

**Living under the Rule of God: Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom**  
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The exploration of any relationship between Christian eschatology and Christian ethics should logically begin with the juxtaposition of eschatology and ethics in the teachings of Jesus. In this short paper,<sup>1</sup> I will examine that intersection. At the outset, I must establish three parameters for this study.

First, I will limit my consideration of the teachings of Jesus to those sayings that historical research can trace to Jesus himself with reasonable probability. Furthermore, I will use versions of sayings deemed to be authentic that have been purged of post-Easter elements, language, and nuances and filtered to remove the theological and linguistic characteristics of the authors who preserved and edited them.<sup>2</sup>

Second, eschatology for Jesus was not some general expectation of the end of the world or a specific set of programmed events leading to the collapse of the cosmos. Jesus' focus was not so much on the end of anything, but the beginning of something. Although he and his contemporaries<sup>3</sup> longed for freedom from social, economic, and political oppression, he mainly proclaimed the dawning of a new day, summed up in a metaphor, ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ “the kingdom of God.”<sup>4</sup> I will examine only the authentic sayings of Jesus that include this kingdom language.

Third, Jesus' ethical teachings within the context of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish ethics were grounded in the demands of the Torah and motivated by observations related to the wisdom tradition and eschatological expectation. In this paper, I will focus on the last of the three with particular reference to the kingdom sayings and the material in close context with them.

Almost everyone agrees that the historical Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup> This expression, along with Matthew's preferred circumlocution “the kingdom of heaven,” is a

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<sup>1</sup> I delivered this paper with the same title to the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, Atlanta, GA, 21 November 2003.

<sup>2</sup> In making my own decisions on matters of authenticity and meaning, I have consulted, among other things, John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) [Crossan]; Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993) [Funk]; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 3 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994-2001) [Meier]; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) [Theissen-Merz].

<sup>3</sup> For a survey of what he calls “God's kingly rule” in the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and the writing of Qumran, see Meier 2:243-70.

<sup>4</sup> Since the time of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer (early 20<sup>th</sup> century), the understanding of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God in terms of some form of eschatology has predominated in New Testament scholarship.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 54. Meier 2:237. For brief overviews of the history of research on the meaning of the kingdom of God in the teachings of Jesus, see Theissen-

political metaphor that refers in some way to God's ruling the world.<sup>6</sup> Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God as something new in his time, implying that in at least some respects God's rule had either ceased or had been diminished.<sup>7</sup> This proclamation of the kingdom of God was the center and focus of his teachings and activities.

The kingdom of God for Jesus includes the following characteristics:<sup>8</sup> (1) It represents the dynamic rule of God more than a static realm where God governs. (2) It is an established reality in the present time but will attain its full realization in the near future.<sup>9</sup> (3) It is oriented to salvation while including an element of judgment. (4) It is established by God alone, but humans may choose to enter it. (5) It includes social, economic, political, religious, and spiritual dimensions. (6) It is based on the prophetic, apocalyptic, and wisdom traditions of the ancient Hebrews. (7) It is enacted and verified by his exorcisms and healings. (8) It is thoroughly Jewish.

Almost everyone also agrees that the historical Jesus was a teacher of ethics. His instructions deal with the whole range of human behaviors including religious, social, domestic, personal, and political practices and attitudes. We find his teachings in aphorisms, expositions, and especially in parables.

Jesus' ethical teachings include the following characteristics: (1) They are based on the Torah. (2) They are motivated by appeals and allusions to the wisdom tradition and to eschatological expectation. (3) They are centered in the command to love. (4) They are surprising reversals of conventional thinking. (5) They are embodied in his association with religiously and socially marginalized people and his healing of the sick, including the outcast lepers. (6) They are thoroughly Jewish.

Jesus did not have a comprehensive ethical program, just as he did not have a complete theological system. His ethical teachings were ad hoc and disconnected. Nevertheless, they covered a wide range of ethical categories and situations and were based on clear norms with specific motivations. This is surprisingly true even when we limit our consideration to his ethical teachings that occur primarily in the context of his kingdom sayings.

As we would expect of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew, Jesus' ethical teachings reflected the norm of the Torah as the embodiment of Yahweh's will for Israel. However, his attitude toward and application of

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Merz, 242-45; Bruce Chilton, *Pure Kingdom: Jesus' Vision of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 1-22.

<sup>6</sup> As Dom Crossan likes to put it, "How . . . would God run the world if God sat on Caesar's throne?" John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 172-73.

<sup>7</sup> For Jesus, God's nemesis is Satan, whose defeat parallels the dawn of God's rule (Luke 10:18; 11:18-20).

