Sadducean aristocracy to turn to him. It would be God, not humankind, who would vindicate Jesus. But in the manner of prophets before him he made the prophetic gesture, and no doubt the prophetic gesture was understood.

Jesus was executed by the Romans. Grounds for such an execution by crucifixion must have been either criminal or political. We may leave the former out of consideration. That leaves us with the latter. The grounds for Jesus' execution were political or at least ostensibly so. The inevitable conclusion is that at least something about Jesus appeared to someone in authority as a potential political threat. It seems absurd to divorce that notion from a perception, however distorted, **of some kind of claim by Jesus to a significant role in a coming new "kingdom."**

The message of the events is borne out in the record of Jesus' teaching, not only on those few occasions in Mark when he seems to acknowledge, or at least not refuse, the messianic title (Mark 9:27-30; 14:61-62), but on other occasions as well. In a saying that appears in both Mark and "Q" (Mark 8:38; "Q" Luke 12:8-9 // Matt. 10:32-33), Jesus declares that by his hearers' reaction to him they determine their relationship to God. Several sayings announce that those who come to Jesus are those to whom the kingdom of God "belongs" (Mark 10:14; cf. Luke 12:32). Other sayings directly or indirectly affirm the presence of the kingdom in his word and work (Luke 11:20; 16:16; 17:21).

Jesus the Son of Man

In this context we may include Jesus' use of the mysterious phrase "Son of Man" in reference to himself. The meaning of this expression has been a subject of scholarly debate for decades. Geza Vermes suggests (he concedes it is not absolutely "watertight") that **"Son of Man" was used by Jesus in a way indicated by Galilean usage of the period as a substitute for "I."** Thus it is "in accordance with Aramaic usage, [that] the speaker refers to himself as son of man out of reserve, humility, or awe" (e.g., Mark 2:27; Luke 9:58).

The Coming of the Kingdom and the Death of Jesus

Some disagree with Vermes in his further suggestion that the connection of Jesus the Son of Man with Daniel 7:13 or other apocalyptic literature, as in Mark 8:38 or 14:62, is the work of "apocalyptically minded Galilean disciples of Jesus" (Vermes 1973, 186). Why, when we already have a good apocalyptically minded Galilean in the person of Jesus himself, should we look for another? If Jesus saw himself as agent of God's kingdom, what would be more natural than that he would apply to himself prophecies that were understood to speak of that agent? What then? How did the agent of the kingdom propose to accomplish this? He would die for it. That much we can say with fair certainty.

The principle of multiple attestation supports the view that Jesus expected to die violently for his beliefs, and afterward to be vindicated. We not only have the three direct Passion predictions (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34 and parallels); we also have allusive predictions (such as Mark 2:20; 10:45; Matt. 9:15; and Luke 5:35) and the Johannine predictions (such as 3:14; 8:28; and 12:33). These last are clearly related to the synoptic predictions but do not seem to be mere adaptations of them. As Raymond Brown suggests, we seem here to have an independent use of traditions that were in themselves older than any of our written records (Brown 1994, 2.1485). No doubt, as the more skeptical will not hesitate to point out, Christians who afterwards experienced the death of Jesus as a "saving event" would naturally interpret their memories of him in light of this. One may even grant that the various Passion predictions do show some signs of touching up "after the event." Yet they remain overall remarkably imprecise and lacking in detail. They could just as well refer to

death by stoning (which prior to Roman involvement Jesus might well have expected) as to death on a cross. **One cannot avoid feeling that if they were *merely* “prophecies after the event” (*vaticinia ex eventu*), they would have been written more precisely.**

Historical common sense also supports that we are on firm historical ground by associating Jesus with John the Baptizer. There was not the slightest doubt that the Baptizer had died because of his beliefs and teaching. Given that Jesus also knew the fates of the prophets, we may well ask: How could he *not* have expected to suffer violence for his proclamation of the kingdom?

Perhaps we may even be more precise. Viewing matters from a purely political and external viewpoint, we may with some confidence suggest that Jesus had to die. By his attitude to Israel’s purity he had alienated the Pharisees who, although without much official standing, had influence among many of the people. By his attitude about rebellion against Rome he had alienated many others who might initially have been drawn to him. And by his action against the Temple he had become a nuisance to the Sadducean priesthood who had the political power to put a stop to a potential troublemaker and used it.

