The Eschatology of the Gospels

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THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE GOSPELS.*

THE Eschatology of the Gospels is an intricate, difficult and delicate subject. It covers such a wide field, and the amount of detail to be dealt with is so great, that it is necessary to confine ourselves within due limits. In our treatment of the subject we have accordingly taken "the Kingdom of God" or "the Kingdom of Heaven" as the central idea, and subsumed the data under three headings:—I. An endeavour to trace the origin of the idea of the Kingdom of God in Jewish literature. II. The Kingdom of God as presented in the Gospels. III. The interpretation of the facts in accordance with the early Christian writings and experience.

I.

"The Kingdom of God" forms the central feature of the teaching of Christ. Alike in His public and private discourses, it is this which He holds before men as the goal of His life and of theirs.

"The Kingdom of God is at hand." Such is the proclamation made by our Lord at the very beginning of His ministry. This proclamation is so alluded to by the Evangelists as to exclude the idea of novelty. Of detailed explanation there is none whatever: familiarity with the topic is tacitly assumed on the part not only of the readers of the Gospel narratives but of actual listeners in the first instance. It may accordingly be inferred that the phrase "the Kingdom of God" was

*For forms of expression and modes of thought throughout the entire article the writer is indebted to *The Teaching of Christ*, by E. G. Selwyn, and *The Eschatology of Jesus*, by H. L. Jackson.

already current among those who heard Jesus proclaim the near approach of the Kingdom.

As a preliminary we must endeavour to trace the origin of the idea of "the Kingdom of God" which was common to both Jesus and His hearers. When we turn to the Jewish literature of the day we find there are two directions in which we may move in our investigation: (a) the Old Testament, and (b) the Apocalyptic literature. It will be necessary to follow each of these in turn.

(a) *The Old Testament*.—The predominant thought of the entire Old Testament is that Israel is Jahve's peculiar people.

It is with the prophetic books, however, that we are mostly concerned. The situations with which the prophets from Amos onwards had to deal were marked either by religious and moral corruption within Israel, or by Israel's humiliation at the hands of foreign peoples. In such circumstances they brought a message of hope. God had not forsaken His covenant with His chosen people, but would speedily vindicate His honour and establish His rule upon earth. This expectation of a good time coming runs through all the prophetic writings of the Old Testament.

The details of the picture vary widely. All speak of, or imply, a Kingdom and a King. Some speak of a Messiah of David's line who shall govern his kingdom for God. Some regard God Himself as the One who will inaugurate the new era and rule in it. One prophet at least urges the people to see the Messiah they long for—their emancipator rather than their acknowledged ruler—in the Persian conqueror, Cyrus.

Again, all the prophets foretell a judgement before the Kingdom comes. Some regard Israel itself as involved in this "Day of Jahve," as it is called, while others confine this judgement and its terrors to the heathen nations alone.

And further, the prophets differ as to those who shall

have part in the new Divine order. Some exclude the Gentiles altogether, while some admit them to the Kingdom as tributaries.

Yet with all these variations of detail the idea of "the Kingdom of God" itself remains constant. For the most part the Kingdom is conceived as a restoration of that Davidic kingdom of which the memory was a perpetual joy to Israel. Yet this conception is by no means invariable, especially towards the end of Old Testament prophecy.

During their long sojourn in Babylon the Jewish nation was in the closest touch with idolatry. As they grew familiar with the imposing idolatries of that land, which had seemed for the hour to conquer, the highest minds were more and more convinced of the measureless superiority of their own religion. They recognized that their faith in Jahve had more to justify it than mere racial tradition and prejudice. He was manifestly different from the most exalted of the pagan gods and would yet assert Himself in His true power as King of the world. The world by consequence would be "the Kingdom of God": a Kingdom nevertheless identified by great prophets with the pre-eminence of the favoured race.

Accordingly when the curtain of the Old Testament falls, it is on those whose hopes are fixed on a future in which God would be King of His People and bring them into direct communion with Himself.

