

## *The Work of Incarnation – Manifesting the Kingdom*

### **I. Introduction**

1. Jesus' ministry was directed toward manifesting the in-breaking kingdom to the children of Israel; *in Him, Israel's God was at last fulfilling His promises of conquest, liberation, reconciliation, restoration and exaltation.* All of those achievements were key aspects of Yahweh's pledge to return to Zion and establish His everlasting rule and kingdom.
2. Jesus was the kingdom-bringer, and this work involved announcement, invitation and challenge to the sons of Israel, but also manifesting God's authority over the ruling powers He would soon defeat. He was the messianic son of David and had come, as promised, to fight the great and decisive battle in order to inaugurate His everlasting kingdom.
3. But this was not the battle Israel expected; *Yahweh would secure His supreme victory by submitting Himself, in the person of His incarnate Son, to all of the enemies assembled against Him.* The Messiah's apparent defeat at the hand of the powers wielding the weapons of condemnation and death would spell death's demise and the inauguration of the everlasting reign of life under the rule of the Lord of life.

### **II. Manifesting the Kingdom**

Jesus took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi to make clear to them the battle He had come to fight, and thereafter He began to explain to them how He would obtain the victory. *He was going to fulfill His Father's will for the world and establish His kingdom, but there would be many among the Father's covenant children who would fall short of that kingdom.* Thus another crucial dimension of Jesus' kingdom announcement was a grave and shocking warning – a warning that became more prominent the closer He drew to His appointed day in Jerusalem.

### **D. Warning**

1. Put simply, Jesus wanted His countrymen to understand the consequences of refusing Him. To most in Israel, Jesus was a curiosity – a wonder-working prophet and teacher who brought a strange and baffling message. To others, He was clearly a false messiah, which provoked great fear that He would catch the attention of Rome and Roman swords would again fall on the Israelite nation, as had happened recently with Judas the Galilean. And this time Rome's retribution would likely be more severe, perhaps even reaching to Israel's sacred institutions (ref. John 11:45-50). Many other Israelites – including Jesus' inner circle of disciples – followed Him as Israel's Messiah, but yet with a flawed sense of the messianic mission. They, too, found themselves often perplexed by what they heard and saw in Him.
2. Thus Jesus found Himself continually warning His hearers about the danger of missing the day of their *visitation* – i.e., the day of Yahweh's return to Zion to accomplish all that He had promised through His prophets. This failure would bring grave consequences, not just for unbelieving individuals, but for the nation as a whole. Many Israelites feared that Jesus' messianic claims and popularity would draw Rome's ire and threaten their institutions and national well-being, and thus they sought to undermine and silence Him. *But the great irony was that their response to Him would bring the very thing they feared.* Roman legions would indeed march against Judea, Jerusalem and its temple – not because Israel was promoting Jesus as Yahweh's messianic King, but because they had rejected Him. \* John 19:1-15

3. All four of the gospel writers make Jesus' warnings a key aspect of their accounts, though Christians often fail to see just how common this dimension of Jesus' ministry was. *A primary reason for this is that many of Jesus' parables and teachings that pertain to Israel's impending judgment are interpreted as referring to His "second coming" and a final day of judgment.* Examples include the parables of the maidens (Mat. 25:1-14), the talents (Mat. 25:15-30; cf. Luke 19:11ff), and the fig tree (Luke 13:6-9; ref. 12:35-13:9), as well as Jesus' answer to the question of how many in Israel were to be saved (Luke 13:22-30).
4. There are numerous reasons why so many of Jesus' sayings are wrongly interpreted as pertaining to His Parousia and a final judgment, but a few are worth noting here.
  - a. The first is historical as well as biblical, and that is failing to understand the dynamics of Israel's *exile* and the fact that it continued right up to the time of Jesus' birth. Many Christians (and Christian scholars) believe that the Judean exile ended when Cyrus allowed the Jewish exiles under his authority to return to Judea and rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 44:28 with 2 Chron. 36:22-23). This return completed the 70 years of decreed desolation, and the temple and city were indeed rebuilt, but the Jews understood that their exile was a *relational* phenomenon, not a *geographical* one; regardless of where they were residing and the condition of Jerusalem and its temple, Israel's exile would end when Yahweh returned and renewed His covenant with them.