Can we go further? NT writers generally attribute great significance to the death of Jesus. According to Paul’s summary of the *kerygma*, Christ “died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3). Was this, as some scholars believe, simply church opinion afterward, or was there warrant for such a view in the teaching of Jesus himself? Can we say anything more of Jesus’ own understanding of his death? Perhaps not. The Gospel writers, the particular witnesses upon which we are most dependent, are prone by their very nature to concentrate on what their subject said and did rather than explore his thoughts or motivations. Perhaps even the question is an impertinence.

The Last Supper and the Death of Jesus

One passage of the gospel narrative helps us discern how Jesus himself might have understood his death: the story of the Last Supper.

With the Last Supper narratives we are on firm historical ground. I simply do

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not believe (despite Bultmann and others . . .) that a tradition so central to the church’s life, so important, so well attested, and so early that it was already recounted by Paul as received tradition (1 Cor. 11:23-26) could *possibly* be simply the “creation” of the community. I am reminded of a somewhat barbed remark made by the classical scholar George Kennedy, in conversation with NT scholars: “ancient writers sometimes meant what they said and occasionally even knew what they were talking about.”

(Kennedy 1978, 126)

Before we examine the accounts of the Last Supper itself we should, however, try to set it in context.

Meals were and still are important for Jews. Shared meals in scripture are a sign of the covenant among those who eat (2 Sam. 9:1-13). Heaven itself is described in terms of a banquet (Luke 14:15; Matt. 8:11). It is not surprising, then, that eating is frequently mentioned in the Gospels. Jesus regularly presides at meals, remembering God’s covenant by giving thanks and saying the blessing (the two ideas are not separable in Aramaic) as would the head of the household at any Jewish meal (e.g., Mark 6:41; 8:7; John 6:11). The covenant between Jesus and those at table with him is marked by all saying the “Amen” to his blessing (cf. 1 Cor. 14:16) and by all sharing the one broken bread (cf. 1 Cor. 10:17).

Jesus eats with many different kinds of people. He eats with the crowds (e.g., Mark 6:30-44; John 6:1-15), with sinners (e.g., Luke 15:2), with sinners newly converted (Mark 2:13), with Pharisees (Luke 7:36; 11:37);

14:1), and above all with disciples and friends (e.g., Mark 1:30-31 and parallels; 6:42 and parallels; 14:13-15; Luke 10:38-42). Because meals are so important Jesus' open table is a scandal to many (Matt. 9:11; Luke 15:2). It is also the importance of the fellowship established by sharing food that makes the betrayal so horrifying (Mark 14:18-20; John 13:18; cf. Ps. 41:9).

The picture we should have in mind, then, is that of a daily table fellowship of the disciples (*talmidim*) with their rabbi as a normal part of their life together during his ministry. In this setting we must place the Last Supper. As one scholar has said, "In reality, the 'founding meal' is only one link in a long chain of meals Jesus shared with his followers, and which they continued after Easter (Jeremias 1971, 289-90). What is more, this form of fellowship with Jesus seems to have been reaffirmed after and indeed by the Resurrection, for many of the resurrection experiences are associated with meals (Luke 24:30-35, 36-43; Acts 1:4 [NRSV margin]; John 21:9-13). The same form of daily table fellowship then continued into the life of the church, which, according to Luke, meant "day by day. . . they broke bread at home . . ." (Acts 2:46).

Incidentally, it is not true to argue, as is sometimes done, that the resurrection meetings with our Lord at table were experienced *only* on the "first day of the week." If the meal described in John 21:9-13 took place on the first day of the week, then either Peter and his friends had just been guilty of a serious piece of Sabbath-breaking, or they had made their preparations and set off fishing after it was already dark.

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The exact date of the Last Supper is one of the most disputed matters in all NT study. For our purposes it will be enough to note that whether the Last Supper was a Passover meal, as the Synoptics seem to suggest (Mark 14:12, 16; Luke 22:8, 13, 15), or whether it only took place on the night before Passover, as John implies (18:28), it certainly happened at a time when Passover was in the air. Passover meant and still means redemption. "On that night they were redeemed; on that night they will be redeemed in the future," said Rabbi Joshua b. Korcha (c. 140-165 CE), although not all agreed with him (*Mek. R. 1.* on Exod. 12:42). Passover was therefore an appropriate time to speak of such matters as the coming of God's kingdom. Let us now turn to the story of the Last Supper itself. We have forms of the tradition, not very different from each other, preserved by Mark and Paul (Mark 14:17-25; 1 Cor. 11:23-26), and a somewhat different version preserved by Luke (22:14-20). Mark's version, which has many Semitic features, may represent the earliest form we have:

When it was evening, he came with the twelve. . . . While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

(Mark 14:17, 22-25)

Here are all the normal features of a shared meal, such as the blessing and breaking of the bread, together with two new features: the so-called "words of institution" and the "vow of abstinence."

