

The Work of Incarnation – Manifesting the Kingdom

I. Introduction

1. The incarnation fulfilled Yahweh’s long-standing promise to return to Zion to liberate and heal His covenant people, renew His covenant with them, and again fill His sanctuary with His presence. But all of that looked to His ultimate design to establish His everlasting kingdom encompassing all creation, *and thus the work of incarnation was the work of announcing and ushering in that kingdom.* *cf. Luke 4:14-21 with Isaiah 59-60
2. All four gospel writers have Jesus announcing and manifesting the “good news” of this kingdom, while also indicating with increasing clarity what this kingdom-bringing would mean for the sons of Israel. Luke especially emphasized this dynamic, introducing it at the outset of his account of Jesus’ Galilean ministry: *The prophet who found Himself without honor in His hometown would see that rejection replicated in the nation as a whole.*
3. The Nazareth incident set the stage for what Jesus could expect for the balance of His ministrations. He came to Israel proclaiming the good news His countrymen had awaited for many centuries, but it didn’t come in the form or manner they expected, and they responded, not by reassessing their own expectations, but by rejecting Him as an impostor and enemy.

II. Manifesting the Kingdom

Jesus came to Israel as the last and greatest of Israel’s prophets – the prophet who heralded the fulfillment of all that the former prophets had promised, namely the coming of God’s eschatological kingdom. That kingdom would see Yahweh’s return to end Israel’s exile, renew the covenant relationship and establish His rule over the entire world by “raising up David’s fallen tent” and setting David’s covenant son on the throne of Israel. In this way Yahweh would fulfill His covenants with Abraham, David and Israel, vindicating Himself as the righteous God who is faithful to uphold His word. *All of Israel’s prophets had spoken of these things, and Jesus proclaimed them as being fulfilled in connection with Himself.*

Again, the kingdom of God was the goal of incarnation, and Jesus manifested the kingdom in His own person, as well as through His words and works. But because He was manifesting a kingdom that has no earthly counterpart – a kingdom that doesn’t originate in or have its essence in this world (John 18:33-37), and that stands in antithesis to human kingdoms and their premises and principles, Jesus’ witness met with confusion, unbelief, fear and rejection.

Israel was expecting a kingdom that conformed to the natural human conception of “kingdom” and “kingship” – a kingdom not unlike the Roman one that was oppressing them, but one in which *they* were in power and able to lord it over their enemies. This was how the people of Israel envisioned the messianic kingdom and its king, and when they measured Jesus and His words and works against this expectation, it left them perplexed, discouraged and resentful, even to the point of wanting to kill Him as a false prophet and messianic pretender.

Jesus didn’t conform to Israel’s messianic hope – indeed, He *threatened* it, and this resulted in confusion, fear, slander and rejection. At the same time, none could deny that He spoke and acted as a prophet of God, showing unique authority and insight and manifesting divine power through astonishing signs and wonders. How could such a one be a false prophet? Would the Messiah do greater things? * cf. Mat. 7:28-29, 12:9-45, 16:13-23; John 7:1-44, 10:22-42, 12:1ff

The kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate stood in absolute antithesis to all human counterparts, including the kingdom the Jews imagined for themselves. Thus Jesus' witness to the kingdom had a quality of *confrontation* about it, whether His witness was implicit or explicit, whether verbal or enacted through His own life or the Spirit's works. *In every respect, the kingdom of God was suffering violence, even as the kingdom-bringer was a sign to be opposed.* This is the story the gospel writers tell, and it is the lens through which their accounts need to be read.

B. Invitation and Challenge

The gospel writers show this confrontation dynamic arising the moment Jesus began to announce and manifest the in-breaking of Yahweh's kingdom. Luke introduced it through his account of Jesus' encounter in His hometown (4:14-30), identifying it by the truism that a *prophet isn't received by his own people*. What was true of Nazareth would prove true of the Hebrew nation.

Jesus began His ministry of the kingdom by announcing its in-breaking in relation to Himself. But this announcement carried an obligation for Israel: *If the kingdom was indeed at hand, the heirs of the kingdom needed to embrace it and enter into it.* Hence Jesus' announcement (in word and deed) was followed by His invitation and challenge. Put simply, the coming of the kingdom meant that Israel's liberation and restoration were at hand, and thus Jesus called His countrymen to become Israel indeed – not by rising up against Rome, but by embracing His way of triumph. *The way to enter Yahweh's kingdom was to become a true son of the kingdom.*