(b) *The Apocalyptic Literature*.—Speaking generally, Old Testament prophecy had found God in this world's life. Looking for the manifestation of His righteousness and power in the near future, it expected that manifestation on the stage of Jewish history, and through the action of forces already operative in human affairs.

With the political horizon extended, and with the rise of new ideas more transcendental in their nature, the voice of the prophet gradually dies away, while an age is entered when students of prophecy begin to dream

visions and to write them down. An eschatological literature attaches itself to a prophetic literature. Even in the Old Testament we find many traces of this apocalyptic element, especially in Daniel and Zechariah.

Amongst the apocalyptic literature not found in the Old Testament are *The Book of Enoch*, *the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *The Book of Jubilees*, *The Psalms of Solomon*, and *The Sibylline Oracles*. These books were written during the two centuries preceding our era, when the Jewish people suffered from the yoke first of Syria and then of Rome, and when even the military successes of the Maccabees could not withstand the inner religious corruption which the spread of Greek influences was producing.

The importance of the apocalyptic books lies in the fact that they bridge the gulf between the prophets of the Old Testament and the age of our Lord. They enable us to understand how the conception of the coming of "the Kingdom of God" which Jesus preached was not a novel one, nor yet an old one which had fallen into desuetude and was now revived, but rather a current conception.

To the apocalyptic writers, as to the prophets, "the Kingdom of God" is the grand interest of the future. Meanwhile it tarried—meanwhile God had withdrawn Himself and was still a God far off—meanwhile malignant powers were arrayed in resistance to His will—His sovereignty was unrecognized and unowned. But the delay was fast drawing to a close—the moment was nigh at hand when the Kingdom in its every aspect would have become the accomplished fact.

One of the chief characteristics of the apocalyptic writings is the sharp antithesis between the principles of good and evil. Sharply does the apocalypticist differentiate between two epochs—the age that now is, and the age that is to come. For him this present world is utterly corrupt, and, past redemption, it hurries on its way to destruction. The future world, on the other

hand is conceived of by him as absolutely good. Good and accordingly divine, and because divine, therefore eternal in its duration.

The Davidic King still figures in the pages of apocalyptic literature, yet he is not the most conspicuous figure. Necessitated by its universalism and transcendentalism, a Messiah of another and altogether higher sort now plays His allotted part in the great drama of the end. He is the Son of Man. Like unto the angels and pre-existent—not of this earth, but a Being who comes down from heaven. His place at the great world-judgement is at the side of God.

Although its ideals and conceptions are by no means uniform, yet we may say of Jewish apocalyptic that it kept alive, and added new features to, the idea of “the Kingdom of God” which we found in Old Testament prophecy. More particularly it developed the idea of a resurrection found in germ in the Old Testament and linked it with a world-judgement. It emphasized an aloofness from the life that now is. On the whole, its prevailing tendency was to eliminate what was local and temporal, and to put forward what was universal and eternal as the true content of “the Kingdom of God.”

Both these streams of thought—that of Old Testament prophecy and that of apocalyptic literature—helped to give content to the various conceptions of “the Kingdom of God” prevalent amongst the Jews, who heard our Lord announce the near approach of the Kingdom.

II.

With such a history behind it, it need not surprise us when we find that most, if not all, of the elements of our Lord's teaching about the Last Things are to be found scattered broadcast in the records of an earlier time. His mission was to emphasize and make essential many details which had hitherto been almost unnoticed owing to their being placed in a chaotic setting.

When we turn to the Gospels we notice a marked difference between the teaching of our Lord as preserved for us in the Synoptic record, and that found in the Fourth Gospel. The latter gives a more spiritual aspect to our Lord's teaching, and moreover often expresses it in terms of a Hellenized philosophy foreign to the Master's own environment. Nevertheless we must believe that it expresses some aspects of His mind which in the Synoptic Gospels are almost buried under the picturesque materialism of Jewish Eschatology.

Our Lord, after the manner of the apocalypticist, distinguishes between the two ages—the present age and the coming age. The present age is an evil age, under the control of Satan—as for the coming age, it is conceived of as a good age. What now is under Satan's dominion will then bear witness to the reign of God. The great necessity of man is to repent and fit himself for “the Kingdom of God.”