First let us examine the "words of institution," or, better, "words of interpretation." Words of interpretation are, and probably were then, a part of the Passover meal. The different items of the meal—*matzah* (unleavened bread), bitter herbs, and so on are interpreted in terms of the story of Israel's deliverance. For example, the head of the household says over the *matzah*, "This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt." So it probably would not have been utterly strange for the disciples that as Jesus gave them, first the bread that made them one, and then "the cup of blessing" (1 Cor. 10:16-17), he should interpret both. The interpretation itself, however, was new:

"This is my body."

“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”

Jesus offered an interpretation of the bread and wine that was also an interpretation of his coming death. “Body” and “blood” clearly speak of Jesus as a victim. Those who sit at his table and accept the fellowship he offers thereby feed on his death, for his death will be the price of his uniting himself to them.

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The phrase “blood of the covenant” (interpreted by Paul as “the new covenant,” 1 Cor. 11:25; cf. Luke 22:20), clearly refers to Exodus 24:5-8 and Jeremiah 31:31. Like the blood of the sacrificed victims at Sinai, so now the blood of Christ marks a new age in God’s dealing with the world.

Like the first covenant, the second is an act of grace. Christ’s blood is not a sign of condemnation for the world that sheds it but rather the sign of God’s continuing faithfulness. It is “poured out for many” (Mark 14:24). In case the meaning of this is not clear, Matthew offers a further interpretation: Jesus’ blood will be poured out for many, an act of atonement “for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). “Many” is inclusive rather than exclusive. It is an Aramaic idiom meaning “all, who are many” rather than “many, but not all.”

Mark adds what scholars call the “vow of abstinence,” which was also an implicit claim that Jesus would be vindicated. He would not again drink wine with them until the time when he drank it with them “new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25). According to Luke the vow of abstinence seems to have come earlier, over the first cup of wine (Luke 22:18). In any case we can hardly doubt that the disciples, in their renewed table fellowship with Jesus after the Resurrection, felt that he did indeed drink wine with them in the setting of a new experience of God’s sovereign power.

According to Luke and Paul, Jesus added a “rubric” (that is, a “direction for worship”) to the words of interpretation: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). This may well be historic, for it is easy to see how it might be omitted. As one scholar has put it, “One does not repeat a rubric, one does it” (Benoit 1939, 386). Clearly the church did “do” the supper in “remembrance” of Christ, and clearly the church would not have done so unless it felt it had Christ’s warrant. What is meant by “remembrance”? The word means a good deal more than reminiscence. In the Hebrew sense, when God “remembers,” God acts (look again at Gen. 9:14-16; 19:29; 30:22-24; Exod. 2:24-3:8; 6:5-8). So, according to the Targum of Genesis, Abraham prays that God will remember Isaac’s willing self-offering on behalf of Israel:

And now, when his sons are in the hour of affliction, remember the *aqedah* (binding) of their father Isaac and listen to the voice of their supplication and hear them and deliver them from all tribulation
(*Targum Neofiti*, Gen. 22:14)

Abraham prays that God will *remember* and that he will *act* by delivering. The Passover is also “for remembrance” (Exod. 12:14). What the rubric implies is that when the Eucharist is celebrated, God will “remember” the Messiah, the new Isaac, and in “remembering,” God will act.

The significance of the memorial and also of the unity of the table is well summarized in William Bright’s eucharistic hymn:

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And now, O Father, mindful of the love
That bought us once for all on Calvary’s tree,
And having with us him that pleads above,

We here present, we here spread forth to thee,
That only offering perfect in thine eyes,
The one true, pure, immortal sacrifice.
Look, Father, look on his anointed face,
And only look on us as found in him;
Look not on our misusings of thy grace,
Our prayer so languid, and our faith so dim:
For lo! Between our sins and their reward,
We set the Passion of thy Son our Lord.