<sup>8</sup> These are based, in part, on Theissen-Merz, 275-76.

<sup>9</sup> Contra Marcus J. Borg (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994], 29), who holds "that in all likelihood the pre-Easter Jesus was *noneschatological*." Although Borg and others are correct in denying that Jesus proclaimed an apocalyptic end of the world in the language and meaning of his post-Easter followers, they are wrong in denying a future component in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. For Jesus, the kingdom was already here in a significant but incomplete sense. He announced both its partial arrival and its coming fullness. He did not put the latter off to some distant end of the world, but anticipated it imminently. See Luke 11:2 Q; Luke 13:28-29 Q; Mark 14:25; the parables of growth and maturity (e.g., Mark 4:1-9; *Gos. Thom.9*).

the Torah was ambivalent.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes he felt that the Torah did not go far enough in its imperatives for living in the kingdom of God, and he intensified it.<sup>11</sup> At other times he felt that the Torah went too far, and he relaxed it.<sup>12</sup> We find this ambivalence in his enigmatic statement in Luke 16:16-17: “The law and the prophets were until John; from that time on the good news of the kingdom of God is being proclaimed and everyone is entering it by force. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for a single pen stroke of the law to become invalid.”<sup>13</sup> The Torah, whether intensified or relaxed, is the general norm of life under the rule of God.

However, for Jesus there was a norm within the norm of the Torah. In a Markan controversy narrative construction, Jesus replies to a scribe’s question about what commandment had first importance by citing the Hebrew monotheistic confession, “The Lord our God is one” (12:29). He went on to quote further from Deut 6, “And you shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, with your whole mind, and with your whole strength” (30). To this he added a second commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” and announced, “There is no other commandment greater than these” (31). When the scribe agreed, Jesus declared, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (34). Love, in the form of love for God and other people, is the specific norm for life under the rule of God.

The norm for Jesus’ ethics took one final, unexpected turn. Although the Torah could be summarized in part as a call to love one’s neighbor, Jesus intensified this with his call to love one’s enemies. From Matthew’s account we may extract the essence of Jesus’ saying: “Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. Thus you will become children of your Father in heaven, because he makes his sun shine on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what advantage do you have? Even the toll collectors do that, don’t they?” (5:44-46)<sup>14</sup> Although not a kingdom saying, we can reasonably consider this a characteristic of God’s rule since it appeals to God’s own behavior as the model. Therefore, love of one’s enemies is the ultimate norm for life under the rule of God.

In general, Jesus appealed to two types of arguments or motivation for his ethical teachings, arguments from the wisdom tradition<sup>15</sup> and motivation from eschatology. Sometimes he appealed to both.<sup>16</sup> His eschatological motivation typically centered on the metaphor of entering the kingdom of God and the types of persons or behavior that merited such entrance.<sup>17</sup> Although God establishes his rule by his own decision and in his own time, Jesus invited people to put themselves under God’s rule by the choices and decisions they make.

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of Jesus and the Torah, see Theissen-Merz, 359-72.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Matt 5:44.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Matt 7:15.

<sup>13</sup> All translations are mine.

<sup>14</sup> See also Luke 6:27-28, 32, 35 Q. Cf. POxy 1224 6:1; *Did.* 1:3 for the call to pray for one’s enemies.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Matt 5:44-45.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Luke 12:22-31 (Matt 6:25-33) Q.

<sup>17</sup> Ironically, entering the kingdom is difficult for the rich (Mark 10:23-25 par.) but assured for children and those who become like them (Mark 10:14-15 par.; *Gos. Thom.* 22; cf. Matt 18:3-4). Toll collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom ahead of the religious authorities (Matt 21:31). It would be better to enter the kingdom maimed than to go to hell in tact (Mark 9:47). Other possibly genuine sayings identify conditions for entering the kingdom as exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees as a condition for entering the kingdom (Matt 5:20) and doing the will of the Father in heaven (Matt 7:21).

Jesus' ethics of the kingdom fall into five categories or types of behavior: religious, personal, domestic, economic, and social.

One religious behavior is expressed in part of Mark's programmatic summary of Jesus' proclamation: "The kingdom of God has drawn near; repent" (1:15).<sup>18</sup> Unlike John,<sup>19</sup> Jesus called for a direct repentance without the mediating experience of baptism. He invited his hearers to forsake their conventional attitudes and evil ways as the first step toward developing the new attitudes and behaviors that characterize life under God's rule. Luke alludes to another religious behavior in his report of a conversation between Jesus and a potential adherent. Jesus invited the man to follow him. However, he said, "Allow me to go and bury my father first" (9:59). Jesus replied, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but *you* go and announce the kingdom of God" (60). Thus, to live under the rule of God is to renounce one's former ways and to follow Jesus, joining him in a discipleship of itinerate announcement of the arriving kingdom and performing the acts of healing associated with it.