Insisting on the ethical nature of the new citizenship, He makes everything depend on the right attitude of mind, on a purity of heart and life. His demands are terrific in their matter of life and death vehemence, and pitched so high as to necessitate the straining of every faculty, complete detachment from essentially earthly interests, and a break with domestic ties. His grasp of essentials is unerring and complete—vital issues are accentuated by Him—clarifying and liberating are His words.

Jesus, like the prophets and apocalypticists before Him, was faced with an emergency, and, like them, He brought to meet it the good news of approaching deliverance at the hands of God. He regarded sin and disease as due to diabolic agency. It was from this bondage that God would shortly deliver those who repented betimes, just as of old He promised deliverance from the yoke of foreign oppression. Now, as then—though now on a scale which was more universal, be-

cause the individual, not the nation, is the ultimate religious unit—man's need was God's opportunity.

In His proclamation of "the Kingdom of God" Jesus anticipates a judgement which, as it takes account not only of the living but of the dead, involves a resurrection.

The "where" of the Kingdom is perhaps comparatively unimportant to Him—at least there is no uniformity of conception on His part. To go by some of the recorded sayings, He points away from earth. On the other hand, the scene is laid by Him here below as thoughts rise in His mind of the "Holy Land," yet even then His glance is upwards. The Kingdom here below is after all a new order, which has come down from on high to earth. It may be that He is content to leave the "where," as He leaves the "when," God's secret.

He points emphatically to what is in store for those adjudged righteous and those adjudged wicked. For the former, everlasting blessedness: for the latter, not simply exclusion from "the Kingdom of God," but an awful fate.

The consideration of what our Lord taught about the time when the Kingdom would come and the manner of its coming positively thrusts itself upon us.

At the outset let us emphasize the fact that the essential point in the proclamation of Jesus is that the coming of the Kingdom is now a positive certainty, and not that the crisis is only more or less near. Nevertheless, He apparently fluctuates between two conceptions. On the one hand the Kingdom as conceived by Him is indeed at hand, but it is still future, and so He bids His disciples pray "Thy Kingdom come." On the other hand He finds in demoniac cures proof positive that Satan's power is actually being overthrown. "If I, by the Spirit of God, cast out devils, no doubt the Kingdom of God is come upon you."

Even if we regard the Kingdom as future, another

question forces itself upon us: When will the Kingdom of God come? Will it be soon or late?

It is clear that for the most part our Lord's teaching implied the immediacy of His coming. He expressly states it in the words: "Ye shall not have gone through all the cities of Israel till the Son of Man be come."

And yet there is a certain body of counter-evidence, small in quantity, but apparently quite explicit, which cannot be disregarded. Of His coming in judgement Jesus said: "But of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." This disowning of knowledge must extend to the time as well as to other features of the day. Again, the parables of the talents and pounds imply a period of long delay, during which the Lord's servants may make good and profitable use of what He has given them.

We notice still another apparent ambiguity. In certain parables Jesus says plainly that the Son of Man shall come suddenly like lightning, or like a snare, secretly like the thief in the night, or unexpectedly like the master returning from a banquet.

On the other hand, He delivered a discourse during the last week of His life, wherein He enumerates the various events which shall prelude His coming. The common tradition of Jewish eschatology is followed; false Messiahs will arise, there will be wars and rumours of wars, the elect will be persecuted, the temple will be profaned, and Judaea beleaguered, and finally, amid the staggering of Heaven and its lights, the Son of Man shall come in clouds with great power and glory.

The "when" of the coming must remain God's secret. It would be a simple matter to eliminate by one process or another all the conflicting features and dogmatically posit what remains. But steadfastly must we refuse to follow that course.

We now pass on to consider what is, after all, the most important point of our subject, *i.e.*, What place

our Lord assigned to Himself in "the Kingdom of God."

From the combined evidence of the Synoptic and Fourth Gospels, it is not too much to say that He makes himself indispensable in the Kingdom of His own proclamation. Where He is there He believes the Kingdom is.