This hymn is largely an expansion of Paul's own commentary: For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

(1 Cor. 11:26)

If in the Last Supper narrative we are in touch with history, then it seems that Saint Paul had precisely understood his master's intention as well as anyone could. Once we grant Jesus' own unique sense of commitment and calling, there is really nothing in the views attributed to him that is particularly difficult to credit when judged by our normal criteria of historicity. None of the ideas involved is likely to have been difficult or unfamiliar in the thinking of contemporary Judaism (or paganism, for that matter). From only a little later period there is ample evidence of extensive rabbinic speculation about the atoning power of death (Tos. Kippurim 4.5b-9). It is we moderns who find the idea of atoning death difficult. There is no evidence that either Jew or pagan would have regarded it so in the first century CE.

This is a convenient point to note that there is little reason to take seriously the suggestion that Jesus cannot have gone up to Jerusalem to die for the world because such an intention would be "odd" or "weird." That one would go out willingly to die for one's God, one's people, one's convictions, one's friend, or one's lover may seem "weird" to North Americans; to Jews or pagans in the first Christian centuries it would have seemed merely honorable (cf. 1 Macc. 1:62-63; Rom. 5:7; Horace, *Odes* 3.2.13; Seneca, *Letters* 9.10), and so for centuries afterwards.

Jesus' Parables

In what has been said so far about Jesus and the kingdom, the reader may have noticed that we have tried—not with entire success—to say nothing about Jesus' parables. This is not because they are not relevant to the discussion. On the contrary, they are very relevant and will be seen generally to support what we have asserted about Jesus' relationship to the kingdom. But the parables fall into a category of their own and deserve to be treated separately.

Jesus taught his followers "with many parables." So says Mark (4:33), and the Gospels as a whole bear this out. Parables are the most characteristic and striking teaching form of our Lord, and most scholars agree that here, if anywhere, we are in touch with the authentic Jesus.

"Parable" is from a Greek word *parabolē* which essentially means "comparison." *Parabolē* was commonly used among Greek-speaking Jews to render the Hebrew *mashal* (plural *meshalim*), whose basic sense was "being similar" or "being like." Both words had come to be used in all sorts of cases where there was the idea of comparison. It was used in speaking directly to a particular situation: so, for example, we think of Nathan's "parable" to David when he had acted tyrannically in the affair of Bath-sheba (2 Sam. 12:1-15). It was also used of sayings intended to illustrate a general truth. Thus a *mashal* // *parabolē*, in the Hebrew/LXX Bible often is something that we in English would call a "proverb" or "byword." If Israel is disobedient, says Moses in Deuteronomy, then it becomes "an object of horror, a proverb (Hebrew: *mashal*, LXX *parabolē*),

and a byword among all the peoples” (Deut. 28:37). In other words, people would talk about Israel when they wanted an example of what can happen if you disobey God. Of course, the Hebrew Book of Proverbs (Hebrew: *Meshalim*) teaches general truths by utterances that often contain comparisons: Hear, my child, your father’s instruction, and do not reject your mother’s teaching; for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck.^{top}

(Prov. 1:9)

The most striking and sustained *mashal* in the Book of Proverbs is one that speaks of Wisdom as a beautiful and wise woman and of folly as a harlot (Prov. 9:1-18). These, of course, are writings that were ancient even by the first century CE. In Jesus’ own time the *mashal* continues to appear.

First and closest in style and atmosphere to the parables in the Synoptic Gospels are the *meshalim* attributed to the Palestinian rabbis. These may be short proverbs that illuminated or illustrated something—such as “Physician, heal thine own lameness” (Gen. Rab. 23). This proverb seems to be quoted in Luke 4:23. The rabbinic *meshalim* can involve longer and more elaborate comparisons, such as the following somewhat **chauvinistic** *mashal* attributed to R. Eleazar ben Azaria (90-130 CE), who wanted to show that the future redemption of Israel would be greater than the redemption from Egypt:

It is like a man wanting children. When a daughter was born he took vows by her life. But when a son was born he left the daughter and took vows by the son’s life.