The personal behavior that Jesus associated with the kingdom of God first involves living free from anxiety over one's life and its support. "Therefore, I tell you, stop being anxious about your life in terms of what you will eat or about your body in terms of what you will wear. . . . But seek first his [the Father's] kingdom and these things will also be granted to you" (Luke 12:22, 31 Q).<sup>20</sup> Jesus taught his followers to pray: "Provide us today with our daily bread."<sup>21</sup> In the kingdom of God, "Happy are the hungry, for they shall be satisfied."<sup>22</sup> Thus, to live under the rule of God is to trust God to supply one's daily sustenance and care.

Jesus spoke of the domestic behavior for those in the kingdom of God in regard to family responsibilities and marriage. Concerning the former, we have already noted Jesus' seemingly

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<sup>18</sup> See also Matt 4:17. For a discussion of repentance in eschatology of Jesus, see Amos N. Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus*, rev. ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 73-85.

<sup>19</sup> Mark 1:4 par.

<sup>20</sup> Matt 6:25-33; Luke 12:22-31. This reconstruction is based largely on Richard J. Dillon, "Ravens, Lilies, and the Kingdom of God," *CBQ* 53 (2001): 608-17.

<sup>21</sup> From Luke 11:2-4 (Matt 9b-13) Q; *Did.* 8:2. See the discussions in Crossan, 293-95; Funk, 325-27; Meier 2:291-302; Theissen-Merz, 253. I have reconstructed the prayer as follows:

Father,  
Let your name be revered.  
Let your kingdom come.  
Provide us today with our daily bread.  
Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven those indebted to us.  
And do not lead us to the test.

<sup>22</sup> From Luke 6:20-21 (Matt 5:3, 4, 6) Q; *Gos. Thom.* 54, 69. See the discussions in Funk 290-92; Meier 2:317-23; Theissen-Merz, 253-54, 377. I have reconstructed the three genuine beatitudes as follows:

Happy are the poor,  
for theirs is the kingdom of God.  
Happy are the hungry,  
for they shall be satisfied.  
Happy are those who weep,  
for they shall laugh.

harsh command to an admirer to leave the burying his dead father to others.<sup>23</sup> For Jesus, the call to follow him literally in his itinerate mission to proclaim the kingdom of God trumped family responsibilities, at least when they could be left to other family members. Another form of recommended domestic behavior concerned sexual relations. Matthew alone reports the following bizarre saying: “There are eunuchs who were born that way; there are eunuchs who were castrated by people; and there are eunuchs who castrated themselves because of the kingdom of heaven” (19:12). The term εὐνοῦχος, in addition to meaning “a castrated male,” can also mean “a sterile male” or “a celibate male.”<sup>24</sup> It is likely that all three meanings apply to this saying as follows: some men are sterile from birth; some are castrated by others; some become celibate for the sake of the kingdom of God.<sup>25</sup> Jesus’ focus here seems to be on the last group—those who have become celibate for the kingdom. Only they have any choice in the matter. Thus, to live under the rule of God is to be free from family responsibilities and marriage itself.

The economic behavior of those in the kingdom, like other behaviors, involves a reversal of the conventional wisdom, according to Jesus. Poverty is valued over wealth. Economic equality is prized above fairness. The first beatitude in the genuine set of three, “Happy are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20 Q), is a kind of keynote for the others.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, Jesus mused, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:23, 25). In the parable of the vineyard workers (Matt 20:1-16),<sup>27</sup> Jesus says that the kingdom is like a man who hired a series of workers throughout the day and paid them all the same wages. The generosity of the employer and his equal treatment of the workers trumps what the workers thought was fair. What kept many people poor in Jesus’ day were the debts they incurred by mortgaging their small land holdings.<sup>28</sup> It is not surprising that he would encourage such people to pray, “Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven those indebted to us” (Luke 11:4 Q). This mutuality of debt canceling is also the subject of Jesus’ parable of the unmerciful slave (Matt 18:23-35). Thus, to live under the rule of God is to value poverty and economic equality and mutually to eliminate debt.