He is, or believes himself to be, or allows himself to be regarded as, the Messiah. Apparently He deems himself, and is, of Davidic lineage—although He does not appear to attach any vital importance to the fact. "If David therefore call Him Lord, how is He then his Son?"

He identifies himself with "the Son of Man" of His occasional allusions. The great bulk of the passages in the Gospels where "the Son of Man" occurs refer to His exaltation and glory, or to His humiliation and death. He will come in power, and He must suffer—those are the two themes which recur throughout our Lord's teaching, and they have their corollaries in the present. He has authority to forgive sins, or to deal with the Sabbath, and He is more homeless and destitute even than foxes or fowls of the air, or is misunderstood and abused because he comes "eating and drinking."

Not only does our Lord identify Himself with "the Son of Man," He is also "the Son of God." He is convinced that He stands in a filial relation to God which is unique in degree and in kind. Nevertheless, all through His life He is conscious of limitations, and He, destined Messiah that He is, eagerly awaits emancipation—the supreme moment when He shall have passed through the gate of death to be exalted as "the Son of Man" at the right hand of God.

Jesus is absolutely persuaded that He would shortly come, come in glory with the clouds of heaven; come to this earth again. At His coming there would be a resurrection, when all nations would be summoned to a dread tribunal, where He himself figures as the judge.

In the Kingdom of God He reigns as Viceroy, King and Kingdom owning the supremacy of the God to whom He is so near akin.

III.

When we try to grasp and combine all the features of our Lord's teaching regarding the Kingdom of God, many questions which seem to be insoluble arise. Yet all these resolve themselves into one great and momentous question—a question prompted by our Lord Himself: Who and what was Jesus?

It is no new question. Raised in His very presence by disciples and by foes; raised, who can doubt it, by Himself; no long time elapses before, whether from internal or external necessity, it is faced and grappled with by primitive Christianity, *i.e.*, by St. John and St. Paul.

It is conspicuous in successive crises of the Church's life, and the fierce stir of controversy engendered by it ever testifies to a relatively clear perception of the momentous issues involved. It is the outstanding feature of incessant critical research.

As in a recent and remote past, so to-day the well-nigh perennial question thrusts itself with renewed importance upon many anxious minds.

Nor is there prospect that the question will speedily be laid to rest. Among the problems of the future there can be no doubt that the central place will be occupied by the problem of the Person of Jesus.

What answer shall we give? In view of all that precluded His appearance on this earth—in view of what happened in Palestine during those fateful thirty-three years—in view of what has transpired in the world since the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth under Pontius Pilate—we take our stand beside Simon, the son of Jonas, and say of Jesus: "Thou art the Christ the Son of the living God." This is the secret that Peter, by

revelation of God, was the first to penetrate. For this confession he was blessed and made the foundation on its man-ward side of the Church of Christ.

This is the only answer, as Father Tyrrell has shown in *Christianity at the Cross-roads*, which does justice to the fact of Christianity as well as to the fact of Christ. Other answers may explain the records of the life of Jesus which we find in the Gospels, but they can never explain how Christianity as an historic religion sprang from that Person. They leave Christ and Christianity as disparate and mutually alien elements.

Having acknowledged that our Lord Jesus Christ was true God and true man, there arises the further question: How will this God-man act? In other words: To what limitations was He subject? The problem of His Person is suggestive on the one hand of exalted claims, while on the other hand it compels to an assertion of genuinely human restrictions. It is from this second point of view that whatever Jesus has to say about the Last Things can be approached, interpreted and appraised.

Being true man, His limitations were not imposed by Himself upon Himself in His earthly life, but were His in virtue of the real manhood which He shared with the race.

In the Gospel narratives we are distinctly told that He grew in wisdom. In our conception of Him then allowance must be made for development—of earlier anticipations yielding place to new and overpowering convictions as His ministry draws to a close.

He Himself disavows omniscience. His knowledge is limited, so are His powers—so is His authority. He realizes the necessity of prayer, and owns His entire dependence on the God to whom He prays. Throughout His life He is straitened—bound by limitations, subject to conditions that fetter and imprison Him.