(*Mek. Exod.* 13:2)

Eleazar made his point by a single comparison. Other *meshalim* make more elaborate comparisons and have obviously allegorical elements. Such, for example, is a parable attributed to Jesus’ near contemporary Chanina ben Dosa. Speaking of the privilege God had given to Israel by bestowing the commandments upon it, Chanina said:

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It can be compared to a king who had before him a well-laid table with all kinds of dishes thereon. When his first servant entered, he gave him a slice [of meat]; to the second, an egg; to the third, some vegetable, and so a portion to each one separately. When his son came in, he gave him all that was before him, saying to him, “To the others I gave only single portions, but to you I give all.” So God gave also to the heathen only some odd commandments, but when Israel arose, He said to them, “Behold, the whole Torah is yours.” (*Exod. Rab.* 30:9)

Here God is in some sense represented by the king, the nations by servants, Israel by the son, and so on. Until the end of the nineteenth century scholars tended to interpret all Jesus’ parables as allegories. Then, having realized that many of the parables, like the physician proverb quoted above, make their point by a simple comparison, the scholars probably went too far in the other direction and denied that there were any allegorical elements at all. Yet some of Jesus’ parables, like Chanina’s, clearly have elements of allegory—for example, the wicked husbandmen (Mark 12:1-12; see Chapter Seventeen). In fact, certain elements in the *meshalim* occur again and again with the same meanings—the king (God), the vineyard (Israel), the son (either Israel or the specially chosen representative of Israel), and so on. We can see these elements playing exactly the same roles in Jesus’ parables and in those of the rabbis.

Parables are an oral method of teaching. The hearer must make something of them. “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” says Jesus on more than one occasion in the Gospels (e.g., Matt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35). Quite often, when parables come to be written down, an interpretation (Hebrew: *nimshal*) is attached to them; so also in the Gospels. Some parables have a *nimshal* and some do not. Often the *nimshal* directs attention to one point of comparison only. In the nature of things a story may contain various details that can become subordinate points of comparison. So we need not be surprised that in the Gospels

some of Jesus' parables have more than one *nimshal*—for example, the slandered steward (Luke 16:1-13) or the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7; Matt. 18:10-14). There is no reason for this to be a problem. Sometimes we ask whether we should distinguish between an interpretation intended by the original teller of the *mashal* and an interpretation made by disciples. But even that is not, in the true spirit of the *mashal*, a problem. "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" The essence of the parabolic method of teaching is that life and the words that tell of life can mean more than one thing. Each hearer is different and therefore to each hearer a particular secret of the kingdom can be revealed. We are supposed to create *nimshalim* for ourselves.

NT scholars debate whether the parables were intended by Jesus as aids to understanding for ordinary people, or whether they are intended to be not wholly clear, so as to be spurs to the imagination, intelligence, and will. Mark, at least, understood them as aids, and no doubt the same is broadly true of Jesus himself. A third-century rabbi is quoted as saying:

If one discourses on the Torah in public and his words do not give as much pleasure to his hearers as a bride gives pleasure to the beholders when sitting in her bridal chamber, it were better that he had not delivered them. (Song of Songs Rab. 4:11)

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A major study of rabbinic parables written some years ago observed that the midrashic similes and parables of the rabbis "were equally intended to elevate and inspire the masses" (Feldman 1927, 25). That, of course, does not rule out an element of challenge and mystery too. Precisely the same seems likely with the parables of Jesus. Thus Mark observes that "with many such parables he [Jesus] spoke the word to them [the crowds], as they were able to hear it" (Mark 4:33). Yet Jesus in Mark also shows us that there is a challenge in the parables, and some may not choose to accept it: To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."

(Mark 4:11-12; cf. Isa. 6:9-10)

The key to the meaning of this passage is in its allusion to Isaiah 6, which speaks of the pathos of God, who sends the prophets that we may hear and is continually ignored. "There are," as some might say, "none so deaf as those that don't want to hear." Parables are aids to understanding. Precisely because they work by challenging us to compare one thing with another, they demand something of us. "What do you think?" they say. They ask us to participate. "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" Disciples—those who are willing to participate, those who will commit themselves in faith and hope and love—listen to the parables and hear illustrations. To them the mysteries of God's sovereignty are revealed in moments of new insight. Those who remain outside, who will offer no faith, or hope, or love, listen to the parables and hear just that—parables. They see, but perceive nothing; they hear, but understand nothing. "I asked a straight question and they told me a stupid story."

In what way do Jesus' parables *differ* from rabbinic parables?