Moreover, the prophets indicated that Yahweh would accomplish this return and renewal in connection with His messianic servant. Jesus understood Himself to be that One, and so confronted His countrymen with the truth that His presence indicated Yahweh's return and hence their obligation to receive Him and His restorative work as He established His kingdom. This is what it meant for Israel to "*repent and believe the good news.*"

- b. Overlooking the matter of Israel's exile leads to a second interpretive problem, which is misunderstanding the concept of Jesus' *coming*. Since Christians live on this side of the "Christ event" and look forward to His return, it's natural for them to read Jesus' teaching concerning His "coming" in terms of a second coming. But it's important first to recognize that Jesus was speaking to His Jewish contemporaries, not Christians in later generations. So He was speaking to them according to their understanding and expectations of Yahweh's return, the messianic work, and the coming kingdom.

From this vantage point, Jesus' teaching on His "coming" has two distinct referents that many (perhaps most) Christians miss: His "coming" to Israel as the messianic servant-son through whom Yahweh was returning to Zion (Mat. 21:33-44; Luke 19:11-27), and His "coming" as referring to His vindication and exaltation as King at the right hand of God following His triumph in death and resurrection. \* cf. Mat. 26:59-64; Dan. 7:1-14

None of this denies the fact of a future *Parousia*, but the Scripture treats this event as Jesus' *appearing* – His becoming openly manifest in the world – not as Him returning to earth from a distant heaven. Indeed, the prophets spoke of *one* "coming," not two, and it was *Yahweh* who was coming to liberate, renew and regather His people and establish His everlasting kingdom on the earth. This was the lens through which the Israelite people heard Jesus' words; they had no concept of a "second coming," and needed only to realize that Yahweh had returned, not in His Shekinah or merely in mighty works of power through anointed agents, but in His *incarnate Son*, and that He would establish His kingdom in an *extended process* according to the principle of already-but-not-yet.

- c. Another reason that some parables and teachings are referred to Jesus' second coming is their proximity to the Olivet Discourse, which is commonly interpreted in the same way. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this episode, but with their own unique emphases. Thus they must be read and interpreted together, and when this is done, it becomes clear that Jesus was primarily (if not solely) speaking about the impending destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. This is evident at the outset from the way Jesus provoked the disciples' questions (ref. Mat. 24:1-2) – questions that He then proceeded to answer.

Jesus' overt allusions to Daniel 9 also show that He had in mind Rome's impending desolation of Israel, not a future "tribulation" preceding His second coming. Of course, making this connection depends upon a right reading of the Daniel 9 context, which itself is commonly read through the lens of a supposed "end times" tribulation scenario. The revelation given to Daniel came through an angel sent to answer his question about Israel's restoration, which he understood had been predicted to occur at the end of a seventy-year desolation and exile under Babylon (9:1-19; cf. Jer. 29:10 with 2 Chron. 36:20-23). Babylon's rule had been broken, and yet Daniel saw no hint that his people's plight was coming to an end. Yes, exiles were returning to Judea, but under Persian authority and Gentile oppression; this was hardly the restoration Yahweh had promised.

Thus Yahweh sent His angel to explain to Daniel that the seventy years were actually seventy *weeks* of years – seventy "sevens." The redemption and renewal Daniel longed for was more than five centuries away, timed by Artaxerxes' yet future authorization to rebuild Jerusalem (circa 457 B.C.; Ezra 7). *What is crucial to recognize is that this disclosed timetable pertains to Daniel's concern with the end of Israel's exile, which Israel's prophets associated with Yahweh's return to Zion and His redemptive and restorative work accomplished through His messianic servant.* This is the lens for interpreting Daniel 9:24-27, and while the angel painted only a general thematic depiction, the crucial features of this future episode are indisputable:

- 1) The restoration Yahweh had pledged through His prophets (9:24) would come in connection with Messiah's rejection. This rejection – astonishingly by Messiah's own people (the "people of the coming prince") – would see them become the causal agents of Jerusalem's destruction.
- 2) They would "destroy the city and its sanctuary," not by their own hands, but by a desolating power brought in "on the wings of their abominations" (v. 27).

Daniel was longing for Yahweh to end Israel's exile and fulfill His promise of reconciliation and renewal, and His angel revealed to him that this fulfillment was going to occur in a most unexpected way. Yahweh would effect this redemption, restoration and relational healing through Israel's *rejection of Him*, culminating with the destruction of city and sanctuary that were at the center of Daniel's longing.

This is what Jesus was referring to when He spoke of the "abomination of desolation" (Mat. 24:15-21; cf. Luke 21:20-24), which fits perfectly with His initial assertion about the temple (Mat. 24:1-2). This interpretation is also consistent with Jesus' repeated warnings to His countrymen of the dire consequence of missing the day of their visitation and rejecting the One sent to them. These warnings escalated as Calvary drew near, reaching their climax as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, symbolizing Yahweh's return to Zion as her King, and pronounced the temple's condemnation. \* ref. Luke 19:28-20:19