Jesus’ ethics of the kingdom include a social dimension, particularly with regard to the unexpected types of people whom he identified with the kingdom of God. We have already seen that the kingdom belongs to the poor—a group marginalized because of its economic weakness. It also belongs to children, whom Jesus elevates above adults. “Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. I tell you truly, whoever does not

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<sup>23</sup> The “dead” probably refer to family members who were not Jesus’ followers. For a review of the various interpretations and support for this one, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (I-IX), AB 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 835-36.

<sup>24</sup> See BDAG, s.v. εὐνοῦχος. Cf. εὐνοῦχίζω. BDAG gives the second meaning as “a human male who, without physical operation, is by nature incapable of begetting children.” This would suggest “a sterile male.” However, it strangely offers the gloss, “impotent male.” Both the noun and the verb could have figurative meanings in Classical Greek. For a discussion of this saying of Jesus within the Matthean redaction and its support of a life of celibacy for Jesus and his followers, see Meier 1:342-45.

<sup>25</sup> Although I think this is clearly what Jesus meant, the literal impact of the words would have shocked his Jewish hearers as much as his saying on self mutilation in Mark 9:43-48.

<sup>26</sup> See n. 21 for the reconstruction of these beatitudes.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion, see Karen Lebacqz, “Justice, Economics, and the Uncomfortable Kingdom: Reflections on Matthew 20:1-16,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1993): 27-53.

<sup>28</sup> See the discussion in Crossan and Reed, 72-73, 274-76.

receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it” (Mark 10:14-15).<sup>29</sup> According to Jesus, “Toll collectors and prostitutes are preceding you [the religious authorities] into the kingdom of God” (Matt 21:31). The irony of this statement probably means that the latter would not enter the kingdom at all. Jesus could even speak metaphorically of the physically maimed potentially entering the kingdom (Mark 9:43-47). Thus, to live under the rule of God is to live in community with the socially marginalized.

For whom did Jesus intend his ethics of the kingdom and what was his purpose? This has been the subject of debate throughout most of the last two centuries.<sup>30</sup> It seems to me that Jesus’ short career was focused on his conviction that the rule of God, long curtailed and delayed, was dawning in the world, particularly his Jewish Palestinian world, and on his compulsion to announce this belief. Accordingly, he left his home in Nazareth, gathered a group of sympathizers, and set out on an itinerate mission throughout Galilee and beyond to announce God’s rule, to invite people to submit to it, and to demonstrate the emerging new age by his healings and exorcisms. Jesus’ ethics of the kingdom must be understood in the context of that mission. Although some of his ethical teachings have a universal appeal, such as his call to love one’s enemies and to value the marginalized, others are conditional to the circumstances of his itinerate mission and that of his followers. This is how we should understand his call for followers to take no thought for their physical lives, to abandon family responsibilities, to practice celibacy, and to renounce wealth.

Do Jesus’ ethics of the kingdom have any validity for his followers today? Of course, his universal teachings have as much meaning today as ever. What about his extraordinary conditional injunctions? Must we take up his itinerate mission, abandon our homes and families, avoid marriage, renounce wealth, and strike out into the world to continue his announcement of the rule of God and to relieve suffering? Some of us may be called to do just such things. However, even Jesus must have realized that not all his followers were called to the itinerate mission or at least to its most radical demands.<sup>31</sup> Itinerates survive only by the good graces of those who provide them with food, clothing, and shelter. This suggests a system of resident associates. For Jesus, the success of his mission required just such a support network. Today, those who, like most of us, are not called to a mission of itinerancy can support those who are. Furthermore, we can engage in tangible and regular acts of advancing the rule of God in our communities by helping to relieve suffering, poverty, injustice, disease, and the pollution of the earth. That is what it means to live under the rule of God.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See also Matt 19:14; 18:3; Luke 18-16-17; *Gos. Thom.* 22. For a discussion of children and the kingdom, see Bruce Chilton and J. I. H. McDonald, *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 80-89.

<sup>30</sup> For a brief survey of the major views, including Schweitzer’s “interim ethic” and the more recent sociological understanding of the impact of Jesus’ itinerate mission on his extraordinary teachings adopted here, see Theissen-Merz, 349-54; 397-400.

<sup>31</sup> It is possible that Jesus’ authentic saying on eunuchs (Matt 19:12) may include the following sentence: “Let those who can accept this, accept it.” If so, we have evidence that he did not intend all his ethical teachings for his resident associates.

<sup>32</sup> I am grateful to the students, faculty, and guests in my graduate seminar on the historical Jesus at La Sierra University, fall quarter, 2003, for their input and suggestions on this paper.