First, as attributed to a single teacher, they are unique in their number. We know of no other single rabbi who has such a large body of parables attributed to him as are attributed to Jesus.

Second, Jesus' parables differ somewhat from rabbinic parables in the range of subjects covered. Almost all rabbinic parables are concerned with explaining aspects of the Torah. Some of Jesus' parables do this, too. Examples are the two debtors (Luke 7:41-43) and the Good Samaritan (Luke 12:29-37). But most of Jesus' parables are concerned with something else—something referred to in Mark as "the secret" (or "mystery," Greek: *mysterion*) "of the kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11). (The Greek word *mysterion* is virtually a technical term in first-century religious vocabulary. It regularly speaks of the divine plan or purpose that has been hidden but is now revealed to the initiate [cf. Eph. 1:7-10].)

There is a parallel to this in another type of ancient Jewish literature which is usually distinguished from the rabbinic—namely, the so-called apocalyptic (“revelatory of things hidden”) and pseudepigraphic (“falsely named”) literature. Thus in 4 Esdras 3-14 (probably written in Hebrew at the end of the first century CE) the angel uses similitudes to explain a number of things to the seer about God’s government of the world, the plan of history, the end, and so on. The angel always provides an expla-

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nation of the similitude. Nonetheless, these somewhat florid, overheated visions are removed in tone from the gentle, often homely realism of the rabbinic parables and those of Jesus, and so they hardly constitute a parallel at all.

More important is to recall the material to which we referred at the beginning of this chapter. We observed that Jesus, living and working within “the constraints of history,” was provided with vocabulary about the kingdom by the synagogue and the Scriptures as read there—that is, the Targums—and that he used this vocabulary to talk about what God was doing in and through his ministry.

There is, however, an important difference. In the Targums we have the fruit of learned meditation on the Scriptures. In Jesus’ parables the kingdom is a matter of experience. Building on vocabulary that the Targums and the synagogue gave him, Jesus presents a picture of God as sovereign that we receive as part of our own experience. We know that what is being said about God’s sovereignty is true because we see it at work in the world, which is also the world of the parables. Images of owner, mother hen, shepherd, master, housewife, and father remind us that the kingdom is God’s kingdom. Images of the vineyard remind us that the kingdom is for the restoration of God’s people. Stories of seeds growing secretly and treasures being found, dishonest stewards and thrifty housewives, sensible girls and silly girls, opportunities seized and opportunities lost, faithful shepherds, doting fathers, and unforgiving servants—all these teach us the ways of the kingdom. This is not surprising, for the parables are stories of life, and the Sovereign of whom they speak is the author of life.

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End of chapter

Kingdom of God in our group^{back}

If we decide to do this, I'm going home!

Truth^{back}

OK, but for the way in which the EFM writers frequently use the word, see the Wikipedia definition of "^{truthiness}."

Kingdom come^{back}

The Greek says "May your kingdom come." Nothing else.

Make a division^{back}

Division? Between what and what? Do the writers mean a distinction between political salvation and something else? But surely the "something else" is what we're supposed to believe Jesus was all about?

The enemy had already won^{back}

Just like the terrorists? Actually, I don't think Jesus ever says anything like this; he simply tells us how to behave.

Not to make common cause^{back}

This is to strain Jesus' words more than a little.

Zeal^{back}

But note fighting to defend one's own religion, not to impose it on others.

Bad news^{back}

Bad news if you believe it, anyway. But the problem is that the people who behave thus don't believe it, or at least have failed to internalize it.

Come with power^{back}

Which in a manner of speaking it has.

Restoration of the twelve tribes^{back}

This bald assertion needs a citation, at least.

Jesus and the new kingdom^{back}

I don't understand this, and the double-quotes don't help. See for example [John, 18:33](#).

Son of Man^{back}

I still choose to believe that "The Son of Man" is Aramaic for "Your humble servant."

Prophecies after the event^{back}

They *were* of course prophecies after the event, in the sense that they were written down long after the crucifixion. But it's a good point, that a writer might have made them more precise if not relying on a very solid tradition that they were as actually reported.

talmidim^{back}

Can you think of a modern Arabic word which might well be related, is in wide public use, and means "students?"

chauvinistic^{back}

Is "chauvinistic" even a word? The writers have forgotten that chauvinism means an exaggerated and unwelcome kind of patriotism. The term "male chauvinist pig" was a joke. Say "sexist."