The bearing of the Jesus of the Gospels on the Eschatology of the Gospels is very vital. When we take the

evidence of the Gospels as to our Lord's predictions of the future at its face value, there is an apparent discrepancy between such predictions and the facts of history. He foretold immediate catastrophe—an act of divine judgement, and the establishment of a new era with new conditions of life for believers. In their outward form, at least, these were not fulfilled.

How are we to reconcile this discrepancy with our belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God?

We cannot accept Father Tyrrell's solution of this problem, when he makes the time-category in the words of Jesus merely a symbol. Futurity, he says, is Christ's way of expressing transcendence: when He said that the Kingdom of God should come immediately He meant that it was transcendental in character.

Time and the future are real and not symbolic, and some explanation of Christ's teaching must be given which satisfies on that score.

When Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God He was dealing with a complex of conceptions, which though they presented themselves to Him as a whole, and could be subsumed under one name, yet none the less contained divers factors or constituents. Judgement by the Son of Man, resurrection, the assembly of the elect of all ages and peoples, and the session of the Son of Man by the right hand of Power. This Kingdom Jesus expected to come suddenly and soon.

Here a solution of the problem presents itself. The evidence does not entitle us to say that Jesus expected all the elements in His hope of the Kingdom to be realized directly. He does not indeed distinguish them clearly—but neither does He insist on their coincidence. Moreover, a very important consideration becomes now relevant. Jesus Himself confesses a large measure of ignorance. "But of that day or that hour," He says, "knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." If this open disowning on Christ's part of any detailed knowledge about

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the great day be taken at its face value, the simultaneity of the various factors of the end implied in His teaching is easily accounted for. He could not distinguish where He did not know. And so these factors appear in His teaching bound together in the coincidence which tradition had given them.

At the same time we on our side are absolved from a rigorous adherence to this coincidence. We can separate elements which Christ handled together, seeing that this common handling sprang from no prevision on His part. We are thus free to slide this back—that forward.

A further meaning may legitimately be found in our Lord's confession of ignorance—namely, His sense of the inadequacy of the thought-forms which were at His disposal for the expression of the truths He had to teach.

Jesus was to this extent of His own day, that only the religious conceptions available to His contemporaries were available to Himself. By available conceptions we do not mean merely those of which men actually availed themselves. We must be careful not to confine Jesus to the language of the apocalyptic books, seeing that He was conversant with the whole library of the Old Testament, and so He could always correct and enlarge the local and transient by the appeal to the classical. But at least he could not overleap in His thought-forms the bounds of the Hebraic.

The Hebrew mind loved the most concrete imagery. It clothed its theological and moral ideas, however transcendental, in highly pictorial language. In the prophetic times the forms of the imagery are various and elastic. By the age of our Lord they have become more stereotyped and fixed, and their symbolic character is probably forgotten. But throughout, the Hebraic love of the concrete and pictorial is clear, and in this our Lord is no exception to the rule. What distinguishes Him from His contemporaries is not the use of different and larger categories, but rather that using the same, He felt their inadequacy while the rest did not.

With this in mind we shall not press too closely the actual details of our Lord's predictions. Let us take, for instance, His prophecy of the Son of Man coming with the clouds. When the author of the Book of Daniel wished to speak of the judgement, he set forth the figure of one "like a son of man" coming with the clouds of heaven and being invested with "dominion and glory and a kingdom." Later writers, particularly the author of the Book of Enoch, adopted this picture, and, so to speak, materialized it, until in our Lord's time the phrase "the Son of Man . . . coming with the clouds" can have had only one meaning—it signified the judgement. When, therefore, our Lord made this prediction He need have meant nothing more than the imminent judgement. His literal appearance on the clouds is not called for. His words will be fulfilled in any act or event wherein God or His Messiah settles the spiritual destinies of men, and the principles of God's ultimate triumph are finally vindicated.