1. This is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about (Mat. 5-7), and the failure to situate it in its Israelite and salvation-historical context is the reason for the divergent perspectives and interpretations of its message and significance. Stripped from its context and treated in isolation, the Sermon on the Mount is characteristically viewed as presenting a *code of ethics*, whether regarded as Mosaic or universal, temporal or timeless, natural or spiritual.
 - a. Many, particularly in the modern church era, have interpreted this passage through a “social justice” lens, and so find Jesus condemning human inequity, injustice, and oppression and calling for a fair and just ordering of human social structures.
 - b. Others view the Sermon on the Mount as setting out the governing ethic for the future Jewish millennial kingdom, with only a general moral relevance for the Church.
 - c. Reformed Christians reject this millennial view, and yet most agree that Jesus' teaching in this passage proves the continuing relevance of the Law of Moses. From the traditional Reformed perspective, Jesus was purging and reaffirming the Mosaic “moral law,” but as the universal obligation of all people in every age, not just the Israelite people.
 - d. Still other Christians (and non-Christians) view Jesus' instruction as a rehearsal and celebration of universal human virtues – timeless, moral and ethical truths that nurture human happiness in this life and will characterize human existence in heaven.

All of these views reflect the “de-judaizing” of the Scriptures and its effect on the Church and its doctrine and practice. But they also reflect the way people naturally conceive deity and human relationship with it. All religion starts from the premise of divine-human distance that needs to be bridged and managed for the good of the “worshipper,” and this same dynamic applies to the Christian “religion in which God relates to humans through a fixed standard to which they are accountable, and that determines their relationship with Him.

2. Like the other gospel writers, Matthew presented Jesus as the anointed Israelite appointed to take upon Himself Israel's life and testing in order that God's pledge to Abraham should be fulfilled. By living out Israel's election and calling as the "seed of Abraham," Jesus would become the foundation for a new Israel – an Israel reconstituted in Himself; an Israel suited to inherit Yahweh's kingdom and the Abrahamic mission on behalf of the world.

This sense of His own messianic identity and vocation lay behind Jesus' instruction and exhortation that day on the hillside in Galilee, a fact that Matthew underscored by the way he constructed his account (ref. chaps. 1-2): This Jesus, son of Abraham and David, was Yahweh's anointed king, appointed to shepherd His people as ruler over His kingdom.

3. And so, while the Sermon on the Mount *does* have an ethical quality, this ethic is the *ethic of the kingdom that Jesus came to inaugurate*. He wasn't pointing to a future Jewish millennial kingdom or setting out a humanistic ideal. But neither was He recovering and reasserting the Mosaic code as God's "eternal moral law" that determines every person's final fate. *Rather, He was describing the kingdom of God and its regal-priestly citizens according to God's design – i.e., what it would look like for Israel to be Israel in truth.*

But Jesus didn't simply announce God's kingdom; He was the kingdom-bringer and the One in whom Israel was to be restored to its God, and this points to three crucial truths:

- a. First and foremost, by describing the sons of the kingdom (5:1-16), Jesus was describing *Himself*; He was the Israelite in whom this authentic sonship was to be realized. But of course, the Israelite people had a different notion of the kingdom and its sons, and this would lead them to see Jesus as undermining and even abrogating God's word and promises concerning His kingdom and Israel's restoration. Jesus understood this, and so challenged His hearers that He and His way of sonship didn't nullify the Scriptures, but fulfilled them; this was the way of righteousness they prescribed. * 5:17-20
- b. And because Jesus recognized that His instruction had its truth and fulfillment in Himself, He wasn't calling His hearers to pursue the better way of life He was depicting. No, He was calling them to *embrace Him*. The sons of Israel would become the sons of the kingdom as Jesus was describing – i.e., Yahweh's restored "Israel" – when they embraced and followed Him, the true Son and Servant. * cf. 5:17-20 with 5:21-48
- c. But this implies a grave negative corollary: *Sonship in the Son is a narrow strait, with all other notions and approaches comprising a "wide path" that leads to destruction (5:13-27)*. Thus Jesus' invitation and challenge came with a sober warning:

The sons of Israel must not listen to and follow the "prophets" who were promoting false notions of Yahweh's kingdom, His messianic King, the messianic work, and the righteousness that defines the sons of the kingdom. All who followed that path would find themselves "cast out" of the kingdom, along with those who had deceived them.

Israel's rabbis had long taught that only the "righteous" – those who are faithful sons of the covenant – would inherit Yahweh's kingdom, but this truth needed to be rethought. Jesus was insisting that *He*, Israel's long-awaited Messiah, is that faithful Son, and His way of sonship is the sole path into the kingdom (5:20). All who follow another way are building their house on sand, and so will find themselves and their abode swept away when the tumult of judgment came upon them. * ref. 7:24-27; cf. Luke 13:22-30, 19:28-44, 21:20-24