We are prepared then, alike by the real content of our Lord's expectations and by the indications He gives us of His own apprehension of them, to find their fulfilment complex. We shall be satisfied that His faith was justified as true if some event or events happened immediately which may be taken as decisive for man's spiritual history: if the germs of a new kind of life and the principles of a new process were introduced at once into the world. We do not require that the whole process should be completed in a trice, but we do need to be sure that all the potentialities of future development should be present at the beginning. And for evidence we can but turn to Christian experience, which finds its normative expression in the New Testament.

The apostolic writers of the New Testament regard themselves as being members of a new order. St. Paul speaks expressly of Christians being part of "a new creation." St. John explains how believers have passed "from death unto life." In the Fourth Gospel this

conception of "life" or "eternal life" appears to supersede that of the Kingdom. In that Gospel the Kingdom is only spoken of three times, but nevertheless the thought is frequently present. The divine gift of eternal life, as the good of the individual, can only be realized in so far as it brings the individual into vital union with the divine community, which is none other than "the Kingdom of God."

Generally in the New Testament the thought is: "Old things have passed away: all has become new." Everywhere there is a sense of a new relation to God and a new outlook on the world. We have, in fact, a new dispensation—a new religion.

If we analyse this new religion we find it to be a complex of different elements, which, however, all contain one common factor—Christ. He is the beginning and end of them all. Whether they look at the present or at the past or at the future, He is the central feature of what they see, the sun of all their world. Yet the distinction of time just drawn is a real one. They do look back to the past, forward to the future, and around, above and within them in the present.

In the past the two salient events are the death and resurrection of Christ. On the cross He had abolished death and conquered sin and delivered His people. In the light of the resurrection His death could be seen to have been not a failure, but a triumph. Now all these aspects of Christ's death—the conquest of sin and death, the deliverance, the triumph—are inseparable in Jewish eschatological thought from the notion of the judgement by Messiah. That act of judgement the early Christians find in the death of Christ. Christ crucified is judge, because in Him is the full revelation in human history of the love of God.

In Jewish expectation the judgement was to be the prelude to the inauguration of the Kingdom. There is nothing in our Lord's teaching which tends to sever this close connexion, but much to confirm it, and He

proclaims that the advent of the new age is at hand. The apostolic writers regard the Kingdom of God as already established, yet not in its entirety. Christians have the Spirit among them, and the Spirit is the "earnest" of their inheritance, *i.e.*, the first instalment of the whole amount which is claimed and expected.

Here we can again take up the unsolved problem referred to in the last section. The day to which our Lord pointed forward in His teaching did come suddenly, like a thief in the night, in so far as it came in that series of events which form the core of the Christian Gospel—the Cross, the Resurrection, Pentecost. But in so far as the coming of the Son of Man includes also the final consummation of all things, and the unveiling of His full glory, it is preluded by signs and troubles throughout the years, and prominent among these was the destruction of Jerusalem.

The third element of early Christian thought is its outlook on the future. The eschatological element has by no means wholly gone—the "inheritance" is still the object of future hope. The Church still prays "Thy Kingdom come." Once more in time of dire distress the apocalypticist takes up his pen and displays his unconquerable faith in God, and his unfaltering certainty of the ultimate triumph of God's cause.

"The Kingdom of God" is the goal to which the world is moving. When it comes in its fulness all the "divine discontent" of mankind will be satisfied.

"The Eschatology of the Gospels" has one constant factor—Christ. Where He is, there is the Kingdom of God. Even in the days of His limitation on earth He could speak of the Kingdom of God as then present, because He was there. The Church is now the Kingdom of God because it is the sphere of operation of Christ's Spirit. In the Johannine thought the individual Christian is in a sense the Kingdom of God, because Christ dwells in him by faith. And yet these are but foretastes of what is to come. Those who obey Christ's

call, "Follow Me," He promises in their following to satisfy the longing soul and fill the hungry soul with gladness. In the future, either here or in a new heaven and a new earth, Christ and His fellow-heirs of the Kingdom will be united in a closer bond, and then and there, with all its train of accompanying circumstances, will be established "the Kingdom of God" in all its fulness.

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